

Sexing the body. The case of Giacomina Foroni

Catriona Seth (Université de Nancy 2)

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Abstract:

Giacomina Foroni, born near Mantua in 1779, was raised as a girl and believed herself to be one. Her unusual sexual organs were deemed female by different midwives, both at her birth and after puberty. The value of outward appearance, anatomical knowledge, the way to define an individual's sex, the question of case studies, etc. are posed by and in the texts about and drawings of a body which departed from the norm, as examined by a deputation of scientists from the Virgilian Academy. These learned men concluded it to be that of a male. The body was made to give evidence against the individual's own beliefs regarding his/her sex. As a result, the scientists had to distinguish between sex and gender.

An Italian woman gave birth on 22 May 1779 to an infant baptized as a girl with the name of Giacomina Foroni. Early on in the child's life, it became apparent to her mother that her body presented anomalies in that she seemed to possess both male and female characteristics. In May 1802, a deputation from the medico-surgical class of the Virgilian Academy, authorized by the government, went to the hamlet of Foroni, near Mantua. This was to be the final stage in a series of attempts to draw definitive conclusions regarding the sex of Foroni, who was then just under 23 years old. The members of the committee were to write a very detailed report about the case. This was printed in Italian, before being translated into French. My contention is that the document shows the body as an archive which can deliver information to those who are ready to scrutinize it, but also that the report sets itself up as a form of archive about a singular body, intended to be a potential manual for scientists

confronted by similar cases⁴⁹. I will be basing my reflections on the French version of the text (which includes an extra layer of annotations on the original Italian version), an in-folio brochure entitled *Jaqueline Foroni rendue à son véritable sexe, ou Rapport, Réflexions et jugement présentés à l'Académie de Mantoue, par la Classe de Médecine, sur le sexe d'un individu vivant, connu sous le nom de JACQUELINE FORONI*, published in Milan by the Imprimerie française et italienne, in year 10 of the French Republic (1802)⁵⁰. Giacoma Foroni's outward physical aspect and sexual organs were scrutinized by midwives and doctors, written about and sketched. In this respect, his/her body is particularly well documented. In their decisions regarding the sex to be attributed to the individual concerned, the men and women who examined him/her⁵¹ drew upon diverse sources, folk memory, myths, medical treatises, etc. Problems regarding the value of outward appearance, anatomical knowledge, the way to define an individual's sex, the question of case studies, etc. are posed by and in the texts about and drawings of a body which departed from the norm.

In 1802, Giacoma's mother was questioned about her child. She answered that she had noticed slight anomalies in Giacoma's sexual organs at the time of her birth in 1779, but that she had thought nothing of them and only asked competent authorities for their assistance once her daughter was an adult – there is no specific indication of the exact age to which she was referring⁵². She talked to various midwives, the one from Roverbella, whom she names as the late Rosalia Mollardi, the latter's successor and another midwife from Villafranca. All three assured her that Giacoma was indeed female but warned her about the dangers the young woman would encounter should she become pregnant. The first set of elements we possess are these gendered decisions: the midwives confirmed, in the final years of the eighteenth century, that Giacoma's sex had been correctly determined at birth. There was

⁴⁹ There is evidence of the document having been read: it is quoted in subsequent studies, including those by Demangeon (1829) and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1836).

⁵⁰ *Jaqueline Foroni rendue à son véritable sexe, ou Rapport, Réflexions et jugement présentés à l'Académie de Mantoue, par la Classe de Médecine, sur le sexe d'un individu vivant, connu sous le nom de JACQUELINE FORONI*, Milan, De l'Imprimerie française et italienne, an X de la République française (1802). I based the study on the two copies of the report held in the Bibliothèque Municipale in Rouen.

⁵¹ Throughout this paper there are times when I will use masculine or feminine pronouns and possessives according to the context: viz., when dealing with Giacoma Foroni's self-judged identity, I will use *she* and *her*, when referring to the identity decreed by the scientists, I will use *he/him* and *his*.

