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Richard Wistreich

»Real Basses, Real Men« – *Virtù* and Virtuosity in the Construction of Noble Male Identity in Late Sixteenth-Century Italy

The prime category of identity for the ruling class as a social group in sixteenth-century Europe and on which they staked their claim to rule, was nobility.¹ At the beginning of the century the nobility still saw their status not so much in terms of a birthright but rather as a quality that needed constantly to be re-affirmed through virtuous actions, an echo of chivalric romance.² In that a fundamental uniting factor amongst male members of the nobility was military, the prime location for their acts of structured violence was war, or its stylised versions, the duel or the tournament. In the course of the century, changing circumstances, particularly in the ways in which warfare was carried out and the political formations that were served by it, limited the possibilities for men to enact affirmations of nobility on the battlefield and there was an increasing tendency for the noble class to elevate birth and riches over deeds as the foundation of their status, and helped, meanwhile, to insulate the class from creeping entristment. Nevertheless, the process was a gradual one, and the military image continued to play a significant part in the construction of male nobility. Likewise, the performance of virtuous actions continued to signify in the affirmation of nobility, even if the location for these performances was, increasingly, the court. When warriors are also courtiers, they participate in a wide-ranging curriculum that includes many non-violent types of social discourse such as conversation, dancing, games and music-making. But to what extent do codes derived from militarism define the structures of this curriculum and its enactment? In particular, how does one of the major differences between the court and the field of war – the presence of women – affect the way that warrior-courtiers perform?

In his classic conduct book, *Il duello*, Girolamo Muzio emphasised the necessity for regular and continuous repetition of deeds of valour in order for the *gen-*

1 See Kristen Neuschel, *Word of Honor: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, 1989), p. 16.

2 See, for example, Ellery Schalk, *From Valor to Pedigree: Ideas of Nobility in France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Princeton, 1986), especially pp. 202–5; Schalk cites Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* (Paris, 1580), vol. 2, ch. 7: »La forme propre, et seule essentielle, de noblesse ... c'est la vocation militaire.«

tilhuomo to authenticate his status and also the need to remain single-mindedly devoted to soldiering even in peace-time:

... and it is required of a man to make honourable prooffe of his person more than once, and to continue long in the warres, and to be known for a good Souldier, and to live as well in time of warre as of peace honestlye, and in such sorte that it may be perceived he intendeth onely to bee a Souldier, and to make that his principall butte and drift.³

This emphasis on the need for continuous demonstrations in order to make »prooffe of his person« begs the question of whether the verification of a warrior's »person« – his very identity – might be dependent on such reaffirmations. Taking up Judith Butler's precept that the gendered body has no ontological status at all except for the »repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal to produce the appearance ...of a natural sort of being«,⁴ we might extrapolate from this and from Muzio's »requirements«, and say that *without* the continuous performance of war-like deeds which generate honour, which can collectively be termed an individual's *virtù*, the subject likewise has no ontological status as a noble or indeed, as a male.

Near the opening of William Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, Aeneas asks the love-sick Troilus why he is »not afield«, and Troilus replies:

Because not there: this woman's answer sorts,
For womanish it is to be from thence.
(Act 1, scene 1)

The implication is that unless he is in the field actively being a soldier, Troilus's gender defaults, as it were to the female, that he has no existence as a male. Linda Levine in her essay about the same play, suggests that only in the continuous performance of masculinity, which in the case of Troilus, and following Muzio's precepts, means specifically in the guise of a warrior, can a man enact his maleness; the natural corollary of which is that when not enacting or performing this role, he may no longer be »male«.⁵

- 3 Girolamo Muzio, *Il duello del Mutio Iustiopolitano con le risposte cavalleresche* (Venice, 1571), libro III, fol. 81r: »... et è necessaria che avolere esser fra i cavallieri ricevuto, si facciano opere degne di cavallieri, Si vuole adunque piu di una volta haver fatto honorata pruova della persona. Et esser lungamente stato in su la guerra, & esser per soldato, & per buon soldato conosciuto;« translation: *Vincentio Saviolo his Practise. In Two Bookes. The First Intreating of the Use of the Rapier and Dagger. The Second, of Honour and Honorable Quarrels* (London, 1595), sig. Ff3.
- 4 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990; rev. ed., 1999), p. 43.
- 5 Laura Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-Theatricality and Effeminization 1579–1642*. Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture 5 (Cambridge, 1994), p. 7.

»Nobility« and »honour« are virtually interchangeable terms in sixteenth-century usage, and it is through the transaction of the currency of honour that male members of the nobility constructed not only the form and functioning of their society, but also their own individual identities. Put another way, honour – which accrues to individuals – is generated and functions only in the context of the collective, as part of a process of exchanges between members of a closed and self-referring society. In her exhaustive examination of sixteenth-century concepts of honour, Arlette Jouanna has defined it as »the effect produced in the consciousness of another by the spectacle of a quality or action conforming to a socially approved model«.⁶ Jouanna adopts a fruitful semiotic model in her analysis of the process by which honour is generated: »Honour, in effect only exists in the relation between an actor and a witness; it is essentially an inter-subjective reality, the fruit of a meeting between an action and a public. If there is no public, it is not possible to have honour«.⁷

Thus the innate authentication of honour (that with which one is born, or which is expressed by estate or role) is inextricably intertwined with the extrinsic signs, which are functions of the esteem that comes as a result of deeds enacted by oneself and by others: esteem must be won through witnessed acts of *virtù* or by reputation. Two different sixteenth-century attempts to define honour capture well the way this process works on each side of the equation. The first, from Louis Ernaud, demonstrates the role of the *regardant* or witness:

