Tullia d’Aragona’s *Il Meschino altamente detto il Guerino* as Key to a Reappraisal of Her Work*

Recent interest in women’s studies has stimulated scholarly re-examination of many Renaissance female authors such as Vittoria Colonna, Gaspara Stampa, Veronica Franco, and Moderata Fonte. The role of Tullia d’Aragona in the history of Italian literature in general and of women’s literature in particular is problematic and awaits a comprehensive examination. Although her work has frequently been studied or anthologized alongside that of other poets, her literary contributions have generally been slighted. One collection of sixteenth-century verse, for example, has described her as “tra i meno pratici di questa lirica” (Baldacci 257). In the past, scholars saw her as morally inferior to Colonna, viewing her as a skilled professional seductress who exploited her relationships with famous men for reasons of self-promotion (Bongi 1.155-59; Sapegno 118). She has also been called an “amatrice di professione” (Ponchirolì 392; Celani viii; Masson 108). Her refined Petrarchist style which largely conformed to the poetic norms of her day seemed undistinguished. Her verses have been criticized variously for their lack of drama or passion, or for their emotional detachment.

Beyond these questions of artistic motivation and aesthetics is the more pressing one of authorship: many critics have charged that d’Aragona’s literary work was not her own, but was crafted by her male admirers. Celani claimed that her *rine* were due to the influence of various literati she knew, and perhaps even the work of Varchi himself (xvi). Similarly, Ponchirolì asserted that “la debole poesia di Tullia d’Aragona . . . molto deve forse all’aiuto e alla ‘consulenza’ del Varchi e del Muzio” (391), and other studies repeat this argument against her (De Vendittis 267; Bonora 23; Renda and Operti 62; Lawner 54). A rough autograph draft of one of her later surviving poems and a letter accompanying five sonnets sent to Varchi asking him to “care for them” as he had done for others have been interpreted as indicating that d’Aragona was incapable of achieving a polished lyric composition on her own (Masson 112, 114-15).

Benedetto Croce extended this line of attack to her prose *Dialogo della infinità di amore*, alleging that it could not have been written without the help of an erudite lover: “Lo compose forse aiutata da qualche suo amante che le tenne la penna?” (Bandini Buti 198). After Croce’s negative dismissal of her work, subsequent critics echoed his doubts about her ability to compose works alone.
Speaking of her treatise on Love, Pompeati asserted: “è naturale il dubbio che la bella donna si fosse fatta per lo meno aiutare largamente da uno pratico del mestiere letterario e uso a frequentare il mondo delle idee” (2.522). Yet it hardly seems likely that any writer who spent the greater part of his or her life in the company of the intelligentsia of several important centers of literary production would not at some time have asked for assistance in smoothing out stylistic or compositional problems.

Recent critical opinion of d’Aragona’s literary merits, while generally more positive, has been largely based on knowledge of her Rime and, to a lesser extent, upon her treatise, both clear products of her Florentine sojourn (February 1546 to mid-October 1548). She has been categorized alongside Stampa and Olimpia Morata as Renaissance women who “published works in verse and prose and acquired authorial reputations in their own lifetimes but did not engage in overt protest” (Jordan 173). Other feminist critics have identified moments in her writing which distinguish it from the stereotypical Petrarchan lyric based on the male gaze. Her sonnet on the Ovidian myth of Philomela has been indicated more than once as addressing the issue of a feminine poetic voice and as transgressing the masculinist injunction on silence for women (Bassanese 109-10; Jones, “New Songs” 263-77; Jones, The Currency 115-17). Whereas her poetic exchanges with male poets published in the Rime were once viewed primarily as the means to advance her career as courtesan, a recent reinterpretation praises these exchanges as a successful manipulation of display which “reveals rather than conceals the negotiations and exchanges through which Renaissance writers... construct(ed) a reputation for themselves” (Jones, “Surprising Fame” 87). Similarly, d’Aragona’s skill at writing prose has been treated more fairly in light of new studies on women writers in general. Kristeller praises her prose treatise on the infinity of love as “a major specimen” of that literary genre (93). One regrets that his survey of learned women did not permit a more detailed discussion of the dialogue.

While great strides have been made in the last few years toward overcoming the view of d’Aragona as an ambitious courtesan with literary pretentions, the end result of these more objective critical disquisitions is to consider d’Aragona as primarily a lyric poet. Most scholars are unfamiliar with her difficult-to-obtain chivalric epic Il Meschino altramente detto il Guerino. This is a verse setting of the epic romance written by the Florentine Andrea da Barberino (c.1371-c.1431).1 The original prose text enjoyed a wide transmission in manuscript and print forms, and French and Castilian translations of it were made and published early in the sixteenth century. The latter translation, which bears on d’Aragona’s own version, was prepared by Alonso Hernández Alemán and printed in 1512, 1527 and 1548.2 D’Aragona’s ottava rima version was published posthumously in 1560 and given two subsequent printings in 1575 and 1594, each time by the firm of Giovanbattista and Melchior Sessa in Venice. Better knowledge of d’Aragona’s Il Meschino and, specifically, of its preface which holds important
philological clues regarding the dating of the poem, could help lay to rest the notion that Varchi may have been responsible for the quality and success of both d’Aragona’s Rime and her treatise on love. Greater familiarity with the content of her epic versification will also enable a more accurate assessment of her work as a literary gestalt, and of her high moral and intellectual qualities as a cortigiana onesta.

