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Why *A Play of Love* in 1534 London? John Heywood and Castiglione's *Libro del Cortegiano*: An Intertextual and Intercultural Hypothesis

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1. INTRODUCTION

John Heywood's *A Play of Love* was published by William Rastell in 1534, the last of the playwright's works to be printed by his brother-in-law, after *The Play of the Wether* in 1533. Both plays are part of the group of the author's three "debates", the other being *Wit and Witless*, which was never printed during the Renaissance. The remaining plays (*Johan Johan*, *The Pardoner and the Frere* and *The Foure PP*) go under the label of "farces", according to Maxwell (1946)¹. While many aspects of all the other plays have been studied (especially the religious sides of Heywood's satire in the latter two farces and the political relevance of *Wether*, by Johnson 1970, Axton & Happé 1991, and Walker 1991, respectively), *Love* still seems to hide some details from the critical consciousness of its readers². Some years ago

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¹ Reed (1926: 124) uses the word "trilogies" for the two groups. Maxwell's categories, though, are highly questionable because farcical elements are included in what he labels "debates", as well as dialogues of religious and philosophical content are to be found in the "farces". Peter Happé, to whom I am grateful for reading a first draft of this paper, points out that the word 'debate' may sound pejorative; in my study of Heywood's plays I also stress the inconsistency of such labels, especially when the high theatricality of some of the so-called 'debates' is taken into consideration.

² I am here concerned with the literary and textual aspects of the play rather than with its theatrical achievement, which has been studied elsewhere (cf. Axton & Happé 1991: 21-4, Mullini 1997: 66-70). Axton & Happé state that "Hunting sources for *Love* has

I detected traces of the neo-Platonic idea of love linking the text to Marsilio Ficino's *In Convivium Platonis De Amore Commentarium* (1484), underlining, though, that Heywood differs from the Florentine in his new consideration of woman's position as a subject and an object of love. In that same article I remarked that the ending of the play, with its Christian flavour, sounds "rather conventional, since religion [is] kept at a far distance from this wholly secular interlude" (Mullini 2000: 115). Now, after further reading and deeper thinking, I believe that the reason for this sort of ending (a prayer for universal love in the name of "that lovyng Lorde / Who to suffer passion for love was content", ll. 1566-7)³ may be due to Heywood's nearly total adherence to his Ficinian source, via such an impressive go-between as Baldassar Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. However it was not in Thomas Hoby's translation that Heywood might have read the book, but in its original Italian, since it is now well known that in 1530, i.e. only two years after its first edition in Venice, the volume was in England (see Hogrefe 1929-30, Gabrieli 1978, Burke 1987 and 1996).

This paper, a series of hypotheses rather than a demonstration, is based on surmises and insights, on hints and echoes, both of textual and of historical origin, even though no document is extant to prove real connections nor do any perfect textual parallels exist. It raises the distinct possibility that Heywood had access to *The Book of the Courtier*⁴, and that he found in it a way of focusing some of his reactions to contemporary issues.

2. POLYDORE VERGIL AND BALDASSAR CASTIGLIONE: TWO SPECIAL ITALIANS IN LONDON

In 1502 Polydore Vergil left Italy for England, leaving his country and especially his town, Urbino, behind, even if he returned there some times during his lifetime. In Urbino he died in 1555 (cf. *Dictionary of National Biography* and Hay 1949 and 1952). He was the papal legate in charge of collecting money for Pope Alexander VI first and then for Julius II at the court of Henry VII, as Cardinal Castelli's deputy, and was to become later the first historian of the Tudor dynasty. While in London, he became acquainted with John Colet and Thomas More: the latter he called "eques singulari virtute vir" (1555, Liber XXVII; edn.

so far proved fairly unrewarding and has shed no specific light on its date and context" (1991: 46). Both Axton & Happé and La Rosa (1979), though, have traced some relevant influences on the play, from Chaucer to Pico della Mirandola (through More's translation).

³ All quotations from *Love* are drawn from the Axton & Happé edition (1991).

⁴ In what follows the title of Castiglione's work appears in Italian because I discuss its possible circulation in England before Sir Thomas Hoby's translation.

