Sirani, Iole and Protofeminism in Early Modern Bologna

Heather Elizabeth White

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ABSTRACT

Sirani, Iole and Protofeminism in Early Modern Bologna

Heather Elizabeth White
Department of Comparative Arts and Letters, BYU
Master of Arts

Elisabetta Sirani (1638-1665), a Bolognese artist, significantly contributed to the Italian protofeminist tradition through her three depictions of the classical figure Iole. These images are drastically different than other depictions of the time period because Sirani shows Iole as an isolated figure removed from her turbulent relationship with Hercules. By focusing on Iole as an individual, Sirani allowed Iole to be seen away from the male gaze; in doing so, Iole encompassed masculine characteristics while maintaining her sovereignty and femininity. Sirani’s paintings of the strong and confident Iole are clear evidence that not only was Sirani inspired by the receptive environment in which she was raised, but she was also actively empowering women through her art and advancing the protofeminist tradition in early modern Italy.

Keywords: Elisabetta Sirani, Protofeminism, Male Gaze, Early Modern, Iole, Omphale, Bologna
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DEDICATION

To my Mom and Dad, without whom I would accomplish nothing
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Introduction

In her short life during the mid-Seicento, painter and printmaker Elisabetta Sirani (1638–1665) significantly contributed to the Bolognese School of painting. She was fortunate to be a native of Bologna, where female education was promoted. Moreover, a significant amount of receptivity for women artists already existed in this important Italian city before Sirani started her career. As a result, the progressive attitudes in Bologna sustained and supported Sirani through her many achievements. Nevertheless, Sirani, herself, was also very progressive in her original approach to subject matter—particularly in relation to her female figures. Specifically, her three depictions of the mythological figure Iole (Figures 1, 2, and 3) display Sirani’s unique artistic interpretations; they also reveal her protofeminist mindset that has heretofore been debated among scholars.

“Protofeminism” is a term describing the philosophical theory that predates modern concepts of feminism. Such a concept is useful in describing attempts at female empowerment through art and literature during the early modern era. Some art historians, like Mary Garrard, have argued that Sirani did not push hard enough against patriarchal boundaries in her art to categorize her as an advocate of women. Although her professional success is recognized, some maintain that Sirani’s conservative style did not represent a strong female voice or furthered artistic development and instead simply emulated masculine values, particularly those of Guido Reni (1575-1642). However, other feminist scholars, like Babette Bohn and Adelina Modesti, contend that she was not only imitating her male contemporaries, but was adding her own artistic

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critique of Baroque subjects in her own individual style. In conjunction with this thesis, such arguments suggest that her original approach, in and of itself, is sufficient evidence for consideration of the artist as a protofeminist. This position will be significantly supported here through a particular analysis of Sirani’s empowering treatment of Iole in three separate paintings.

Research on Sirani is expanding and therefore following the trend of growing scholarship in feminist art history. This scholarship is aimed at balancing the sexual biases that previously permeated much art historical research by looking at women artists and art from a feminist perspective. Although investigation into early modern Italian women and Sirani is growing, more work still needs to be done. Only in recent years has Sirani gained more attention as an artist of historical significance. In the past, she was dismissed as one of the many insignificant followers of Reni to work in Bologna. Her reputation was further damaged because a large number of

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mediocre works that followed the style of Reni were falsely attributed to Sirani. The fame she held during her lifetime, her large catalog of work, as well as a survey of her subtle and elegant pictorial style in accurately attributed works initiated a reevaluation of the artist’s significance.

My thesis seeks to fill some of the voids in research by connecting the life of Sirani to the larger existing Bolognese and Italian protofeminist tradition and by exploring her unique artistic interpretation of a singular antique heroine.

In order to accomplish this task, this thesis will be composed of four sections. The first section explores the protofeminist tradition that occurred in Italy during the early modern era. Some of the most prominent examples of influential women and their cultural contributions will be highlighted to show this existing trend. This will then lead to exploring the general tradition of female empowerment in Bologna, where a receptive environment allowed many women, including Sirani, to pursue education and careers.

Building on this context, section two will specifically explore the life and development of Elisabetta Sirani. It will include a synopsis of her education, training, and patronage. This discussion of her artistic development will aid in the interpretation of important signifiers in her work. Furthermore, an introduction to her patrons will give added understanding to the seeming popularity of her subjects among both sexes throughout Italy.

The third section follows the evolution of the ancient Greek characters Iole and Omphale. Iole was desired by Hercules, but her father refused to allow the two to marry. As a result, Hercules invaded Iole’s city, and took her into servitude. Omphale was the Queen of Lydia and Hercules was her slave for several years. Although these two women have different stories,

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6 Otto Kurz stated “the list of paintings to be found under her name in museums and private collections and the list of those paintings which she herself considered as her own work, coincide only in rare instances.” Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 100.
Sirani chose to combine characteristics of both into a singular individual. Knowing the consistent patterns and subtle changes in the literary history of these two mythical women gives a basis to understanding Sirani’s visual interpretation.

Finally, the fourth and last section will specifically analyze Sirani’s three depictions of Iole. These images of powerful and active representations of women clearly demonstrate the artist’s desire to endow Iole with a narrative of her own, separate from her relationship with Hercules. Through such analysis, and via comparisons with other contemporary depictions of the myth, it will clearly be demonstrated that Sirani was interpreting these women from a strong and independent female perspective that significantly altered the meaning of the story and the view of the historical character Iole.

**Protofeminism in Italy and Bologna**

The protofeminist tradition in Italy began several centuries before the birth of Sirani. The acts of these women did not create a sweeping suffrage or equality movement, but these accomplishments planted seeds that formed a feminist consciousness.7 Tracing this consciousness in the art and literature of the early modern era and beforehand shows a definitive development of a pattern advocating for female equality in Italy.8 The art and literature created in Italy during this time proved that women clearly had a voice that they asserted through their creative endeavors. I will highlight and discuss key figures and their output in the Italian

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7 Gerda Lerner defined a feminist consciousness as the “awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group” and the need to “provide an alternate vision of societal organization in which women as well as men will enjoy autonomy and self-determination.” Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy*. Women and History, Vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 14.
8 Overall, more of the available literature was written by men, as there was a higher literacy rate among men at that time. However, there are letters, poetry, dialogues, treatises, and plays by women that have survived. Much of that has been made available and translated by the series “The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe” published by the University of Chicago Press, the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies in Toronto, and Iter Press in conjunction with the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.
protofeminist trend and explore the receptive environment of Bologna to show how Sirani is an extension of these traditions.

One of the first to initiate the trend of empowering women was Christine de Pizan (1365–1430). Born in Venice, she was perhaps the first woman to make a living through writing, which as a widow she counted on to support her three children. Although she first gained attention with the aristocracy for writing romantic ballads, by the early 1400s she gained a reputation of advocating for women. This is traced to the debate now referred to as the Querelle des femmes, or the “Women Question.” Pizan solidified her argument about the cultural and social restraints against women in her published work, *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames (The Book of the City of the Ladies)* (1405). With the immediate aim to oppose the mistreatment of women, this protofeminist work allowed her to respond to misogynistic accusations and defend women.

She accomplished this aim by constructing her work to loosely follow the structure of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De Mulieribus Claris (Of Famous Women)* (1361-1362). Pizan’s work was, like Boccaccio’s, a recorded history of mythological and allegorical women but with the added goal of empowering women. Pizan began the work by wondering “how…so many different men…[were] so inclined to express…so many wicked insults about women.” With this statement, she clearly identified that she recognized the prejudices that men held against women. In examining her own life and experiences, she could not find support to favor or

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9 Her father and grandfather were both educated in the sciences at the University of Bologna. Her family comes from Pizzano, a town just southeast of Bologna.


12 Historian Gerda Lerner aptly notes that this is “the first time in written record, we have a woman defining the tension every thinking woman has experienced—between male authority denying her quality as a person and her own experience.” Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy*, Women and History, Vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 258–259.
warrant these insults. With that conclusion guiding her, Pizan questioned the traditions set in place by men and defended the worthiness of women. One way she showed the worthiness of women was to reinterpret the lives of condemned women. By looking at the lives of historic women from a female perspective, Pizan represented them in a more favorable manner by reinterpreting the biographies of women customarily considered disreputable. Through her writing, Pizan unapologetically praised the worth of women and offered an alternative view—a female view—of traditional history. In so doing, she helped establish the existence of protofeminism in Italy.

Even though writing and fighting for the recognition of a woman’s value did not create a greater feminist movement, it helped spark the feminist consciousness that slowly changed women’s sense of self during the Renaissance. This consciousness led to Italy producing more female authors like Cassandra Fedele, Olympia Morata, and Laura Cereta. These women pioneered education, attained knowledge equal to prominent men, and wrote in response to the “Women Question,” where they defined issues related to the societal limitations placed on women. Following the example of these women was the Venetian author and poet Moderata Fonte (1555–1592). Her work, *Il merito delle donne (The Worth of Women)* (published posthumously in 1600), recharged the debate between the worth of women and the injustice of men, further solidifying the protofeminist tradition in Italy.

13 Medea, for example. Pizan focused on Medea’s wisdom and skill as a sorceress—skills for which Zeus praised her. The tragedy of Medea’s life was the fault of the lies of Jason, not her own. Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Translated by Earl Jeffery Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982), 256–264.
14 Without any kind of social organization or female community, who could move the ideas forward?
To extend and contribute to the awakening of ideas favorable to women, the structure of *Il merito delle donne* shifts between practice and theory, differentiating the work from other contributions to the *querelle des femmes*. Fonte wrote her work in the form of a dialogue between seven women—all Venetian, but of differing age, experience, and marital status—in order to achieve her aim of reshaping contemporary beliefs and securing recognition for the value of women. The dialogue among the women was both quick and witty. Using female characters to speak on such a variety of cultural and scientific topics was groundbreaking for the time and a forceful defense against the educational barriers that continued to confine the female sex.

During the sixteenth century, contemporary education prevented much theoretical and practical knowledge from being taught to women. Fonte cleverly used both of those tactics in her writing, asserting a woman’s potential for learning. She also recognized that as a result of men commonly assuming that women were of lesser value and abilities, restrictions were reflected in both law and custom. She contended that women deserved to be equal rulers alongside men by harkening to the biblical book of Genesis. Fonte claimed that if men were created to help women, they have failed; instead of protecting them, men have deprived women of wealth, freedom, and respect. Additionally, she added that if women were created to be the “helpmates” of men, that would mean that men and women are “the same…in every quality or substance.”

