What lies in the space between a woman’s makeup and her face? Implied by this question are various assumptions attending the material practice of face painting in early modern Europe and informing its meaning in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture. Despite the fact that some men also used cosmetics, increasingly as the seventeenth century progressed,¹ invectives overwhelmingly target only women’s adornment, associating it with feminine vanity. As Nathaniel Richards writes in *The Celestiall Publican* (1630),

> A painted Face sleekt o’re by cunning Art,
> Is but the Pride of a luxurious Heart
> . . . Lust, Pride, and Envie, all the sinnes that are,
> Wait on the painted Beautie falsely faire.²

Because early modern invectives against painting were culled from those of the church fathers (who also aggressively represented face painting as women’s diabolical work), these texts contribute to the period’s pervasive and multifaceted misogyny, marking its discursive and ideological foundations. Giovanni Battista della Porta offers a scathing example of the misogyny guiding both invectives
against cosmetics and instructional manuals prescribing their use when he con-
cludes his list of recipes for cerussa, acqua di argento vivo, and other cosmetics
with “alcune burle, che si fanno alle donne” (“Some Sports against Women”).
“E così portremo conoscere le faccie imbelletate,” he advises, “faccisi così: Masticà con i denti un poco di zaffrano, & accosta la sua bocca alla loro faccia ragion-
nando, che l’iasi farà impallidire il belletto, a al farà giallica, ma se non sarà
imbellettata, non ricerverà alcune nocimento” (“If you would know a painted
Face, do thus: Chew Saffron between your Teeth, and stand neer to a woman
with your mouth: when you talk to her, your breath will foul her Face, and make
it yellowish; but if she be not painted, the natural colour will continue”).3

Closely associated with the painting woman’s assumed vanity is the question’s
implication of fraud—the concern that cosmetics might disguise the face to
deceive onlookers. Because the practice of face painting was feminized in early
modern culture, as well as the polemics that sought to police it, the lie of
makeup—the troublesome product of women’s illicit self-creation—reflected
women’s inherent doubleness. The painting woman “had need to be twice de-


defined,” Tuke moralizes, “for she is not what she seemes. And though she bee a
creature of God, as she is a woman, yet is she her own creatrisse.”4 In the distinc-
tion between the body and its ornament, feminine duplicity is literalized and
defined.

Finally, the question and its multiple answers in early modern culture assert
a confidence in the identifiable borders of the physical body, assuming that it is
possible to determine the limits of the flesh and, accordingly, to distinguish
between what belongs to the body and what is beyond it.5 In fact, such faith is
continually challenged by cosmetic practices and their interpretations. This
challenge is issued on two fronts. First, the highly toxic ingredients of early mod-
ern cosmetics led critics of face painting to condemn the practice on the evidence
of its damaging physical effects. Thus, Tuke quotes Andres de Laguna’s Annota-
tiones in Discordiem—“translated out of the Spanish,” he notes, “by Mist. Eliza-
beth Arnold”6—in likening the effects of mercury sublimate to “originall sinne,”
passing “from generation to generation, when the child borne of them, before
it be able to goe, doth shed his teeth one after another, as being corrupted and
rotten, not through his fault but by reason of the vitiounesse and taint of
the mother that painted her selve.”7 The comment indicates the second means by
which perceptions of face painting blur the imagined limits of the physical body.
Even as early modern cosmetics were able to penetrate the skin and corrupt the
body from within, so the notion of the painting woman’s “vitiounesse” aligns
her cosmetic practices with an internal, spiritual corruption, a kind of “original sinne.” Thus, Tuke explains, “as the exterior Author of these devices is evill, even no other then the devell: so the interior grounds thereof are also evill, as pride, wantonnesse, and lacke of judgement, or else rebellion of affections against judgement.” What is applied to the surface of the body, then, what is “exterior” to it, makes manifest a legion of feminine weaknesses lying within. In this respect face painting serves as a clear and compelling case study of early modern constructions of gender: women paint, the argument goes, and, because they paint, they reveal themselves to be, essentially, women.

For the female artist in the period invectives against women’s face painting provided the terms by which her creative endeavors could be viewed as alternatively prodigious and transgressive. To the woman who moved from the privacy of her closet to the public forum of the artist’s studio, who shifted her gaze from her looking glass to subjects and objects beyond it, and who applied the pigments of her trade (the same materials used in cosmetics) to the canvas rather than the body, treatises on cosmetics defined the contours of the period’s resistance to the idea of feminine creativity and virtuosity. As Frances E. Dolan has shown, early modern discussions of the art of poetry and of face painting both associate female creativity with the physical and the artificial (that is, with cosmetics) in order to “reinforce the perception of its self-absorption, transience, and decadence.” If the male poet can be described, however optimistically and provisionally, as creating a golden world,” she explains, “his female counterpart, the ‘creatrice,’ can be depicted as brazen, both counterfeit (brass rather than gold) and shameless, presumptuous, and bold.” Thus, George Puttenham denigrates poetry’s excessive “colours” by comparing them to “the crimson tainte, which should be laid upon a Ladies lips, or right in the center of her cheekes” but “by some oversight or mishap [is] applied to her forhead or chinne,” resulting in “a very ridiculous bewtie,” and Roland Fréart de Chambray’s *Idée de la perfection de la peintre* (1662) personifies modern painting, “l’Idole du temps present” (“this Idol of the present Age”), as “une nouvelle Maistresse, coquette & badine, qui ne leur demande que du fard & des coleurs, pour agreer à la premiere rencontre, sans se soucier si elle plaira long-temps” (“a new Mistress, trifling, and full of tattle, who requires nothing of them but Fard and Colour to take at first sight, without being at all concern’d whether she pleas’d long or not”). Whereas these theorists on the arts deploy images of painting women figuratively, polemists in multiple genres condemn face painting as an illicit form of imitation. Martin Cognet observes that, “as a man would judge one to be yll at ease, which weareth a plaster on his
face, or one that hath been scourged to have been punished by lawe, so doeth painting betoken a diseased soule marked with adulterie.” Similarily, Philip Stubbes imagines face painting as simultaneously an adulterous corruption of God’s creation and an idolatrous self-love: “And thinkest thou (oh Woman) to escape the Judgement of God, who hath fashioned thee, to his glory, when thy great and more then presumptious audacicitie dareth to alter, & chaunge his workmanship in thee?” Women’s face painting is viewed as impersonating, and thus debasing, men’s creativity in treatises on the arts and as presumptuously usurping God’s creative license in invectives against cosmetics. Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* spells out the implications of these arguments for the woman artist herself. Whereas Michelangelo stands at the pinnacle of Vasari’s teleology of the arts because his “divinissimo ingegno” (most divine genius) and “sì maravigliosa perfezzione” (such marvellous perfection) surpass the slavish imitation of nature, his female contemporary Sofonisba Anguissola is praised as a faithful portraitist, because women, incapable of creating a golden world, can only hope to copy fallen nature. Thus, the trait most frequently attributed to her—five times in the three-page biography—is not *ingegno* (genius) but *diligenza* (diligence). Vasari’s life of the female artist ends with a (nervous) quip that deflates Anguissola’s creativity by associating it with the female body’s reproductive capacity: “Ma se le donne sì bene sanno fare gl’uomini vivi, che maravaglia che quelle che vogliono sappiano anco fargli sì bene dipinti?” (But if women know so well how to make living men, what marvel is it that those who want to do so are also so able to create them in painting?)!

This chapter follows these difficult negotiations with the painting woman into three works—the spectacle of Elisabetta Sirani’s funeral in Bologna in 1665, Shakespeare’s narrative poem “The Rape of Lucrece,” and Sirani’s painting *Portia Wounding Her Thigh*—each engaging early modern discourses on cosmetics, rhetoric, and painting that commonly “construct the display or spectacle as feminine and the spectator as masculine.” Each, accordingly, casts gender as a function of subjects’ engagements with artistic and/or linguistic conventions and explores the alliances between inward and outward states and between private experience and public performance implicit in and troubled by women’s painting in both of its senses. Each uses the painting woman to guarantee the author’s creative sovereignty in his or her medium. The memorials following Sirani’s death both celebrate the female artist’s virtuosity and contain her exceptional powers of self-authorship within masculine rhetorical virtuosity. “The Rape of Lucrece” also explores this masculine “rhetoric of display” as mani-
fested in men’s and women’s encounters with pictorial and rhetorical conventions. Like Sirani’s eulogists, Shakespeare complicates the terms of anti-cosmetic invectives, but he goes beyond them by demonizing masculine colors and establishing feminine self-representation as a model for the male poet’s work. Finally, in Sirani’s *Portia Wounding Her Thigh* both the heroine and her female creatrice claim a virtuosity that defends the painting woman’s authority to create and self-create using the pigments of her trade.

My point in seeking characteristically masculine and feminine approaches to painting in these works is not to argue that Sirani’s sex definitively alters her treatment of her subject or that Shakespeare and Sirani’s eulogists, as men, inevitably place their female subjects in predictable gender categories current in early modern culture. Instead of linking their positions to essentially male or female points of view, I offer a spectrum of responses to the figure of the painting woman based upon their authors’ encounters with the conventions of painting. The works of Sirani’s eulogists mark one extreme on this spectrum, Sirani’s *Portia* occupies the opposite extreme, and Shakespeare’s poem stakes out a middle ground between the poles at which feminine self-authorship is alternatively denied and affirmed. I plot the coordinates of early modern culture’s more or less feminist treatments of the image in response to these encounters with generic and discursive models, rather than in connection with the sexes of their authors.