1570: 676, ll. 39-40; ‘knight of excellent virtue’)⁵, the former he praised in a long passage (Liber XXVI: 618, ll. 21-2) which extols Colet’s many virtues (“erat enim homo continentissimus, qui semel in die cibum capiebat, non sitiēbat honores, non cupiebat opes, non quaerebat divitias”; he was a very temperate man who ate only once a day; he did not thirst after honours, did not desire power, did not ask for riches”). Colet’s praise is so complete as to include also a hint to the School of St Paul’s and to the flourishing state of English literary studies: “Ac ut Londinensis iuventus e Paulina schola multo est politior, sic tota Anglia, multi studiis & doctrinis dediti, perfecta literatura florent” (618, ll. 41-4; ‘And as the London youth coming out of St Paul’s school is much gentler, so is all England; many people, devoted to study and doctrine, shine for their perfect literature’).⁶

He was in England when Guidobaldo Duke of Urbino was honoured with the order of the Garter in 1504. The bestowing of the Garter happened by proxy: in 1506 an extraordinary messenger was sent by the feeble and sick Guidobaldo to London, Baldassar Castiglione “equitem honestum ac nobilem”, comments Polydore (Liber XXVI: 615, l. 38; ‘a noble and honourable knight’), who was given “possessionem Garterij ordinis” (l. 39; ‘possession of the order of the Garter’; cf. Hay 1949 and 1952, *passim*). Perhaps this was the first occasion on which Polydore heard or saw Castiglione, since the latter arrived at the court of Urbino some years after Polydore had left.

Hardly any document testifies to Vergil and Castiglione ever meeting, but it seems feasible that while in London Guidobaldo’s messenger met one of Guidobaldo’s most devoted subjects (Vergil’s devotion to his duke is attested by many witnesses, especially by the address to him as his patron in the first edition of *Proverbiorum libellus*, Vergil’s *Adagia*, published in Venice in 1498)⁷. Denistoun (1909, II: 468-9) reproduces an otherwise forgotten notice of Castiglione’s arrival at Dover in 1506 which ends by stating that the “Pope’s Vicecollector” together with others met the Italian embassy on its way from Dover to London, where Castiglione was “conveyed [...] to the Pope’s Vicecollector’s

⁵ I would like to thank my colleague, Girolamo De Vanna, whose precious copy of Polydore Vergil’s *Anglica Historia* I borrowed a long time ago and who did not mind my keeping the volume for an unreasonably long time. This and all the following translations from Latin and Italian are mine.

⁶ The 27th book of *Anglica Historia* was published only in the third edition in 1555, while the first (Basel, 1534) and the second (1546) included only the history of England up to Henry VII’s death (Book 26). The political and religious reasons for the withdrawal of the last book till 1555 are self-evident (cf. Hay 1949: 145; 1952: 17). Books 26 and 27 are translated in Hay ed. 1950.

⁷ For the controversy which arose between Vergil and Erasmus (and the following exchange of correspondence) about the primacy in writing a collection of proverbs, cf. Hay 1952 and Ruggeri 1992.

hows, wher he was lodged”. It does not seem difficult to understand that the Pope’s Vicecollector and Adriano Castelli’s “deputy in the collection of papal revenue” as Vergil calls himself in the manuscript version of his *Anglica Historia* (Hay 1952: 4) must be the same person. Strangely enough the document transcribed by Dennistoun, though, goes unmentioned in Hay’s biography of Polydore Vergil. Given this identity for granted, not only did Castiglione meet Polydore Vergil, but they also lived under the same roof for a while.

When in London, Vergil lived “with some style in St Paul’s Churchyard and was a member of Doctors’ Commons, at this time [about 1510] a club for learned men which included Colet, Tunstall, Grocyn, More and Ammonio”⁸ (Hay 1949: 147; 1952: 19). Vergil’s name appears in the Register of Doctors’ Common among its first members (before May 1511; Davis 1931: 38). According to his own declaration, Thomas More joined the Common on 3 December 1514 (Davis 1931: 39); therefore, if not before and in other circumstances, Vergil and More may have met in that place, where a consort of divines and lawyers found “a building, with a hall suitable for meals taken in common, and perhaps other amenities – residential chambers, a library” (Davis 1931: 33). There, or elsewhere, he also met Erasmus during the great humanist’s visits to London (Squibb 1977: 57)⁹.