An accurate dating for Il Meschino has important implications for refuting claims that her poetry was written with Varchi’s assistance. Scholars who are aware of this work generally ascribe to it a late date of production, perhaps simply due to the fact that it was the last of her works to receive a printed edition. Several unsupported conjectures regarding the date of d’Aragona’s versification of Il Meschino have been set forth during her Florentine years 1546-1548 (Masson 123-24), “verso il 1547” (Osella 167), and “nel 1550” (Beer 236). Francesco Flamini takes the penitential theme of the Meschino preface at face value, suggesting its composition around the time of her marriage to Silvestro dei Guicciardi on January 8, 1543 in Siena (196). The present study will argue a likely date of execution between 1543 and early 1546 or perhaps slightly before, but in any case prior to her arrival in Florence and subsequent relationship with Varchi.

Il Meschino and its preface

Although Il Meschino has been called “la prova migliore dell’ingegno di Tullia” (Pompeati 522), it is often included almost as an afterthought in bio-bibliographical passages on the poet and her works: “Oltre alle Rime e al Dialogo tentò anche il poema narrativo . . . ” (Dizionario 272). Yet the prose preface to this epic poem would appear to be “il più importante documento che resti della vita interiore della scrittrice” (Bongi 188). This document, remarkable in its apparent sincerity and high moral tone, has provoked a particular attack against the possibility of her authorship. Celani, who casts no aspersions on d’Aragona’s right to authorship of the poem, emphatically denies her authorship of its preface (Ix, lxiii)! At issue are her apparent repentance of earlier activities as courtesan, her pronouncements against lascivious reading material, and her declared intention of providing “chaste and pure” reading material suitable even for young women. Past critics, interpreting these comments ironically, have seemed unwilling to believe that a woman who practiced an “immoral” profession could express honest, moral concepts in her literary works: “Tullia d’Aragona offre vivissimo il contrasto fra la moralità vuota e insincera della sua produzione letteraria e la corruzione della vita” (Renda and Operti 62). Despite the protestations of her modern detractors, evidence indicates that d’Aragona was the author not only of the preface, but of the entire poem. A dedica by Claudio Rinieri printed at the beginning of the 1560 edition states that he had received an autograph manuscript of the work some years before: “Havendomi la mia buona sorte da
certi anni à dietro fatto capitare alle mani questo bel libro della Signora Tullia d’Aragona, & scritto tutto di sua man propria . . .” (Tullia d’Aragona, Meschino iii). Her death date in 1556 is in agreement with Rinieri’s comment about having had the manuscript “certi anni”. The manuscript was not listed in her will nor in the inventory of goods compiled at her death (Celani lxi).

Much autobiographical information is contained in the preface, and a thorough examination of it permits a more comprehensive view of d’Aragona’s literary production and abilities. Was her writing career launched only with the assistance of Varchi or other major authors? Was her rhetoric used merely to seduce men? Can her words be taken at face value or are they merely the outcroppings of a mannered style then in vogue? Evidence found in the Meschino preface furnishes clues to an approximate date of composition for the poem. These data also authenticate d’Aragona as author of both preface and poem thereby laying to rest various slurs on her literary abilities and erudition. At the same time, the content of the preface furnishes many clues about d’Aragona’s audience, her poetics, her life, and her morality, as well as her purpose for writing.

Before any further discussion of d’Aragona as writer, it will be useful to portray her as reader. We know that she had a personal library which may have been quite considerable at one time: the inventory of her goods made at the time of her death includes a trunk full of “trentacinque libri tra volgari e latini de più et diverse sorte, et tredici di musica” (Bongi 195). From explicit references in the Meschino preface as well as imitative passages within the poem, we can determine her familiarity with various important Italian texts of the preceding two centuries. In her preface, she cites Boccaccio, Pulci, Boiardo, and Ariosto by name, and various chivalric epics — Morgante, Ancroia, l’Innamoramento d’Orlando, Bovo d’Antona, Il Mambriano — by title. Interestingly, all of these authors and titles except Il Mambriano had also been mentioned by Pietro Aretino’s prostitutes, Nanna and Pippa, in his satire Sei giornate. Thus, not surprisingly, d’Aragona’s list reflects the standard reading material known to courtesans of her day. What is surprising is her strong denunciation of the lascivious content of such books from the standpoint of the female reader, and her choice of the Meschino as a suitable text for the virtuous reader of either sex.

