CHAPTER 3

A Giant Corrupt Body: The Gendering of Renaissance Roma

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Quo magis dictu mirabile est et acerbum aspectu, adeo speciem formamque
ipsius immutasse fortunae crudelitatem, ut nunc omni decore nudata,
prostrata iaceat instar gigantei cadaveris corrupti, atque undique exesi: deflen-
dum quippe est hanc urbem tot quondam illustrium virorum atque imperato-
rum foetam, tot belli ducum, tot principum excellentissimorum altricem, tot
tantarumque virtutum parentem, tot bonarum artium procreatricem.

How much more wondrous to speak of and bitter to observe: the appear-
ance and beauty of the city changed by the cruelty of fortune, so that
now denuded of all grace, she lies prostrate like a giant corrupt body, and
worn away everywhere: one must surely weep over this city once fertile
with so many illustrious men and emperors, of so many leaders of war, the
nursemother of so many most excellent leaders, the parent of so many and
such great (masculine) virtues, the procreator of so many good arts.1

In the pontificate of Martin V (1417–31), Poggio Bracciolini and his papal col-
league Antonio Loschi took a tour of the monuments of ancient Rome, pausing
to ponder the panoramic ruins from the heights of the Campidoglio. In this
passage of his De varietate fortunae (On the Vicissitudes of Fortune), Poggio
recounts his friend’s reaction to the sight: Loschi was overwhelmed both by what
had been lost and by what remained, and he used his knowledge of Roman
history and literature to reconstruct those components no longer visible. While
this account has been closely studied for its description of the surviving ancient
monuments, and more recently for its tension between the accomplishments of
man versus the ravages of nature,2 it is also remarkable for the gendered and phys-
ical terms used to dramatize the view. Significantly, the city is rendered corporeal
in the description, as a giant corrupt cadaver now denuded and splayed across
the landscape. This is no generic body, but one struggling for definition in

1 Poggio Bracciolini, Historia de varietate fortunae (Paris: Constelier, 1723) 1.6–7, translation by
the author.
2 Mary D. Garrard, Brunelleschi’s Egg: Nature, Art, and Gender in Renaissance Italy (Berkeley:
terms of gender and purpose. This body is invested with the feminine ideals of fertility and nurturing by its characterization as fertile (foeta) and as a nurse-maid (altrix), but at the same time it engenders masculine qualities (virtutes) and dominant men: illustrious men and emperors (illustri viri atque imperatores) and leaders of war (belli duces). This uncertain status, on the border between masculine and feminine, combined with the city’s fragmentary appearance, inspires the viewer (and reader) toward a desire for comprehension and reconstruction. Thus this gender tension is at once a vivid description of the ruined state of antiquity, and a vivid metaphor for conceptualizing the Italian Renaissance desire to view, complete, and revivify Roman material remains.

Using Poggio’s account as a touchstone, this chapter focuses on the interpretation in Renaissance Italy of ancient sculptures with intersexual status, namely those depicting hermaphrodites. The first section explores the theme of the hermaphrodite in Italian humanistic thought and artistic output of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Drawing from antiquity’s varied accounts of the intersexual quasi-deity Hermaphroditus, Renaissance thinkers and artists crafted heterogeneous responses to perceived blending of genders in both ancient and contemporary art. The range of reactions, from prurient desire to disgusted abjection, from admiration of potential to rejection of corruption, parallels the attitude towards the ruins of Rome described by Poggio and promulgated by later Renaissance popes and antiquarians. The second section of the chapter turns to literary descriptions and visual renderings of Roma, which significantly are subject to the same heterogeneous methodologies of interpretation as the overtly intersexual hermaphrodite. Both in literary descriptions of ancient sculptures and in contemporary artworks, the iconography, attitude, and even gender of Roma are open to interpretation, developing and changing as the Renaissance both reveals more of antiquity and comes to grips with its response to it. Kathleen Long’s characterization of the image of the hermaphrodite in Renaissance France could also easily be applied to the image of Roma in this formative period: “It can be read as a descent into chaos that lies outside of carefully categorized culture; yet it is also a symbol of harmony, of generation, of corruption, and of renewal... It is the perfect figure for troubled times.”

Parte un sottil velo ha circuita: Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Italy

Around the same time as their contemplation of the ruins of Rome, Loschi and Poggio received and read a notorious volume of neo-Latin poetry by Antonio

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