Apart from all his other occupations and tasks¹⁰, the role played by Vergil must needs have been that of a reminder in England of his original country and, in Urbino, of the friendship which linked the latter to the English court¹¹.

From all these historical fragments there emerges an interesting picture not only of the general links between the English and Urbino courts at the beginning of the sixteenth century, but also of the mediating cultural role played by Polydore Vergil in London. In the capital, actually, he was in touch with the most excellent intellectuals of the time, all of them sharing their humanist interests during a period when the political and religious problems were still far ahead. At the same time the early presence of Baldassar Castiglione in England, who in 1508 also wrote a long letter to Henry VII in memory of the recently deceased duke Gui-

⁸ Cf. *Letters and Papers Henry VIII* 1895: 79 n. 24: in 1539 Polydore Vergil is mentioned as being four and a half years late in the payment of the annual rent of his tenement in St Paul’s Churchyard.

⁹ The correspondence between Erasmus and Polydore Vergil is collected in Ruggeri 1992. The first witness of this exchange goes back to 23 December 1521.

¹⁰ For Polydore Vergil’s complex and long life and especially for his coming and going between England and the Continent, the compelling reference is to Hay 1952 (cf. also *Calendar* 1867: 516 for Vergil’s correspondence with the Marquis of Mantua in 1511; *Letters and Papers Henry VIII* 1864 for the documents relating to Vergil’s imprisonment in 1515 and *Letters and Papers Henry VIII* 1882 about the permission granted to him to travel to Italy in 1533). Here I am interested only in those biographical details that may refer to Vergil’s role as a cultural intermediary between the Tudor and Urbino courts.

¹¹ The relationships between England and Urbino up to 1508 are well documented in Dennistoun 1909 (vol. II) and Clough 1967.

dobaldo¹², justifies the fame and the relevance acquired by his *Book of the Courtier* in later times, when, through Castiglione's portrait of the Urbino court, the English were also reminded of a period of their recent past. It is not surprising, therefore, that as early as 1530, just two years after its Venetian publication, *Il libro del Cortegiano* circulated in England, it being something written by a personage 'well known' to the London court and, perhaps, 'sponsored' by Polydore Vergil, that citizen of Urbino who was the living connection between the two cultural realities.

2.1. *Il Cortegiano before* The Book of the Courtier

From a letter written by Edmund Bonner to Thomas Cromwell, we know that in 1530-31 at least one copy of the recently printed *Il libro del Cortegiano* was in London (cf. Hogrefe 1929-30). It is possible, though, that other copies circulated in England, and – even if we do not have a catalogue of Polydore Vergil's library – that one of these might have been in the papal vicecollector's possession. And why might it not be conjecturable, then, that, given the long-established acquaintance between Vergil and More, the Italian treatise was at least known in the More circle?¹³ Sir Thomas Elyot, who drew from Castiglione even if he never mentioned this as a source of his *Book named the Governour* published in 1531, was a friend of More's. In her detailed analysis of the echoes of *Il Cortigiano* in Elyot's work, Carla Gabrieli notes that "the influence deriving from the Italian text of *Il Cortegiano* is part of the early 16th-century English cultural history. It cannot be denied, however, that the circulation of the text in Italian enjoyed a relatively limited success in the educated circle of the court. [...] The reading of *Il Cortigiano*, therefore, was confined to a small community of privileged people" (1978: 230; my translation).

My hypothesis is that, among these privileged readers, there might have been Thomas More, at that time Lord Chancellor, after Cardinal Wolsey's fall in 1529¹⁴, who was certainly interested in treatises dealing with courtly behaviour and with the education of courtiers¹⁵, and John Heywood, member of More's family.

¹² The Italian translation of the letter, originally published in Latin in Fossombrone in 1513, is contained in Castiglione 1978, I: 162-98. See also Clough 1981, XIII: 772-83.

¹³ In a letter written by William Budé to Thomas More on 23 May 1521, Polydore Vergil is affectionately called "Polygraphum" (More 1947: 252). On his turn, Vergil - writing to Erasmus on 17 February 1525 - names Thomas More as "totus meus" ['very dear to me', but also 'completely on my side'; Ruggeri 1992: 68].