⁵² Since there was no evidence of menstruation as such, it is difficult to ascertain how female puberty would have been assessed for Giacoma Foroni in her mother's eyes.

therefore no discrepancy between her official social identity and her physical identity, as ascertained by the midwives. It is however worth noting that one characteristic of the female body – the capacity to bear children – was deemed to be potentially fatal to her.

Unsurprisingly, the deputation which turned up in 1802 was made up of male individuals: doctors and surgeons called Tonni, Tinelli, Paganini and Ballardini, along with a military man, Siauve, and the artist Campi. In order to give their mission an official legal appearance, they also brought along Madaschi, the magistrate from Roverbella, and his registrar, Tambelli, who were present at every stage of the examination. When they arrived, Giacoma Foroni was working in the fields. On her return home, she was asked whether she would agree to be seen by the official deputation, which intended to produce useful documents for the Government and could have no unpleasant consequence for her since, she was reminded, no-one believed in the existence of hermaphrodites any longer and fortunately the age of casting such individuals into the sea or the Tiber was long over. These assertions call for a couple of remarks. Nothing indicates the nature of the useful documents the government intended to acquire, though it is fair to assume the report we have in our hands is the repository of the information gathered and, implicitly, is intended to guide subsequent research into individuals whose bodies departed from the norm. There is also here a clear indication that in 1802 Giacoma Foroni could not be classified as hermaphrodite, and thus, at the end of the examination would have an official gender, whether male or female. Finally, the affirmation that there could be no unpleasant consequences for her deserves to be taken with a pinch of salt, as we shall see. Giacoma Foroni herself apparently accepted the initial examination gladly as she believed it would determine her to be a woman and allow her to marry a local peasant to whom she was engaged, the parish priest having seemingly shown some reluctance to celebrate the union. Foroni apparently became less forthcoming when she found out during the investigations of her body that the decision was leaning towards deciding he/she was male.

Giacoma Foroni's outright acceptance of the intrusive examination suggested to her is interesting. Whilst others, looking at her anatomy – and her mother in the first instance – cast doubt on her normality, she had no doubts, she stressed, that she was of the female sex. An examination would be superfluous, according to her. Her lack of doubt about her

own sex is backed up by a gendered response which she expressed: she claimed to feel sexual desire towards men, not women. She was thus entirely fearless when she submitted to medical scrutiny. In a sense, she was waiting for external scientific conclusions to back up her personal certainties. It is as though for her there was no ambiguity except in the eyes of others. She was living in a female body when, as we shall see, others deemed it to be male.

The investigation proceeded according to a series of stages. There was obviously some prior knowledge of Foroni's case⁵³, which motivated interest in her and explains the official deputation's arrival. Questions were asked of her mother about menstrual discharge – which had apparently only occurred twice, when Foroni was 18 – and any possible illnesses from which she might have suffered. The examination proper started with the external aspect of the 23-year-old's body, subsequently homing in on the sexual parts and ultimately, as we shall see, involving some uncomfortable palpation.

To the lay reader, the illustrations which accompany the text offer the most immediate indication of what is at stake here. They are stark and offer only the amount of information which is immediately necessary: there is no attempt to transform Giacoma Foroni into an anatomical Venus or to show her posing against a background of drapery or foliage. The body is the artist's sole concern. In addition, there is a clear progression in the set of full-page black and white plates. We start with Giacoma Foroni dressed as a peasant [**Illustration 1**], as she was, we learn, when the scientific deputation arrived in her home village. There is nothing lascivious about her pose. Nothing makes the individual represented look monstrous. Indeed there would be no indication, were we to be shown this single plate, that the individual's anatomy was in any way abnormal. On the contrary, the detail of the peasant costume invites us to believe that this is an accurate portrait of Giacoma Foroni – and therefore, implicitly, that the anatomical detail of the subsequent engravings is perfectly exact, as the text states.