You ask me advisedly what I mean by Honour. I'll tell you: it is a certain recognition imprinted first in the minds of men, then represented by gestures and words going from mouth to mouth and giving testimony of the *vertu*, excellence and loyalty of someone.⁸

and the second, from Guillaume du Vair, focuses on the deep satisfaction which accrues to the *regardé* or actor when the dynamic system functions:

6 Arlette Jouanna, »La notion d'honneur aux XVI^e siècle«, *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 15 (1968), pp. 607–8: »l'effet produit dans la conscience autrui par le spectacle d'une qualité ou d'un acte conforme à un modèle socialement approuvé.«

7 Ibid., p. 608: »L'honneur, en effet, ne se conçoit que dans la relation entre un *regardé* et un *regardant*: c'est essentiellement une réalité intersubjective ... L'honneur ... est le fruit d'une rencontre entre un acte et un public; si l'on supprime le public, il ne peut plus y avoir d'honneur.«

8 Louis Ernaud, *Discours de la noblesse et des justes moyens d'y parvenir* (Caen, 1585), fols. 15^v–16^r, quoted in Jouanna, *ibid.*, p. 616: »On me dira, qu'appellez-vous doncques Honneur, à bon escient? Je vous le diray. C'est une congnoissance certaine, empreinte premierement dans les esprits des hommes, puis représentée par gestes et paroles, allant de bouche en bouche, et rendant tesmoignage de la vertu, excellence et preud'homme de quelqu'un«; translation by Jeanice Brooks.

True honour is the brilliance of a beautiful and virtuous action, that rebounds to our credit in the sight of those with whom we live, and through reflection within ourselves, brings us evidence of what others think of us, which results in great satisfaction of the soul.⁹

So honour is, amongst other things, a »certain recognition« or a »brilliance«: in other words, something which is essentially subjective, and only has substance in terms of an interchange of emotional and visual signs and effects between parties who recognise the same signs.

So what constitutes a »beautiful and virtuous action« when you are slugging it out on a battlefield or laying siege to a town, rather than dashing around on a white charger slaying dragons and rescuing princesses? Whatever it is, the important thing is to be sure that it is seen by the right people at the right time, and that they then report what has been done. As Baldassare Castiglione says in the *Book of the Courtier*:

... where the Cortyer is at a skirmishe, or assault, or battaile upon the land, or in such other places of enterprise, he ought to worke the matter wisely in separating himself from the multitude, and undertake his notable and bould feates which he hath to do, with as little company as he can, and in the sighte of noble men that be of most estimation in the campe, and especially in the presence and (if it wer possible) beefore the very eyes of his king or greate personage he is in service withal; for in dede it is mete to set forth to the shew things well done.¹⁰

In the context of the actual horror, violence and sheer confusion of the real battle situations in which soldiers found themselves in the sixteenth century, this seems like the gauchest fantasy of an »armchair warrior«: the courtier who just happens to »find himself« at a battle or in a skirmish, who should »discretely arrange« to stand apart from the crowd, and to ensure that if possible, the king himself should be watching before he does some »notable and bold feats«. And yet there is evidence for the fact that the choreographing of such ideal moments

9 Guillaume du Vair, *La philosophie morale des stoïques* (Paris, 1598), p. 266, quoted in Jouanna, *ibid.*, p. 616: »Le vray honneur est l'esclat d'une belle et vertueuse action, qui rejallit de nostre conscience à la vue de ceux avec qui nous vivons, et par une reflexion en nous-mesmes, nous apporte un tesmoignage de ce que les autres croyent de nous, qui se tourne en un grand contentement d'esprit«; translation by Jeanice Brooks.

10 Baldassare Castiglione, *Il libro del cortegiano*, ed. Giulio Carnazzi (Milan, 1987), p. 123: »che ritrovandosi il cortegiano nella scaramuzza o fatto d'arme o battaglia di terra o in altre cose tali, dee discretamente procurar di appartarsi dalla moltitudine e quelle cose segnalate ed ardite che ha da fare, farle con minor compagnia che po ed al conspetto de tutti i più nobili ed estimati omini che siano nell'esercito, e massimamente alla presenza e, se possibil è, inanzi agli occhi proprii del suo re o di quel signore a cui serve; perché in vero è ben conveniente valersi delle cose ben fatte«; translation: *The Book of the Courtier from the Italian of Count Baldassare Castiglione: Done into English by Sir Thomas Hoby anno 1561*, ed. W. E. Henley (London, 1900), p. 113.

was regarded as possible even on a battlefield, which, despite the enormous technological and strategic changes that occurred during the course of the century, could nevertheless still serve as much as a stage for displays of chivalric fantasy as the court palace itself. Likewise, the deeds done there will always be much more likely to impress themselves on the minds of the witnesses if they are extraordinary and executed with panache.