Men should not dominate the natural world or female world. If a woman was spiritually equal to

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17 Following the success of Vittoria Colonna’s *Collected Poems* (1538), more women’s writing began to appear in print. Although Venice was a publishing capital in Europe, it was not a center of production for women’s writing. Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella (of which more will be said) were somewhat of an anomaly. This could be due to their supportive male relatives and husbands, and in Fonte’s case, her older brother whom she forced to repeat his lessons with her after school each day.


19 Ibid., 61, 168–169.
man, then physically, politically, and socially she should be equal, too. The work of Moderata Fonte continued the progress of women in Italy by seeking to reshape the hierarchy of society by placing women in a position of equality.

Other Italian authors like Arcangela Tarabotti, Veronica Franco, and Lucrezia Marinella soon followed the example of these pioneers. Marinella (1571–1653), the most well-known of the three, was a skilled and prolific writer who was respected by even her male contemporaries. She excelled in philosophy and ethics and used that knowledge to write her protofeminist work, *La nobiltà et l’eccellenza delle donne co’ diffetti et mancamenti de gli uomini (The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men)* (1601).

Marinella’s work was a skillful rebuttal to Giuseppe Passi’s *I donneschi diffetti (The Defects of Women)* (1599), which attacked the alleged unreasonable emotions and sinful natures of women with sweeping condemnations. She supported her arguments clearly with demonstrative proof. For example, following the lead of Fonte, Marinella reinterpreted the creation story in a way that celebrated the origin of women and rearranged the traditional hierarchy. She wittily added that “since woman was produced after man she must…be more excellent than he since…things produced later are nobler than ones made earlier.” Her counter response exposed men as cowards and bullies preventing female education because of their fear to lose their tyrannical dominion. In deconstructing each of Passi’s arguments, Marinella showed her developed feminist consciousness by openly challenging gender constructions and

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20 In Arcangela Tarabotti’s *Lettere familiari e di complimento* were several letters to Vittoria della Rovere, a patron of Elisabetta Sirani, as well as other correspondences to friends in Bologna.
23 It is important to note that Marinella’s work was written within a genre “governed by a system of rhetorical assumptions…accepted by her peers.” In this context, “when dealing with probable rather than certain truths, the important skill was in making a better case for the side you were defending than your opponent made.” Ibid., 23–24.
defending women as having the same, if not better, aptitude to learn, compose, and rationalize as men. This work rooted her firmly in the growing trend favoring women in Italy.

Although protofeminism was active throughout Italy, it found a uniquely receptive environment in the city of Bologna, which allowed many women to thrive. The basis for this environment may have been initiated in 1088 when the University of Bologna, the oldest university in Europe, was established. Allegedly, women were allowed to earn degrees soon after the university’s foundation. Bettisia Gozzadini graduated with a law degree in 1237; in 1239, she returned to teach law at the university. Her lessons were said to have been so popular they were held in public squares in order to accommodate all the students.24 By the fifteenth century, several other learned women had graduated from the University of Bologna.25 Although these women were typically viewed as outliers from the general female population, their numbers indicate an environment that allowed women to rise above the traditional limitations of their gender.

Another factor that contributed to the encouraging setting of Bologna was the influence of Saint Caterina de’ Vigri, also known as St. Catherine of Bologna (1413–1463). St. Catherine was a Poor Clare nun who founded the new Corpus Domini Convent in Bologna in 1456. She was well known for her skills in Latin, illumination, music, writing, and painting; she was possibly the first known female painter in the city.26 She experienced mystical visions during her life, which inspired many of her artistic pieces. These images often included Saint Clare, Saint

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25 Bettina Calerini, Milanzi dall’Ospedale, Dorotea Bocchi, Maddalena Bonsignori, Novella d’Andrea, Barbara Arienti, and Giovanna Banchetti all graduated from the university. Novella d’Andrea returned to teach law, while Dorotea Bocchi returned and held the chair of medicine at the university. Germain Greer, The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Girous, 1979), 209.
26 Her best-known written work is The Seven Spiritual Weapons which is about “the spiritual battles of a religious woman who saw her intellect and will in conflict with the submission and obedience demanded by the church,” Whitney Chadwick, Women, Art, and Society (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 88.
Francis, or the Madonna with the infant Christ. Her biographer, a fellow nun, noted that she often painted in miniature for many monasteries and books. The small number of her works (Figure 4) that have been assembled show an untrained hand and variations in style that have caused attribution problems. However, a lack of information regarding St. Catherine’s artistic achievement does not diminish her significance as a woman painter and saint.

Her importance was distinguished by the growth of a local cult that was stimulated by the exhumation of St. Catherine’s preserved body shortly after her death. News of this miracle spread throughout Italy, drawing pilgrims to Bologna, and leading to the formal authorization of her cult by Pope Clement VII in 1524 and her beatification in 1592. The physical presence of St. Catherine’s uncorrupted body in the city of Bologna and the continuing veneration of her as the patron saint of painters gave her an influence and legacy unprecedented for a female saint.

Elisabetta Sirani lived in close proximity to Corpus Domini, which held the uncorrupted body of St. Catherine. Sirani’s own sister, Anna Maria, was cited as having painted a work of the Beata Caterina de’ Vigri. Furthermore, Sirani’s student, Lucrezia Scarfaglia, was also commissioned to paint the beatified saint for the Bolognese Albergati family and another for the convent St. Catherine established. Sirani was not ignorant of the influence of St. Catherine, and neither was the city of Bologna. Indeed, the presence of St. Catherine’s body as well as the influence and

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27 Ibid.
28 Preserved bodies that did not decompose or decay after death were thought to be a blessing from God. Shortly after St. Catherine’s burial, sweet smells were noticed coming from her grave. This is called the Odor of Sanctity and is an indication of that individual’s piety and righteousness. Because of the smell, St. Catherine’s body was exhumed and found perfectly preserved. Since then, her body has been in the Corpus Domini church in Bologna, where she regally sits on a golden throne. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 330 and Jeryldene Wood, *Women, Art, and Spirituality: The Poor Clares of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 121.
29 St. Catherine is the only saint associated exclusively with painters. St. Luke, often associated with painting, is the patron saint of artists in general.
popularity of her cult were factors that helped to establish an admiration for women artists in Bologna.

Another element instrumental to Bologna’s environment was Properzia de’ Rossi (1490–1530). De’ Rossi, one of the first documented women to work in sculpture, was first noticed for intricately carving small figures into fruit pits.\(^{31}\) This choice of medium might have been due to the fact that materials for sculpting were costly. By the early 1520s, she was able to progress to marble and engraving. Around this time, the city of Bologna began a campaign to make San Petronio the largest church in Italy, second only to St. Peter’s.\(^ {32}\) De’ Rossi won a coveted commission to create sculptures for the façade; one of the results of this commission was her bas-relief *Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife* (Figure 5).\(^ {33}\)

In that bas-relief, de’ Rossi expressed persisting classical ideals while fusing together different stylistic modes—she captured the balanced and muscular bodies of Michelangelo, the lines of Raphael, and the energy of Correggio. This shows her familiarity with other artists from which she drew inspiration but also her talent as a sculptor. Her expertise drew the attention of Giorgio Vasari and de’ Rossi became the only woman to receive a separate *vita* in his 1550 edition of *Le Vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori* (*The Lives of the Most Excellent Italian, Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*).\(^ {34}\) Even though protofeminist roots had

\(^{31}\) Of these peach stones, Vasari said de’ Rossi “executed so well and with such patience, that they were singular and marvelous to behold, not only for the subtlety of the work, but also for the liveliness of the little figures.” Julia Kathleen Dabbs, *Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550–1800: An Anthology* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 56.

\(^{32}\) Only a portion of the church was completed. Payment records show de’ Rossi completed two angels, two pictures, and three sibyls.


\(^{34}\) Vasari’s account, arguably rather sexist, neglected to include where de’ Rossi was trained; her artistic development, how she became capable of carving marble, or learned the art of sculpture remains unknown. There are not records of her father being an artist, so she had to have been trained outside of the home. Julia Kathleen Dabbs, *Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550–1800: An Anthology* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 50-58.
been initiated in Italy, by the sixteenth century women artists were still unusual, and women sculptors were even more atypical. Sculpting was decidedly a masculine art; the act of carving stone was viewed as too physically taxing for a female body to manage. By simply braving to take up the chisel, Properzia de’ Rossi pushed traditional gender boundaries and reinforced a receptive environment in Bologna.

An additional determinant that extended the tradition of female empowerment in Italy and an amenable perspective on women artists in Bologna was the painter Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614). Fontana is largely regarded as the first professional female painter in Italy; she was in direct competition with contemporary male artists, and she achieved monetary success not in a convent or court but through her patronage networks. She directly benefited from the ecclesiastical and civic patronage that resulted when Bologna became a papal state in 1512 and the Council of Trent (1545-1573) that soon followed.

During the ensuing Counter Reformation, archbishop Gabriele Paleotti challenged women to take a more active role in Catholic theology through Christian imagery. Paleotti, a Bolognese native like Sirani and Fontana, wrote Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane (Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images) (1582) which became the manual for post-Tridentine


36 Sofonisba Anguisola found great success as a female painter and preceded Fontana. However, Anguisola worked primarily in the court, while Fontana found success through multiple avenues like her male contemporaries.


38 The Council of Trent, held in Trent, Italy, was a response to the Protestant Reformation. The Council refuted and condemned the beliefs of protestants like John Calvin and Martin Luther, while clarifying Catholic beliefs. These clarifying decrees also impacted the development of art because several styles and iconographies popular in the Renaissance and medieval eras were condemned. In the Counter Reformation that resulted, the goal of art became restoring the predominance of Catholicism. The Church reaffirmed the importance of art, pushing the quantity of art developed that conveyed Catholic beliefs. Ibid., 1–3.

artists. His encouragement of female participation allowed Bolognese women greater artistic agency. Fontana also benefitted when the Bolognese Cardinal Ugo Buoncompagni was elected as Pope Gregory XIII in 1572. His election resulted in a growth of papal commissions from Rome. Many other aristocratic and learned patrons followed suit, which produced more prospects as well as artistic competition between Rome and Bologna as Bolognese artists traveled between the cities to fulfill commissions. One-way Bologna competed against Rome was its ability and willingness to claim exceptional women artists like Lavinia Fontana. Indeed, Fontana provided Bologna with a unique and notable status in Rome, which spread the city’s reputation as a proponent of women artists.

Fontana, who was taught to paint by her father, became renowned for her skills as a portraitist. She also skillfully completed many historical and religious paintings and was one of the first female artists to paint the female nude, as seen in her graceful figure Minerva Dressing (1613) (Figure 6). In this piece, done for Cardinal Borghese, Fontana’s attention to detail, composition of space, and reflective light show her treatment of the Mannerist style and her talent as a painter. The mythological figure is shown without her garments and instruments of war; however, Fontana is careful to keep her modesty intact. Disarmed, Minerva personifies wisdom and peace, which is also represented in her traditional symbols of the owl and olive branches outside her room. In the corner, Cupid plays with the goddess’s helmet, while on Minerva’s head, Fontana placed pearls that seem more reminiscent of Venus, goddess of love.