In its self-conscious manipulation of the commonplaces attending painting, Sirani’s *Portia* provides an emblem of the strategies for self-authorship undertaken by the painting women studied throughout this book. The image exposes the fiction of an essential femininity on which the early modern cosmetic debate proceeds and, in doing so, stages Sirani’s performance of femininity and her assertion of the female painter’s powers of self-creation.

When Elisabetta Sirani died at the age of twenty-seven, Giovanni Luigi Piacenardi, prior of lawyers of the University of Bologna, lamented her in terms that objectify her as an icon of Bolognese identity and self-praise: “Piange il Reno di Felsina, e sul di lui nobil margo deploro ancor’io lo scorno della Natura, il prodigio dell’arte, la gloria el Sesto Donesco, la Gemma d’Italia, il Sole della Europa, elisabetta sirani” (The Reno of Felsina weeps, and on its noble banks I too deplore the shame of Nature, the prodigy of art, the glory of the Female Sex, the Gem of Italy, the Sun of Europe, Elisabetta Sirani). The daughter of painter Giovanni Andrea Sirani, Elisabetta was an extraordinarily prodigious painter, producing nearly two hundred works in a career that spanned only a decade, sup-
Fig. 2. Catafalque of Elisabetta Sirani from Giovanni Luigi Picinardi, *Il Pennello Lagrimato* (Bologna: Giacomo Monti, 1665). By permission of the British Library, shelf mark 72.i.16.
porting her family when her father succumbed to gout, and opening a successful school to train women painters, including her two sisters, Barbara and Anna Maria.\(^{20}\) Although Sirani was buried on August 28, 1665, next to Guido Reni in the Church of San Domenico in Bologna, an elaborate funeral took place six weeks later, on November 14. For the occasion the church was hung in black and decorated with wreaths and shields bearing emblems and devices: one, for instance, showed “un’arbore carco di frutti, con una acetta che lo tronca” (a tree laden with fruit, with an axe cutting it off), with the motto *Invidia Manus.*\(^{21}\) In the middle of the nave a catafalque of imitation marble representing the Temple of Fame was erected (“alta, e nobile Machina fabricata di finti marmi, rappresentante il Tempio dell’Honore”) (fig. 2).\(^{22}\) There “si mirava la Statua al Naturale di detta Signora Sirani maestosamente sedente nel mezzo di detto Tempio in atto di dipingere” (one observed the lifelike statue of the said Signora Sirani majestically seated in the middle of the said Temple, in the act of painting).\(^{23}\) The publication of Picinardi’s funeral oration, *Il Pennello Lagrimato (The Lamented Paintbrush)*, shortly after the event ensured the immortality of the spectacle and its participants as well as that of its dedicatee.

Some of the celebrity surrounding Sirani’s death was due to its mysterious circumstances. Following a series of complaints of stomach pains for which she was treated throughout the summer of 1665, Sirani fell ill and died in August. An autopsy revealed the apparent cause of death to be “materia velenosa e corrosiva” (poisonous and corrosive matter) and led to the arrest of the family’s maid-servant, Lucia Tolomelli.\(^{24}\) Despite the lack of clear motive (which gave rise to the theory that Tolomelli was employed by an *invidia manus*, a jealous painter), a trial ensued, resulting in Tolomelli’s banishment from Bologna.\(^{25}\) Although the maid-servant was subsequently pardoned, Sirani’s “fine oscura e tragica” (obscure and tragic end),\(^{26}\) following her extraordinary career, won her a place in the city’s pantheon: when Sirani’s contemporary and mentor, Carlo Cesare Malvasia, published his *Felsina pittrice* in 1678, the survey of Bolognese painters culminated with the brief life of this “Pittrice Eroina,” a literal counterpart to the feminine *Felsina pittrice (Bologna-as-Painter)* of the volume’s title.\(^{27}\)

In Sirani’s apotheosis following her death, one can detect resonances of her culture’s conflicted relationships with the female artist and with women engaged in the more mundane practice of face painting. At the center of the ceremony, literally and figuratively, is the effigy of the painting woman: a life-size likeness of Sirani, probably made of wax (much like the effigies that surmounted the caskets of royalty during heraldic funerals in the period), painted to resemble the
artist in life, and eternally engaged in the act of painting. We can imagine the effigy as resembling Sirani’s portrait (fig. 3), now in Bologna, probably the posthumous portrait of the artist by her sister, Barbara, praised by Picinardi in Il Pennello Lagrimato. Here Sirani appears as a calm allegory of the art itself. Painting is imagined as a gentile pursuit for the well-bred woman of which the female painter is both practitioner and personification (that is, Felsina pittrice). As a posthumous representation, memorializing in paint the art of painting embodied by the subject, the portrait foregrounds the material practices by which the image, the art, and the female artist are constructed.
The painted (made-up) face of the subject is the immediate product of the female painter's applications of pigments to create her sister's image, literally an image of the sister art. Thus, the subject's face makes manifest painting in both of its senses. The white skin and red cheeks and lips seem to be the products of cosmetics: the subject, Elisabetta Sirani, would have applied ceruse (white lead mixed with vinegar) to lighten her skin and fucus (red crystalline mercuric sulphide) to dye her cheeks and lips.30 Beyond the canvas, meanwhile, the female artist, Barbara Sirani, creates and colors the image with “Ceruse, or white lead” (“la biaca [o] il bianco”), which, as Richard Haydocke reports in his translation of Lomazzo’s Trattato dell’arte de la pittura (1584), is the chief means by which the painter manufactures white pigments and by which the painting woman whitens her skin. To color the cheeks and lips, they both employ “i due cenapri, cioè di Minera, & artificiale” (“reddes made of the 2 cynnabars called Vermilians Natural and Artificial”).31 When Haydocke adds to Lomazzo’s treatise two chapters based on Leonard Fioravanti’s Dello specchio di scientia universale (1564) that, “debating the matter partly like a Physician, and partly like a Painter,” explicate the ill effects of women’s cosmetics,32 he suggests the perceived equivalence between the two arts based on their shared ingredients. Physicians such as Haydocke were often involved in discussions of, and activities surrounding, the creation of artist’s pigments and women’s cosmetics; during this period the Latin word pigmentum referred to both a pigment and a drug, and colors for both arts of painting were sold at apothecaries’ shops.33 Odoardo Fialetti’s description of the painter’s process for making ceruse, for example, is a mirror image of Porta’s recipe for the cosmetic of the same name. Fialetti instructs the painter, “To make white Lead . . . Take a Gallypot, whereinto put several small plates of clean Lead, cover them with white Wine Vinegar, cover the Pot, and dig an hole in a Cellar, where let it abide for the space of six Weeks; take it up, and scrape off the White Lead from the plates.”34 And Porta similarly advises the painting woman:

ponila in vase overe crucivolo di creta di bocca larga, e spargerà sopra aceto fortissimo . . . dopo firma sopra la bocca lamine di piombo . . . [P]er ogni quindici giorni si toglie quel coverchio, e si vede se il piombo sia anchora rissoluto, e radine sopra quello, che vi stà come fuliggine, e raso torra a coverchiare, & a ferrar le commissure, e lascia per altro tanto tempo, e fa il medesimo come habbiamo insegnato ai sovra, finche tutto il piombo sia dissoluta in cerussa.

[into a pot, or earthen vessel, with a broad mouth; pouring in the sharpest vinegar . . . then fasten a plate of lead on the mouth of the pot . . . Every fifteen days take
off the cover, and see how it is, if the lead be dissolved, and scrape the cover of all that hangs upon it, and put in the cover, anoint it all about, and let it stand so long, till all the rest be performed, as I said before, and the whole lead be turned to cerus.]35

Considered in light of the material and metaphoric associations between the two arts of painting, Barbara Sirani’s portrait presents her sister as an allegory of self-authorship in which the painting woman is the lord and owner of her face. Sirani establishes her sister’s femininity, and her own artistic identity, through her self-conscious embodiment and display of the conventions of beauty, realized through the painting woman’s artistry. In the specular canvas, as Picinardi suggests, Barbara sees her own creative and self-creative skills reflected in her sister’s image:

E poi, che avrai la sua sembianza espressa,
Se d’esprimere ancor brami l’ Idea
Del Germano valor, pungi te stessa.

[And then, since you will have expressed her likeness,
If you still desire to express the Idea
Of sisterly valor, paint yourself as well.]

Barbara’s performance and self-representation, like those of her sister, valorize and authorize female creativity and virtuosity.36

These two posthumous portraits of the artist, the funeral effigy and Barbara Sirani’s allegory of the art of painting, stand in different relationships to the problem of women’s creative sovereignty addressed by the early modern cosmetic debate. This difference can be illuminated by considering two letters written by the Venetian courtesan and poet Veronica Franco and published in Venice in 1580. Together the letters explicate the positive and negative connections between the two arts of painting and women’s conflicted relationships to them. In letter 21 Franco addresses the painter Tintoretto in response to his portrait of Franco, now in Worcester, Massachusetts (fig. 4):37

Vi prometto che quando ho veduto il mio ritratto, opera della vostra divina mano, io sono stata un pezzo in forse se ei fosse pittura o pur fantasima innanzi a me comparita per diabolico ingagno, non mica per farmi innamorare di me stessa, come avenne a Narcisso, perchè, Iddio grazia, non mi tengo sì bella che io tem a di avere a smaniare delle proprie bellezze, ma per alcun altro fine, che so io.
I swear to you that when I saw my portrait, the work of your divine hand, I wondered for a while whether it was a painting or an apparition set before me by some trickery of the devil, not to make me fall in love with myself, as happened to Narcissus (because, thank God, I don’t consider myself so beautiful that I am afraid to go mad over my own charms), but for some other reason unknown to me.