⁵³ In a brief presentation of the newly published document under discussion, the *Journal général de la littérature de la France* (vendémiaire an XI, p. 289) indicates that there have already been several reports on the case (“On a déjà publié divers mémoires sur une hermaphrodite des environs de Mantoue, nommé [*sic*] Jaqueline Foroni”).



Illustration 1

The illustration sets up an initial means of judging the body: by outward trappings, here a specific costume which offers information about the geographical origin and gender that appear to define the individual. We have successive engravings of a person, clothed, naked, and only then of the bizarre sexual parts: Foroni is being depicted as a human being, not as a fairground monster.

Starting as they meant to continue, the examiners measured Giacomina Foroni's height and the length of her face. They subsequently described her hair, eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth, teeth and chin, paying some interest to her facial hair – she had hairs in her nose, some thick

ones over her upper lip and soft hairs on her cheeks. The hair on her chin appeared to have been cut, which is the only indication that some deceit could have been involved.

Along with the facial hair, which seems to have been more prominent than on most women, she had a visible Adam's apple, some two inches wide. Foroni's voice is characterized as neither male nor female since it is compared to that of a male individual entering puberty.

This voice stuck between two ages is a troubling indication of the fact that Foroni seems in many ways to have been caught between two sexes – an earlier report had said that her voice was in the tenor range⁵⁴.

Whilst hairs and Adam's apple tend to make Giacoma Foroni lean towards the masculine, the observers also noted that she was somewhat flat-chested, though other elements in the text and illustrations do not appear to bear this out completely⁵⁵ [Illustration 2].

This initial stage of an examination intended to offer the final word on Giacoma Foroni was based on a scientific process which the observers describe after having set out what they present as an objective description. They invoke Haller as their model, quoting him in Latin, whilst their official report was to be drawn up in Italian and translated into French:

« *Simpliciter ut decet anatomicum narrabo. [...] Ex minuta rerum anatomicarum descriptione veri quid aut certi definire potest*⁵⁶ ». The authors of the report commit themselves to the most scrupulous exactitude in their description of Giacoma Foroni's sexual organs, described as « le théâtre des écarts et des bizarreries de la nature⁵⁷ ».

⁵⁴ V. *Jaqueline Foroni*, p. 22 : "Les Académiciens de Mantoue auteurs de ce mémoire, le plus exact qui ait été fait sur *Jaqueline Foroni*, ne me sauront pas mauvais gré de citer quelquefois l'opinion des médecins qui avaient examiné avant eux cet individu, soit qu'il y ait dissidence ou non dans leur manière de penser. Les auteurs du mémoire rédigé à la date du 1^{er} février 1802 s'expriment ainsi, en parlant de sa voix : '*Piuttosto grave risouana la sua voce capace ad eguagliare il tuono di un tenore*'".

⁵⁵ *Jaqueline Foroni...*, p. 8 : "Les mamelles sont saillantes et arrondies en forme de deux hémisphères légèrement aplatis [Note, p. 22] Il est dit dans l'original que les mamelles de *Jaqueline Foroni* sont un peu pendantes ; mais la figure 3, qui la représente nue et debout, a été dessinée par le professeur de peinture Campi avec beaucoup de soins et de précision : or on ne voit pas dans cette figure que les mamelles de la *Foroni* soient pendantes, et je ne sais si le léger *aplatissement* qui se fait remarquer ne vient pas de la compression habituelle d'une espèce de plastron mobile, garni de fortes baleines, dont font usage les paysannes d'Italie".

⁵⁶ *Jaqueline Foroni*, p. 9.

⁵⁷ *Jaqueline Foroni*, p. 9.