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40 Having grown up in Bologna, Paleotti was aware of the importance of scientific knowledge as well as spiritual. When writing his treatise, he sought the help of scholars such as Ulisse Aldrovandi, who represented the community of scholars residing in Bologna and their search for scientific knowledge, which Paleotti applied to art. Ibid., 18-19.


42 Her father, Prospero Fontana, also taught her husband, Gian Paolo Zappi, and Ludovico Carracci. Ibid., 93.


Those elements are juxtaposed by the very act of dressing. Minerva is not donning gowns of leisure, but actively putting on symbols of power. Fontana chose to depict Minerva, the goddess of wisdom and the arts, as an active female. This action establishes Fontana within the protofeminist tradition and progressive nature of Bologna.

From Pizan to Fontana, each of these groundbreaking women pushed boundaries and established precedents that formed the protofeminist tradition in Italy. That custom was reflected in Bologna through the city’s observance and respect for women’s education and artistic creation. By growing up in a context that supported talented women, Sirani was allowed to follow her ambitions. Those ambitions were reflected in the quantity of active and intelligent women portrayed in her art. The original interpretations of her female figures show she was building on the foundation of the feminist consciousness and employing the progressive attitude in her native city to her advantage.

**The Life of Elisabetta Sirani**

Elisabetta Sirani (1638–1665) was born in Bologna to the already-established artist Giovanni Andrea Sirani (1610–1670), student of the popular Baroque Bolognese artist Guido Reni. Growing up in her father’s art studio and in the favorable culture of Bologna allowed Sirani to flourish as an artist. Not only did she receive ample education and training, but she was supported and beloved by the people of her hometown. Sirani’s cultural formation produced a progressive woman whose ideals of female ability are seen in her unique artistic interpretations.

One of the reasons she was able to pursue art was the mediation of Count Carle Cesare Malvasia, an art collector and scholar. Sirani’s father initially opposed her artistic endeavors, but Malvasia interceded in Sirani’s favor when he noticed her natural talent. As a result, Giovanni

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45 Fathers of female artists are often portrayed as supportive teachers. Malvasia’s portrayal of Sirani as a natural talent who must overcome opposition paralleled her life to many male artists, which were established in the literary
Andrea Sirani would teach her and her two sisters, Anna Maria and Barbara, in his art studio. Around 1655, Sirani’s father retired due to illness and gave his studio to Sirani. Directing the art studio made Sirani the main source of monetary support for her family and aided the success of her professional career.46

Sirani was well prepared to run the studio due to her education. A professor at the University of Bologna noted that she was “blessed with vivacious intelligence . . . excellent memory . . . fine judgement . . . [and] a perfect knowledge of the science which she practiced.” She received a well-rounded education that included the traditional female aristocratic instruction in letters and arts, as well as in the classics and philosophy. She studied privately with Luigi Magni, a professor who most likely focused on Aristotelian philosophy.48 In addition to her philosophical training, she attended the *scuola di dottrina cristiana* (School of Christian Doctrine), a local girls’ school. However, the majority of her education likely occurred in her father’s studio and his professional library. Giovanni Andrea had approximately eighty volumes in his library, to which Elisabetta Sirani would have had unlimited access. His library included scholarly texts, artist biographies, theoretical and art historical texts, as well as literary works like Plutarch’s *Bioi parallēloi (Parallel Lives)* (125); Ovid’s *Metamorphoseon (Metamorphoses)* (8); works by Pliny, Bocaccio, and Cartari; Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia (Moral Emblems)* (1600);
and many more.\textsuperscript{49} The basis of Sirani’s formative education shows that she was clearly knowledgeable about the several allegories and historical narratives she chose to depict in her art.

Sirani’s formal education enhanced the artistic training she received in her father’s studio. Her father, Giovanni Andrea Sirani, was described by his biographer Luigi Crespi as a master of his craft. Giovanni Andrea trained with Giacomo Cavedone and several other minor artists before moving to the studio of Guido Reni where he soon became Reni’s principal and loyal assistant. After Reni died, Giovanni Andrea opened his own flourishing studio, which produced drawings, paintings, and prints on commission. In this studio, alongside her father’s male students, Sirani received her artistic training.\textsuperscript{50}

Her instruction consisted of the basic practice of drawing as well as observing and copying the manner of masters.\textsuperscript{51} Sirani’s visual observation and imitation skills were greatly aided by the art collection her father amassed. Records of two inventories completed in 1672 and 1689 for her sister, Anna Maria, show that Sirani had access to some eighty plaster reliefs, which included antique busts and casts of antique sculpture. One was cast specifically after the \textit{Laocoön};\textsuperscript{52} there were also three wax figure models by Michelangelo. The workshop contained several paintings and drawings by Guido Reni, an etching by Albrecht Dürer, a \textit{Madonna} by Ludovico Carracci, nude sketches from Michelangelo’s \textit{Last Judgement}, and many more.\textsuperscript{53} Access to this art was critical to Sirani’s learning; she was able to view a variety of works from

\textsuperscript{49} Some of the specific texts were recorded in an inventory by Elisabetta’s sister Anna Maria, who received about a fourth of the library after their father’s death in 1670. Ibid., 93–94.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{52} Having access to the \textit{Laocoön} sculpture is important to note because it was held in high esteem and consistently used for imitation by art masters and students in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
different periods and different hands without leaving Bologna, and, more importantly, she could study the nude male form. Nude life drawing, especially of males, was still restricted to only men at this time. Sirani would go on to paint several anatomically correct nudes, both male and female, which may not have been possible without access to her father’s art collection. As a fast learner with natural talent, by the time she ran the workshop, Sirani was teaching her own students and creating professionally.

Soon after taking charge of the studio, Sirani opened the space as an academy for men and women. In addition to her male assistants,\(^\text{54}\) she had several female students who would all at one point be considered professional painters or printmakers. Her studio became one of the first professional *accademie di disegno* for women in Europe.\(^\text{55}\) Finally, women did not have to join a convent or come from a family of painters to pursue their interest in art. In addition to her own studio, Sirani was a member of the painters’ *Accademia di San Luca* in Rome. To be accepted as a full member, or *professore*, Sirani would have been held in the highest professional esteem by her colleagues, would have been able to produce original work that did not rely on the patterns of others, and would have been an independent master of an art workshop.\(^\text{56}\) That recognition, along with the establishment of her female academy of art, placed Sirani among the most influential and important figures in professionalizing artistic practice for women.

Through Sirani’s pioneering efforts, the latter half of the seventeenth century saw increasing numbers of professional women artists.\(^\text{57}\) By being a master of her own workshop and

\(^{54}\) Several of her male students had previously studied with her father and chose to remain with Elisabetta Sirani at her academy.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 2.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 67; and Franca Trinchieri Camiz, “‘Virgo-non sterili...’: Nuns as Artists in Seventeenth-Century Rome,” *Picturing Women in Renaissance Baroque Italy*, Edited by Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 283, n. 91.

\(^{57}\) Prior to Sirani, the known number of active Italian women artists from the fifteenth century numbered around forty, half of those working in the church. Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries in Bologna there were forty-three female professional artists. The majority of those were active only after Sirani opened her academy. See
opening that space to women, Sirani began the development of female artistic training in a common arena. Before Sirani, women were traditionally trained either in a convent or through a male family member. Her studio opened an avenue for female cultural production and public female-to-female teaching. In that model, women would learn their craft through female mentorship and be able to build a community amongst themselves, outside of the home or church.

While running her own studio and cultivating the potential of a female artistic community, Elisabetta Sirani also made a prolific body of work within her short life. Her early paintings were reminiscent of the elegant and refined style of Guido Reni. Nevertheless, she would go on to develop a distinctive maniera of her own. In a career that lasted just over a decade, she completed more than two hundred paintings in addition to prints, drawings, and wash sketches. This makes Sirani one of the most productive women artists in early modern Europe. Until Angelica Kauffman, over a century later, Sirani created more historical, classical allegories and religious narratives than any other female artist. Her paintings in genres other than portraiture substantiated her professional credibility, building the path that would lead her to be the most marketable and celebrated female artist in Bologna.

By the early 1660s, Sirani’s fame resounded throughout Italy. Her work was in high demand by royal, diplomatic, and religious leaders. She was aided by both her father and


59 For comparison, Rosalba Carriera is believed to have finished three hundred and sixty-one pieces (she lived into her eighties), Artemisia Gentileschi one hundred and sixty-one, and Lavinia Fontana one hundred and five. Neither Gentileschi or Fontana made prints, and there are no known drawings of Gentileschi’s. See Adelina Modesti, *Elisabetta Sirani ‘virtuosa’: Women's Cultural Production in Early Modern Bologna* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2014), 3–4.

60 Ibid., 1–2.
Malvasia, as well as the Marchese Ferdinando Cospi and Conte Annibale Ranuzzi, who ceaselessly promoted her and her art.\textsuperscript{61} Giovanni Andrea’s business and managerial skills in combination with Sirani’s diplomatic and branding strategies aptly promoted her work and herself as an artist.\textsuperscript{62} For example, important guests were frequently invited to her studio to watch her paint.\textsuperscript{63}

In her studio, Sirani’s skill as an artist and her natural wit would often charm diplomats and leaders into ordering commissions. Such was the case with Crown Prince Cosimo III, who visited the Sirani studio in 1664. After he watched Sirani work on the \textit{Medici Allegory}, he quickly commissioned a \textit{Madonna} for himself. The active, erudite culture of Bologna also aided Sirani’s success; the “intellectual bourgeoisie” were supportive patrons because they were interested in pursuing and interacting with creators of art. The emerging middle class became committed patrons as well; next to aristocrats like Count Corrado Ariosti and Padre Ettore Ghisilieri, Sirani formed close relationships with the banker Andrea Cattalani and the merchants Simone Tassi and Giovanni Francesco Bassani. Her patrons also extended outside of Bologna and into the royal courts of Bavaria and Parma.\textsuperscript{64} Sirani’s art appealed to all classes of society and to both genders.

Some of Sirani’s earliest and most loyal patrons were women. In 1655, at only seventeen, Elisabetta was commissioned to create an altarpiece for Camilla d’Alfonso Fantuzzi in Parma.