D’Aragona’s Choice of the Meschino Project

The reasons d’Aragona chose this project are clear. First and foremost was the need to defend herself against claims of common prostitution. Stylistic, linguistic, and literary considerations also were factors in her decision, as we shall see. Recent studies of Veronica Franco by Margaret Rosenthal and Marcella Diberti-Leigh have demonstrated the constant need for the cortigiana onesta to win public recognition and maintain an air of respectability. D’Aragona had similar reasons for writing, and later publishing, her work. The successful outcome of her carefully organized “publicity campaign” in Florence won her a written exempt-
tion from Cosimo I in 1547 which spared her from the dreaded yellow veil which the law demanded be worn by prostitutes to demarcate them from the general populace (Bongi 183-85). Yet this was not the first time she chose a literary weapon to defend her honor. Evidence in the preface suggests that Il Meschino was probably written for much the same purpose at an earlier date during her adult years in Siena. Despite her marriage to Silvestro dei Guicciardi on January 8, 1543, she was accused of breaking the statutes pertaining to prostitutes by living outside the prescribed area and wearing clothes forbidden to them (Bongi 173). Such a crisis would explain the careful wording of the preface and the moral tone of the epic, in many ways higher than that of the original.

In the preface, d’Aragona expresses regret for her former life: “Ho ne’ primi anni miei hauuta più notitia del mondo, che ora con miglior senno non uorrei hauer’ hauuta . . .” (iiiiv). The pointed denunciation of lascivious reading matter from the Decameron to contemporary texts which accompanies this confession, combined with certain historical facts about that period of her life, reveals a sincere desire to establish herself publicly as a virtuous woman. Regardless of what her earlier behavior may have been, she was now attempting to rehabilitate herself and to claim the status of donna onesta. D’Aragona may have produced her Meschino versification at this time in defense of her virtue. On February 5, 1544 the officials of the Sienese Gabella declared d’Aragona “non essere in modo alcuno compresa nello statuto relativo alle meretrici . . . ed esserle quindi lecito di abitare in qualsivoglia luogo della città . . . e portar vesti ed abito . . . come fu ed è lecito alle persone e donne oneste e nobili” (Bongi 174).

It was precisely to this respectable class of “persons and women” that d’Aragona directed her Meschino: she clearly defines her ideal readership in the preface: “Ogni uomo, & . . . ogni donna di non in tutto basso & uill’animo . . .” (iiiir). She further stated her intent to “far cosa gratissima alle uere donne, & . . . anco a gli huomini di gentil’animo,” in short, to “honest” persons (iiiir). The Meschino preface offers evidence that she personally sought out an appropriate subject to attain her goal of providing women — and men — of virtuous disposition a delightful, yet unobjectionable, text to read or hear: “Dico adunque, che con questa mia saldissima intentione di trouar qualche libro di uaga & dilettuole lettione, oue non fosser cose disoneste & brutte, io doppo l’hauerne riuoltati quanti me ne poterono capitar in mano, trouai finalmente questo bellissimo libro in lingua Spagnuola . . . ” (ivr).

The terminology of these claims to “honesty” is in complete concordance with the definition of amore disonesto e onesto found in her Dialogo and voiced by the interlocutor called “Tullia”:

Lo amore è di due ragioni: l’uno chiameremo ‘volgare’ overo disonesto, e l’altro ‘onesto’ overo virtuoso. Il disonesto, che non è se non degli uomini volgari e plebei, cioè di quelli che hanno l’animo basso e vile e che sono senza virtù o gentilezza, qualunque essi si siano, o di picciolo legnaggio o di grande, è generato dal disiderio di goder la cosa amata; ed il suo fine non è altro che quello degli animali
brutti medesimi, cioè di aver quel piacere e generare cosa simigliante a sé, senza pensare o curare più oltra.

L’amore onesto, il quale è proprio degli uomini nobili, cioè che hanno l’animo gentile e virtuoso, qualunque essi siano, o poveri o ricchi, non è generato nel disiderio, come l’altro, ma dalla ragione . . . . (Tullia d’Aragona, Dialogo 222, emphasis added)

These passages also provide a valuable gloss to the modern reader of the much debated concept of the cortigiana onesta and what her professional relationship with men may have entailed.7 As such, it serves to rebut the many critics who have chosen to paint her as purely a seductress or prostitute.

The Meschino preface also contains explicit references to d’Aragona’s stylistic choices. Her poetic Muse inspired her to “perfect” an imperfect, but otherwise noble, prose model by reclothing it in verse, “il quale non è alcun dubbio che molto più diletta, molto più uagamente si legge, molto più efficacemente fa impressione ne gli animi nostri, & molto più lietamente ci lascia la forma sua nella memoria, che le prose non fanno” (iii-r-v). She also comments on her choice of language — Tuscan — “il padre della Lingua,” and cites three theorists of linguistic elegance to support this choice, not coincidentally, her former acquaintances: Dolce, Ruscelli, and “il mio Bembo.”

Evidence for a More Accurate Dating

D’Aragona’s appeal to this triumvirate of authorities was not idle erudition, but a comment which reflects her personal acquaintances of the preceding years. She had encountered the noted polygrapher Dolce early on in her career while still in Rome. Dolce, in a satire to Bentivoglio, wrote of the young courtesan’s striving to excel in the world of the demimonde: “Tullia de l’alte vuol esser maggiore / Et vuol fantesche et paggi et nane, e sfoggia, / E fa con tutti i giovani l’amore” (Bongi 158).