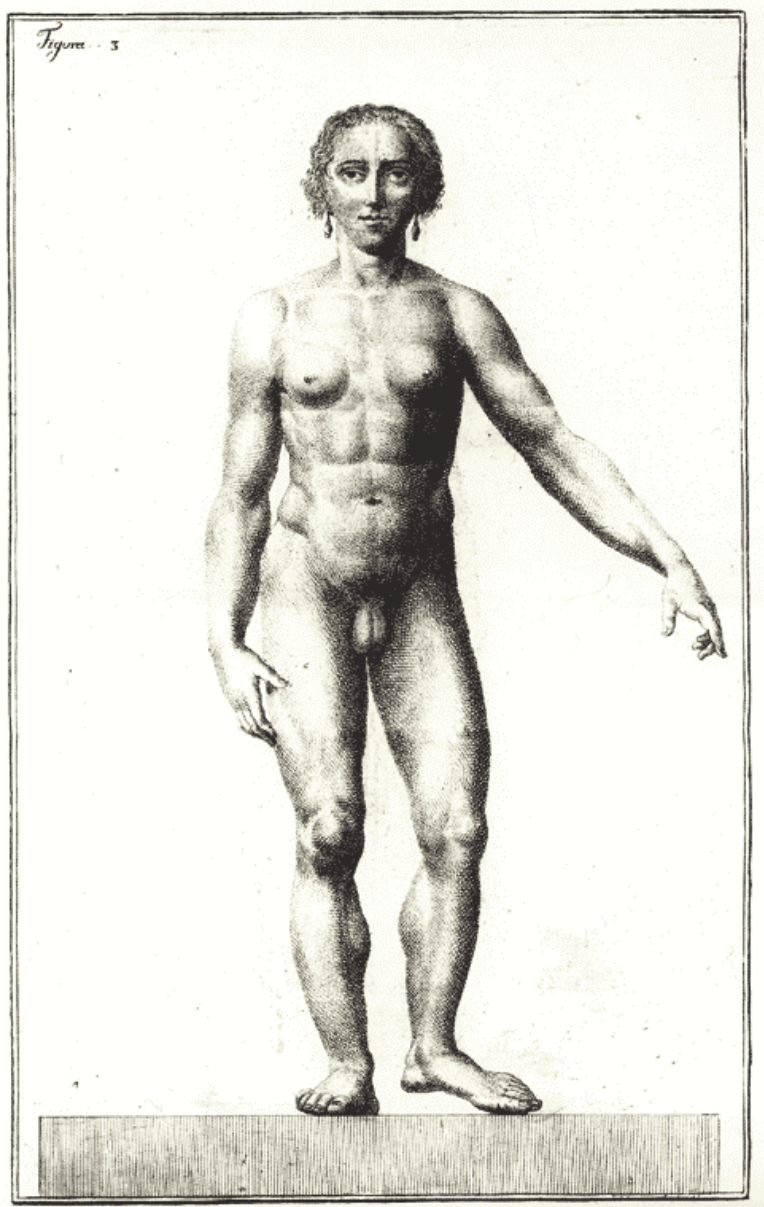


Illustration 2

The private parts are shown as partly deceptive in their appearance. Foroni has what seem to be two ill-formed labia. They are falsely feminine in appearance. In addition, when one separated them to investigate what lay under them, one apparently discovered a small protuberance, about an inch in length, the size of an index finger, which looked like a small phallus, complete with tegument and some trace of discharge [**Illustration 3**].