A good example of an entire military action which seems to have fulfilled this precept successfully was the siege and capture of Calais from the English by François, Duke of Guise in the first days of January 1558. A number of witness reports are good examples, too, of the way that the generation of honour through Louis Ernaud's »gestures and words going from mouth to mouth and giving testimony of the *vertu*, excellence and loyalty of someone«. The duke ensured that his actions would come as a surprise (both to his enemies and to his compatriots) and would take place in full view, as it were, of his king. Guise flouted accepted conventions by launching an attack in the depths of winter, taking his opponents by surprise and then besieging the town not from the landward side but from the sand dunes by the sea, thereby displaying notable virtuosity as a strategist. On 1 January 1558, he arrived with 29,000 troops, and within three days the artillery was in place. A breach was made in the seaward wall in the remarkably short space of two more days, and Guise's troops swarmed into the town to take possession of England's last foothold in Continental Europe.¹¹ Guise had not only adopted an unusual and tricky strategy but had also achieved his goal with remarkable ease. The episode has all the hallmarks of a conscious manifestation of two related Renaissance concepts normally associated more with the production of artistic artefacts than with military actions, *difficoltà* and *sprezzatura*.

The ability to be able to overcome difficulty in the exercise of *virtù* with apparent ease was famously expressed by Castiglione in the word *sprezzatura* which was elevated as a *sine qua non* of ideal courtly accomplishment. Both *difficoltà* and *sprezzatura* contribute to the production of what the art historian John Shearman identifies as the essential component of mannerist art: *meraviglia*,¹²

11 See David Potter, »The Duc de Guise and the Fall of Calais, 1557–58«, *English Historical Review* 118 (1983), pp. 481–512, and C. S. L. Davies, »England and the French War, 1557–9«, *The Mid-Tudor Polity c. 1540–1560*, ed. Jennifer Loach and Robert Tittler (London, 1980), pp. 159–187.

12 John Shearman, *Mannerism: Style and Civilization* (Harmondsworth, 1967), pp. 21, 144–6. See also Maria Rika Maniates, *Mannerism in Italian Music and Culture, 1530–1630* (Chapel Hill and Manchester, 1979), pp. 214–5.

and it was precisely this word which the Ferrarese ambassador Giulio Alvarotti used when he described the Duke of Guise's achievement in taking Calais:

And this aforesaid [François, Duke of Guise], climbed up himself, and going with the vanguard in such a manner ... that the king is satisfied that the facts and the circumstances constitute a miracle.¹³

The entire assault had taken only six days and immediately the full machinery of »reputation generation« was set in motion: even before he had secured the town, Guise was already writing letters reporting his victory, and foreign ambassadors soon communicated the news to their respective employers. On 19 January Henry II made a triumphant entry into the captured town. Guise was hailed throughout Europe, and the victory became part of his mythology. The entire process from inception through execution to acclamation was a model of *meraviglia*, whose absolute pivotal central focus both in terms of moment and of place might be said to have been the first breach in the wall and the first attacker to enter it. And the man who had managed, in Castiglione's words, »to work the matter wisely in separating himself from the multitude« and »in the sight of noble men that be of most estimation« and to race into the breach and up on to the walls of the town with a flag in his hand, was a Neapolitan captain, a member of the minor nobility trying to make a name for himself as an exile in a foreign land, one Giulio Cesare Brancaccio. Known to music historians not as a soldier, but as the most famous bass singer of the sixteenth century, he had had, nevertheless, an extraordinarily long and rich military career that took him to points as far afield as Tunis, Algiers, Germany, France, all over Italy and even London.¹⁴

On 5th February 1558 the Farnese ambassador to Rome, Vincenzo Buoncambi, reported that »they say that the King of France has written with his own hand that he received Calais from Giulio Cesare Brancaccio, who was the first to climb onto the walls and that it is greatly noticed.«¹⁵

13 Modena, Archivio di Stato, Ambasciatori di Francia, Busta 34, Giulio Alvarotti to Duke Alfonso d'Este II, Paris, 9 January 1558: »... e questo detto si levorno da se stessi, et andorno fra tutt'i primi di maniera ... che'l Re et del fatto et delle circonstante et satisfatto ch'è una meraviglia.«

14 Principal sources for Brancaccio's biography are Benedetto Croce, »Un capitano italiano del cinquecento: Giulio Cesare Brancaccio«, B.C., *Varietà di storia et al letteraria e civile* (Bari, 1949), pp. 57–78; Umberto Coldagelli, »Brancaccio, Giulio Cesare«, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 13 (Rome, 1971), pp. 780–4, and Richard Wistreich, *Giulio Cesare Brancaccio and Solo Bass Singing in Sixteenth Century Italy* (Ph.D. diss. Royal Holloway College, University of London, 2002) (forthcoming).

15 Parma, Archivio di Stato, Carteggio Farnesiano estero, Roma, Busta 22: Vincenzo Buoncambi to the Duke of Parma and Piacenza, Rome, 5 February 1556/7, given in Croce, *Un capitano*

Giulio Cesare Brancaccio's bravado and sheer sense of the theatrical which the »photo-opportunity« on the walls of Calais demonstrate, may also have characterised his musical performances. His exceptional abilities were first noted in 1545, when he was reported as having »done miracles« with his bass voice in a comedy performed with a mixture of gentlemen amateurs and professionals in Naples.¹⁶ Without doubt, Brancaccio's singing abilities went way beyond even the somewhat idealised amateur level imagined by Castiglione's model courtier. Indeed, even without a great deal of direct concrete evidence, there is no reason to doubt the assessment of Vincenzo Giustiniani, writing in the 1620s, who credited Brancaccio with being one of the founders of a new style of solo singing, that in retrospect, can be seen to have ushered in the baroque age of affective vocal virtuosity.¹⁷