¹⁴ Wolsey's fall must have been warmly welcomed by Polydore Vergil, who had been imprisoned by the cardinal in 1515. Actually Book 27 of his *Anglica Historia* shows how revengeful Vergil was in drawing Wolsey's picture.

¹⁵ Another, if later, witness of the presence of *Il Cortegiano* in England is Sir Thomas Wyatt's "critique of the *Courtier*" in his *Satire addressed to Sir Francis Bryan* (ca. 1538): see Starkey 1982.

3. HEYWOOD'S A PLAY OF LOVE AND IL CORTEGIANO

John Heywood was part of the More circle and had been receiving a royal pension for his services at court since 1528. In 1530 he was still called “one of the king’s servants” and, in 1533, the King gave him a gilt cup as a New Year’s gift (Reed 1926: 42-4; Axton & Happé 1991: 3-4). Heywood’s family links with More derived from his marrying Joan Rastell, born of the marriage between John Rastell and More’s sister Elizabeth. In other words, Heywood’s wife was More’s niece. It is well known that Heywood wrote plays for the Henrician court and that he was influenced by his wife’s uncle’s religious writings and by the culturally rich milieu of More’s circle. His first play, *Wit and Witless*, shows clear signs of Erasmian derivation; *Johan Johan* is an adapted translation of the French *Farce du Pasté*; *The Pardoner and the Frere* (a broad adaptation of another French farce) together with *The Foure PP* gives voice to the contemporary religious controversy about the Reformation and the abuses of the Catholic Church; *The Play of the Wether* is a satire of Henry’s court. Among all these, *A Play of Love* does not seem to find a topical collocation. Sources of the play have been found, as I have mentioned, but none of them gives a complete reason for both the choice of the topic and its development in the text. The basic question about this text is what is summarised in the title of this paper: “Why *A Play of Love* in 1534 London?”, that is, even if the date of composition is certainly previous to the year of publication, what is the relevance of such a play to English culture at the end of the third decade of the sixteenth century, or at the beginning of the fourth?

3.1. *The Ending of the Play*

The full title of the play reads: “A Play of Love. A new and a mery enterlude concernyng the pleasure and payne in love. Made by John Heywood, The players names: A man, a lover not beloved. A woman beloved not lovyng. A man, a lover and beloved. The vyse, nother lover nor beloved”. These names, apart from No lover nor loved, are all traceable in Ficino as relevant ‘characters’ in a love relation (cf. Mullini 2000: 114). In the interlude, each character claims to be superior in something: Lover not loved and Loved not loving quarrel about the supremacy of their respective love pains; Lover loved and No lover nor loved dispute who is the happier of the two. Impartial umpires are appointed (the two ‘strange’ couples judge each other, respectively), until the closure, when all forms of love are considered inferior – even if pleasurable – to divine love.

Ficino’s comment on Plato’s *Convivium* gave rise to a long series of treatises on love and on behaviour (cf. Patrizi 1984), of which *Il libro del Cortegiano*

is certainly the apex. Particularly important for the purpose of this paper – that is, to trace possible intertextual influences of continental treatises about neo-Platonic love on John Heywood – are Pietro Bembo’s *Gli Asolani* (1505) and Mario Equicola’s *Libro de natura de amore* (1525). These two works deal with the neo-Platonic idea of love stressed by Ficino, arriving at the same final exaltation of divine love. In Ficino, the last chapter (the seventeenth of Oration VII) is entitled “Quomodo agenda sunt gratiae spiritui sancto, qui nos ad hanc disputationem illuminavit atq; accendit” (‘How the Holy Ghost must be thanked, which inflamed us and gave us light for this reasoning’), and, at the end of the short chapter, the author states that

Amorem vero diuinorum bonorum omnium largitorem, non amare non possumus. Nos autem amorem hunc adeo nobis proprium ea mente colemus ut veneremur sapientiam & potentiam admitemur, ut amore duce totum, ut ita loquar, Deum habeamus proprium, ac totum amoris flagrantia diligentes, toto etiam Deo amor [sic] perpetuo fruamur. (Ficino edn. 1576: 1363)

[In sooth we cannot but love love, the giver of all divine goods. Let us worship this love which is so gracious to us, so that we venerate its wisdom and be afraid of its power, in order to have all God gracious to us and, by honouring all of him with the flame of love, also to enjoy all God with everlasting love.]