\textsuperscript{61} All four men continued to promote her work even after her death.
\textsuperscript{62} Elisabetta often paid homage to the patron within her paintings through inclusion of imagery or symbols. She would also cultivate patrons by gifting her works.
\textsuperscript{63} This tradition was already practiced by Guido Reni—a precedent she capitalized on. Many also gossiped that the work was by her father so the family could exploit the value of a “female” prodigy. Working in public proved the work was her own. See Whitney Chadwick, \textit{Women, Art, and Society} (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 104. The speed at which she painted in public may also explain the variations in the quality of her work. Also see Julia Kathleen Dabbs, \textit{Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550–1800: An Anthology} (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 129.
The next year she made a small altarpiece for Isabella Clara of Austria, who put the piece in the Duomo of Mantua. Isabella Clara’s sister-in-law was the Empress Palatine Eleanora Gonzago, who commissioned at least two pieces from Sirani. In 1661, Margherita de’ Medici Farnese visited the Sirani studio and also became a patron. One of the paintings Sirani was working on at the time of her death was a commission from Vittoria della Rovere, Grand Duchess of Tuscany. In addition, the women of Bologna enveloped Sirani as one of their own and supported her with frequent commissions; she was especially sought after for her celebrated reputation and her abilities in portraiture. After seeing the full-length portraits of Contessa Laura Calderini and Elisabetta Maria Bianchetti, Marchese Ferdinando Cospi wrote to Leopoldo de’ Medici that he had never seen portraits more beautifully painted. The strong matronage and patronage networks that Sirani developed helped support her large œuvre and possibly influenced the active and empowered images of women that dominated her art.

Sirani’s approach to the female figures depicted in her art is indicative of her artistic manner. Interestingly, Sirani’s biographer Malvasia stated that she didn’t share the “timidity and polish” of other female painters. Rather he characterized her style as “bold” and “virile.” By gendering Sirani’s art technique with descriptions associated with masculinity, Malvasia situated Sirani within the grandiose tradition of male artists. Furthermore, Sirani responded stylistically to Carracci’s naturalism and Reni’s elegant Baroque Classicism. However, she diverted from the patterns of established male artists through her interpretation of themes and the inclusion of

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65 Camilla’s husband was “Senator Marchese Gregorio Spada, nephew of Cardinal Bernardino Spada.” Isabella Clara was wife to the Duke of Mantua Carlo II Gonzago and cousin to Margherita de’ Medici Farnese. See Adelina Modesti, Elisabetta Sirani ‘virtuosa’: Women’s Cultural Production in Early Modern Bologna (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2014), 19.
66 Ibid., 20.
67 Ibid., 51.
68 Elisabetta’s painting style is usually described as graceful and elegant. Malvasia used language that traditionally represented male artistic achievement in order to convey her greatness to contemporaries. See Julia Kathleen Dabbs, Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550-1800: An Anthology (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 122.
atypical iconography, specifically in her depictions of women. By doing so, Sirani struck a balance between stylistic tradition and personal innovation.⁶⁹

This balance is seen in her painting *Portia Wounding her Thigh* (1664) (Figure 7), commissioned by the merchant Simone Tassi in 1664. Here Sirani selected a story from ancient history that shows the courage and heroism of a woman, which can fundamentally be described as protofeminist. The story Sirani illustrated comes from Plutarch’s *Bioi parallēloi* in the *Life of Brutus*. In Plutarch’s narration, Portia noticed something was troubling her husband, Marcus Brutus. To prove to herself that she could share his troubles, she made a deep wound in her thigh with a knife. Once Brutus observed Portia’s discomfort, she asserted “[she] was brought into [Brutus’] house, not, like a mere concubine, but to be a partner in [Brutus’] troubles.” The wound demonstrated to Brutus—and to herself—Portia’s power over pain and her courage. In return, Brutus shared with her the plot to kill Caesar.⁷⁰

After Brutus killed himself, Portia committed suicide by swallowing burning coals. Portia’s suicide is the event traditionally depicted by Baroque artists.⁷¹ For example, Guido Reni depicted this moment in a painting (1625–1626) (Figure 8). Sirani broke that tradition and instead focused on a woman rebelling in her private space while claiming masculine courage and

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⁶⁹ When examining female cultural production, the extent to which a woman challenged or conformed to traditional gender behavior is considered. In art historical literature, Artemisia Gentileschi is posed as the protofeminist and Elisabetta the less imaginative of the two. Gentileschi did have a considerable impact, but was also responding to the dramatic and aggressive style of Caravaggio. The difference in their style does not necessarily make one woman more impactful or conservative than the other, but perhaps only shows how each responded to their own artistic and social contexts. See Adelina Modesti, *Elisabetta Sirani ‘virtuosa’: Women’s Cultural Production in Early Modern Bologna* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2014), 130–134 and Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 141–179.


political influence. Sirani physically separated Portia from the women in the background, just as Portia separated herself from them by her task and her decision. This purposeful visual juxtaposition between the heroine and other women instead of with her husband draws attention to the femininity and fortitude that coexisted in Portia.72 She drew her own blood in order to leave the private world of women and enter the public world of men. Portia demonstrated courage and strength of character—qualities that were traditionally only used to characterize men. The male gendered characteristics contrast with the brightly colored clothing that accentuate her female gender, reinforcing the image of masculine traits being displayed by a woman.73 Sirani challenged the idea of female passivity by representing a politically aware and very involved Portia.

A unique interpretation of a rarely depicted event from a familiar story was a pattern used by Sirani on several other occasions, as seen in Timoclea of Thebes Throwing the Captain of Alexander’s Army into a Well (1659) (Figure 9), Cleopatra (1663) (Figure 10), and her multiple depictions of Iole (see section 4) to name a few.74 In Timoclea of Thebes Throwing the Captain of Alexander’s Army into a Well, Sirani painted an account from Plutarch’s Alexander and Caesar of the virtuous and respected Timoclea. She shows Timoclea throwing her rapist and would-be robber, a Thracian captain, headfirst down a well; she proceeded to throw stones upon him until he was dead.75 Timoclea quickly and assertively took charge of a terrible situation, cleverly tricking the captain with his greed to give herself an advantage. The image strongly

73 Elisabetta painted her fabric to look particularly luxurious, appealing to her silk merchant commissioner.
74 For an in-depth analysis on Timoclea, Cleopatra, and several other heroines, see Babette Bohn, “The Antique Heroines of Elisabetta Sirani,” (Renaissance Studies, Vol. 16, No. 1, March 2002) 52–79.
contrasts Timoclea’s calm and unemotional demeanor with her attacker’s toppling limbs. This scene, specifically chosen by Sirani, represents a woman of dignity and courage.

Cleopatra is a popular figure depicted in art. Although she was an accomplished political leader, artists were usually drawn to her romantic entanglements with Mark Antony and Julius Caesar. Another popular subject was her suicide, an event painted at least six times by Guido Reni (Figures 11-13). Reni approaches the Egyptian queen in a highly eroticized manner, portraying a nude Cleopatra with a phallic poisonous asp attacking her breasts. His artistry shows Cleopatra as a sexual and destructive female and is inconsistent with written accounts that specify the queen died due to venomous bites on her arm while she was wearing royal garb. In contrast, Sirani avoided the suicide entirely and instead focused on a different event in the queen’s life. To show Marc Antony her exceptional wealth, Cleopatra put a priceless pearl in vinegar and drank the dissolved stone. In a simple yet effective act, she showed her wealth and cleverness, while easily winning a wager. Sirani presents Cleopatra as a solitary figure away from her male companions, unemotional save for the shadow of smile that demonstrates her confidence and self-assurance. Away from the banquet hall and with dramatic lighting against a darkened backdrop, the Queen arrests the full attention of her viewers. The untraditional interpretation explores Cleopatra not as an erotic temptress, but as an intelligent political leader. Through her atypical figures, Sirani reinterprets the narrative to remove biases against women to instead focus on the strength, fortitude, and power of the female.

76 Lavinia Fontana completed an unusual depiction of Cleopatra that shows the queen moments before her suicide. Lavinia Fontana, Cleopatra, 1585-1613, Galleria Spada, Rome, Italy.
77 This subject would not become popular in Italian painting until the eighteenth century.
Sirani died suddenly and painfully in August 1665 among rumors of poisoning, but mostly likely as the result of ulcers. She was only twenty-seven. Marchese Ferdinando Cospi wrote to Leopoldo de’ Medici that the entire city wept, “having lost a Virtuosa.”79 Passing away prematurely transformed her, tragically, into a legend in the city of Bologna, as seen by an outpouring of communal grief and the decision to have her buried with the beloved Bolognese bachelor artist Guido Reni. Although her life, and therefore her range of influence, was cut short, during her few years Sirani empowered herself and the women around her. Aided by the uniquely accepting environment of Bologna, she was able to pursue a position of female authority and independence through her art, which further extended the protofeminist tradition in Italy generally.

The Myth of Iole and Omphale

The tales of Iole and Omphale and their individual relationships to the hero Heracles (Hercules) are dispersed through ancient and medieval literature. Several different sources, from Herodotus to Hyginus to Lucian of Samosata,80 recount their myths with slight variations or additions. Such diverse accounts make providing a true narrative of their lives quite difficult; Iole and Omphale are individually only referenced in a few sentences, and longer accounts have inconsistencies in timelines or details of events. Therefore, both Iole’s and Omphale’s relationship with Hercules and the roles they play have minor differences. Understanding the consistency and changes in the myth will guide the interpretation of Sirani’s depiction of the combined myths.


One of the earliest literary references of the characters was by Diodorus Siculus between 60 and 30 BC. Here we learn that Iole, daughter of the ruler of Oechalia, was desired by Hercules, but her father refused his marriage proposal. In contrast, Omphale, the Queen of Lydia, purchased Hercules and he served as her slave. Hercules performed many feats to keep Lydia safe; as a result, Omphale set him free, married him, and bore him children. These accounts, comprising only a few sentences, summarize key events that are fairly consistent throughout literature.