An interesting detail of Giustiniani's description of the abilities of Brancaccio and two other basses was that »they all sang bass with a range of twenty two notes and with a variety of *passaggi* new and pleasing to the ears of all«. »Twenty two notes« seems to be a very precise figure to find in writing that is otherwise short on concrete information; Giustiniani was himself a music-lover, but not an expert, and his information, intended to enable cardinals to hold conversations with appropriate authority on the subject of music, was in fact gleaned from listening to other dilettantes. It is thus interesting to find the identical figure in another »Discorso sopra la musica« by the Anconan cornetto player, Luigi Zenobi, (written around 1600) to an as yet unidentified prince, offering extensive and highly informative concrete suggestions about what to look for when choosing court musicians. A bass, amongst other things,

must have a *trillo* and a polished *tremolo*, and a voice that has the same timbre in high and low range; nor may he be called a real bass unless he has a compass of twenty two notes of the same timbre throughout; otherwise one will call him a forced tenor who through perpetual singing and screaming, has achieved equal

(cf. fn. 14), p. 66: »Dicano che il Re di Francia ha scritto di sua mano che riceve Calès da Giulio Cesar Brancatio, il quale è stato il primar di montar sopra la muriglia et che si è segnalato grandamente.«

16 Antonino Castaldo, *Dell' istoria di notar Antonino Castaldo libri quattro ne' quali descrivono gli avvenimenti più memorabili succedenti nel Regno di Napoli sotto il Governo del Vicerè D. Pietro di Toledo e de' Granveza* (Naples, 1769), pp. 71-2.

17 Vincenzo Giustiniani, *Discorso sopra la musica de' suoi tempi* (1628), in Angelo Solerti, *Le origini del melodramma* (Turin, 1903, reprint Hildesheim, 1969), p. 106: »L'anno santo del 1575 o poco dopo si cominciò un modo di cantare molto diverso da quello di prima, e così per alcuni anni seguenti, massime nel modo di cantare con una voce sola sopra un istrumento, con l'esempio ... del sig. Giulio Cesare Brancacci ... che canta ... un basso nella larghezza dello spazio di 22 voci, con varietà di passaggi nuovi e grati all'orecchie di tutti.« See also Wistreich, Giulio Cesare Brancaccio (cf. fn. 14), especially ch. 4: »Il basso del Brancazzo«.

force in the high and in the low registers and who always carries with him a certain crude resonance, which appears beautiful and fine to an ignoramus, but ugly and faulty to a connoisseur.¹⁸

What trope could the two writers Giustiniani and Zenobi then be invoking with their twenty two notes? My own suggestion is that on the so-called Guidonian hand, which represents all »possible« pitches for singing, the compass between the *la* at the top of the highest hard hexachord and the *ut* at the bottom of the lowest encompasses precisely twenty two notes. If a singer can cover all twenty two, he might, then, be said to be able to sing »all of music«, capable, as it were, of performing alone a piece of music conceived in four or more parts, which would be a *meraviglia* indeed.¹⁹

What were Brancaccio's singing performances then like? At a technical level, it is very possible that he was an exponent, perhaps the original exponent of a style of performance called vocal *basso alla bastarda* which, in brief, is a way in which one person alone can perform as a soloist a piece of music composed in polyphony. Instead of four or five or more singers or instrumentalists sitting around the table and each performing one of the voices of a piece in ensemble, just one singer with a huge vocal range improvises a solo version that takes in fragments of all the parts, bass, tenor, alto and soprano. The harmonic skeleton of the piece forms an accompaniment played simultaneously on the lute or other suitable instrument, and we know that Brancaccio had a special theorbo lute constructed in 1580 with extra low diapasons.²⁰ A typical *basso bastarda* perfor-

18 Bonnie Blackburn and Edward Lowinsky, »Luigi Zenobi and his Letter on the Perfect Musician,« *Studi Musicali* 20 (1994), p. 82: »Colui, che canta il Basso, se canta in compagnia, è obligato a saper tener salda la sua parte, giusta, e sicura: salda quanto al cantare, giusta quanto alla voce, sicura quanto al sapere, e se vuole alcuna volta passeggiare: deve appostare il tempo, che le tre parti tengan saldo, e conoscere i luoghi, dove può fare il passaggio. Perchè il passeggiare al Basso, quando gli salta l'humore, senza conoscer molto bene il tempo, et il luogo di ciò fare, senza dubbio è argomento di crassa ignoranza. Deve poi conoscere, e sapere quali siano li passaggi proprij da Basso, perchè il farli da Tenore, da Contralto, e da Soprano, è argomento del già detto chiarissimo. Deve poi haver trillo, e tremolo netto, e voce nell'alto e nel basso eguale tondezza di tuba; nè si potrà dire realmente Basso, se non va ventidue voci alto, e basso con eguale tondezza di tuba.«

19 Andrew Hughes, »Solmization«, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, second ed. (London, 2001), vol. 24, pp. 644–9. See also Richard Wistreich, »La voce è grata assai, ma ...: Monteverdi on Singing«, *Early Music* 22 (1994), pp. 7–20.

20 Modena, Archivio di Stato, Particolari, Busta 227, Giulio Cesare Brancaccio (Ferrara) to Cardinal Luigi d'Este (Venice), 26 February 1581, given in Elio Durante and Anna Martellotti, *Madrigali segreti per le dame di Ferrara: Il manoscritto musicale F. 1358 della Biblioteca Estense di Modena* (Florence, 2000), vol. 1, p. 21. See also Marco Bizzarini, *Marenzio. La carriera di un musicista tra Rinascimento e Controriforma* (Brescia, 1998), p. 40.