Ruscelli was most likely the Girolamo named by Rinieri in his dedica. This Ruscelli was one of the members of the Venetian Accademia della Fama which was founded in 1557 (Rosenthal, The Honest Courtesan 213, 216-17). The poet had most likely encountered this compiler and editor of poetry anthologies during her sojourn in Venice from 1534 to 1537.

The young d’Aragona could have met “her” Bembo, author of the Prose della volgar lingua, while they were both still in Rome, or perhaps later in Venice or Padova. The fact that she refers to him with an endearing epithet inclines me to believe that he was still living: an important clue to indicate that the Meschino preface must have been completed prior to January 18, 1547, the date of Bembo’s death, by which time d’Aragona had relocated to Florence.

Near the end of her preface, the poet states that she was writing “in questa mia età non ancor souerchiamente matura, ma giouenile & fresca . . . .” The credibil-
ity of any statement made by a courtesan on her youth and beauty may be questioned, but given the overall tone of humility in the preface, her remark seems sincere. A similar remark about her youth and beauty withstanding the passing of time appears in a letter written to her on March 6, 1546, shortly after her arrival in Florence, by Niccolò Martelli: “La gratia et la virtù . . . per esser doti et ricchezze del animo et partecipare più del divino che del humano, non sogghiar-ciono alla violenza degli anni. Dato che anchora et giovane et bella sete, anzi bella tanto . . .” He concludes with the wish that “l Signore vi mantenga bella nella gratia sua come sete” (Bongi 179n). Martelli’s description tallies with d’Aragona’s own: both obliquely express concern for maturity and the passing of the years, yet both take pains to stress that she is still young and lovely. The Meschino preface was clearly not a product of her extreme youth nor of her dote in Rome.

Among those works and authors denounced by d’Aragona in her diatribe against “cose lasciuissime, disonestissime, & ueramente scelerate” (IIIv) are three references which furnish more precise evidence toward a dating of Il Meschino. The first reference to “le Nanne, & le Pippe” is surely an allusion to Sei giornate, a satirical dialogue describing the education of a young woman into the courte-san’s profession. It was written by her arch-detactor, Aretino, and published in two installments: Ragionamento (1534), and Dialogo (1536) which includes the characters Nanna and Pippa. In a passage on the jealousy experienced when a prostitute sees a competitor dressed in a showy manner, Aretino refers to “la signora Tullia” as exemplifying the latter category (210). Her reference to Areti-no’s dialogue furnishes a terminus post quem for the Meschino preface, if not the entire poem, of 1536. The second scurrilous text d’Aragona names was the poe-metto La Puttana errante (1531) by Aretino’s even more misogynous companion, the Venetian courtier Lorenzo Venier. While Venier’s poem was directed against the courtesan Elena Ballerina, d’Aragona herself had been named among one hundred and ten courtesans in the anonymous pamphlet La Tariffa delle puttane di Venetia, published c. 1535 (Barzaghi 175-76). This venomous tract has been attributed to Venier and was likely written under Aretino’s aegis (Masson 98-99). Lastly, d’Aragona mentions in her preface an extremely scabrous book, referring to it only as “quel libro, che ha per certo offesa troppo alta-mente la maestà della gentilissima Città di Siena” (iiiiv). Bongi has identified the book as Cazzaria, by “Arsicco Intronato” (Bongi 189n). This young Sienese libertine, whose real name was Antonio Vignali, had been spurned or offended by d’Aragona in some way: there is further evidence of his animosity toward her in his play Floria (Masson 124).

The three protectors which d’Aragona names — Dolce, Ruscelli, Bembo — are carefully balanced by three virulent detractors, the unnamed Aretino, Venier and Vignali. Taken together, these six acquaintances recall various cities in which she had lived: Rome, Venice, Siena. The Meschino preface could only have been written after her years in Rome and Venice, and after she and Vignali
had crossed paths in Siena, yet it contains no mention of Florentine protectors (or detractors). Thus, textual evidence of persons and publications named or alluded to in the preface argue for a date of composition between 1536 and early 1546, or perhaps before the 1544 declaration of her “honest” status. One can only conjecture whether the composition of the poem itself would have been carried out in the same ample time span: near the end of her sojourn in Venice, or shortly thereafter, and most likely during the adulthood years she spent at Siena. The lack of any mention in the preface of Florentine protectors or clients would seem to invalidate claims by various critics that d’Aragona’s works could not have been produced without the aid of Varchi. Perhaps he was responsible for some corrections to her sonnets, but the fact remains that she was able to produce a lengthy manuscript in a challenging meter prior to meeting him. It is, of course, possible that another, earlier literary “protector” had retouched the Meschino, but from the deeply personal statement of intent found in the preface and several passages reflective of female contrition in the poem (which do not appear in the Castilian translation nor in the Tuscan manuscript tradition) one is inclined to believe d’Aragona to be the sole author of Il Meschino. Lacking the autograph, we can only speculate on whether d’Aragona herself continued polishing and correcting her poem in the later years while the ms. was still in her possession.