In the letter immediately following, Franco admonishes a mother who is forcing her daughter to become a courtesan:

Dove prima la facevate andar schietta d’abito e d’acconciamenti nella maniera che conviene ad onesta donzella . . . a un tratto l’avete messa su le vanità del biondeg-
giarsi e del lisciarsi, e d’improviso l’avete fatta comparer . . . con tutti quegl’altri abbellimenti che s’usano di fare perché la merzanzia trovi concorrenza nello spedirsi.

[Where once you made her appear simply clothed and with her hair arranged in a style suitable for a chaste girl . . . suddenly you encouraged her to be vain, to bleach her hair and paint her face. And all at once, you let her show up with . . . every other embellishment people use to make their merchandise measure up to the competition.]

She concludes the letter, “Nostro Signor vi guardi col rimanervi dalla mala intenzione che mostrare avere di guastare e corrompere la fattura del vostro proprio sangue e delle vostre proprie carni” (“May Our Lord save you from your obvious intention to ruin and corrupt what you have created from your own flesh and blood”).38

The two letters are arguably juxtaposed in the collection in order to explore the distinction and similarities between the two arts of painting, and Franco self-consciously notes that the diabolico ingagno of the art of painting is one version of the courtesan’s diabolical painting. Like Sirani’s two posthumous images, the letters alternately celebrate the painting woman’s virtuosity and register the corruption and objectification attending her illicit self-creation. Tintoretto’s portrait is itself a portrait of a painting woman, displaying Franco’s use of the abbellimenti that she condemns in her letter to the nefarious mother.39 As such, Tintoretto’s image celebrates his own artistry and Franco’s mastery of her art as well; her self-mastery, which, deployed in her publications and her professional persona, enables her to perform her femininity on the public stage of Venetian society. Moreover, as Elisabetta Sirani’s portrait provides a mirror for her sister Barbara, Tintoretto erects a mirror for Franco: when Franco describes herself as a self-effacing Narcissus—as a modest, feminine correction of this infamous male example of vanity and self-love—she suggests the merger of her own and Tintoretto’s arts of painting. Alberti’s Della Pittura, after all, had advanced Narcissus as a symbol of the art of painting, arguing that his specular self-knowledge symbolizes the art’s concern with “representing only what can be seen” (“solo studia il pictore fingiere quello se vede”). “What else can you call painting” (“ché dirai tu essere dipigniere”), Alberti asks, “but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain?” (“‘atra cose che simile abbracciare con arte quella ivi superficie del fonte?’”).40 In invoking the figure,
Franco may have had in mind Tintoretto’s *Bathing Susanna* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) and *Narcissus* (Galleria Colonna, Rome), a pair of images dating from about twenty years before her portrait, which illustrates the affinities between women’s face painting and the art of painting. Both works represent their protagonists admiring their reflections: Narcissus gestures toward his own image in the pond, while Susanna, with the accoutrements of the painting woman before her, engages in her toilette unaware of the elders lurking nearby. In their unusual depiction of Susanna as a painting woman and their juxtaposition of her art with that of Alberti’s original painter, Tintoretto’s twin canvases note, as do Franco’s letters, that the two arts are implicated by each other.

If Tintoretto’s celebration of the painting woman’s virtuosity parallels those undertaken by Barbara Sirani and by her sister’s eulogists, Franco’s letters make it clear that this optimistic vision of women’s painting can never be wholly divorced from the debased art of cosmetics. Her address to the mother in letter 22 emphasizes the physical and moral corruption precipitated by face painting and the dehumanizing effects of the mercantile culture of courtesanship that reduces a woman to dead *merzanzia*. Franco’s complaint is against the Pygmalion-like construction of the courtesan proposed by her addressee, an undertaking that, as she suggests elsewhere, is unlikely to succeed, given the girl’s *mediocrità*, her limited talents and unremarkable looks. Incapable of Franco’s own self-creative virtuosity, the daughter will be rendered a mere object offered for sale by her mother. This objectification, of course, is an unavoidable product of the beauty culture, which, like the profession of courtesanship, displays the spectacle of the woman’s body for men’s estimation, pleasure, and use. Smith’s *Wonder of Wonders*, for example, exempts “the Venetian Curtizans (the most impudent Harlots of all other)” from his castigation of cosmetics, since among them “the art or craft of painting or tincturing of womens faces is ordinarily used, without any sense of evil in it . . . and so by long continuance [they] may ignorantly take up and practice that fashion with impunity.” Unaware of the immorality of the practice, these courtesans can neither be held accountable for their sin nor be reformed. For Smith the Venetian courtesans are emblems of the most venal of feminine vices and practices, face painting included. As Franco’s letter demonstrates, the objectification of women in the sexual marketplace approximates the calcifying effects of the beauty culture itself. Only the true virtuosa, she argues, can control the vagaries of the market, turning the spectacle to her own advantage. Thus, letter 21 unites Tintoretto and Franco as artists engaged in pro-
ductive self-creation, an empathetic Narcissus and his responsive Susanna, while letter 22 personifies the dehumanizing effects of the cosmetic culture in the perverse, exploitative mother.

Although the effigy central to Sirani’s funeral resembles Barbara Sirani’s empathetic portrait of her sister, the object inevitably associates women’s painting with corruption and death. Presented to an audience that replaces the female artist before her specular canvas, the effigy forecloses on the female painter’s creative sovereignty. Like the extremes of Petrarchan praise realized in the poetic blazon, the effigy literally praises Sirani to death, in Laura A. Finke’s words, “killing her into art.” A common theme in anti-cosmetic invectives is that cosmetics both belie a woman’s internal, moral corruption and hasten the corruption of her flesh. As Stubbes puts it, painting women “think their beautie is greatly decored: but who seeth not that their soules are thereby deformed.” The falsehood of the painted exterior is an index of “a wanton, lying hart.” Thus, Tuke moralizes,

Fucus is paint, and fucus is deceit,  
And fucus they use, that doe meane to cheat  
. . . If truth the inwards held, and governed,  
Falshood could not so shine in white and red.46

The moral corruption associated with women’s painting figures the very real, very detrimental effects of cosmetics themselves. Fioravanti lists among the ill effects of ceruse, fucus, and other cosmetics, “i denti neri e scanati come una mula, il fiato pupzzolente, & la faccia mezza abbruggiata . . . offusca la vista, impedice l’udito, & disconcia lo stomaco” (“black teeth, standing far out of their gums like a Spanish mule; an offensive breath, with a face halfe scorched . . . dimming the complexion, dulling the hearing, and offending the stomack”). Tuke’s image of the “vizard newly varnished ore . . . with ceruses” as besmeared with “poisons one would loathe to kiss” resonates tellingly with his subtitle: “A Treatise Against Painting and Tincturing of Men and Women: Against Murther and Poysoning, Pride and Ambition; Adulterie and Witchcraft.” Clearly, the poison included in Tuke’s litany of moral sins and imagined as the product of painting recalls the literal poisons contained in early modern cosmetics.

Interpreting these descriptions of the material and moral corruption attending face painting, Finke has persuasively argued that the painting woman implies “all the horrors, both visual and olfactory, of the putrefying corpse.” By representing the futility of efforts to stave off age and decay, she becomes “a power-
ful *memento mori*.” The effigy of Elisabetta Sirani—the painted, memorial image of a woman painter purportedly killed by corrosive poison—functions as such a memento mori. A contemporary observer’s comment that Sirani was “mourned by all . . . [T]he women especially, because she made their portraits beautiful, cannot hold their peace” (“È pianta da tutti: e le donne ancora [perché faceva belli i loro ritratti] no se ne possono dar pace”) cites the artist’s skill in embellishing women’s faces with false colors as the essence of her artistic identity. Like Vasari’s biography of Anguissola, the comment relegates Sirani, as a female painter, to the relatively debased task of portraiture, and it shares the notion that women’s painting reflects and depicts only the physical rather than the spiritual or intellectual, the body rather than the soul. The association of Sirani’s femininity with that of her subjects emphasizes not the female portraitist’s accuracy (as Vasari claims for Anguissola) but her willingness, like her subjects’, to employ colors to improve upon nature with counterfeit faces. Thus, Sirani is not a guarantor of her subjects’ immortality through faithful reproductions of their likenesses but a coconspirator with them in the effort to defy age and physical imperfection. According to this view, such an attempt, in Sirani’s painting and in that of her subjects, can only confirm the inevitable triumph of moral deformity, physical decay, and death.