Figure 1: Cipriano de Rore, »Ben qui si mostra il ciel vago e sereno«, arranged for solo bass and continuo in Angelo Notari, *Prime musiche nuove* (London, William Hole, 1613), p. 21 (continued on next pages)

Maugale a + Peri ai Ghisane di Rore.

Ben qui si mostra il ciel Bonqui si mostra il ciel vago e sereno, no,

qui ri = don le ro = se, ei lie ti fiori Spi = ran do a matio - doni Desti d'hu

The image shows a handwritten musical score on two systems. Each system consists of a single five-line staff. The notation is a form of early modern musical shorthand, likely a simplified version of the Italian 'basso continuo' notation. The notes are represented by various symbols, including circles, dots, and lines, some of which are grouped together. The lyrics are written in Italian and are aligned with the musical notation. The first system of music ends with a double bar line. The second system continues the piece. The handwriting is in a cursive style typical of the early 17th century.

Handwritten musical score for a vocal piece by Richard Wistreich. The score is written on two systems of staves. The first system contains two staves with lyrics in German. The second system also contains two staves with lyrics. The music is written in a cursive, handwritten style. There are some corrections and markings throughout the score.

First system lyrics:
"del-li al dolce can = to meno; Ma ria uen-tu-ral fin Ma ria uen-tu-ral"

Second system lyrics:
"fi-nis = so ne sor ge (b) mortuamente Es-se-tri-fic-ri-er be-um-pla = ri = dvan = gae;"

Unde uenit, On de ue = nen si dal = ceai pet = ti pur = de, Bîlcorso a = ue = men = te Pien

Eco

di al ce de si: meruio #: lanque ma = ren = do lan = = que Pien di dulce de si: me =

ren do ma ren = do lan = que ma ren = do lan = = que.

mance, more or less improvised on the spot, requires the performer to know the original piece inside out and involves thrilling leaps between the extremes of the register, flashes of brilliant fast passage work and risky excursions into the falsetto: it sounds extraordinary and indeed it was.²¹ One of the few surviving graphical representations of vocal *basso alla bastarda* performance is the version of Cipriano de Rore's madrigal, »Ben qui si mostra il ciel«, which is the final piece in Angelo Notari's *Prime musiche nuove* (1613, see Figure 1).

Such a performance style depends not only on voice but also an exuberance and a sense of risk that is positively mannerist in its aspiration to *difficoltà*. It also depends for its effect more on the power of subjective effects on the body and emotions of the witnesses than on any intellectual awareness of the technical structure of the composition being transformed. We get a glimpse of this from the description of such a performance by a rather shocked conservative who, referring to a well-known passage in Gioseffo Zarlino, criticises *basso bastarda* performance because of the way it subverts the musical architecture of the composition. His description nevertheless also hints at the strangely thrilling horror that transfixes the helpless bystander-cum-listener:

... [consider] the presumptuous audacity ... of those who perform the low part, the bass, [who] forget – not to say are ignorant of the fact – that it is the base and the foundation on which the whole song was built. And by not standing steadfast and firmly as the building requires they go on up adding fanciful passaggi allowing themselves the sheer pleasure of going so far as, not only passing into the Tenors' part but even getting as far as the Contraltos. And if that wasn't enough, going almost as far as the Sopranos, clambering as though to the top of the tree, from where they can't get down again without breaking their necks.²²

A poem written by Torquato Tasso around 1580 described the specifically kinaesthetic effects of Brancaccio's voice on those who heard his performances:

21 The standard view of *basso alla bastarda* is that it was primarily a style of performance on the viola da gamba, although there is a body of evidence which indicates that it was also a vocal practice. The most recent surveys of *viola bastarda* are Veronika Gutmann, »Viola bastarda – Instrument oder Diminutionspraxis?«, *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 35 (1978), pp. 178–209, and Jason Paras, *The Music for the Viola Bastarda*, ed. George and Glenna Houle, *Music: Scholarship and Performance* 13 (Bloomington, 1986); a discussion of sources relating to vocal *bastarda* is in Wistreich, Giulio Cesare Brancaccio (cf. fn. 14), ch. 4: »Il basso del Brancazzo«.

22 Ercole Bottrigari, *Il Desiderio, ovvero de' concerti di varij strumenti musicali. Dialogo di Alemanno Benelli* (Venice, 1594, reprint Bologna, 1969), pp. 50–1: »quella prosontuosa audacia ... (e vedete di gratia sin dov'è giunto questo capriccio, & questa frenesia) che essercitano la parte grave, e bassa, non si ricordando, per lasciar di dir non sapendo, che ella è la base, & il fondamento, sopra il quale è stata fabricata conviene, che vada sossopra, si pongono sù grilli de' passaggi, & si lasciano da questo particolare diletto loro tirar tanto oltre, che non solamente passano nella parte de' Tenori: ma giungono à quella de' Contr'alti: & non li bastando, quasi à quella, de' soprani: inarborandosi di maniera alla cima, che non ne possono scendere, se non à rompi collo.«

Mentre in voci canore
 I vaghi spirti scioglie
 Giulio, tempra in ciel l'aure, in noi le voglie.
 Si placa l'aura e 'l vento
 Placido mormorando
 Risuona e van tuoni e procelle in bando:
 Un interno contento
 N'accorda anco ne' petti
 E i membri acqueta da' soverchi affetti.