In Bembo’s work, divine love is praised by the Saint Hermit, who says that love is “della vera bellezza disio; e la vera bellezza non è umana e mortale, che mancar possa, ma è divina e immortale” (Bembo 1505, modern edn.: 149; ‘desire of true beauty; and true beauty is not human and mortal, which may die, but is divine and immortal’).

Equicola, on his side, concludes his treatise, which is also an analysis of love literature up to his time, in the following way:

Per la qual cosa concludiamo, doue è mancamento, & desiderio, doue non è cosa permanente, oue è nocumento, oue è pazzia, quiui esser non possa beatitudine. Resta dunque quel esser beato, che ama cosa ottima per ottima conosciuta, riamato quella fruisce senza noia, senza dubbio di mutatione, questo è solo Dio, il qual è sempre, & immutabile, da altri non dipende, sempre proficuo, amato sempre riamato, dator unico di perfetta beatitudine. (Equicola 1606: 317v)

[For all this we conclude that where there are deficiencies and desire, where nothing is permanent, where there is damage, where there is madness, here there cannot be beatitude. Therefore that human being is blessed who loves what is best and known as best; when requited, that best he enjoys without nuisance, without fear of mutability, and this only God can be, who always is, and unchangeable, independent of others, always profitable, always requiting when loved, the only giver of perfect beatitude.]

In the last chapters of *Il Cortegiano*, Book 4, Castiglione charges Pietro Bembo

– here one of the characters in the dialogue (cf. Arbizzoni 1983) – with the task of concluding the long dissertation on love which occupies most of Books III and IV. Bembo’s inspired exaltation of love of beauty and perfection reaches its utmost in chapters LXIX and LXX, where worldly love gives way to eternal and heavenly love, from imperfection to perfection:

This is the beawtye unseperable from the high bountye, whiche with her voyce calleth and draweth to her all thynges: and not onlye to the indowed with understandinge giveth understandinge, to the reasonable reason, to the sensuall sense and appetite to live, but also partaketh with the plantes and stones (as a print of her self) stirring, and the natural provocation of their properties. So much therefore is this love greater and happier then others, as the cause that stirreth it, is more excellent. And therefore, as commune fire trieth golde and maketh it fyne, so this most holye fire in soules destroyeth and consumeth what so ever there is mortall in them, and relieveth and maketh beautyfull the heavenlye part, whyche at the first by reason of the sense was dead and buried in them. [...]Thys is the fyrie bushe of Moses: the divided tunges of fire: the inflamed Chariot of Helias: whych doobleth grace and happynesse in their soules that be worthy to see it, whan they forsake thys earthly basenesse and flee up into heaven. (Book IV, ch. LXIX)¹⁶

So far, these three fundamental works are not very different in their conclusions, but chapter LXX of *Il Cortegiano* also contains an explicit prayer, which is not present either in Bembo’s *Asolani* or in Equicola’s *Libro de Natura de Amore*:

Therefore vouchsafe (Lorde) to harken to oure prayers, power thy selfe into oure hartes, and wyth the bryghtnesse of thy most holye fire lyghten oure darkenesse, and like a trustie guide in thys blynde mase, showe us the right waye: reforme the falsehoode of the senses, and after longe wandringe in vanitye gyve us the ryght and sounde joye. Make us to smell those spirituall savoures that relieve the vertues of the understandinge, and to heare the heavenlye harmonie so tunable, that no discorde of passion take place anye more in us. Make us dronken with the bottomlesse fountain of *contentation* [It. *contentezza*] that alwaies doeth delite. (Book IV, ch. LXX; my italics)

Following perhaps the pattern of the Italian treatise, Heywood’s play also ends with a prayer. It rejects all disputes about supremacy (the “discord of passion” in *Il Cortigiano*) (those which render the text theatrical and not only a debate in dialogic form for four characters) and, by using Castiglione’s own word, stresses the pleasure of “contentation”, which is possible only on a ghostly level:

¹⁶ All English translations from *Il libro del Cortegiano* are taken from Thomas Hoby’s version (*The Book of the Courtier*, 1561), even if – as mentioned above – this was not what John Heywood read.