In the first or second century AD, Iole and Omphale were published in *Bibliotheca (The Library Book)*, usually attributed to Apollodorus of Athens. Apollodorus included more detail about Iole in his narrative. Eurytus, Iole’s father, was renowned for his skill in archery; he decided to hold an archery tournament and whoever could best him and his sons would be given Iole to wed. Hercules won this archery tournament, but Eurytus refused to allow Hercules to marry Iole. Hercules was refused due to the madness that caused him to murder his first wife, Megara, and their children. After this, Hercules murdered Iphitus, Iole’s brother, and was punished with a disease. In order to be healed, he received an oracle from Delphi which instructed him to be sold and serve as a slave for three years to compensate for the murder. Omphale, queen of Lydia, purchased Hercules as her servant. After serving his sentence, Hercules eventually returned to Oechalia, slayed Eurytus and his remaining sons, pillaged the city, and took Iole as his captive. However, taking Iole would prove fatal for Hercules; Deianira,
the wife of Hercules, was jealous and fearful of Hercules’ affection for Iole. This allowed her to be tricked by the centaur Nessus into poisoning Hercules.84

The playwright Sophocles mentioned the two heroines, Iole and Omphale, in his play *Trachiniae (Women of Trachis)* (approximately 450 BC). Hercules was Omphale’s servant and eventually her lover. Sophocles even alluded to the “offensive” behavior of Hercules under the Lydian queen, perhaps suggesting the crossdressing and traditionally female work completed by Hercules in servitude—a theme that is later emphasized. The play focuses more on the story of Iole and the jealousy of Deianira. Deianira was told by a messenger that Hercules had overthrown Oechalia because of the love and passion Iole ignited in him. Seeing the beauty and youth of Iole, as well as knowing the past unfaithful behavior of her husband, Deianira tried to win Hercules back with a love potion, which instead lead to his death. As Hercules lay dying, he forced his son Hyllus to promise to marry Iole and keep her safe.85

The Roman poet Ovid recorded the stories of Iole and Omphale in three of his works. In *Metamorphoseon (Metamorphoses)* (8 AD), he briefly mentioned Iole and Hercules’ love for her and her subsequent betrothal to Hyllus once Hercules died.86 In *Fastorum Libri Sex (Fasti or The Book of Days)* (8 AD), Ovid detailed the behavior with Omphale to which Sophocles alluded. The god Faunus, or Pan, observed Hercules holding a parasol above Omphale’s head as the besotted couple entered a cave. There, they switched clothes. “[Omphale] gave him gauzy tunics…[and] the dainty girdle.”87 His arms, too large, broke her delicate bracelets, and ripped

84 Ibid., 269.
87 In the account by Statius, much is similar, except for the distinction where Omphale laughed at Hercules when he was stripped of his lion’s skin and ripped her dress. Ovid’s rendition is slightly more lustful in tone. See Statius, *Thebaid, Books 8–12*, Edited by D.R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 172–181.
shoes too small for his feet. Omphale the queen “took the heavy club, the lion’s skin, and the lesser weapons stored in their quiver.”

Ovid last mentioned them in *Heroides (The Heroines)* (25-16 BC). Deianira was angry at Hercules for his many affairs and ridiculed him for the rumors of his servitude in “bejewelled chains.” Arms that once “crushed the life from” the Nemean lion instead were bound with gold and gems. His hair was wrapped in a woman’s turban and his body clothed in a woman’s dress. Not only had he dressed as a woman in the land of Lydia, but he carried baskets of wool and helped spin the wool with the women. Most telling of all, Ovid wrote of Omphale that “she has proved herself a man by a right [Hercules] could not urge. [Hercules was] much less than she, O greatest of men, as it was greater to vanquish [Hercules] than those [he] vanquished. To her passes the full measure of [his] exploits… [he was] victor over the beast, but she over [him].” Omphale conquered Hercules, made him effeminate, wore the Nemean lion’s skin, and held Hercules’ club as symbols of her victory. Deianira might have disbelieved this emasculated vision of her husband, but Hercules returned home with Iole. Instead of acting as a broken captive, “[Iole strode] along…in plenteous gold…with head held high, as if ‘twere she had conquered Hercules.” In this reading, Ovid began to add a thematic similarity between Iole and Omphale: their unabashed control over Hercules. Whether the servant or master, there was something in his actions that rendered both Iole and Omphale confident in the power they wielded over the mighty Hercules.

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Plutarch mentioned Omphale in two sections of his extensive biographies. The first was a brief sentence of Hercules’ slavery under Omphale in Lydia.\(^{90}\) Later, Plutarch compared Antony and his love for Cleopatra to that of Hercules and Omphale. Because of Antony’s love for Cleopatra, Antony sacrificed victory in battle, which Plutarch compared to Hercules giving Omphale his lion skin and club.\(^{91}\) Both Cleopatra and Omphale had such dominion over their lovers that the men acted in ways that were against their traditional behavior.\(^{92}\) A different work by Plutarch described Iole as Hercules’ beloved. After Iole’s father refused to allow Hercules to marry her, Hercules attacked Oechalia. Plutarch then added to the traditional narrative that rather than become a captive, Iole threw herself off a wall. However, she was saved by the wind and her garments, which broke her fall.\(^{93}\)

Several of these classical texts regained popularity during the middle ages, and authors were once again inspired by the myth.\(^{94}\) For instance, in Dante’s third canticle of the *Divina Commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*) (1308-1320 AD), Bishop Folco compared the passion and love of his youth to Hercules and Iole.\(^{95}\) Some of those later authors began to combine the characters of Iole and Omphale into one person. For example, in the poetry of Edmund Spenser of the late sixteenth century, Hercules gave up his lion skin and club to Iole.\(^{96}\) Traditionally, the lion skin

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\(^{92}\) This analogy was seen again in Robert Garnier’s *Marc Antoine* (English translation by Mary Sidney Herbert) when Antony was told his soul was captured by Cleopatra like Hercules’ was by Omphale. Philip Sydney, Mary’s brother, also wrote about Hercules spinning wool and his effeminate behavior for Omphale in *Defense of Poetry*.


\(^{94}\) Seneca also wrote about them in his tragedies. *Hercules Furens* referenced Hercules cross-dressing in Lydia. *Hercules Oetaeus* featured the story of Iole in captivity and how that lead to the demise of Hercules. The same lustful passion referenced by Dante also appeared in *Architrenius* by Johannes de Hauvilla, *The Fall of Princes* by John Lydgate, and the *Trójumanna Saga*, likely written in the thirteenth century by an Icelander.


and club were only associated with Omphale, but in this instance, where Omphale did not exist,
Hercules was overcome with the same desire to submit himself to Iole. Perhaps in doing so, Iole
was given more power than Omphale because Iole was in the role of a servant.

Sirani may not have been familiar with the English poet; however, she most likely had
access to Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Genealogie degli Dei de Gentili* (1360), or *Genealogy of the
Pagan Gods*. In this work, Boccaccio intermingled the characters of Iole and Omphale together
by attributing iconography traditionally associated with Omphale to Iole and then left the
character of Omphale completely out of his narrative. Boccaccio began *Geneology* by
following the traditional route of Hercules’ attack on Oechalia and the capture of Iole. At this
point, Hercules was “infiammato dall’amore di costei,” or “infamed with love,” so much so that
he submitted himself to Iole, gave her his lion skin and club, began perfuming himself and
wearing dresses, and learned to spin—effectually enslaving himself. For the purpose of this
research, the assumption is made that the depictions of Iole by Sirani were inspired by
Boccaccio’s interpretation of the legend.

The stories of Iole and Omphale left their mark not only on literature, but on art as well.
During the Renaissance and Baroque period, the story of Omphale and Hercules was a popular
subject for painters and sculptors, more so than any of the labors of Hercules. The prevalence
of Omphale in the art world and Elisabetta Sirani’s own familiarity with the work of Bocaccio
may have inspired Sirani to depict a combination of both Iole and Omphale. Sirani’s first Iole

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97 Giuseppe Betussi translated the work into Italian during the sixteenth century. This edition was so popular it
received over ten reprints in a century. Likely one of those editions found a home in the Sirani Library. Ruth B.
Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales Framed: Early Forewards, Afterwords, and Critical Words* (Albany: State University of
New York Press, 2012), 15
98 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie degli Dei de Gentili*, Translated by Giuseppe Betussi (Venice: Bertano, 1574),
211.
99 Mary D Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton:
painting garnered enough success to paint Iole a second and third time. Her unique interpretation sparked interest from Sirani’s contemporary literary colleagues as well.¹⁰⁰ A sonnet written by Francesco Talleoni after he saw Sirani’s *Iole Crowned by Cupid* reads, “Spettator, che qui miri | Della dotta Sirani alto valore | Non ben conosci in quete tele espresso: | Pensi, ch’io fili, e à Lei Corone intesso” (Spectator, who here admires | the high worth of the learned Sirani | you do not know expressed in these canvases | Think, that I spin, and to Her the Crown is intended).¹⁰¹ Overwhelmed by the painting, Talleoni related himself to Hercules and Sirani to Iole—he effeminized and she queen.

The literary history of Iole and Omphale spread through several different sources and throughout several centuries. While many aspects of their stories remain consistent, the details and changes over time are significant to Sirani’s interpretation of the mythical figures; particularly, the trend in the middle ages to combine the two individual characters into a singular woman.

**Sirani’s Three Ioles**

Sirani challenged the traditional social place of women by being a professional unmarried artist and master of her own workshop. Those indications show the positive developments in Bologna for women and show Sirani’s own individual stand in empowering women. Her extensive artistic production, the majority of it comprised of female images, also shows her stand against traditional gender ideology. For example, Sirani interprets the familiar stories of Iole and Omphale in an independent manner with her own concerns, balancing tradition and innovation. Her three paintings of this combined character show a strong, independent, and intelligent

¹⁰⁰ *La Poesia Muta Celibrata della Pittrice Loguaci* by Piccinardi includes sixteen poems about Sirani’s *Iole* and more poems about her other works. Adelina Modesti, *Elisabetta Sirani ‘virtuosa’: Women’s Cultural Production in Early Modern Bologna* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2014), 160.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.
woman who extends the protofeminist tradition in Italy. An examination of the Iole paintings by Sirani—their patronage and their innovations—will demonstrate how she accomplished this empowering frame.

The commissioning of these paintings of strong women is important because it is likely that they were all requested by men. The first of Sirani’s Ioles was the 1659 *Iole Crowned by Cupid* (Figure 1). This piece was solicited by Conte Alfonso II Gonzaga of Novellara (1616–1678); a lover of religion and reading, he visited Sirani’s workshop in January 1659, which was when he requested the painting. Sirani described the piece in her workbook as “An Iole, half-figure with a small putto about to crown her, for the Signor Count of Novellara.” Records show that the piece stayed with the Novellara nobility for at least the next century.102 The next image was her 1661 *Iole* (Figure 2) that was commissioned by Belingiero Gessi for Count Cesare Leopardi of Osimo; Gessi was Leopardi’s secretary and art agent. Sirani noted in her workbook in 1662 “an Iole for the . . . most illustrious Berlingiero Gessi, who donated it to signor Cesare Leopardi, Gentleman of the city of Osimo, in which I changed the Lion skin of the said Iole, and instead I made it a Leopard.”103 In this second image, Sirani cleverly took the traditional lion skin, which Hercules gave to Iole, and changed it into a flattering symbol of the receiver’s name. The final *Iole* (Figure 3) of 1663 has the least amount of provenance data. Belingiero Gessi must have been quite taken with the Leopard *Iole* because there are notes of him requesting an additional *Iole*, which could possibly be this piece.