While in tuneful words / Giulio disentwines his aspiring thoughts / he tempers breezes in heaven, and in us, desires. / The air is pacified, and the wind / peacefully murmuring / sounds forth, and thunder and storms are banished: / an inner contentment / harmonises us in our breasts / and calms the imperious emotions of our limbs.²³

The therapeutic and transformational effect of Brancaccio's voice on the bodies of his witnesses is tangible. Tasso also reminds us that vocal performance becomes efficacious only in terms of a two-sided process – there is the singer and there is »us« – »Giulio tempers breezes in heaven and in us, desires«. This interdependence of voice and ear to render the sound efficacious mirrors the process of honour generation which I explored earlier.

Brancaccio tried his best to live up to the Castiglionian ideal of a nobleman as expressed by Count Lodovico: »I judge the principall and true profession of a Courtyer ought to be in feat of armes ... and al other good qualities for an ornament thereof«,²⁴ and even when he was an old man and no longer in what we would call active service, he still regarded himself as a soldier; his singing, in principle at least, was just one of the »ornaments« of courtiership. In 1580, after a couple of false starts, Brancaccio joined the court of Duke Alfonso II d'Este at Ferrara, where he imagined he had been accepted because of his long military experience and reputation as an expert on fortifications and tactics. Nothing, however, could have been further from Alfonso's intentions. The duke was engaged in a radical project to turn the already renowned performances by a number of the female members of his court into something even more extraordinary and marvellous. In order to achieve this, he basically had to subvert all the traditional unspoken protocols of music-making in the court by members of the nobility, including recruiting virtuoso singers and then artificially ennobling them through arranged marriages, and essentially passing off highly trained

23 Torquato Tasso, »Sopra la voce del Brancaccio«, *Le Rime di Torquato Tasso*, ed. Angelo Solerti, vol. 3: *Rime d'occasione o d'encomio* (Bologna, 1900), p. 269; translation by Ronald Martinez.

24 Castiglione, *Il libro* (cf. fn. 11), bk. 1, ch. XVII, p. 72: »Ma per venire a qualche particolarità, estimo che la principale e vera profession del cortegiano debba esser quella dell'arme«; translation by Th. Hoby (cf. fn. 11), p. 48.

professional singers as »courtier's wives«. The *concerto delle dame* created huge prestige for his court.²⁵ In Brancaccio's case, Alfonso appropriated his extraordinary singing ability and commodified it, so that now, instead of Brancaccio occasionally spontaneously singing as an organic facet of the performance of his total *virtù* as a warrior-nobleman, it was now required that he do so on demand, and often, as a member of the cast of the carefully directed *soirées* to which Duke Alfonso invited selected guests. This in turn created a serious challenge to long-accepted restrictions and boundaries designed to avoid any risk to virility posed by over-indulgence in what was considered to be the effeminising effects of music, and especially of singing.

A fundamental protocol of Castiglione's prescription of the conditions for music-making by nobles implicitly acknowledged its gender implications. It is an activity associated with *otium* or leisure, which is the opposite of the world of *neg-otium*, which naturally includes military action. *Otium* is not only desirable, but also beneficial, for men of war when it is employed in therapeutic pursuits including music-making.²⁶ Just as the appropriate arena for military action is a male one, so then the proper place for music is amongst women:

Nowe as touchyng the time and season whan these sortes of musike are to be practised: O beleve at all times whan a man is in familiar and loving company, having nothing elles to doe. But especiallye they are meete to bee practised in the presence of women, because those sightes sweeten the mindes of the hearers, and make them the more apte to bee perced with the pleasantnesse of musicke, and also they quicken the spiries of the verye doers.²⁷

There was a well-established set of doctrines governing music-making by warrior-noblemen derived from classical precedent. The most complete compendium of this received lore can be found in a *Discorso sopra la musica* by the Flor-

25 See Wistreich, Giulio Cesare Brancaccio (cf. fn. 15), especially ch. 5: »poco preggio di soldato, ma anche di Cortegiano«; Anthony Newcomb, »Courtesans, Muses, or Musicians? Professional Women Musicians in 16th-century Italy«, *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition 1150–1950*, ed. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (Urbana, 1986), pp. 90–115; Laurie Stras, »Musical Portraits of Female Musicians at the Northern Italian Courts in the 1570s«, *Art and Music in the Early Modern Period: Essays in Memory of Franca Camizim*, ed. Katherine A. McIver (London, 2002) (forthcoming).

26 As expressed by Castiglione, *Il libro* (cf. fn. 11), p. 127: »Venga adunque il cortegiano a far musica come a cosa per passar tempo.« (»Therefore let our Courtier come to shew his musicke as a thing to passe the time withall«; translation by Th. Hoby, cf. fn. 10, p. 117.) On the concept of *otium* in the Renaissance, see Brian Vickers, »Leisure and Idleness in the Renaissance: the Ambivalence of *otium*«, *Renaissance Studies* 4 (1990), pp. 1–37, 107–54.