Sirani’s posthumous image in wax, moreover, is a material embodiment of the idea of femininity as pliable matter upon which masculine creativity impresses its defining form. From treatises on the art of painting to entries in the cosmetic debate, the gendering of form and matter aligns men with substance and women with surface. Alberti’s advice to painters to “circumscribe the plane with their lines” (“agiugnimenti delle superficie”) before “fill[ing] the circumscribed places with colors” (“tingono superficie”) reveals, in Reilly’s words, “the ornamental and supplementary role he believed [feminine] color plays in its relation to [masculine] disegno.” Thomas Overbury’s satirical portrait of *The Wife*, too, casts procreation and *cosmesis* in similar terms when he claims, “God to each man a private woman gave/ . . . that on her his like he might imprint,” and later applies the vocabulary of early modern art criticism to women’s bodies: “Beauty in decent shape, and Colours lies, / Colours the matter are, and shape the Soule.” If Sirani’s effigy offers a synecdoche of her culture’s gendered approaches to the painting woman, it also reveals her eulogists’ constructions of a difficult femininity in terms of the female painter’s relationship to her masculine art. Pignardi’s figurative description of Sirani as “il Sole della Europa” and his praise of “l’eccellenza del suo Pennello” (the excellence of her Paintbrush) associate her
with masculinity, particularly in the conflation of *il pene* and *il pennello*, a salacious pun exploited most famously by Aretino.\(^{55}\) Similarly, Malvasia’s posthumous praise of Sirani claims for the female painter a “manly” (*virile*) style: unlike her female precursors, Sirani “non lascio mai una certa timidità e leccatura propria del debil sesso” (never left in her work a certain timidity and flattery that is proper to the weaker sex).\(^{56}\) Her posthumous association with women’s portraiture in particular, then, suggests that Sirani misused her talent—perhaps as a function of her popularity among her female clientele in Bologna\(^{57}\)—by portraying merely her subjects’ bodies rather than their souls. While the notion of Sirani’s masculine-feminine style elevates problematic feminine painting by association with the superiority of masculine *ingegno*, her eulogists also depict Sirani as the exception rather than the rule, a “prodigio dell’arte” not to be rivaled by living female artists. As Picinardi and Malvasia enhance the stature of the deceased artist, and consequently increase the value of their own encomia, they implicitly acknowledge that “the gender of style, like that of *virtù*, is not necessarily determined by sex.”\(^{58}\)

In the city’s mourning for Sirani the represented body of the painting woman—the *creatrissse* who also self-creates—becomes a cipher of the troublesome self-authorship implicit in women’s painting itself. In the comfortable wake of her death, Sirani’s power is appropriated by her male eulogists, while the image of the living-dead artist renders her an objet d’art, in Finke’s terms.\(^{59}\) The effigy underwrites the male-authored narratives predicated on its malleable form, from Picinardi’s civic “pride in ownership” to Malvasia’s teleological myth of *Bologna-as-Painter.*\(^{60}\) For the purpose of the funeral, above all, was to celebrate Bolognese culture and its accomplishments. Picinardi’s opening words thus define the symbolic meaning of Sirani’s life story to the grieving but approving body politic:

> Chè la Città di Bologna sia mai sempre stata, e sia Madre, e Prodottrice a ‘Ingegni cospicui, & Illustri tanto del Maschile, quanto del Femineo sesso, in ogni genere di scienze, & Arte . . . fra quali nell’ Età corrente a guise di Sole, la Virtue della Signora Elisabetta Sirani, risplendente a gli Occhi universali apparvia, a benche per dura sorte prima di giongere all’ Auge del Meriggio, e tramontata all’ Occaso nello, anno vigesimo sesto di sua Età, nulladimeno ha ella accresciuto non piccolo raggio di gloria a questa sua Patria con l’eccellenza del suo Pennello.\(^{61}\)

*[Since the City of Bologna has ever and always been either the state, or the Mother, or Producer of eminent and Illustrious Geniuses both of the Masculine and the Feminine sex, in every kind of science and Art . . . among whom in the current*
Age, like the Sun, the Virtue of Signora Elisabetta Sirani appeared, resplendent to the universal Eyes, and although it was her fate to last only from daybreak to the Zenith of Midday, and to decline into the Sunset in her twenty-seventh year, nonetheless she has increased not by a little the ray of glory of this her Fatherland with the excellence of her Paintbrush.

Although Picinardi, like Malvasia, acknowledges Sirani’s possession of a masculine-feminine *ingegno*, he praises her virtue rather than her talent, describes her as a spectacle evaluated by male onlookers, and turns her legacy to the patria’s glory rather than her own. He subsumes Sirani’s *virile* power of self-authorship within a patriarchal vision of civic ownership, while the effigy reduces her to an object; the “idoll” of face painting, in Tuke’s phrase. Recreating malleable femininity in his own image, Picinardi advances his, and his city’s, creativity on the material, moribund power of the painting woman.

While the female painter is both exalted and controlled by the spectacle’s display of her objectified form, the effigy also carries the material traces of the ideological and discursive affinities between face painting and the more orthodox coloring involved in the art of painting. The male artist engaged in coloring Sirani’s effigy—that is, painting the face of the painting-woman-turned-object—practices an art that is admittedly counterfeit but which nonetheless employs artifice to offer “il medesimo aspetto che rende la natura istessa” (“a true and natural resemblance of Life”). As Jacqueline Lichtenstein has shown, the early modern debate concerning the relative merits of *colore* and *disegno* participates in a philosophical tradition “that had never separated the problematic of ornament from that of femininity.” She explains: “used in excess, ornament becomes makeup, which conceals rather than elucidates truth. This distinction . . . was applied in the same manner to language and to the image.” Thus, theorists of both the arts of painting and of rhetoric condemn or defend colors in terms that associate artifice with women’s cosmetic practices. For proponents of design-based painting, such as Franciscus Junius, the preoccupation with color constitutes “an effeminate kinde of polling and painting” (“vulsa atque fucata muliebriter comat”). He explains, “Lawfull and stately ornament ad a certaine kind of authoritie to the bodies of men, whereas a womanish and luxurious trimming doth not so much decke the body, as it discovereth the mind” (“foedissima sint ipso formae labore. & cultus concessus atque magnificus addit hominibus . . . autoritem; at mulierbris & luxuriousus, non corpus exornat, sed detegit mentem”). The overuse of “strumpet-like ornaments” (“ornamentis mereticis”),
which he compares to “fucus and ceruse” (“fuco & cerussa”), weakens “the whole strength of our invention and designe, with the unseasonable care of garnishing the worke too much” (“Neque tamen haec eo pertinuerunt, ut in pictura nullus fit ornatus; sed ut pressior & servior, atque eo minus confessus”).66 Within the corrective context of masculine virtuosity, whether rhetorical or artistic,67 color “ne solamente esprime nelle figure le cose come sono; mà mostra ancora alcuni moti interiori . . . ponendo sotto gl’occhi l’affettione de gl’animi; & i loro effetti” (“not onely expresses the outward forms of thinges; but also discovereth certain inward passions . . . laying before our eies, the affections of the mind, with their effect”).68 As such, the work of the male artist coloring the effigy mirrors that of the rhetorician, Picinardi, as he embellishes the memory of his female subject. The masculine re-creation of Sirani as effigy redirects the conflicted art of women’s painting toward productive imitation and civic panegyric. Similarly, Picinardi’s rhetoric is itself offered as the orthodox alternative to the feminine artistry both eulogized and definitively curtailed in Sirani’s memorial effigy. In the spectacle of Sirani’s funeral, the painting woman, objectified and displayed, ensures and enables the masculine rhetorical and artistic virtuosities that kill her into art.

If Picinardi’s Il Pennello Lagrimato turns its epideitic prowess toward adorning and advancing the painting woman as its chief metaphor and motive, Shakespeare’s “Rape of Lucrece” anatomizes and genders this rhetorical and representational strategy through a protracted meditation on painting in both of its senses. As Nancy J. Vickers has shown, the poem captures Lucrece within a masculine “rhetoric of display” grounded upon “the woman’s body raped at the poem’s center.”69 Collatine opens the poem by “blazoning” his wife (“to blazon, to describe in proper heraldic language, to paint or depict in colors”)70 before a male audience that includes her future rapist. His performance—motivated, as Vicker’s notes, by a pride in ownership much like Picinardi’s toward Sirani—initiates a descriptive poetics of which Tarquin’s crime is the result: “rape is the price Lucrece pays for having been described.”71 In creating the poem as a “rhetorical display of virtuosity,” moreover, Shakespeare both problematizes and masters the descriptive mode in which he engages. Shakespeare’s encomium of Lucrece, like Collatine’s and like Picinardi’s of Sirani, is “an artfully constructed sign of identity, a proof of excellence,” underwritten by the artfully constructed body of the female heroine.72
Lucrece is the painted effigy central to the poem that memorializes her, as Elisabetta Sirani’s effigy both decorates and enables the funeral in her honor. Shakespeare, however, complicates the objectification of women common in both the early modern cosmetic culture and the Petrarchan rhetoric of praise, foregrounding each genre’s reliance on masculine spectatorship to focus and define the feminine object. The result is to illustrate and eulogize the complicity of women in masculine standards of beauty and to expose the constructed quality of those objectifying standards (and, therefore, of the femininity predicated upon them). He does so, first, by treating female spectatorship in Lucrece’s lengthy contemplation of a “skillful painting, made of Priam’s Troy,”73 as a model of feminine self-representation that guides the male poet’s eye and, second, by diverting the demonized practice of face painting from Lucrece, “the picture of pure piety” to Tarquin (542). Whereas Lucrece’s “true eyes have never practic’d how / To cloak offenses with a cunning brow” (748–49), the poem insists, Tarquin “doth so far proceed / That what is vile shows like a virtuous deed” (251–52).

“The Rape of Lucrece” anatomizes and explores good and bad painting and the use and abuse of colors. From its first moments the poem is obsessively concerned with colors, a term ubiquitously employed to signify the emblazoned body of Lucrece and the false motives of her attacker:74

But she with vehement prayers urgeth still
Under what color he commits this ill.

Thus he replies: “The color in thy face,
That even for anger makes the lily pale,
And the red rose blush at her own disgrace.” (475–79)

Six times Shakespeare synecdochically describes Lucrece through the red and white of her face, and he repeatedly imagines her “stained,” “tainted,” and “poisoned” body following the rape (1655, 1746, 1707). Clearly, the poem borrows its reds and whites from Petrarch but does so within a critical consideration of Petrarchism’s legacy in the early modern cosmetic culture, in which these vernacular commonplaces enforce women’s compliance with masculine standards of beauty. In the narrative poem and in Shakespeare’s own Petrarchan exercise, The Sonnets, this “chiastic color scheme,” as Fineman has called it, merges creation and self-creation in terms of masculine and feminine painting. Thus, sonnet 20 praises the “woman’s face with Nature’s own hand painted” of the poet’s
“master-mistress,” opposing this untainted image to “false women’s fashion.”75 “The Rape of Lucrece,” meanwhile, deploys these colors to join the protagonists, Lucrece and Tarquin, as “inverse versions of each other . . . [who] together make the rape of Lucrece.”76 Whereas Sirani’s eulogists expend posthumous praise on her masculine-feminine style, Shakespeare imagines a masculine-feminine painting that challenges the cosmetic culture’s casting of femininity by arguing that masculinity, too, is implicated in and defined by that culture.