LOVER LOVED. Thus not we foure but al the worlde beside
Knowledge them selfe or other in joy or payne,
Hath nede of contentacion for a gyde;
Havinge joy or payne, content let us remayne.
In joy or payne of other fee we disdaine;
Be we content welth or woo, and each for other
Rejoyse in the tone and pyte the tother.

LOVER NOT LOVED. Syns such contencion may hardly acorde
In such kynde of love as here hath ben ment,
Let us seek the love of that lovyng Lorde
Who to suffer passion for love was content,
Wherby his lovers that love for love assent
Shall have in fyne above contentacyon
The felyng pleasure of eternall salvacyon.

Which Lorde of lordes, whose joyfull and blessed byrth
Is now remembred by tyme presentyng
This accustomed tyme of honest myrth,
That Lorde we besече in most humble meanyng
That it may please hym by mercyfull hearyng
Thestate of this audyens longe to endure
In myrth, helth, and welth, to graunt his pleasure. (ll. 1557-77)

Admittedly, early modern plays often end with a prayer: in Heywood's case *Witty and Wittless* and *Four PP*, besides *Love*. The peculiarity of this prayer consists, though, in its unity and coherence with the main and sole theme of the play: spiritual love is introduced as the supreme aspiration of all human love and as giver of the "contentation" which is said to be the only possible joy in life.

It is evident that this type of prayer is not exactly the same as the one in *Il Cortegiano* and that here the emphasis is laid on a more Christian vision than in Castiglione and all the other neo-Platonists, but this may be due to the different nuances of the so-called Northern Renaissance (cf. Levi 1974: 24-6; Carlson 1993). Besides that, one must keep in mind that *Love* is a play performed in front of an audience. Therefore, the rules and conventions of the dramatic genre are at work: the audience must be greeted and asked a *plaudite*, and – as is often the case in early English plays – the situation or the time of performance is stated (here Christmas).

The mention of Christmas as a time of "honest myrthe" underpins Axton & Happé's hypothesis about the date of performance of the play. They date it at Christmas 1529, after Wolsey's fall and the beginning of More's chancellorship, in an Inns of Court environment (given the frequent use of legal language; 1991: 46). I would like to argue that the date of composition should take into account the first possibly traceable presence of *Il libro del Cor-*

tegiانو in England, too, and this not only because of the particular ending of the play, but also for the position of women highlighted in the text, which is far from the usual contemporary misogyny.

3.2. *Loved not loving: The Woman in the Play*

As I maintained elsewhere,

In dealing with a person who is loved, but does not reciprocate his/her lover, Ficino is particularly strict and violent in his judgement, since he considers that this person is “guilty of murder, even more is a thief, murderous, and sacrilegious”(Oration II, ch. VIII, my translation). When one considers the role of *Loved not loving* in the play, it is possible to realise that Heywood [...] goes beyond his own misogynist ideas when he does not let the woman’s pains to be judged inferior to [her antagonist] *Lover not loved*’s. On the contrary, the woman is given the opportunity to amply express her feelings. (Mullini 2000: 114)

Neither does Pietro Bembo in his *Asolani*, nor Equicola in his *Libro de Natura de Amore* reserve such a treatment to women. But something similar, on the contrary, is to be found in Book III of Castiglione’s work. In it is included a real “book of good women”, in which Gaspar Pallavicino and Giuliano de’ Medici dispute to complete the portrait of the perfect gentlewoman. It is Giuliano who stresses the accomplishments of a lady of the palace:

I will that this woman have a sight in letters, in musike, in drawinge or peinctinge, and skilfull in dausninge, and in divising sportes and pastimes, accompaniynge with that discrete sobermode and with the givinge a good opinion of herselfe, the other principles also that have bine taught the Courtier. (Book III, ch. IX)

In the following chapter, Giuliano praises the female sex for its political skills:

Do you not know that Plato (which in deede was not very friendly to women) giveth them the overseeing of Cities, and all other marciall offices he appointeth to men? Thinke you not there were manye to be found that could aswell skill in ruling Cities and armies, as men can? (Book III, ch. X)

Giuliano is the defender of women once more in Book IV, ch. LXII, apropos of the possibility for women to attain the perfect love just indicated by Bembo in the previous chapters:

In this point men shall nothinge passe women, for Socrates him selfe doeth confesse that all the misteries of love which he knew, were oped unto him by a woman, which was Diotima. And the Aungell that with the fire of love imprinted the five woundes in

Saint Francis, hath also made some women woorthy of the same print in our age.

