...when a subject is highly controversial—and any question about sex is that—one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

The literary and philosophical phenomenon of the Renaissance *trattati d’amore* began with the publication in 1484 of Marsilio Ficino’s highly influential *De Amore* (first manuscript version 1469) and found an impressive culmination in Giordano Bruno’s *De gli eroici furori* published in 1585. Many greater or lesser authors contributed to the development of the genre during the intervening century,¹ resulting in an extensive corpus of treatises devoted to “Renaissance love theory.”² John Charles Nelson, in one of many scholarly studies that have been devoted to the subject, emphasizes that these writers chose to treat love “Platonically” as an intellectual, nonsexual, or even anti-sexual phenomenon…. [they] profess in regard to sexual love a severe contempt which is tempered by an almost grudging admission

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of the necessity of sexual intercourse in order to propagate the human race... Sexual activity in itself is identified with ugliness and bestiality. Yet, discussion of the philosophical problems of “divine” and “Platonic” love often lapses into a consideration of “doubts” (dubbi) concerning “practical” questions of “human” or “vulgar” love.  

Given this fact, any contemporary scholar who wishes to make sense of Renaissance love theory has to make a basic methodological choice. A first option—which has been chosen by the overwhelming majority of specialists—is to restrict oneself to analysis of the emic level (i.e. the “author’s point of view”): one tries to explain as faithfully as possible what the author is trying to say in his text, places that text in a historical framework, points out philosophical or literary backgrounds and influences, and so on. In the case of Renaissance love theory, this means that one chooses to take the author at his word when he says that love is essentially “intellectual, non-sexual, even anti-sexual,” and then proceeds to explain and contextualize that opinion. The second option—which I will choose in this article—is to try and develop an additional etic perspective as well, i.e. a scholarly one that may be very different (as regards terminology and theoretical assumptions) from the author’s point of view, but that might help us make more sense of what we are studying. This implies that the author is not regarded as the final authority regarding his own text: he may well tell us that love is “intellectual, non-sexual, even anti-sexual,” but we want to know why he thinks so and what it means that he seeks to convince us of such a thing. Scholars who restrict themselves to the first approach function

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3 Nelson, Renaissance Theory of Love, 70.
4 The emic/etic distinction was originally introduced by Kenneth Pike (Language in Relation to a Unified Theory, 38–39) and Marvin Harris (Cultural Materialism, ch. 2), but has come to be understood in new ways in the contexts of cultural anthropology and the study of religion (see e.g. Platvoet, Comparing Religions, 4–5, 21, 29; Snoek, Initiations, 4–8 and passim). Contrary to some current understandings (or misunderstandings) of the distinction, “emic” as understood in this article has nothing to do with taking the “author’s point of view” as normative or with “going native,” and “etic” has nothing to do with reductionist agendas or naïve beliefs about “objectivity.” My perspective can best be explained by an example. If one watches a group of children playing in a park, and asks one of them (or its parents) what they are doing, the answer is likely to be “we are playing.” This “emic” response is indeed quite correct as a description of the childrens’ activity. However, if one asks a child psychologist what the children are doing, one is likely to get an answer like, e.g., “they are engaged in a learning process in which they acquire important social skills.” This “etic” response may be underpinned by complex social and psychological theories using technical language that would not be understandable (and not necessarily very interesting) to the children or their parents, but which make it possible for academics to gain new insights and ask relevant questions that help us better understand child behavior.