By constructing Lucrece’s femininity as a product of painting, Shakespeare troubles the presumed correspondence between internal state and external appearance on which moralizations of face painting rely. At the same time, he associates rival perceptions of the visible proof of inward vice or virtue with male and female spectators, presenting the resulting differences in objective or subjective responses. Thus, Lucrece, incapable of false painting, is nonetheless viewed by her maid with “fair cheeks over-washed with woe” (1225), a perception that leads the maid, Lucrece’s “poor counterfeit” (1269), to weep in sympathy with her mistress. The scene illustrates women’s empathetic union based upon an artless art of painting—that is, upon an “over-washing” that, in Lomazzo’s terms, “mostra le passioni dell’animo, è quasi la voce istessa” (“expresses all the passions of [the] mind and almost the very voyce itself”).77 While this will be the model for women’s painting throughout the poem, Shakespeare further observes and displays this scene within painting’s artificial, objectifying terms when his male narrator reports, “A pretty while these pretty creatures stand, / Like ivory conduits coral cesterns filling” (1233–34). Finally, he revises the notion of woman as malleable matter, man as defining form, to claim for women a guilelessness that shames men’s falsehood:

For men have marble, women waxen minds,
And therefore are they form’d as marble will;
The weak oppress’d, th’impression of strange kinds
Is form’d in them by force, by fraud, or skill.
Then call them not the authors of their ill,
   No more than wax shall be accounted evil,
   Wherein is stamp’d the semblance of a devil.

Their smoothness, like a goodly champaign plain,
Lays open all the little worms that creep;
In men, as in a rough-grown grove, remain
Cave-keeping evils that obscurely sleep.
Through crystal walls each little mote will peep; 
Though men can cover crimes with bold stern looks, 
Poor women’s faces are their own faults’ books. (1240–53)

This insistence on women’s malleable characters and the transparency of their faces exonerates Lucretia, and women in general, from the suspicion of veiling “a lying, wanton hart” with a painted face. Rather, feminine painting in the poem is an exercise in empathy, mirroring, and imagining the self as other. The poem describes the creation of the female subject in a specular relationship with other women—a subjectivity that male observers, in the poem and beyond, inevitably objectify.

Shakespeare’s exploration of feminine subjectivity in connection with painting also occurs in cosmetic recipe books, in which it defends not the women’s innate honesty but their right to employ cosmetic artifice. In other words, the gesture ultimately displaces the female subject with the objectifying standards of feminine beauty. Thomas Jeamson’s *Artificiall Embellishments* (1665), for example, argues that “the Soule that better part of Man, when it becomes Tenant to the Body, should have it not a Prison but a Palace, a Lodging, whose structure and superficial Ornaments might make its Pilgrimage pleasant, and invite its stay.”

Jeamson’s departure from the moralized interpretations of women’s face painting common in anti-cosmetic invectives is clear in this audacious rewriting of the spiritual commonplace of the soul’s imprisonment in the flesh. To prove that the fleshly palace, adorned by women with the superficial ornaments of painting, is to be preferred to the prison, the author offers “Roman Lucretia, whose braver Spirit, had for its lodging a White-hall, suitable to its Grandure, I mean her body.” He favorably compares her to “Socrates whose Royall Soule was condemn’d to the Prison of a crooked or mishapen body.” And, to explain his appeal to female readers in particular, Jeamson claims: “all Bodies not being equally capacitated for its impressions, it [Art] usually imploys its skill about the Female Sex; whose soft and pliant earth, Nature works with a more carefull hand, to make it a thriving soile for the tender plant of Beauty; so that it slights Men, and casts them by, as Canvace too course and rough to draw thereon the taking lineaments of a cleare and smooth-fac’d Venus.” Although cosmetic recipe books, like Jeamson’s, remove cosmetic practices from the moral turpitude with which they are associated by anti-cosmetic polemicists, their assertions of women’s agency in crafting their appearances are vexed by their coetaneous mandates that women conform to prescribed standards of beauty. Ostensibly empowering women to
self-create, *Artificiall Embellishments* actually contains and objectifies them within an understanding of feminine beauty as valuable only insofar as it pleases male onlookers. Thus, Jemson adapts the imagery of women as pliable matter to literalize their value according to their conformity with cultural standards of beauty: “those whose bodyes are dismist natures press with some errata’s, and have not the royall stamp of Beauty to make them currant coyne for humane society, make choice of obscurity.”

Shakespeare releases Lucrece from the suspicion of fraudulent self-display according to terms borrowed from discussions of painting current in his culture. His adaptation of the works of the cosmetic debate exposes their regulatory goals, equating them with the sexual and oratorical violations of Lucrece enacted by and within his poem. Recognizing that the painting woman necessarily connives in the disciplinary practice that renders her a spectacle for men’s perusal, Shakespeare stops short of granting creative sovereignty to his heroine. Instead, he emphasizes Lucrece’s fatal complicity in the standards of beauty permeating his poem and his culture. Moreover, he qualifies the poem’s rhetoric of display by imagining Lucrece’s self-display before painted mirror images, alternative versions of painting women similar to Barbara Sirani before the image of her sister and Veronica Franco before Tintoretto’s portrait. “The Rape of Lucrece,” therefore, employs the discourses of painting, on the one hand, to contain its female protagonist within the poem’s objectifying rhetoric and, on the other, to explore the potential of feminine painting, understood as self-authorship accomplished through Lucrece’s empathetic encounter with the art of painting, as a model for poetic creation. An artful blazon of Lucrece as Tarquin gazes upon her accomplishes the former (386–413), while the *ekphrasis* of the Trojan scene undertakes the latter (1366–1582).

By staging masculine spectatorship of the objectified female form—rendering woman a smooth, compliant “canvace”—the blazon presents a gendered counterpart to the *ekphrasis* later in the poem. The blazon casts Lucrece as a painted effigy while relentlessly foregrounding its self-conscious artistry. Shakespeare vividly emblazons Lucrece’s “lily hand” resting beneath her “rosy cheek” (386); the other hand, “perfect white” upon a “green coverlet,” “showed like an April daisy on the grass” (393–95); her eyes are “marigolds” (397); her hair is “golden threads” (400); and her breasts are “like ivory globes circled with blue, / A pair of maiden worlds unconquered” (407–8). Perusing this objet d’art, Tarquin is filled with desire: “With more than admiration he admired / Her azure veins, her alabaster skin, / Her coral lips, her snow-white dimpled chin” (418–20).
The experience of reading this passage is reminiscent of that of numerous passages in early modern treatises on coloring, in which the pigments’ enumerations visually displace the sense of the language itself in accidental contests between the sister arts, painting and poetry:

Ad oglio si consano, per bianco, la biacca, per giallo, tutti i gialdolini . . . per tur- chino tutti gl’azzuri, & alcuna sorte di smalti; per verde, il verde rame, il verde santo; per morello, quel di ferro, di cilestro, & l’endico, per rosso quanti cene sono; de’ sanguinei, tutte le lacche; de’ ranzati il minio, è l’oropimento arso, di color d’ombra tutti i narrati d’essa; & di nero, tutte le sorti.

[These colours are to be used in Oyles; of whites white lead; of yeallows al sorts . . . Of Blewes all the azures, & some kind of smalts. Of Greene, Verdigrease, & pinke: of Murries, that of iron, skiecolour, & Indico. Of Reds all sorts; of Sanguin, all lakes. Of Orange-tawny red lead, and burnt orpigment. Of shaddowes all that are named. And of Blakes all sortes.]82

Shakespeare’s poetic colors, applied to and creating the body of Lucrece, exploit the traditional strategies of *ekphrasis* that advance poetic virtuosity by augmenting and surpassing the merely visual experience of painting with the semiotic nuances available in language. The blazon, like Picinardi’s enumeration of Elisabetta Sirani’s virtues, translates Lucrece from animate being to inanimate object,83 gendering the viewer of this highly crafted spectacle as male and, not incidentally, as threatening both ocular and sexual violence. In doing so, Shakespeare implicates masculine spectatorship, including its Petrarchan and rhetorical legacies, and opens a space in his poem for describing a feminine alternative.