27 Castiglione, *Il libro* (cf. fn. 10), p. 128: »Il tempo poi nel quale usar si possono queste sorti di musica estimo io che sia, sempre che l'uomo si trova in una domestica e cara compagnia, quando altre facende non vi sono; ma opra tutto conviensi in presenza di donne, perché quegli aspetti indolciscono gli animi di chi ode«; translation by Th. Hoby (cf. fn. 10), pp. 118–9.

entire man of letters, Francesco Bocchi. Called on to advise a nobleman about whether his son should indulge in music and if so, how much, he weighs up all the pros and cons with copious examples from classical precedent. On the plus side is the therapeutic value of moderate »use« of music and its traditional powers and benefits, set against which are the serious dangers of over-indulgence, which he characterises as primarily threatening to masculinity. At one point, he characterises this in terms of a metaphor in which music is a sort of drug or poison that interferes with the flow of masculine energy:

And who does not know, that he who abandons himself in his study of music, blocks the opening to the operation of *virtù* and to the seriousness of life and dries up the fount of valor and glory, and wrapped up in the deliciousness of singing, consigns strong and virile action to oblivion?²⁸

This echoes a passage from a more famous volume of courtier science, Stefano Guazzo's *La civil conversatione*:

Seeing then that in the conversation with women is chiefly founde this honest pleasure which serveth to comfort, yea, and to take from us greivous passions which oppresse our heartes, we must take heede that we bee not so wrapped in it, that wee never come out of it, lest thereby wee distemper the minde, and effeminate it in suche sorte, that it loose that courage which is proper to man.²⁹

Thus too much company of women and also immersion in singing have the same effect – the nobleman will be as though »poisoned«, become »wrapped up (*ravvilupato*)« and, to return to the analogy I proposed near the beginning, will cease to perform his virility and default to femininity.

Bocchi's final conclusion is a rather unconvinced concession to allowing controlled indulgence. Just as the healthy body can tolerate a small amount of poison mixed in with a healthy diet, he argues, so will a small amount of musical activity probably not do any harm: »Music in itself is commendable, but con-

28 Francesco Bocchi, *Discorso ... sopra la musica, non secondi l'arte di quella, ma seconda la ragione alla politica pertinente* (Florence, 1581, reprint Bologna, 1977), p. 24: »Et chi non sà, che colui, il quale tutto nello studio della Musica, si abbandono, serra l'entrata alle operazioni di virtù, & alla gravità della vita, & secca il fonte del valore, & della gloria, che ravvilupato tra' canti deliziosi si pone in oblio le operazioni forte, & virili?«

29 Stefano Guazzo, *La civil conversatione* (1584), ed. Amedeo Quondam (Modena, 1993), vol. 1, p. 173: » Poichè adunque nella conversazione delle donne si fiora principalmente quell'ozio onesto, il quale è alto a sollevarci dalle gravi passioni che ci opprimono il cuore, bisogna anco avvertire che lo starvi continuamente involto non sia cagione di stemperare l'animo e di liquefarlo in modo che venga a perdere quell'ardire che è proprio dell'uomo.« Translation: *The Civile Conversation of M. Steeven Guazzo, the First Three Books Translated by George Pettie, anno 1581* (London, 1925), vol. 1, p. 245.

tinuous usage of it is damnable, and listening to it and singing it secretly is like a sweet poison that creeps into the soul to murder valour.»³⁰

Bocchi's little volume was published in 1581, the same year in which Brancaccio first began regularly to perform with Duke Alfonso's new ensemble. The old soldier at first appears to have been happy to exercise this part of his *virtù* in the private spaces of the chambers of the Duchess Margherita Gonzaga d'Este or the duke's sister, the Duchess of Urbino. It would appear that his particular type of virtuoso performing style was not incompatible with the expression of his warrior *virtù*, but as his performance became incorporated into the female-dominated *musica secreta*, whether out of simple jealousy or for more complex reasons, he began to grow uneasy. The Florentine ambassador Horatio Urbani played down Brancaccio's complaints about being treated like a *musico* or professional, writing that »he is only required to perform in a secret company of women«.³¹ It looked as though Brancaccio's ebullient and powerful singing style had been captured and the warrior-singer subsumed into a feminised performing environment.

Torquato Tasso was a fellow Neapolitan friend of Brancaccio, who had known the poet's father back in their joint service of Ferrante Sanseverino, Prince of Salerno. The poet clearly admired Brancaccio's singing but also understood the potential dangers that arose in the new and untried circumstances of the *musica secreta*, in which the warrior sang together with women in sophisticated displays of vocal virtuosity. In an extended six stanza poem he pictures Brancaccio performing together with the two female members of the group, Anna Guarini and Livia d'Arco, singing a dialogue representing the conflict between Apollo and Amore, which is essentially about self-control and free will in love.³² Apollo speaks through the voice of Brancaccio while the two women sing for Amore, who mixes up their voices so that the double sweetness of their singing causes every sick soul to swoon and desire only to languish. »But«, asks

30 Bocchi, *Discorso* (cf. fn. 28): »Così la Musica verso di se è commendabile, ma l'uso continuo dannoso, & nel udire, nel cantare celetamente, quasi un dolce veleno sottentra nell'animo per uccidere il valore.«

31 Florence, Archivio di Stato, Archivio Mediceo del Principato, filza 2900, in Elio Durante and Anna Martellotti, *Cronistoria del concerto delle dame principalissime di Margherita Gonzaga d'Este* (Florence, 1982; rev. ed., 1989), pp. 140–1: »...ma non è già da credere che a lui fosse detto di havere a servire per musico, come forse con tuttaciò non si può dire che serva, poichè non l'essercita se non in secreta compagnia di Dame.«

32 Tasso, *Le rime*, vol. 3 (cf. fn. 24), pp. 270–2, »A Giulio Cesare Brancaccio per il concerto de le dame a la corte di Ferrara«.