Evidence for Determining a Probable Model

Having discussed the problems of dating and authorship, the question of whether d’Aragona actually worked from the translation or from the better-known original may now be addressed. In the proem to Meschino she states: “Trouai . . . questo bellissimo libro in lingua Spagnuola” (ivr). This remark has generated a certain amount of confusion in studies of her work. Celani and Croce for once accept her words at face value, and both imply that she was ignorant of the Tuscan original (Celani lxii; Croce 165). Such ignorance seems unlikely since, unlike Andrea’s other texts, his Meschino enjoyed wide transmission in Italy before and after its first printing in 1473. An extant manuscript of Meschino reveals that the Tuscan version had penetrated the Aragonese court at Naples by the 1460s, demonstrating that it was known to Spanish literati and offering a raison d’être for its eventual translation. Some scholars such as Bandini Buti who are themselves unfamiliar with the existence of the Castilian edition discredit the notion that d’Aragona worked from a translation (198). Marina Beer acknowledges both versions and asserts that d’Aragona’s Meschino “non è stato rifatto dallo spagnolo . . . ma dal notissimo romanzo italiano in prosa” (236). While Beer does not offer evidence to support this claim, she rightly suggests the strong appeal of fashionable Spanish romances as a possible reason for d’Aragona’s statement.

During this phase of the Renaissance, Spanish culture, literature, and music were all the rage across Italy (Croce 85, 124, 164). Due to the marriages of Spanish royalty into various Italian courts, there were strong cultural and politi-
cal ties to Spain, not only in Naples, but in Ferrara, Florence, Mantua, and Milan. The young Ariosto himself apparently did translations of Spanish romances (Pigna 2r). In his treatise on the vernacular, Bembo noted the extent to which the Spanish language had penetrated the Roman curia as a result of the Borgia papacy (Bembo 29-30). One recalls Castiglione’s view that knowledge of the Spanish language and use of Spanish terms in conversation were praiseworthy attributes for his perfect courtier (Castiglione 135). In emulation of the aristocracy and because of their dealings with its members, many courtesans spoke and wrote in Spanish, and certainly read it. The romance genre in particular seems to have lent itself well to the amorous entertainments of the bel monde.

As one of the most stylish courtesans of her day, d’Aragona surely participated in this trend. Furthermore, numerous circumstances in her life indicate probable points of contact with either the Tuscan Meschino or its Castilian translation. Her close alliance with Bernardo Tasso, future author of the Italian Amadigi, in Venice in 1536 or 1537 has been documented. Their romantic alliance was incorporated into Sperone Speroni’s Dialoghi di Amore (Venice, 1542). Immediately after this period, she was welcomed at the court in Ferrara, not coincidentally, a place where interest in chivalric material still thrived. Given her own stated knowledge of several important Renaissance epic poems, she may very well have been aware of the existence of both versions of Meschino, declaring that she was working from a Spanish text for reasons of fashion, but perhaps utilizing the Tuscan one for reasons of facility.

A Comparison of Texts

A three-way comparison of Hernández Alemán’s prose translation and d’Aragona’s versification with Andrea’s original reveal both later versions to be extremely faithful to their source with regard to plot, details, and characters. The Castilian’s brief prologue is very close in content and tone to that of the original, although it is more pious than either Italian version and contains an addition pertaining to the Trinity. D’Aragona’s longer preface echoes Andrea’s, but on the whole is largely original. Overall, d’Aragona’s adaptation of the text is the freer of the two later versions due to the need for setting prose into ottava rima. Sometimes she has eliminated banal details or statistical passages which were employed in the pseudo-chronicle style of the original. At other times, these passages are recast in Ariostan epic language. Unlike the procedure followed by Hernández Alemán, d’Aragona has in places amplified or abbreviated the narration according to her own poetic norms. For instance, she greatly expands the characterization of the sharp-tongued princess Elisena who spurns the worthy hero and intensifies the somewhat misogynist sense of moral outrage already present in Book 1 of the original. This stance is in line with her insistence upon her own high moral character expressed in the preface, an anti-feminist artistic posture which nonetheless would have supported the historic need to defend her
virtue. She has compressed the material about the Cumaean Sibyl found in Book 5 of the original, eliminating an account of the ten sibyls (B 78v; C 748). With the exception of the prologue, this sort of alteration to the model is almost never done by Hernández Alemán who rarely inserts a word or phrase of his own and only infrequently eliminates a narrative detail.

Turning now to the content of the different versions, a close comparison of several chapters selected from different Books of the text reveals only slight variant readings, notably with respect to proper names and toponyms. Analyzing name variants in a text which was originally transmitted by hand-copying is always a sensitive task, and frequently inconclusive. The presence of certain identical spelling variants found in C and T, however, would seem to indicate that both Hernández Alemán and d’Aragona followed a late, second branch exemplar of the manuscript tradition, or more likely, one of the several printed editions by then in circulation which was based on a late manuscript exemplar. A few examples, compared to the manuscripts which I find to be most authoritative, will be illustrative.¹⁴

Book 1:

Balante Ueltachin et Ricci (Branch A) B 1v;  
Ballante Valdachi e Ricci (Branch B) R 2r;  
Falante Veraquino e Roseto C 348;  
Balante e Veraguino e Rosseto T 2r.