The rivalry between the sister arts is most apparent in “The Rape of Lucrece” when Shakespeare and his heroine digress to blazon the “skillful painting” of Troy.84 While clearly an exercise in poetic virtuosity for Shakespeare himself, the *ekphrasis* also places the female observer before the work of art, where she is further observed by the male narrator in order to explore and expose the “regime of vision” governing the poem throughout.85 If Tarquin’s, and Shakespeare’s, invasive anatomy of Lucrece renders her an object, a painted effigy, Lucrece’s engagement with the scene of Troy sets off a series of affective, empathetic correspondences between women—Lucrece, Hecuba, and Helen—that resonate with the early modern literatures of painting. Lucrece’s meditation upon the Trojan scene is prompted by her initial identification with Helen as a victim of rape (1369): “To this well-painted piece is Lucrece come,” we’re told, “To find a face
where all distress is stell’d” (1443–44). Yet Shakespeare and his heroine are both quick to distinguish between Lucrece, “the picture of pure piety,” and the painting woman, Helen. “Show me the strumpet who began this stir,” Lucrece exclaims, “That with my nails her beauty I may tear” (1471–72). It is, rather, the figure of “despairing Hecuba” with whom Lucrece identifies and in whom she finds her sorrow mirrored (1447). In opposing Helen to Hecuba, the poem echoes early modern treatises on the art of painting, which frequently recommend such binary pairs to create “copiousness and variety” (“copia et varietà”), as Alberti puts it, in painted istorie. Moreover, the passage adopts the language and imagery current in various discourses of painting by returning to the original painting woman: as the Greek story went, Helen was the first mortal to use the cosmetic arts, the knowledge of which Paris had purloined from Venus. Bartas’s La Judit (1574), for instance, complains against the fraudulent craft that transforms a Hecuba to a Helen: “Vous dont l’art et le fard, dont les perles d’or / De la femme à Priam font la soeur de Castor” (“Ye who with riches art, and painted face,/ For Priam’s wife put Castor’s sister in place”). While Hecuba is the matronly correction of the strumpet Helen in Shakespeare’s ekphrasis, Jeanson deploys the familiar pair to encourage women’s self-creation through painting: “Though you may look so pallidly sad, that you would be though to be dropping in your Graves; and though your skins be so devoid of colour, that they might be taken for your winding sheets; yet these Recipe’s will give you such a rosie cheerfulnes, as if you had new begun your resurrection. They are the handsome Ladies Panacaea, of such efficacy that they will teach you creatures of mortality to retrace the steps of youth, and transforme the wrinkled hide of Hecuba into the tender skin of a tempting Helena.” Through the judicious use of cometics, he assures his female readers, “There is none of you but might equallize a Hellen.”

As she is described by Shakespeare, however, Hecuba embodies the painting woman as memento mori, her own emblazoned effigy:

In her the painter had anatomiz’d
Time’s ruin, beauty’s wrack, and grim care’s reign;
Her cheeks with chops and wrinkles were diguis’d,
Of what she was, no semblance did remain.

Her blue blood changed to black in every vein,
Wanting the spring that those shrunk pipes had fed,
Show’d life imprison’d in a body dead. (1450–56)
The image resonates with the language of anti-cosmetic polemicists as they describe the living death of the painting woman: “To what may I a painted wench compare?” asks Thomas Draiton, “She’s one disguized, when her face is bare. / She is a sickly woman alwaies dying. / Her color’s gone, but more she is a buying.” In her age and brutal sorrow Hecuba appears in the *ekphrasis* as the painting woman unveiled, her physical deformity depicted by the imagined author of the scene and further emblazoned in Shakespeare’s verse. Ironically, however, this external deformity reverses the assumptions of anti-cosmetic invectives by indexing Hecuba’s moral virtue rather than her apparent viciousness. Thus, Bar- tas’s description of the painting woman unveiled, translated by Tuke, shows affinities with Shakespeare’s portrait of Hecuba:

> With hollow yellow teeth, or none perhaps,
> With stinking breath, swart cheeks, & hanging chaps,
> With wrinkled neck, and stooping as she goes,
> With driveling mouth, and with a sniveling nose.

“This sad shadow,” Hecuba, is the mirror image of Lucrece (1457); her “counterfeit,” as Edward Tylman calls the painting woman, “A shadow of [her] selfe.” She is, like Helen, the painting woman observed in Lucrece’s looking glass, the *ekphrasis*. But Shakespeare adopts the imagery of anti-cosmetic invectives only to undermine their assumptions. By canceling Lucrece’s initial identification with Helen and replacing it with her empathetic self-representation as a second Hecuba, and by doing so within a meditation upon painting and its observation, “The Rape of Lucrece” severs the reliable link between the mask of the painting woman and the character hidden beneath.

Lucrece’s identification with Hecuba exposes face painting’s fraudulent surface, as does Shakespeare’s proto-feminist thesis, “Poor women’s faces are their own faults’ books,” but the falsehood that is exposed is the misogynistic interpretation of women’s cosmetic practices as proof of their moral corruption and deformity. Moreover, the *ekphrasis* deploys early modern condemnations of women’s painting to characterize male, rather than female, manipulations of appearance in the service of fraud. Tuke’s claim that “If truth the inwards held, and governed, / Falshood could not so shine in white and red” resonates with the description of “perjur’d Sinon” in the *ekphrasis* (1521). The figure of Sinon revises and reclaims the red and white “heraldry in Lucrece’s face” (64), offering a masculine, demonized, example of painting to mirror Tarquin’s false colors, “Whose inward ills no outward harm express’d” (91):
In him the painter labor’d with his skill
To hide deceit, and give him the harmless show
An humble gait, calm looks, eyes wailing still,
A brow unbent, that seem’d to welcome woe,
Cheeks neither red nor pale, but mingled so
That blushing red not guilty instance gave,
Nor ashy pale the fear that false hearts have. (1506–12)

Gazing upon this “constant and confirmed devil” (1513), Lucrece quickly makes the connection between Sinon’s guile and Tarquin’s, figuring masculinity as a function of men’s diabolical deployment of painting’s false shows:

“It cannot be,” quoth she, “that so much guile”—
She would have said, “could lurk in such a look”;
But Tarquin’s shape came in her mind the while,
And from her tongue “can lurk” from “cannot” took:
“It cannot be,” she in that sense forsook,
And turn’d it thus, “It cannot be, I find,
But such a face should bear a wicked mind.

“For even as subtile Sinon here is painted
So sober-sad, so weary, and so mild,
(As if with grief or travail he had fainted),
To me came Tarquin armed to beguild
With outward honesty, but yet defil’d
With inward vice: as Priam did cherish,
So I did Tarquin, so my Troy did Perish.” (1534–47)

Shakespeare’s brilliant staging of Lucrece’s thought processes in the choreographed exchange between the male poet’s interpretations and her reported speech exemplifies the poem’s masculine-feminine painting and constructs feminine subjectivity as a product of the heroine’s specular interactions with the painted scene.

In the fluid currencies of painting as they traverse the *ekphrasis*, Lucrece shifts from identification with Helen to Hecuba, two versions of the painting woman, and finally to Priam, the *male* observer beguiled by painted show. Throughout the episode Lucrece explicitly acts as a figure for Shakespeare the poet, augmenting the “pencilled pensiveness and color’d sorrow” of the *ekphrasis* with the virtuosity of the poet’s words (1497). “The painter was no god,” Shakespeare insists
(1461), to give Hecuba a voice, a deficiency of painting that its sister art repairs in Lucrece’s empathetic complaints: “Poor instrument,” quoth she, “without a sound,/I’ll tune thy woes to my lamenting tongue” (1464–65). While Shakespeare performs his own rhetoric of display in the ekphrastic spectacle of Lucrece, the bifurcated impulses of early modern cosmetic discourses split between the poem’s twin protagonists, Lucrece and Tarquin. As Lucrece becomes Hecuba, embodying the painting woman as a memento mori blazoned into art, Tarquin, as a second Helen, carries the traces of face painting’s diabolical rupture between inward state and outward show. Although Stubbes argues that cosmetics are “the Devils inventions to intangle poore soules in the nets of perdition,” the devil stamped on the waxen mind of Lucrece is the impress of the fraudulent male painter, Tarquin. “Such devils steal effects from lightless hell,” Lucrece insists of “subtile Sinon” (1455). This white devil and his “sad shadow,” Tarquin, perform masculinity by vividly embodying the commonplace of invectives against women’s painting, “‘tis hard to find/A painted face sort with a single mind.”

Shakespeare’s preoccupation in “The Rape of Lucrece” with the incongruity between “inward ills” and painting’s outward show parallels the poem’s alternative versions of masculine and feminine spectatorship. These gendered relationships to display, in turn, appear in the poem as a tension between public performance and private subjectivity. While masculine scrutiny—the rhetoric of display practiced by Collatine, Tarquin, and the narrator himself—reduces Lucrece to an objet d’art, female subjectivity is constructed in the privacy of Lucrece’s meditation upon the “painted images” of the ekphrasis (1578), a privacy itself observed by Shakespeare and displayed to the reader of the poem. Thus, the lesson that Lucrece draws from the Trojan scene is voiced in her question, “Why should the private pleasure of some one/Become the public plague of so many moe?” (1478–79). It is a question that reverberates throughout Lucrece’s own story as her rape and its consequences violently usher her from private domesticity (itself penetrated by the rapist’s desire) to public display: “They did conclude to bear dead Lucrece thence,” the poem ends, “To show her bleeding body thorough Rome,/And so to publish Tarquin’s foul offense” (1850–52). This tense intersection of spectacle and subjectivity is addressed, moreover, in the poem’s opening scene, in which the narrator interjects to condemn Collatine’s foolhardy showcasing of his wife’s charms, the rhetoric of display that propels Tarquin toward rape: “Or why is Collatine the publisher/Of that rich jewel he should keep unknown/From thievish ears because it is his own?” (33–
Fig. 5. Elisabetta Sirani, *Portia Wounding Her Thigh* (1664). Stephen Warren Miles/Marilyn Ross Miles Foundation, Houston.
Again, it is the threat of publicity with which Tarquin subdues Lucrece before the rape (“But if thou yield, I rest thy secret friend: / The fault unknown is as a thought unacted” [526–27]) and with which Lucrece, in turn, attempts to save herself from violation: “Think thou how vile a spectacle it were / To view thy present trespass in another” (631–32). Lucrece’s description of her violated body as a “poisoned closet” underscores the conflation of the woman’s body with private domestic space, both penetrated—thus rendered public—by the rapist (1659). Whereas the scopic economy of Lucrece’s male governors aggressively displays and objectifies her, Shakespeare gives us Lucrece’s (qualified) privacy within which the female observer rewrites her relationship to her own objectification in the work of art and thereby underwrites the male poet’s virtuosity. Lucrece’s corpse, appropriated by Brutus in the poem’s closing movement from rape to republic, parallels Sirani’s effigy as deployed in Picinardi’s civic panegyric. Like Barbara Sirani poised before the sisterly and specular portrait of Elisabetta Sirani (see fig. 3), Lucrece positioned before the skillful painting of Troy demonstrates and valorizes feminine creativity and subjectivity as an affective union of self and reflected other—an unadulterated image lying behind the mask of the painting woman.