Tasso, »how is it that you, Brancaccio, manage to prevent this poison from descending to your heart: what is it that protects you?«³³

Mentre tu dolce canti
E dolce a te risponde
La vaga coppia, Amore il suon confonde
E la doppia dolcezza
Trae sì dolce armonia
Che di languir desia
Qual alma inferma è di languire avvezza.
Ma perchè nel tuo core
Il venen non discenda,
Chi fia che ti difenda?
Altro diletto forse ed altro amore,
E de' tuoi propri vanti
Gioia e vaghezza e sdegno
Di piacer folli e di femineo ingegno?

While you sweetly sing / and sweetly to you / the desiring couple answers, Love confounds the sounds / and the sweetness doubled / draws forth such sweet harmony that any infirm soul, to languishing inclined, / comes to crave that melting pain; / But so that into your heart / the poison should not descend / what shall it be defends you? / Another delight it may be, another love, / both the joy and delight in your own success, / and disdain for mad pleasures and feminine wiles?

Tasso imagines Brancaccio, even in the middle of a performance charged with dangerously enervating eroticism, keeping his head clear by concentrating on soldiering. But he warns that just as Amore was able with arrows to ensnare the mighty Apollo in hopeless love, so Brancaccio is in severe danger from the sound of the women's voices and also from their glances (which we know from Vincenzo Giustiniani's description of the performances of the *concerto delle dame* to have been an intrinsic part of their act). Tasso pictures Brancaccio as Ulysses:

Signore, Amor t'ha colto
Tra novelle sirene,
Quai non so s'udir mai le nostre arene.
Gli orecchi al suon, deh, chiudi
Ed apri gli occhi al sonno,
Chè lusingar te 'l ponno
Detti e vezzi soavi insieme e crudi.

Sire, Amore has placed you / amid new sirens / such as I do not know our land ever to have heard. / Ah, close your ears to the sound / and open your eyes to sleep / Since they can entice you / with words and glances both sweet and cruel.³⁴

The poet begs Brancaccio to stop up his ears and eyes which are the conduits for a poison that will, as in Bocchi's image, emasculate him. Apollo may win the

33 Ibid., p. 271; translation by Ronald Martinez.

34 Ibid.

battle with Amore as long as it remains a singing contest, because Brancaccio's singing is virtuosic and powerful, but the danger is that Brancaccio himself will be ensnared by the insidious allurements of the women, their singing and their beauty and fall prey to their »dolcezze mortali.«

Mentre in sì dolci accenti
Canti in dolce tenzon, impiaga il core
Altrui co' detti e te co' guardi Amore
...
Perché mentre il bel canto
Quindi alternato e quinci
Suona e risuona, tu le donne vinci
E riman' vinto da' begli occhi intanto;
...
Ahi, lusinghiero volto,
Ahi, voci insidiose,
Ove dolcezza Amor mortali ascose.

While in such sweet notes / in sweet contest you sing, Love wounds the others' hearts / with words and you with looks / ... / For while the beautiful song / from here alternating and from there / sounds and resounds, you defeat the ladies, / yet you remain defeated by their beautiful eyes; / ... / Oh enticing faces, Oh insidious voices wherein Amore makes heard deathly sweetness.³⁵

Tasso may well have been expressing in this poem a general uneasiness about Duke Alfonso's almost obsessive interest in the performances by his *musica secreta*; he may have seen the Duke as already »poisoned« by his over-indulgence and the attendant »emasculatation« that had an all-too-real manifestation in Alfonso's inability to father an heir, which in turn would mean the termination of Este rule in Ferrara. The poet perhaps recognised in Brancaccio a warrior-nobleman of the old school who was in danger of being dragged down into the same impotence, and he counsels him to either flee the court altogether or at least

... t'inaspri tanto
Sdegno e 'n sì dure tempre,
Che per dolcezza il cor non si distempre.

embitter yourself [with] so much / disdain and in such hard tempers / that the heart is not distempered through sweetness.³⁶

In fact, Brancaccio, had already been reported as having expressed his anxiety and dissatisfaction with the »tanto musica« of the court in 1581 and he reiterated this with greater force in an aside in a dialogue written in 1585

35 Ibid., p. 272-3.

36 Ibid., p. 273.

extolling the urgent necessity of mounting a campaign against the Turks, to which nobody was prepared, even for one hour, to give the attention that they happily gave »per musiche ò poesie, ò altre simili delectationi«. ³⁷ In the event, Brancaccio chose to follow Tasso's advice, and engineered his own dismissal from the court in 1583. Denied permission to enact his soldierliness – if only by talking of war – Brancaccio found himself restricted to exercising only one part of his *virtù*, repeating performances as a singer in a strictly feminised space. Unable to repeat the performance of his masculinity, he felt his very existence disappearing. A few days after he had left Ferrara he wrote disconsolately back to one of his colleagues:

I can no longer live in this world because so much wickedness rules in it. ... I have left behind my life, or at least part of my honour; Dear God help me, because I do not know what I should do with the last remaining bit of my life until I arrive at that place whereto I am called and expected with infinite desire. ³⁸

37 Giulio Cesare Brancaccio, *Ragionamento di Partemio et Alexandro sopra il modo di far la guerra al Turco*, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS R 105 supp., fol. 41^r.

38 Modena, Archivio di Stato, Archivio di Materie, Letterati, Busta 11, Giulio Cesare Brancaccio (Padua) to unknown recipient, 3 August 1583: »Io non posso più vivere al mondo per tanta sceleragine che regna in esso; ... *Nostro Signor* m'aiuti ch'io non so più che farmi per passar la vita finche arrivi dove son' chiamato et aspettato con' infinito desiderio.«