Alcibrando B 8v; Arciprandone R 13r;  
Dulcebrando C 381; Dolcebrando T 13r.

Antigoro B 10r; Antichor R 15v;  
Antifor C 389, T 17r.

Book 2:

Partiferon B 24r; Pantinforo R 37r;¹⁵  
Pacifero C 460, T 43v.

Penapolens B 18v; Napoli R 28v; Morea C 431, T 30v.

Remue B 19r; Remute R 29r; Remín C 434; Remino T 30v.

Book 3

Caristopo . . Asemus . . Palitrea B 36r;  
Charistopo . . Asemaus . . Palvera R 57v;  
Cariscopo . . Essemus . . Paluera C 520;
Cariscopo . . . Espemus . . . Paluera T 59r.

Censafie . . . Anticha . . . Arabarta B 39r;
Censazie . . . Tinticha . . . Anfria R 62v;
Zenzafra . . . Indica . . . Arbate C 536;

Other evidence links the Hernández Alemán translation and d’Aragona’s versification to the later textual incarnations of Il Meschino. Structural divisions found in La corónica del noble cavallero Guarino Mezquino follow exactly the practice of Branch B manuscripts: the eight Books are clearly denoted by a rubric signalling the ending of one and the beginning of the next; and the first chapter of each Book recommences numbering at “one.” Unfortunately, this criterion cannot be applied to d’Aragona’s versification since it is divided into 36 cantos, without respect for “Books.”

A stylistic detail which both C and T have in common concerns the oft-repeated prayer Salvim me fac used by the protagonist to escape both physical and spiritual peril. In certain later manuscripts, the Latin form has dropped out, being replaced with the same prayer in the vernacular: Fammi salvo, Ricc. 2432, 132r; fame salvo, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, ms. Codex 16, unfoliated; fazme salvo C 808; Saluo mi rendi T 141r. Occasionally, identical lexical items may be found in Hernández Alemán’s and d’Aragona’s versions which are not present in the Tuscan manuscript tradition. The appearance of such synonyms may be due only to the different century and culture in which the texts were produced, or they may be traceable to changes already present in the print tradition. For example, the original monetary value danari d’oro (B 43v) has become ducatos in Hernández Alemán (560) and ducati in d’Aragona (69v). Mention of the Venetian gold coinage which had replaced the earlier medieval denarius, already somewhat anachronistically referred to by Andrea as “danari d’oro,” again suggests that both Hernández Alemán and d’Aragona relied on a Venetian edition (Gies and Gies 303-5). A passage which refers to negromanti and indovini in B (15v) contains the added term astrólogos in the Castilian translation (418) and astrologo in the versification (24v).

These data are tantalizing in their ability to suggest a common textual model for both Hernández Alemán and d’Aragona, but do not resolve the pressing question of whether Tullia worked from the Castilian translation as the remark in her preface states, or from a Tuscan version. Due to the general faithfulness of both later versions to their model, it is difficult to locate significant discrepancies or deviations. When the three texts are subjected to intense scrutiny, a few proofs that d’Aragona must have worked from a Tuscan version do emerge. Some of these are lexical in nature while the more significant ones concern the presence of narrative details from the original.
D’Aragona’s versification conserves several words from the Tuscan version which are not found in the Castilian translation. In a passage describing the hero’s infancy, Andrea da Barberino had employed the verb *allattare*, a rather unusual one in view of standard Carolingian cycle vocabulary (B 3r). The versification uses an adjectival form of this infinitive, *lattata* (5r), whereas the Castilian expresses the concept by the phrase *le dava a mamar* (354). The verb *mammare* was adopted into the Italian language from Spanish as early as the fifteenth century (Beccaria 13). Thus d’Aragona’s use of the older *lattare* is all the more significant. In Book 1 of the Tuscan original, a joust is held in a specially-constructed enclosure: “fue fatto insula piazza un *palanchato* molto grande” (B 4v). This word and the concept itself have been omitted in the Castilian, but are retained in the versification: “Cominciari ne la piazza a farsi intorno 1 gran *palancati*, con travi, & antennê” (7v). The protagonist partakes in the joust carrying *una grossa lancia nerbata* (B 5r) and wearing a simple vestment of *panno bigiello* (B 5r). These details of weaponry and dress are maintained by d’Aragona: the hero carries *una grossa lancia . . . neruuta*, and wears a garment made of *panno bigiellino* (T 8v). In the Castilian, however, there is no corresponding adjective to describe the leather-reinforced lance. The hero’s garment is of *paño presado*, a term which refers to the greenish color of the fabric rather than to its rough weave (C 365-66). The interior of Prester John’s oriental palace (Book 3) is described in both Italian versions with the noun *colonne*: “era nel mezzo due *colonne* d’oro . . .” (B 57r); “Di massiccio Oro ha due *colonne* in mezo” (T 82r). In the Castilian this has been replaced with a logical synonym which is not, however, a cognate: “en media estavan dos *mármoles*, los quales eran de oro maciço . . .” (601). In Book 6, the entrance to the Purgatory of Saint Patrick in Ireland is twice described as a *tomba* in both the manuscript tradition (B 90r) and in d’Aragona (140v). Despite the existence of the cognate *tumba*, Hernández Alemán’s translation avoids direct translation both times, preferring *cueva* (807). Had d’Aragona been working only from the Castilian, it would have required considerable semantic dexterity on her part as well as a good bit of luck to obtain the identical wording of the original.