Shakespeare’s quiet alignment of his own poetic project with the painting woman’s self-authoring power anticipates Elisabetta Sirani’s virtuoso display of this power in *Portia Wounding Her Thigh* (fig. 5). Like the ceremony surrounding Sirani’s death, and like Shakespeare’s poem, the painting overtly meditates upon the possibility of women’s creative self-authorship and makes use of the painting woman to underwrite its author’s performance of artistic virtuosity. Unlike these male-authored examples, however, Sirani’s *Portia* energizes the difficult alliance between the painting woman’s internal state and external appearance to challenge the divisions between public performance and private subjectivity and between masculine and feminine forms of creativity. In “The Rape of Lucrece” Shakespeare reveals the multiple genderings implicit in cosmetic and rhetorical colors and undermines the misogynistic assumptions of anti-cosmetic invectives by describing a feminine self-representation grounded in painting and its observation. But he ultimately contains this power in Lucrece’s emblazoned corpse, publicly displayed at the poem’s close. Sirani engages the question of women’s creative sovereignty on similar terms. She, however, exploits the generic and discursive choices available in her culture’s approaches to painting to imagine a feminine, and feminist, point of view on the art. She does so by exposing
and challenging the essentialism governing her culture’s constructions of the painting woman.

In 1664, the year before her death, Elisabetta Sirani recorded in her “Nota” her creation of “una Porzia in atta di ferisi una coscia quando desiderava saper la conguira che tramav il marito” (a Portia in the act of wounding herself in the thigh when she desired to know the plot her husband was devising).98 Commissioned for the private apartments of Signore Simone Tassi, “the subject belongs to a group of themes including the Rape of Lucretia which explores the relationship between public and private, often sexual, behavior.”99 According to the life of Brutus in Plutarch’s Vite (a copy of which was included in Giovanni Andrea Sirani’s library in an inventory of 1666),100 Portia undertakes the act of self-wounding in order to prove her masculine self-restraint:

non prima hebbe ardimento domandare al marito i segreti del suo cuore, ch’ella havesse fatta questa esperienze di se stessa. Perche pigliando un piccolo coltello, colquale i barbieri sogliono tagliar l’unghie, e cacciando di camera tutte le sue cameriere, si fece una gran ferita in una coscia, onde n’uscì di molto sangue: e di là poco quella ferita le mise addosso un grave dolore, & una terribil febre.

[Because she would not aske her husband what he ayled before she had made some proofe by her selfe, she tooke a little rasour such as barbers occupie to pare men nayles, and causing her maydes and women to go out of her chamber, gave her selfe a great gash withal in her thigh, that she was straight all of a goare bloud, and incontinently after, as vehement fever tooke her, by reason of the Payne of her wounde.]101

Insisting that she ought “not to be [Brutus’s] bedfellow and companion in bed and at borde onelie, like a harlot, but to be partaker also with [him of] good and evill fortune” (“perche io partecipassi solamente teco del letto, e della tavola, ma accioche io havessi parte teco della cosiete, e delle triste anchora”), Portia denounces womanly weakness and offers her wound as evidence of her trustworthiness and fidelity:

Io sò, che la natura della donne è fragile a ritenere i segreti, ma io, o Bruto mio, hò in me una certa forza e di buona creanza, e d’ottima consuetudine oltra lo ingegno naturale; e mi conosco essere figliuola di Catone, e moglie di Bruto. Nelle quai cose fidandomi io prima poco, hora hò conosciuto per pruova, ch’io non mi lascierei vincere dal dolore. Dette queste parole gli mostrò la ferita, e gli scoperse la pruova, ch’ella haveva fatta di se medesima. Allora Bruto spaventato, & alzando
te mani al cielo, pregò gli Dei, che riuscendogli valorosamente i suoi disegni, lo facissero riputare marito degno di Porcia: e poi amorevolmente confortò la moglie.

[I confesse, that a womans wit commonly is too weake to keepe a secret safely: but yet, Brutus, good education, and the company of vertuous men, have some power to reform the defect of nature. And for my selfe, I have this benefit moreover: that I am the daughter of Cato and wife of Brutus. This notwithstanding, I did not trust to any of these things before: until that now I have found by experience, that no paine nor griefe whatsoever can overcome me. With those wordes she shewed him her wounde on her thigh, and told him what she had done to prove her selfe. Brutus was amazed to heare what she sayd unto him, and lifting up his handes to heaven, he besought the goddes to give him the grace he might bring his enterprise to so good passe, that he might be founde a husband, worthie of so noble a wife as Porcia: so he then did comfort her the best he could.]

In displaying the moment of Portia’s self-wounding, Sirani focuses on the act itself as simultaneously one of self-mutilation and self-definition. Beautifully dressed, coiffed, and ornamented, her Portia is set in the well-lit foreground of the domestic scene, a space uncomfortably shared by the viewer. The light emphasizes the white flesh of her face, shoulders, and the thigh exposed from the folds of her scarlet skirt. Although Sirani exploits the conventional markers of feminine beauty to stress the figure’s sexuality, she also reflects Portia’s self-proclaimed status as an exceptional woman, a virago, in the quasi-military sandal encircling the leg that she rests boldly on a foreshortened chair, the gold chain, a usual element of the noblewoman’s donor, here slung like a holster across Portia’s torso, and of course the small blade with which she has just penetrated her thigh. Evidence that the image was originally intended as a companion piece to Giovanni Andrea Sirani’s Semiramis further underscores, in Babette Bohn’s words, “the remarkable coexistence of Portia’s femininity and fortitude” in Elisabetta Sirani’s hands. The calm with which Portia undertakes her wounding, too, alludes to her father’s and husband’s philosophy of Stoicism, which she, despite her femininity, intends to adopt. Sirani thus presents Portia’s attempt to overcome feminine weakness (“How weak a thing,” says Shakespeare’s Portia, “The heart of woman is!”) through self-mutilation. Furthermore, she emphasizes the heroine’s self-exile from ordinary femininity by including her maidservants in the bifurcated space of the domestic scene. Set beyond the privacy of Portia’s chamber, they are separated from her not only by the physical threshold through which they are seen but also by their identification with the
quintessential tools of femininity, the materials of spinning. Engaged in women’s work, gossiping, and oblivious to the heroic action being undertaken by their mistress, the servants, as Chadwick writes, “betray their sex by talk . . . Removed from the private world of women to the public world of men, Portia must assert her control over speech.”107 Unlike Lucrece, who, as Shakespeare’s “Argument” tells us, proves her chastity when “Collatinus finds his wife (though it were late at night) spinning amongst her maids” (p. 1816), Sirani’s Portia turns away from feminine pastimes toward masculine Stoicism and secrecy. She attempts to substitute one privacy for another, one subjectivity for another, in the act of self-wounding, which is also a virtuoso performance of exceptional femininity.

As Portia’s maidservants deploy the emblematic objects of femininity, the tools of spinning, their mistress marks her distance from them by taking in hand a masculine tool, “un piccolo coltello, colquale i barbieri sogliono tagliar l’unghie”—in effect, a nail file. In depicting this object, Sirani turns to the material culture of cosmetics surrounding her, illustrating a typical accoutrement of the early modern men’s toilette (fig. 6). In her left hand Portia holds a compact toilet set, from which the coltello has been removed and which still holds two other grooming aids. The toilet set is a smaller version of one now owned by the Victoria and Albert Museum (fig. 7). An English example coetaneous with Sirani’s Portia (possibly a gift from Charles II to Thomas Campland), the wood and tortoiseshell case contained silver, tortoiseshell, and ivory instruments necessary for the gentleman’s toilette: scissors, nail files, razors, combs, and a mirror. From mid-century women’s toilet sets (“including pots for creams, glue,
patches and powder, pin cushions, brushes, snuffers, candlesticks and perhaps a silver-framed mirror”) were customary gifts for wealthy brides, while their masculine equivalents were purchased, inherited, or acquired as gifts. Borrowed from her husband, Portia’s toilet set displaces the material objects of feminine painting with those of masculine self-definition and self-fashioning. As such, Sirani explicitly engages the cosmetic culture on gendered terms, exposing the degree to which men as well as women are implicated in its mandates and exploring the contours of its gendered form in creating her masculine-feminine heroine.