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102 The last record of this piece was when N. Poggi sold the painting at an auction in Milan, Italy November 20–30, 1941. There has been no information on its whereabouts since, and is only known by a black and white photograph in the Witt Photo Library, Courtauld Institute, London, and published by Adelina Modesti (2014, figure 21), and again in this thesis as Figure 1. Adelina Modesti, *Elisabetta Sirani ‘virtuosa’: Women’s Cultural Production in Early Modern Bologna* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2014), 250.

103 This 1661 *Iole* is now held at the Collection of Art and History of the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio in Bologna. Ibid., 302.
Knowing that these three paintings were commissioned by men causes the three nude depictions of Iole to not settle as easily into the progressive trend of female empowerment. Truthfully, the nudity in these paintings may have been a calculated choice to satisfy some erotic need from her patrons or simply because of her access to female models. However, I believe the choice is rooted more in the protofeminist tradition that was accepted by intellectuals in Bologna. Sirani’s patrons were of the elite and erudite society, which positioned them on a constant quest for higher learning. The learned liberal art groups of intellectual prowess were male dominated—except for in the Bologna tradition where women were seen in the University setting; these women could be viewed as academic equals because of their high intelligence and thirst for knowledge. Even painting in itself had a place among mathematic knowledge, which lent further respect towards Sirani and her craft. And these Iole depictions, nude though they may be, did not remind the patrons of a dangerous female power, but of an enlightened woman in search for intellectual mastery—like the male patrons.

Furthermore, a 1663 sonnet referring to the third Iole piece was published in Giovanni Luigi Piccinardi’s La Poesia Muta Celebrata dalla Pittura Loquace; Applausi di Nobili Ingegni al Pennello Immortale della Signora Elisabetta Sirani (The Silent Poetry Celebrated by the Talkative Painting; Applauses of Noble Talents to the Immortal Brush of Ms. Elisabetta Sirani) (1666). In the poem, an Iole with a Club was described as “virile | Ciò, che à loro in Natura era disette | È lodeuole, e vago hoggi il tuo stile,” (Virile | that, which in Nature was scarce | is praiseworthy, and general of [Sirani’s] style today). To Sirani’s contemporaries, the nude Iole

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104 The Silent Poetry Celebrated by the Talkative Painting; Applauses of Noble Talents to the Immortal Brush of Ms. Elisabetta Sirani was published in 1666. The Iole painting was last seen at a Roman art market in 2006. I have so far been unable to find more information of its current whereabouts. Ibid., 300.

105 Giovanni Luigi Piccinardi, La Poesia Muta Celebrata dalla Pittura Loquace; Applausi di Nobili Ingegni al Pennello Immortale della Signora Elisabetta Sirani (Bologna, 1966, http://dlib.biblhertz.it/Ca-SIR295-2660#page/4/mode/2up) 57.
was not viewed as a sexual temptress, but virile—masculine even—which was admissible due in part to the Bolognese intellectual tradition. Sirani’s blending of traditional figures and style with her original execution clearly made a strong woman figure acceptable and desirable among her male clients.

The emasculated Hercules and the masculinized Omphale/Iole was the established visual theme of their myth during the Renaissance and Baroque eras. This was frequently used to represent disruption to established gender roles and the patriarchal social order. While the majority of these artists chose to depict Omphale and Hercules, the Bolognese artist Annibale Carracci (1560–1609) followed the pattern of Boccaccio and collapsed Omphale and Iole into a single figure as part of his fresco cycle The Loves of the Gods: Hercules and Iole (1597) (Figure 14). Carracci shows the two lovers entangled. Iole lazily supports herself on Hercules’ club and is wrapped in his lion skin while she strokes Hercules’ shoulders. He serenades her on the tambourine. A small cupid keenly gestures to the tambourine in Hercules’ hand, clearly showing his amusement that the hero has traded his weapon for music. Instead, it is Iole—with the club in hand, her naked leg over Hercules’, and her arm around his shoulders—physically indicating that she will protect and defend him so that he can continue playing. Carracci illustrates the switched gender roles and the danger that a weapon wielding woman can pose over a man. Perhaps interchanging Iole and Omphale was a popular trend in Bologna at this time as two Bolognese artists, Carracci and Sirani, both decided to endow Iole with Omphale’s characteristics. But that is where the similarities end, and instead, Carracci’s fresco has more in common with other contemporary depictions of Omphale and Hercules.

As with the Carracci fresco, several images of the lovers focus on Hercules’ loss of power, specifically his humiliating disempowerment at the hands of a woman and the idea of a
world dangerously turned upside down through gender reversal. One of those images is *Hercules and Omphale* (1602–1605) (Figure 15) by the Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), who was working in Italy at the time. In this painting, a towering Omphale, lightly balancing on the club and wrapped in lion skin, pinches the ear of a shrinking Hercules. He is occupied spinning wool, his face cringing in embarrassment. Not only is Hercules being physically chastised by Omphale, he appears to be further belittled by doing the work of children, as evidenced by the two girls at his feet expertly working their spinning tools. Giovanni Francesco Gessi (1588–1649), also a Bolognese artist, interprets the emotions of his figures somewhat differently. In *Ercole e Onfale* (1620–1630) (Figure 16), Omphale takes a wide stance as a master teacher pointing towards her student, absentmindedly she leans on Hercules’ club and wears his lion skin like a masculine loincloth. Hercules is seated and daintily crosses his legs to hide his nudity while holding a spindle and distaff; he looks eager to learn, listen, and to please his teacher. Gessi shows a complete reversal of gender roles in the clothing, poses, and emotions of his figures. Both of these paintings stand as warnings to male audiences that their masculinity and identities would dissolve if they allow a woman to take charge over them.

Several other paintings of Omphale and Hercules further similar themes and imagery of a world where gender is upended. For example, Bernardo Cavallino (1616–1656) depicts multiple figures in his *Hercules and Omphale* (1640) (Figure 17). Both Hercules and Omphale are seated, but Omphale is clearly in the position of power. She is dressed befitting her royal status and sits on a draped chair with a pillow under her feet, holding the club in one arm. Cavallino chose to dress his figures in contemporary garb, but has the traditional lion skin wrapped around the Queen like a shawl. Omphale indifferently looks at the viewers while gesturing towards her conquest. Hercules, nude save for a small blue undergarment, will not meet the viewer’s gaze; he
looks away in embarrassment as he receives instruction on how to spin wool. There are five more figures in the piece. Four of them are also dressed in contemporary garb; the fifth is a small putto. Each figure, with wide jeering smiles, appears to find raucous enjoyment in the humiliation of Hercules. Likewise, Luca Ferrari (1605–1654) also shows Hercules learning to spin wool in *Hercule et Omphale* (1652–1653) (Figure 18). Ferrari depicts a bare breasted Omphale standing over a seated Hercules. Over one of Omphale’s shoulders is the club and lion skin, yet her attention is solely focused on the labor of Hercules. The nude Hercules is concentrated on learning how to spin from a small putto nestled between the two. Although Ferrari’s Omphale is more eroticized than Cavallino’s, each painting demonstrates how the effeminized Hercules is the result of role reversal.

An emasculated Hercules by Queen Omphale is painted by Giovanni Francesco Romanelli (1610–1652). In *Hercules and Omphale* (late 1650s) (Figure 19) a putto gives a spinner with a spindle and distaff to Hercules who is draped in a red robe. Omphale, wearing the lion skin as a headdress and holding the club upright, caresses Hercules in a manner similar to Carracci’s Omphale. Two other maids and two more putti look on curiously. Additionally, Michele Desubleo (1602–1676) was a Flemish artist who worked for many years in the studio of Guido Reni. In *Hercules and Omphalos* (No Date) (Figure 20), he paints Omphale lounging gracefully, and almost suggestively holding the club, nude save for the shawl of lion skin. Hercules turns his back to the audience and gestures to his queen, as though asking for favor or assistance, while three maids observe the scene. All of these paintings show the exchanged

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106 There are several other depictions of Hercules with Omphale or Iole. These select examples show repeated themes for further references, but are either not Italian or were created a considerable time before or after Sirani’s. *Iole and Hercules* (1570–1572) by Santo di Tito; *Hercules in the Palace of Omphale* (1698) by Antonio Bellucci; *Hercules and Omphale* (1607) by Abraham Janssens; *Hercules and Iole* (1540–1545) by Antonio Fantuzzi; *Ercole e Onfale* (1617–1618) by Giovanni Francesco Guerrieri; *Hercules and Omphale* (1700–1710) by Luigi Garzi; *Hercules and Omphale* (1537) by Lucas Cranach the Elder; *Hercules and Omphale* (1585) by Bartholomeus Spranger; *Hercules and Omphale* (1732–1734) by Francois Boucher; and *Heracles and Omohale* (1724) by Francois
attributes between Hercules and Omphale. Hercules, the ridiculed and feminized figure, is usually in a position of subordination, wearing colorful robes or nothing and holding an object gendered as female. The stereotypical masculine hero undertaking feminine tasks, and being subservient to a woman, illustrates the male fear of a woman dominating over a man, resulting in a loss or reversal of identity. While these artists barely explore Omphale’s role and status as a powerful leader, many will show Omphale in a commanding position. Yet, that power can be seen as threatening or belittling to Hercules and, consequently, the males that see themselves in the hero. Omphale is often shown very aware of herself and her abilities, an awareness that also insinuates danger. Their gender reversal further represents a crisis in masculinity because the strong Omphale symbolizes the power women can have over men domestically, sexually, and professionally.

In each of these images by male artists, Iole/Omphale’s identity, role, and significance relies entirely upon the relationship with Hercules. In Sirani’s three depictions of Iole, the classical figure has appropriated Hercules’ club and lion skin; however, Iole has been separated from Hercules, allowing her to have her own narrative. In Sirani’s *Iole Crowned by Cupid* (Figure 1), Sirani has Iole seated, not to subjugate Hercules but to place Iole on a throne, emphasizing the status and respect due to royalty. Iole is comfortably leaning on Hercules’ club and dressed in masculine garb. Because she is isolated from Hercules, any masculinization in the character does not have to be directly correlated to dominating over men. Instead, she can be authorized as a strong ruler, capable of defending her kingdom and ruling with dignity. This idea is solidified by the small cupid crowning Iole with laurels to signify Iole as a powerful and victorious leader. Unfortunately, the only surviving pictorial record of this image is a Lemoine. There are records that Artemisia Gentileschi painted her own *Hercules and Omphale*; however, the piece itself and any pictorial record has been lost.
substandard black and white photo of the painting, missing much in definition and contrast. What can be seen in the photograph is Sirani’s use of dramatic contrasts between light and shadow to illuminate the poise of Iole. This chiaroscuro enhances the moment of the crowning of Iole and her fearless, almost challenging, gaze from her shadowed eyes. Without Hercules, Iole does not disappear from the hero’s narrative, she simply becomes a heroine on her own merits.