Still more convincing evidence that d’Aragona certainly knew and worked from a Tuscan version concerns narrative details which do not appear in the Castilian, but which are conserved in her versification. In the opening chapters, the hero’s uncle is always called *Guicciardo* in the manuscript tradition as in d’Aragona (T 2r), but is repeatedly called *Girardo* in the Castilian (348, 349). The nuance that Guerrino’s guardian Sefera had been his mother’s wetnurse, omitted by Hernández Alemán, appears consistently in the manuscript tradition. D’Aragona’s version states this twice in a single canto:

*quella*

che già lattata hauea Fenisia bella; (5r)
In one episode of Andrea's original text, the protagonist enjoins his troops to fight to the death "chome fae il lupo e 'l chane e lla uolpe" (B 11v). The triple simile is preserved by d'Aragona "imitando la uolpe, e 'l lupo, e 'l cane" (19v), but has been abbreviated by Hernández Alemán "como hace el lobo o el perro" (398).

Elsewhere, narrative details as well as the similarity of lexicon and language argue that d'Aragona had a Tuscan copy before her as she worked. In these examples, not only have the identical words and meanings been maintained, but even something of their original rhythms survives, this despite the fact that d'Aragona was setting Andrea's prose into verse. The infrequency of these moments makes their discovery all the more precious. For example, in both Italian versions the adolescent hero participates not only in the expected athletic activities for training a knight, but in two unusual ones as well: in Andrea, "lanciare .. . et gittare pietre et paly di ferro (B 3r); in d'Aragona, "trar gran pietre, e lanciar pali" (6v). In the Castilian, these two particular exercises do not appear: "esgremir, saltar, luchar y jugar de bastón e de las otras cosas" (357).

As the hero begins his travels in Book 2, one of his early exploits is to strike down a court jester who was tormenting him. He does this rather indecorously with a single blow from his fist. While the episode features in all three versions, only Andrea and d'Aragona describe the precise wound the jester received:

li die' d'uno pungno sul ciglio che tutto il ciglio gli aperse, e 'l pazzo cadde in terra; (B 21r)

Dagli il Meschin un pugno sopra un ciglio
Che gli fe' l'occhio mezo uscir di testa;
Cade egli in terra di sangue uermiglio; (T 38v)

e dio el Mezquino una puñada al albardán e dio con él en el suelo (C 443).

Book 3 of Il Meschino describes the hero's visit to Mecca and the legendary ark of Muhammad. According to the original Tuscan version, the coffin levitates because it is made of iron, and the mosque in which it is placed is lode-stone. The quasi-scientific description of the magnetic stone has been retained in all its particulars by d'Aragona, but its coloration has been omitted by Hernández Alemán:

... calamita la quale è una pietra marina che ène di colore tra nnero et bigio e ène questa proprietarie chella tira il ferro a ssé per la sua friggidezza; (B 38v)

... Calamita, ch'è pietra marina
Tra nera e bigia, che se ui s'accosta
Il ferro, ouer s’ella gli s’auuicina
Per la frigidità c’ha in sé riposta
Tiralo a sé; (T 62r)

... piedra ymán la qual piedra tiene virtud de traer el hierro a sí, por su gran frieldad ... (C 534)

A final example of this type shows d’Aragona’s adherence to original Tuscan readings. In the Purgatory of Saint Patrick episode (Book 6), angelic beings warn the demons he is about to encounter will be his most formidable opponents:

non sono le fiere d’India et non sono li armatid’Arabia nè di Persia; (B 90r)

D’India non son le fiere; nè gli armatj D’Arabia, nè di Persia; (T 141r)

no pienses que son las sierpes, ni los grifos, ni animalias fieras con quien tú has peleado en las Indias, ni son los hombres armados de Arabia y de Persia ... (C 808).

This is a rare case in which the Castilian reading has been slightly expanded, making the versification’s conformation to the original wording all the more remarkable.

Since the Castilian translation is generally very faithful to the text as transmitted by the later Tuscan manuscript tradition and since the two extant Castilian editions do not present major variants between them, any deviance from the “original” narrative found in d’Aragona’s reworking becomes crucial. Readings which the versification shares with the Tuscan textual tradition can only point to her close working knowledge of such a version. D’Aragona’s reference to the “Spanish” book she has found indicates an awareness of the Castilian translation which was then more fashionable. Just as she chose to clothe her poem in the highest possible language (purest Tuscan, in accordance with Bembo’s theories), she must have felt a certain pressure to present her model according to the highest standards prevailing for the chivalric genre.