Acknowledging the gaze traditionally imposed upon women by the cosmetic culture, Sirani’s Portia carries the traces of the regime of vision established by male spectatorship, which renders the female form an aestheticized object of display. Indeed, Rosika Parker and Griselda Pollock discount interpretations of the painting as “a feminist image in its portrayal of a strong woman,” stressing instead Sirani’s acquiescence to Reni’s aesthetics, in which “women caught in . . . acts of

Fig. 7. Traveling toilet set (English, 1640–50). Victoria and Albert Museum, no. 720-1877.
heroism or courage, are shown to the viewer for the enjoyment of the sight of woman.” They argue, “Sirani’s participation in the dominant stylistic and iconographic modes of her period and city led her to represent female figures in a way which confirmed rather than disrupted the sexual ideology which the Reni mode of representation served.” The visually seductive qualities of Sirani’s image, however, and her illustration of “the necessity for [feminine] self-mutilation,” when read through the lens of painting, challenge women’s mandated complicity in the self-mutilating standards of the cosmetic culture and of Baroque aesthetics. Sirani displays Portia’s self-mutilation to demystify and deconstruct early modern constructions of femininity advanced according to their relationships to painting. She gives visual form to the debilitating practices of the cosmetic culture and supplements the feminine, seductive qualities of painting, in both of its senses, with the self-defining tools of masculine adornment in order to challenge this culture’s assumptions. Her insistence on the centrality of the material female body—a prolepsy of her own funereal effigy—enables a feminist intervention that disrupts the transhistorical dimensions of Portia’s story, turning them toward the specific, physical gestures with which her heroine negotiates masculine prescriptions for women’s beauty and virtue and co-opts masculine tools of self-creation. Moreover, Sirani’s depiction of Portia’s masculine virtues, focused in the heroine’s manipulation of the material objects of the masculine toilette, complicates and undermines cultural prescriptions for feminine beauty, which, in turn, inform the aesthetic tenets of Renist representation.

As her heroine distinguishes herself from mundane femininity through her act of self-wounding, so Sirani, too, complicates this construction of femininity by mirroring her own creativity in Portia’s self-authoring act. Portia’s claim to possess characteristics of both sexes and Sirani’s visual allusions to those characteristics reflect the exceptional femininity of the female artist herself, a woman set apart from her sex through her mastery of the art that translates her from the privacy of the household into the public world of the artistic marketplace. Like Portia, Sirani establishes her femininity by manipulating the tools of traditionally masculine arts: the “barbers rasour” (un piccolo coltello) wielded by Portia is the visual and functional equivalent of the paintbrush (il pennello) that occupies Elisabetta Sirani’s hand in her portrait as the art of painting (see fig. 3). Both tools are employed by the female virtuoso, performing a masculine-feminine subjectivity in the privacy of her chamber. Sirani’s handling of her heroine further aligns Portia with Sirani’s self-authorship as memorialized by her sister:
rather than portraying the “goare bloud” (molto sangue) that Plutarch describes as the near-lethal results of Portia’s wound, Sirani depicts the gash with a delicacy that reduces it to mere decoration, a superficial wound at best. The pale red paint that constitutes the wound mirrors the sumptuous coloring of Portia’s dress and the rosy shading of her cheeks and lips. In displacing the sexual wound of Lucrece’s rape with Portia’s highly erotic self-wounding with the tools of the masculine toilette, Sirani calls attention to the constructive, rather than destructive, power of female creativity in her story. Whereas Shakespeare’s Lucrece refuses agency in her fatal wounding, insisting “’tis he [Tarquin], / That guides this hand to give this wound to me” (1722), Sirani’s Portia is eager to define her own sexuality and subjectivity by marking the body’s surface, inscribing her identity upon her skin, in order both to articulate and to alter the sex hidden within. Portia Wounding Her Thigh is, in this respect, a looking glass for the painting woman. Like the woman who employs makeup to alter and define her physical appearance, Portia and Sirani explore a woman’s power and potential to self-create, self-define, and eradicate the feminine “defect of nature” (“ingegno naturale”) by manipulating her own flesh. Although she practices an art of painting in which the accretion of surfaces is also a self-decapitation, Sirani’s decision to represent the wound in and as painting exposes the violence implicit in feminine self-adornment and supplants it with masculine-feminine self-control. Portia’s wound marks the distance she travels from domestic submission to public performance and figures the early modern woman painter’s journey from privacy to publicity as a self-mutilation much like that enacted by women’s cosmetic practices themselves.

Sirani’s Portia offers an allegory of women’s painting, in both of its senses, that foregrounds the problematic correspondences between spectacle and subjectivity. Portia’s story is one of an attempt much like that undertaken by the artistic technique of coloring, which promises, in Lomazzo’s terms, “mostra . . . alcuni moti interiori . . . ponendo sotto gli’occhi l’affettione de gl’animi” (to “discover […] certain inward passions . . . laying before our eies, the affections of the mind”). Portia attempts to signify her exceptional femininity, her hidden identity as a virago, by altering the material surface of the body. Sirani’s painting responds to and registers Portia’s subsequent career in Plutarch’s history in order to anatomize the difficult alliance between internal state and outward form as it is imagined both in the art of painting and in discussions of women’s cosmetic practices. For, as Plutarch reports, Portia’s attempted cross-gendering is ulti-
mately unsuccessful: “she did what she could to dissemble the griefe and sorrow she felt in her heart” (“tentò di nascondere al marito i dolori, che per ciò laffligevano”), he writes:

ma la magnanima, e generosa donna fu scoperta da una certa pittura. Il suggetto di questa scrittura era una historia Greca, cioè Hettore, che usciva di Troia, accom- pagnato da Andromacha; laquale haveva preso il figliuolo dal marito, e gli teneva gli occhi addosso. Veggendo Porcia questa pittura, per la somiglianza della passion si diede a piangere, e molte molte appressandosi quivi, sospirò, e pianse amarissimamente.

[But a certaine painted table bewrayed her in the end, although untill that time she alwaies shewed a constant and patient minde. The devise of the table was taken out of the Greeke stories, how Andromache accompanied her husband Hector, when he went out of the citie of Troy to goe to the warres, and how Hector delivered her his little sonne, and how her eyes were never off him. Porcia seeing this picture, and likening her selfe to be in the same case, she fell weeping: and comming thither oftentimes in a day to see it, she wept still.]114

Like Lucrece, Portia identifies with a painted image of Troy and is both associated with and distinguished from her mirror image in the representation. When Brutus is informed of his wife’s sorrowful self-identification with Andromache, he insists:

Sorridendo Bruto, & io, disse, posso dire hora i versi d’Hettore a Porcia.

A te convien pensare à tuoi filati,

A le tue lane, e commandar le serve.

Percioche la natura del corpo è in colpa, ch’ella non può fare attioni equali alle nostre: man con animo non merita minor lode in servigio della patria; che facciano noi.

[I cannot for my part say unto Porcia, as Hector aanswerèd Andromache in the same place of the Poet:

Tush, meddle thou with w eying dewly out

Thy maydes their taske, and pricking on a clout.

For in deede the weake constitution of her bodie doth not suffer her to perform in shewe, the valiant acts that we are able to do: but for courage and constant mind, she shewed her selfe as stout in the defence of her country as any of us.]115
For Plutarch, Portia’s experience of the painting of Troy and her identification with the painted heroine, Andromache, reveal her inability to alter her feminine essence: as Shakespeare’s Portia complains, “I have a man’s mind, but a woman’s might. / How hard it is for women to keep counsel!” Brutus acknowledges Portia’s movement from femininity to masculinity in leaving behind the feminine occupation and companionship of the loom, but hers is an imperfect translation. Through her spectatorship of the Trojan scene, Portia’s hidden interior is indeed laid forth, and what is revealed is femininity as a deformity, the “weake constitution” of the female body itself (“la natura del corpo”), which prevents Portia from performing “in shewe” the valiant acts (“attioni equali alle nostre”) for which men are created (the story argues) by nature. Painting is the means by which Portia’s attempt to establish an autonomous feminine subjectivity in the act of self-wounding is revealed as an impossible dream: betrayed by pittura (the “painted table”), Portia’s veneer of masculinity collapses, and her indelible essence emerges from behind the body’s torn veil.

Portia’s wound, in fact, is a cosmetic wound. Her story plays out the imagined moral deformity of the painting woman. Thinking to decorate the surface, Tuke and his companions insist, the painting woman corrupts the soul. Portia’s story of attempted self-definition through a masculine wounding of the female flesh reveals the essentialist underpinnings of the antifeminist invectives against women’s painting. The painting woman, like Portia, not only corrupts the flesh but also reveals the essential deformity that is femininity itself. As Sirani understood, Portia’s self-inflicted wound not only parallels the physical self-mutilation enacted in women’s use of cosmetics but also lays forth and exposes the internal, moral deformity of the painting woman that prompts her irreverent and idolatrous self-creation.

In Sirani’s handling, however, the calm beauty of Portia’s face—the product of the painting woman’s colors—belies neither the “goare bloud” of the external wound nor the deformed femininity hidden below the surface. Masculine stoicism and feminine beauty both appear as false shows. Like her creatrisse, Sirani’s Portia is poised between spectacle and spectatorship, between masculinity and femininity, to assert her right to self-definition and her sovereignty over her flesh. Sirani, like Jeamson, confirms that “deformity . . . is a single name, yet a complicated misery,” but she calls attention to the constructed character of this misery, imposed upon women by men, and thereby exposes and defies the essentialist reading of femininity at the heart of her culture’s discourses on painting. She imagines and illustrates in Portia the legitimate power of the painting woman.
not only to counter this construction but to create herself in her own image. While Jeamson promises to free his female readers “from the loathsome embraces of this hideous Hagge [Deformity],” Sirani uses her skill as a female painter to challenge the objectifying tenets of early modern anti-cosmetic invectives and the nascent beauty industry promulgated by cosmetic manuals such as Artificiall Embellishments. In Portia Wounding Her Thigh the painting woman—Sirani as well as her mirror image, Portia—occupies a middle ground between an objectified femininity, fixed by the male gaze beyond an impassable threshold, and a transgressive subjectivity that defines and decorates the female painter’s specular image. As the painting woman inscribes her identity on the female body, she undertakes an act of self-authorship that re-creates the world in her own image.