What might be most striking about this piece is the legitimizing Sirani gives to Iole by having a small putto in the act of crowning her with laurel leaves. The laurel wreath is a motif repeatedly used in art history. The god Apollo is often shown wearing a laurel wreath because of his myth with Daphne; once Daphne turned into a laurel tree, he crafted her leaves into a wreath, making it a symbol for himself as well as for poets and musicians. Laurel leaf wreaths were also given to athletic victors, which is the subject of Peter Paul Rubens painting Coronation of the Victor (1630) (Figure 21), or the wreaths were given to a ruler after a military victory like they did in Rome. “Laureate” as in “poet laureate” is in reference to a laurel wreath; as such, philosophers and poets are often shown wearing a laurel wreath like Ovid, Virgil, Plato, Petrarch, and Dante (Figure 22 and 23). The goddesses Minerva and Diana, Saint Cecilia, Tiberius Caesar, Julius Caesar, Titus Flavius, and Constantine are but a few figures who have been depicted wearing laurel leaf crowns. Some use the laurel wreath to add validation to their knowledge and decisions, while others use the symbol to help authorize them as divine leaders.

Even the mighty Hercules is depicted in a laurel leaf crown. Two pieces in particular show him being crowned by cupid, like Sirani’s Iole Crowned by Cupid. In Hercules as Heroic Virtue Overcoming Discord (1632–1633) (Figure 24), Hercules’ foot is pressing down the head of a serpentine Discord. Around Hercules’ shoulders is his Nemean lion skin; raised high above

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107 See footnote number 96.
his head for the final fateful blow is his club. Just behind the hero’s head, waiting for the exact moment of victory, is cupid holding a laurel leaf wreath with which to crown Hercules. The Apotheosis of Hercules (1688) (Figure 25) is celebrating the arrival of Hercules who, after successfully completing his labors, can be raised to the status of a god. In the painting, Hercules rides in a golden chariot on his way to receive his reward on Mount Olympus. Coming to meet him on the chariot is a cupid, wearing a wreath himself, holding a laurel crown to give to Hercules. In these specific examples, the laurel leaf wreath signifies Hercules as a victor, but also as a divine ruler.

Sirani likely wanted the laurel wreath in Iole Crowned by Cupid to signify similar things: victor, ruler, poet, goddess, philosopher. The laurel wreath crown was an important enough symbol that the artist chose to wear one herself in her painting Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting (1658) (Figure 26). In this self-portrait, Sirani is not only representing the excellence of painting as a profession, but she is drawing attention to the Bolognese tradition of education for women. Sirani is a beautiful young noblewoman in fine Baroque attire, but behind her are books, writing instruments, a classical statue, and even a compass to allude to the geometry and perspective she mastered in order to become a successful artist. She and her Iole look at the viewers with the same confident gaze, each crowned with the laurel wreaths of genius, fame, honor, and victory. This intellectual crown, celebrating the talent of Sirani and the power of Iole, further shows to the patrons of the Ioles that a “male level” of wisdom has been achieved. The patrons can look past the female nudity because the humanist intelligence, achieved by both the painter and the figure in the painting, have made the women acceptable in male society.

The aspect of royalty and validation in Iole Crowned by Cupid is also encapsulated in the Leopard Iole (Figure 2), sometimes referred to as the Donna Reale, or Royal Woman. The poet
Agostino Gallo wrote of this Iole: “Donna reale, e il formidabil legno | E ben puoi tù, perch' altri cada offeso | Scoccar da tua beltá strale piú degno,” (Royal Woman, and the formidable wood | and well you are able, because others fall hurt | strike your beautiful arrow most worthy). This poet aptly noted that Iole, while royal and beautiful, was fully capable of wielding the club of Hercules without much effort unlike others—a feat that would be admired by a male patron who was both a gentleman and a scholar. This piece is representative of Sirani’s typical impasto. She allows the brushwork to model forms in short thick strokes. The Leopard Iole also shows a more dramatic chiaroscuro which Sirani started to move towards as her art matured. Sirani contrasts the deep blue of the sky with the golden hues of her figure and especially in the intricate curls of Iole’s hair, emphasizing the light effects seen in the Bolognese school of art. Iole is placed half in shadow, half in light, juxtaposing her against the background that shows clear blue skies to the left, and darkened storm clouds on the right. Differing from the previous coronation scene, Iole’s gaze is away from the viewer and instead looks out of the frame past the storm clouds. Her bright eyes are contemplative and alert. The shadows of this piece seem to signify the challenges that come from being a ruler and a woman in a male dominated society. Even so, Iole graciously holds her scepter-like club, calmly reigning in spite of the torrents that will accompany her role.

Around the royal Iole’s shoulders Sirani wrapped the leopard skin that has purposefully replaced the lion skin. The luxurious skins surround her shoulders as though it is a fur-lined royal robe. This leopard robe is a symbol of power and authority, just as many kings, queens, emperors, gods, and goddesses have worn similar rich garments to denote their royalty and

status. The robed Iole is also holding a weapon which brings to mind the maiden warriors of the Renaissance epic poem *Orlando Furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto. The maiden warriors would sometimes wear capes over their armor. In the poem, the warrior Bradamante, as valiant as she was fair, personified the moral consistency and courage that her fellow male knights were striving to attain. Although Bradamante was a great warrior, she also intended to marry and expand her dynasty; because of that, she was not viewed as threatening to male readers, but as a character with qualities both men and women could aim to achieve. The robed Iole can be viewed as a celebration of those same virtues of Bradamante that her male patrons can admire, respect, and personally work towards.

The way our maiden warrior, Iole, holds Hercules’ club is not threateningly, like a weapon or even as a phallic replacement, but as a scepter, a symbol of sovereignty. On the base of the club, Sirani placed her signature: ELISABETTA SIR FECIT (Figure 27). Artist signatures were not new, but they were not yet widely used in Bologna. However, Sirani signed her works quite consistently. She used her signature in a way that emphasized her professional and individual identity. For example, in this piece, by placing her signature on Hercules’ club, she drew attention to her identification and the weapon, but more importantly she physically embedded her identity into the visual text of the painting. Viewers cannot look at the painting without associating the artist with Hercules’ club, which further connects Sirani to the purpose of Iole.

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112 Sirani was not the first or only artist to impose her signature in the work in this way. For example, in *Adoration in the Forest* (1459), Filippo Lippi placed his signature on an axe near the Christ child.
Additionally, by looking at this Iole and the aforementioned *Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting*, I believe the Leopard *Iole* to be a self-portrait of Sirani as well. To further support this statement, I look to the way Iole holds the club. The club is one of Hercules’ most terrible and useful weapons, but when Iole holds it, the club appears lighter than air. The club is an important tool that in the role reversal has become part of Iole’s identity, and she holds it as though the club could be the paintbrush in *Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting*. Or perhaps it is the paintbrush that is like the club; when either is used by one with skill, the result can lead to success. Hercules used the club as a tool to complete his many labors, and now Iole may use the club for victories of her own just as Sirani may use her paintbrush to fulfill her artistic destiny. Serendipitously, or perhaps purposefully, as previously noted Luigi Piccinardi titled his book of poetry on Sirani *La Poesia Muta Celebrata dalla Pittura Loquace; Applausi di Nobili Ingegni al Pennello Immortale della Signora Elisabetta Sirani*, or *The Silent Poetry Celebrated by the Talkative Painting; Applauses of Noble Talents to the Immortal Brush of Ms. Elisabetta Sirani*. Here, Piccinardi notes the power of paintings to speak. This ability can allow paintings to act for themselves and change the dynamics of the world around them, just like the club within the hands of Hercules, or Iole, has the power of influence. Piccinardi also astutely called the paintbrush of Sirani *immortal*. In *Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting*, Sirani holds her undying and unyielding paintbrush while representing the prudent symbol of painting. Similarly, Iole now holds power over the tool of an immortal, making her own story everlasting. The opportunities for such tools in the hands of powerful women are limitless.

Besides the similar facial features, the clothing in the two paintings also supports *Iole* being a self-portrait of Sirani. Although the Leopard *Iole* is nude, the images have similar garments: a robe falling off their shoulders and around their elbows, a strap across their chests,
dangling jeweled earrings, and a green circlet in their hair—for Sirani a laurel leaf wreath and for Iole ribbons. Yet greater verification is found in the large, gold, and nearly identical bracelet on the wrist of both women. This sign of wealth is on the arm each woman principally uses for her craft, signifying the importance of the tools they hold and the hands that wield them. Again, distinction is placed on their immortal instruments, one of which is the scepter-club that Sirani chose to place her signature on. With that signature, Sirani claims authority, not only for the beautiful, royal, and powerful Iole, but for herself as an indispensable and immortal artist.

Sirani’s third and final Iole (Figure 3) is equally regal to the two other depictions. The lively touches of Sirani’s shadowing and the tranquil expression of Iole are imitative of the Leopard Iole, which similarity is another indication that the provenance of this piece leads to Belingiero Gessi. The life-size figure easily balances the heavy club as she takes a stance in front of a dramatic, Baroque, curtained interior. Sirani contrasts her light and shadow to illuminate the body of Iole. Engulfed in the lion skin with her hand on her hip, Sirani presents Iole in a wide stance—a traditional male akimbo pose of confidence. This woman is in control of her passions, unaffected by any tumultuous romantic relationship. Iole is once again shown as royal, collected, and fearless.

Sirani’s Iole is not the first to pose in this power stance. For example, Anthony van Dyck painted a Portrait of King Charles I in his Robes of State (1636) (Figure 28) in a similar fashion. The akimbo stance helps to show the monarch over three kingdoms as a ruler the people would trust. In a contrasting fresco, Domenico Ghirlandaio created Saint Christopher and the Infant Christ (No Date) (Figure 29) in a similar stance, but for a different purpose. Here, with the Christ child on his shoulders, Saint Christopher uses this power pose as a means of stability and safety. Iole also hearkens to two statues of Hercules: Marble Statue of a Youthful Hercules (69–96)
(Figure 30) and the *Farnese Hercules* (216) (Figure 31). The nude youthful Hercules, with his hands to his hips—one hand holding his club and the other cradling the lion skin—gazes sternly past his viewers. He has taken the manly hero stance; his rippling muscles and determined face show he is ready to be victorious in his many labors. Although the *Farnese Hercules* may have a more wearied face, his pose is no less heroic. One arm learns on his club and lion skin while his other hand lays on the back of his hip, holding the apples of his twelfth labor. The muscular hero poses as the victor of many battles, and while he may be tired, his stance shows he can still handle more challenges. Iole too, in this strong pose, can handle the challenges of any king, saint, or hero.