Conclusion

When considered alongside d’Aragona’s other works, the genre and form of Il Meschino reveal a hitherto unrecognized literary breadth and poetic competence. The preface to Il Meschino demonstrates a range of formative influences on her poetics beyond the expected Petrarchism, as well as a wider audience and more serious purpose for writing than to merely furnish an elegant literary entertainment for courtly gentlemen. According to her own testimony, d’Aragona numbered literate women of all classes and ages among her ideal readership, not just
the male clientele usually cited by modern critics. The Meschino versification argues for the poet's autonomous writing ability: she was able to produce an extended poem in ottava rima (an admittedly difficult rhyme) even before she moved to Florence and met Varchi. The presence of Guerrino among her works and its decidedly Ariostan style displays a hitherto unrecognized variety of registers: d'Aragona turned her hand quite successfully not only to the Petrarchan lyric and the prose dialogue, but to epic narrative as well.

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NOTES

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1 The Tuscan original, il libro chiamato el Meschino di Durazzo, lacks a viable edition and therefore must be studied in manuscript form. I wish to express my gratitude to the directors of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, the Biblioteca Riccardiana, and the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze for allowing me to examine the various Florentine manuscript exemplars of this text. Special thanks are due the director of the latter institution for allowing me to obtain a microfilm of a 1560 exemplar of d'Aragona's versification (St. Landau Finaly 143).

2 Surviving copies of the Castilian edition are extremely rare. Baranda Leturio's valuable collation of exemplars of the last two editions greatly facilitated this comparative study.

3 Masson assumed Il Meschino belonged to d'Aragona's Florentine years, hypothesizing that the poet chose the subject to "appeal to Eleanora [sic] de Toledo" and that she left Florence for Rome because "perhaps she had been disappointed over finding a wealthy patron for the publication of Guerrino" (123-24).

4 For an analysis of Florentine attempts to control prostitution under Cosimo I, see Brackett 290-95. Fines of the living prostitutes and properties of the deceased were used paradoxically to support the convent of the Convento.

5 Bongi was unable to locate the complete records of her trial.

6 Not surprisingly, this comment echoes that of the Tuscan originator of Il Meschino, who stated in his own preface: "Mi sono dilectato di cierchare molte storie novelle... trovay questa leggienda che molto mi piaque" (Oxford, Bodleian Library canon. ital. 27, 1r; hereafter, B).

7 For various definitions of the term "cortigiana," see Brackett 294n.

8 On Venier's "pupil/teacher" relationship to Aretino, see Aquilecchia 85-86.

9 The theorist Girolamo Ruscelli, mentioned above as one of d'Aragona's acquaintances, included the octave among the most difficult rhyme schemes and described those who selected it as "arditi, e valorosi ingegni" (Rosenthal, The Honest Courtesan 178). An investigation into the history and use of ottava rima by women poets would be a fascinating project: it may reveal d'Aragona's Meschino to have been a pioneering work in this area, predating better known examples by Laura Terracina and Lucrezia Marinelli.

10 For a discussion of this subject, see my "Un ignoto manoscritto."

11 This ms. is now bound in two parts: present-day Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fonds italien mss. 491 and 98. Its language and script shows the copyist to have been a Neapoli-
tan, clearly a professional scribe, who may have worked in the chancellery (De Marinis 1: 175-76). Another ms. recently come to light was copied by a Florentine noble, Tommaso di Domenico Guascioni, in Naples. Its date of 1462 furnishes proof of the text’s early transmission beyond Tuscany (Degenhart and Schmitt 1, pt. 2: 338-39). Formerly part of the Dyson Perrins collection, it is now in private hands.

12 The activity of translating as a preliminary exercise for aspiring poets suggests a practical reason for d’Aragona’s choice of this project. Such an activity would again place Il Meschino near the beginning of her career.

13 To facilitate citation, I shall use the following abbreviations: B = Oxford, Bodleian Library canon. ital. 27, Andrea da Barberino, Il libro chiamato il Meschino di Durazzo, branch A; R = Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ricc. 2226, id., Meschino, branch B; C = La Corònica, ed. Baranda Leturio; T = Tullia d’Aragona, Il Meschino . . . (Venezia: Sessa, 1560).

14 I have employed modern capitalization in passages transcribed from manuscripts; spellings are unretouched.

15 Two other Tuscan mss. (Ricc. 2266 and 2432) consistently use the spelling “Patifero.”

16 Ms. 16 is a rare example of a Meschino produced in the Veneto, as may be discerned by its language. This codex and that of Bergamo, Biblioteca Cívica MA 297, furnish valuable evidence of the text’s transmission to northeastern Italy prior to its first printing in 1473 in Padua. A thorough study of the contents of these two mss. with respect to the text’s early print tradition should be fruitful in illuminating the changes the text underwent from its manuscript to its printed form. I plan to conduct such an investigation in the future.

17 On the question of chivalric lexicon, see my The Chivalric “Histories”; and “The Language of Chivalry.”

18 This episode is discussed in my “Portrayal.”

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