Even if in the very last chapter the delicate question “whether women be not as meete for heavenlie love as men” is left unresolved, the general attitude towards women in *Il Cortegiano*, then, appears to overcome contemporary misogyny, at least as far as noble women are concerned¹⁷. And this lesson from Castiglione’s work may have passed to Heywood, who decided to make his only woman in the play not the killer of her lover – who suffers desperately from unrequited love – but a person free to refuse this lover’s love, without being necessarily judged his cruel destroyer. A woman able to choose, and free to express her disdain towards what the text portrays as an executioner “Wyth an exe in hys hande” (l. 131):

Love hym? Nay, as I sayd, must I stryght chose
To love hym or else my hede here to lose,
I knowe well I coulde not my lyfe to save
Wyth lovyng wyll graunte hym my love to have. (ll. 958-61)

And in the ending prayer, Loved not loving is not excluded from the general aspiration towards heavenly love and the possibility of attaining it.

4. FINAL HYPOTHESIS

It is difficult – and ultimately uncertain – to assert that John Heywood read, or knew, Baldassar Castiglione’s *Il libro del Cortegiano* “in Ytalion”. Nevertheless this very book might have been the spring that pushed him to write *A Play of Love* in the way he did, even if other sources – including a French ‘connection’ – are at work as found out by scholars (cf. Axton & Happé 1991: 46-7). In a Henrician London burdened by the political and religious problems of the royal divorce (and of royal love), the influence of a lay book which extolled

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that, as a sign of the difference between southern and northern Humanism, the lay pastimes and accomplishments described by Castiglione do not fit into the educational programme Thomas More envisaged for his own daughters. Writing to William Gonell (one of his children’s tutors) More suggested that “they [his children] will learn in particular what end they should propose to themselves in their studies and what is the fruit of their endeavours, namely the testimony of God and a good conscience” (22 May, 1518?; More 1947: 122-3). Margaret, More’s favourite daughter, was well learned in Latin and Greek and also translated Erasmus’s comment on the Lord’s Prayer (*A Devout Treatise upon the Paternoster*, published in 1526). In *Utopia*, however, More repeatedly stresses the role of music as a pleasant and profitable pastime, even if nothing is said about a special relationship of music and women (More 1516: 65, 74, 90).

Christian love via a humanist debate seemed perhaps an elegant and indirect way to hide and overcome the otherwise dangerous topicality of the subject matter of the play. “Contentation” is the message, with no winner in a competition that sees woman on a level with man. Man – as a matter of fact – is portrayed still according to the old cliché of Petrarchan and tormented love, the same predicament that Romeo will painfully experience in the first act of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, while woman acquires a new and positive position.

In any case *Il Cortegiano* was present in England, having been brought there by one of the many travellers or a merchant (among others, Girolamo Vergil – Polydore’s brother – might be mentioned, who lived for a long time in England where he still was in 1526; cf. Hay 1949: 144).

The historical circumstances concerning the intercultural relationships between England and Italy – with Polydore Vergil in London and so many witnesses of Castiglione’s 1506 visit still living – may have favoured a prompt and positive reception of *Il libro del Cortegiano* among the well educated members of the More circle, just a few months before More’s disgrace. Possibly Heywood (who read French as is testified by his translation of the *Farce du Pasté*) may have read the latest literary novelty dealing with the Urbino court – Castiglione’s book – in Italian, or heard of it from somebody who understood Italian, belonging – as he did – to a highly literate “network of readers” (Burke 1996: 151). If much of this is only a surmise, thematic and intertextual relationships seem to suggest more than that.

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