Even though Sirani has painted Iole in a heroic stance after Iole has appropriated some of Hercules’ masculinity, I do not believe Sirani is expressing women are better than men or that women should replace men. She makes Iole, who is in the unusual role of man, look both comfortable in her position while also maintaining her femininity; Sirani is asserting the protofeminist tradition that women are capable and deserving of the same equalities and opportunities as men. Iole’s nudity is not eroticized, but is emphasizing the fact that she is a woman in a man’s role with a man’s power. Her female body, long curled hair, the finely adorned circlet around her head, and jeweled earrings all point to her femininity. When contrasted with her manly, powerful stance, the club she easily balances, and the heavy Nemean lion skin that gently folds around her body, they are all testaments that she is female, but strong, powerful, and intelligent. Sirani used a similar tactic in her *Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting*. The books and tools that she surrounded herself with are gendered male; even the laurel wreath around her head is more commonly used for men who have accomplished greater physical than she as a painter. However, with the presence of those tools and Sirani painting herself to
symbolize the art of painting, she has claimed her right to be a painter and to have a career in a male dominated profession. Sirani has allowed the same right for Iole, to claim the right to be sovereign of herself and her people. The contemporary poet who described this Iole as “virile,” in the same poem also recognized her “bellezza hà in forte” or “beauty in strength.”\textsuperscript{113} Her ability to take over the role of Hercules, and to do that part well, did not make her threatening, it made her strong. Sirani and the poet both recognized that masculinized strength can coexist with feminine beauty.

Superficially, by following the tradition of Boccaccio and collapsing the mythological characters of Iole and Omphale into one person, Sirani may not appear to empower women. Reducing or removing a woman’s individuality usually leads to the lessening of her worth and existence. In a patriarchal society, the choices of women are limited. Many cannot choose who to marry, to have a career, or even what to read. Their own individuality and their independent thoughts are what they do have control over. But Sirani took two separate personages and combined them into one, removing their individual identity. That choice was not to make Iole and Omphale weaker or to remove their unique identities, but to make them stronger as a united community. Together, they left behind their negative issues, and maintained their positive attributes. For example, by combining the identities of the two women, Sirani does not allow Iole to succumb to a life of servitude due to the whims of men. Instead, Iole borrows the strength and authority of Queen Omphale to gather control over her situation. Iole is no longer bound to follow the commands of her father and brothers or fated to become the servant of Hercules, nor is Omphale forced to accept Hercules as her servant. They are each granted the agency they

\textsuperscript{113} Giovanni Luigi Piccinardi, \textit{La Poesia Muta Celebrata dalla Pittura Loquace; Applausi di Nobili Ingegni al Pennello Immortale della Signora Elisabetta Sirani} (Bologna, 1966, http://dlib.biblhertz.it/Ca-SIR295-2660#page/4/mode/2up) 57.
deserve and the power to follow through with their choices. Just as Sirani was able to create a
community of women in her studio to bolster and strengthen each other, so did combining
Omphale and Iole into a single community make them stronger. Because of this, Iole and
Omphale not only existed outside of their relationship with Hercules, but they thrived.

The most distinctive characteristic overall in the three Ioles is Sirani’s presentation of
Iole as an isolated individual. Sirani’s male artist contemporaries view and portray Iole/Omphale
as either a dominatrix to avoid or a sexual being to use. The format of their pictures leaves little
to distract from Hercules’ torment and Iole/Omphale’s carnality. Iole and Omphale simply
become eroticized offerings to the male gaze due to the emotions of the figures in combination
with the narrative of their portrayal.114 The male gaze is in control; whether from fear or desire,
Iole/Omphale is reduced to a passive object.115 To fix the sexual imbalance, Sirani simply
removed the male figure from the narrative so that viewers wouldn’t be swayed to reflect his
actions or emotions. Moreover, Sirani did not imbue Iole with potent sentiment or sensuality
typically favored in representations by male artists. In contrast, she focused on traits associated
with masculinity—logic, strength, dignity, and courage to name a few. By doing so, Sirani
rejected male voyeurism and did not let Iole or Omphale disappear into the narrative of Hercules
and his many labors and lovers. Instead, she strengthened their unique traits and authorized a
distinctive history for Iole and Omphale to claim.

Sirani’s three Ioles are images of powerful women who are active in pursuing their own
narrative, and in ruling their own life. Sirani’s interpretations, very different from her male
contemporaries, show Iole and Omphale from a strong and independent female perspective.

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64–74.
Those values, already present in the literary history, were pinpointed and intensified by Sirani’s protofeminist mindset. This resulted in three images of a formidable woman who was finally autonomous and separated from the story that reduced her to one of the many lovers of Hercules.

**Conclusion**

Sirani was an empowered woman and much of her oeuvre reflected that perspective. Her approach was aided by the protofeminist tradition, which grew in early modern Italy as a result of the creative work by strong female predecessors like Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella. Christine de Pizan said “one could find plenty of intelligent women in the world if one were only willing to look.”[116] Many of the early modern women were willing to look and work hard to make their intelligence and their desires known. Each woman had strength on her own but, like the combining of Iole and Omphale, together they formed a community that spread protofeminism in Italy.

Sirani’s development as a beloved and significant painter is the result of the work done by the females before Sirani, but also of her residence in Bologna, where progressive attitudes towards females seeking education and career were encouraged. Bologna proved its support of women by allowing them to attend the reputable University of Bologna and by helping its artists, like Lavinia Fontana and Sirani, establish impressive matronage and patronage networks. And it was here in Bologna were Sirani was allowed to strengthen the female community by opening her own art studio to women, allowing them to learn from each other and begin careers.

A result of the cultural formation of Sirani was her unique and original interpretation of female figures in her art. Some scholars argue that Sirani is an example of a quiet feminist—although a few may have recognized her intention to empower women through her art, overall

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the finished product was too ambiguous and nuanced to succeed. By looking at Sirani’s three depictions of the mythological figure Iole, I hope to have shown Sirani as more than a quiet feminist and more than a simple follower of Reni. Indeed, I believe her renderings of heroic women can be viewed as reactions against the passive or sexualized models that dominated Reni’s work. I also hope to have supported and shown that Sirani’s art shows Sirani as an advocate of women; that her has protofeminist artistic interpretations which purposefully reject the eroticized representations of females, and give women new and empowering archetypes.

Furthermore, in literary and artistic history, Iole and Omphale were consistently recognized only in terms of their relationship with Hercules. This immediately reduced their value to an object and subjected them to the male gaze. Even though Sirani combined characteristics of both women into a singular person, this did not reduce their value but formed a stronger community for the two. This combining kept the positive attributes of both women, which allowed her to easily control Hercules’ club, worthily wear the Nemean lion skin, and reach her full potential as a ruler. Sirani reinforced each Iole/Omphale by painting her as an isolated figure, deliberately separated from her relationship with Hercules. In this setting, Iole/Omphale claimed the fearlessness and confidence worthy of an influential sovereign. Those qualities clearly expressed in the visual representations of Iole/Omphale, and in Sirani herself, further advanced the call for female equality and expanded the protofeminist tradition in Italy.
Figure 1: Elisabetta Sirani, *Iole Crowned by Cupid*, 1659, Location unknown
Figure 2: Elisabetta Sirani, *Iole*, 1661, Collezioni d’Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio in Bologna, Italy
Figure 3: Elisabetta Sirani, *Iole*, 1662–1663, Location unknown
Figure 4: Attributed to Caterina de’ Vigri, *St. Ursula*, 1456, Gallerie dell’Accademia di Venezia, Venice, Italy
Figure 5: Properzia de’ Rossi, *Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife*, 1525–1526, Basilica de San Petronio Museum, Bologna, Italy
Figure 6: Lavinia Fontana, *Minerva Dressing*, 1613, Galleria Borghese, Rome, Italy
Figure 7: Elisabetta Sirani, *Portia Wounding her Thigh*, 1664, Collezioni d’Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio in Bologna, Italy
Figure 8: Guido Reni, *Portia*, 1625-1626, Durazzo–Pallavicini Collection, Genoa, Italy
Figure 9: Elisabetta Sirani, *Timoclea of Thebes Throwing the Captain of Alexander’s Army into a Well*, 1659, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples, Italy
Figure 10: Elisabetta Sirani, *Cleopatra*, 1663, Collection of the Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, Michigan, USA
Figure 11: Guido Reni, *Cleopatra with the Asp*, 1630, The Royal Collection Trust, Windsor, England
Figure 12: Guido Reni, *Death of Cleopatra*, 1639, Sanssouci Palace, Potsdam, Germany
Figure 13: Guido Reni, *Cleopatra*, 1635-1640, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, Italy
Figure 14: Annibale Carracci, *Hercules and Iole*, 1597, Palazzo Farnese, Rome, Italy
Figure 15: Peter Paul Rubens, *Hercules and Omphale*, 1602–1605, Louvre Museum, Paris, France
Figure 16: Giovanni Francesco Gessi, *Ercole e Onfale*, 1620–1630, Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna in Palazzo Pepoli Campogrande, Bologna, Italy
Figure 17: Bernardo Cavallino, *Hercules and Omphale*, 1640, National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, Japan
Figure 18: Luca Ferrari, *Hercule et Omphale*, 1652–1653, Musée d’art et d’histoire de Chaumont, Chaumont, France
Figure 19: Giovanni Francesco Romanelli, *Hercules and Omphale*, late 1650s, The Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia
Figure 20: Michele Desubleo, *Hercules and Omphalos*, 1602–1676, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena, Italy
Figure 21: Peter Paul Rubens, *Coronation of the Victor*, 1630, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria
Figure 22: Giorgio Vasari, *Six Tuscan Poets*, 1554, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota, USA
Figure 23: Sandro Botticelli, *Portrait of Dante*, 1495, Private Collection, Switzerland
Figure 24: Peter Paul Rubens, *Hercules as Heroic Virtue Overcoming Discord*, 1632-1633, Museum of Fine Art, Massachusetts, USA
Figure 25: Noël Coypel, *Apotheosis of Hercules*, 1688, Château de Versailles, Versailles, France
Figure 26: Elisabetta Sirani, *Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting*, 1658, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, Russia
Figure 27: Elisabetta Sirani, Close-up of *Iole* (see Figure 2), 1661, Collezioni d’Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio in Bologna, Italy
Figure 28: Anthony van Dyck, *Portrait of King Charles I in his Robes of State*, 1636, The Royal Collection Trust, Windsor Castle, England
Figure 29: Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Saint Christopher and the Infant Christ*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA
Figure 30: *Marble Statue of a Youthful Hercules*, 69-96 AD, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA
Figure 31: Glykon, *Farnese Hercules*, 216 AD, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy