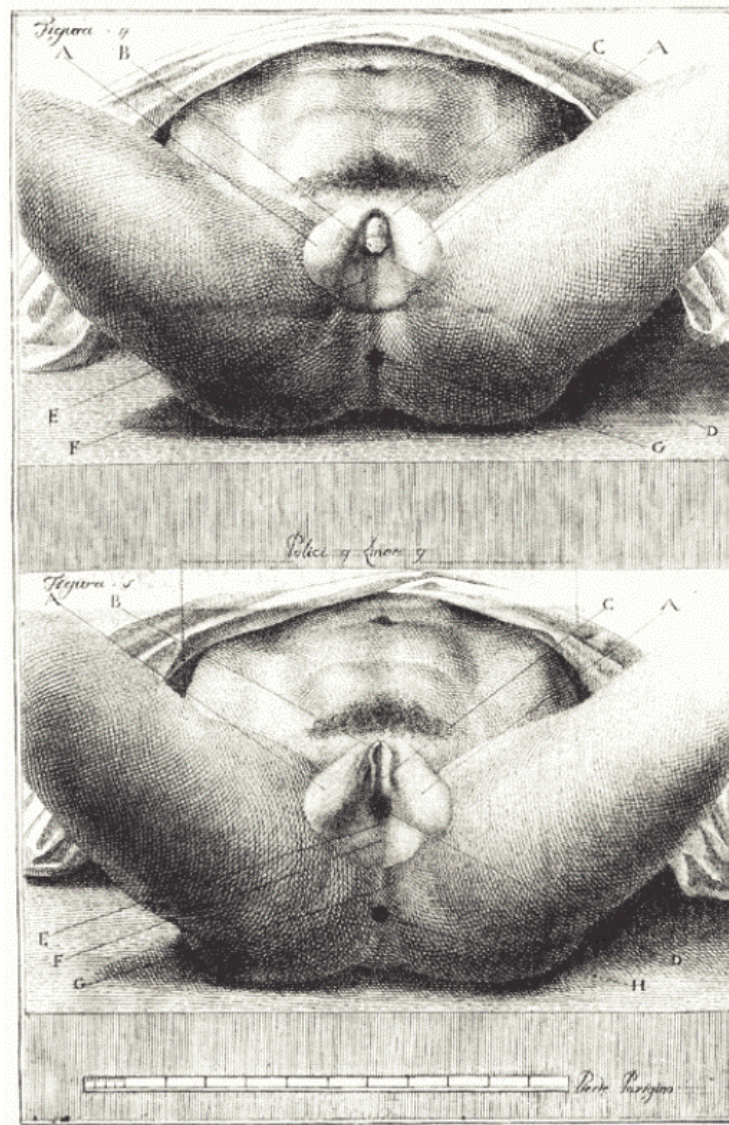


Illustration 3

It is worth noting here that the female aspect is false, a sort of visual trap, and that the male organ is hidden underneath, as though the body were inviting a form of in-depth investigation. There is also an inversion in this body: the female appearance is visible and the male organs are concealed.

Again, there is a hollow which at first glance, according to the scientists, looked like a vagina and could easily accommodate two fingers. Giacoma was duly prodded and the end of the canal found to be soft. The intromission of fingers caused her some pain. When Giacoma Foroni passed water, it could have looked as though she was a woman, but it just seemed on

in-depth examination that her bladder was in a strange place: « la vessie de cet individu est, par un effet de la bizarrerie de sa conformation, située beaucoup plus haut qu'elle ne l'est ordinairement chez les autres individus⁵⁸ ».

The aim of all this prodding and poking was to check whether there were any other organs inside. This indiscreet examination was stopped as the patient was finding it too painful, though more searching seemed to reveal the existence, where one would have expected it in a man, of a prostate. One can note here that the examination undertaken appears to be the equivalent of an autopsy as carried out on a living individual, the threshold of unbearable pain being the element which sets the limits of possible and impossible probing. Giacoma Foroni is seen as owning her body; there is therefore a limit to intrusion, even in the name of science. Another barrier, mentioned in a note, comes when Foroni admits that friction of her private parts causes some form of discharge but the scientists consider it would be indecent to study the consequence of his or her masturbation even though showing that it was sperm would have been another way to ascertain Foroni's gender.

To reach their decision, the scientists also used their knowledge of previous cases – of archives regarding bodies, often the autopsies of hermaphrodites. Here, the living body is used as the repository of information, as archives which can only be read by specialists. It is, for instance, only because the body had been examined and no trace of a uterus or a vagina found, that the occurrences of discharge which Giacoma Foroni believed to be menstruation were discounted by the scientists, who stated that for blood to be menstrual, it must issue from the blood vessels of a uterus or a vagina. If you have neither, you cannot have menstruation. With no trace of menstruation, one of the elements presented as decisive indicators of her sex by Giacoma Foroni, who claimed she had to be bled⁵⁹ to make up for the fact that she no longer menstruated, ceased to exist.

The medico-surgical team sent to investigate Giacoma Foroni's case concluded that the individual duly possessed different important characteristics which made it look, in the first instance, as though she was a woman, including the allusion to two cases of menstrual

⁵⁸ *Jaqueline Foroni*, p. 11.

⁵⁹ Some deception is surmised by the doctors, who only found the trace of the scars of three bleedings.

discharge and her apparent attraction to the male sex. The examination of the body itself made these seem less important than at first glance, as though they had been exaggerated or were in some cases baseless. This was said once the deputation had duly noted the effective presence of organs corresponding to the male and not to the female sex. The delegation concluded therefore that it had not seen a woman or a hermaphrodite, but a man... a bizarrely conformed man, but a man all the same. The body was used as evidence against the individual's own beliefs. One notes the need, perceptible from the introductory remarks, to arrive at a definitive gender as the completion of discovery, rather than classifying Foroni as 'intersex', which would probably be the preferred modern conclusion.

There remained the problem for the scientists of Giacomina Foroni's other essential argument in favour of her being a female: the attraction she claimed to feel for men. It could, according to the report's author, be considered a moral aberration – a *gioco morale*. We are at a time when same-sex relationships were regarded as a crime. Previous cases, in eighteenth-century Italy, had led to the imprisonment of individuals who cross-dressed to practise homosexuality. Foroni's attraction to men was not something about which the body delivered information. The scientists from Mantua refuse to consider that there is treachery or deceit at work here. They are also quick to state that, as far as they are concerned, Foroni's attitude is far from being criminal. This is a new way of pointing out that the individual they have decided is definitely a man is not to be considered in the same way as male individuals normally would. They appear here to be distinguishing between sex and gender, if gender is to be viewed as a social construct. They believe Giacomina Foroni to be a man, but also to be in good faith when he/she claims to be attracted by men. They attribute this to the unusual body s/he has, but also, more than anything, to educational errors. Giacomina Foroni's parents were convinced, mistakenly, that their child was a daughter; as a result, they had brought the said child up as a girl and instilled in her – or rather him – reactions, beliefs, social cues and attitudes characteristic of the fair sex. The body was thus obeying external influences. There is a double anomaly here with an absence of female organs and an excess of female sexuality.

The scientists who reached this decision did not refer to Christian tradition. They had other references to hand and draw a line between civilized and natural man. Natural man, like an

animal, would, according to them, invariably copulate with individuals of the opposite sex, without requiring any education or examples to do so, his sole desire being the satisfaction of his carnal urges. As to civilized man, according to the Italian team, he still has natural instinct pressing him to seek satisfaction with the opposite sex, but his natural instinct is governed by cultural and social proprieties. He is also led to develop sentiments and to feel love. As a result, man in society does not discover his own gender through the innate instinct which harks back to primitive man, but through what other men tell him. By way of consequence, an individual induced to believe, from his or her early years, that he or she belongs to the opposite sex and educated accordingly, all the more so if his or her body plays tricks on him or her by not making it clear that he or she cannot belong to the gender which has been assigned to him or her, is unlikely to escape from this error. Giacoma Foroni, a man with 'muddled' sexual organs brought up as a woman, naturally believes himself to be a woman and therefore feels sexual urges which are those of a woman. It is interesting here that the abnormality – in the scientists' eyes – of Giacoma Foroni's body's inner urges is attributed to external causes. The learned men concluded that the urge itself is primeval and that all creatures feel a need to copulate and reproduce, but it is because of errors made by his parents, compounded by his education and because of his extraordinary physical aspect that Foroni has, in a sense, been betrayed by nature: he feels the desires of a sex but does not have the right organs to satiate these desires. Only by consciously going against your sex can you be considered to be acting unnaturally, according to the doctors: Foroni's ignorance of his true sex exculpates him from any responsibility for his behaviour in this matter. He cannot be said to have the scandalous mores of the ancient Greeks!

The scientists return to the question of Foroni's maleness: having shown that he does not possess female organs and that his gender is a social construct, not the reflection of an anatomical sexual identity, they now turn back to his body and describe it once more, setting out before the reader's eyes that which makes him a man. Foroni's size, Adam's apple, voice like a pubescent boy's, facial hair, broad shoulders, muscles, etc. All of these seem to lead presumptively to the conclusion that he has a male body – one might add that having a beard was often seen at the time as a sign of maleness and of the capacity to reproduce. Foroni is reminiscent, according to the authors, of similar cases examined by Tortosa and detailed in the *Istituzioni di Medicina forense (cap. IV. Degli Ermafroditi)*. The swellings which

looked like imperfect labia are in fact deemed to be testicles. Nature may have shaped Foroni in an irregular manner, he nonetheless has testes which, as everyone knows, are the characteristic of virility – and the scientists recall Zacchia’s opinion on the matter: the very existence of testicles makes you a man. They also recollect a case observed by Saviard and mentioned by Tortosa (which is detailed again subsequently): it concerns the body of a child which dissection proved to be male whereas he had been thought to be a hermaphrodite whilst alive.

The translator comments on the conclusions and notes that the academicians present a well-argued case: to the eye of the observer, nature seems to have hesitated constantly between the two sexes but to have been a little heavier-handed when distributing the male characteristics. He also notes that Giacoma Foroni may not be a hermaphrodite in the way that snails are, since they possess the organs of both sexes, but a sort of half-and-half individual⁶⁰. He is here suggesting the existence of an intersex gender, which the delegation did not consider. There is a contradiction in the decision taken, since Foroni was decreed to be a man but not allowed to contract matrimony: « cet être malheureux, quoique tenant à l’espèce masculine, ne peut s’engager dans les liens du mariage. Il ne peut en effet goûter les fruits de l’hymen comme femme, en ce qu’il n’appartient point à ce sexe chéri, et il ne le peut non plus comme homme, n’ayant point la perfection requise dans les organes reproducteurs. Il paraît donc né en quelque sorte pour vérifier la destinée de *Salmacis*, que la mythologie nous représente comme étant privé de l’un et de l’autre sexe. » There is no theoretical room for the intersex subject, but there is a tentative acknowledgment that Giacoma Foroni could be one. Foroni becomes a form of legal outcast, unable to wed. The decision in one sense does not enable Foroni to fulfil her female self in marriage, as she had

⁶⁰ "Il m’a paru nécessaire de prévenir les lecteurs que *Jaqueline Foroni* montra, lors de la première visite, une ingénuité, une sorte d’abandon qu’on ne retrouva point chez elle lors de la dernière, et cela parce qu’elle avait été leurrée d’abord de l’espoir qu’on la déclarerait femme, espoir qui ne se réalisa pas. Ainsi, quelque peu exacte que soit la description du 21 février, nous ne pouvons-nous refuser d’en transcrire ici un paragraphe. D’ailleurs les aveux de l’individu, que nous recueillons comme propres à éclaircir l’objet traité par les Académiciens de Mantoue, sont étrangers à la description anatomique ; mais, en les supposant vrais et exacts, il importe d’en faire usage, et l’on me saura gré de les avoir fait connaître, bien qu’ils soient tirés d’un mémoire qu’on assure manquer de critique. Je les transcris en italien, eu égard aux règles de la bienséance. / *Facile da se eccita la polluzione, a sua confessione medesima, coll’introdur il dito nell’apparente vagina, e la fluida sostanza che n’esce, a suo dire, è simile alla saliva, ed alcun poco filosa. La confricazione e l’alettamento del glande non producono un simil effetto. Se la legge dell’onestà, se la delicatezza degli osservatori non vi avessero posto ostacolo e impedimento, non sarebbe stato difficile di esaminare il colore, l’odore e la consistenza di questa materia*". (*Jaqueline Foroni*, p. 24).

hoped at the outset, but in another sense *disables* her by decreeing her to be male, though a subspecies, unable to lead the normal life of a man, either physically or legally. It is striking that we have no information regarding Giacomina Foroni's subsequent existence.

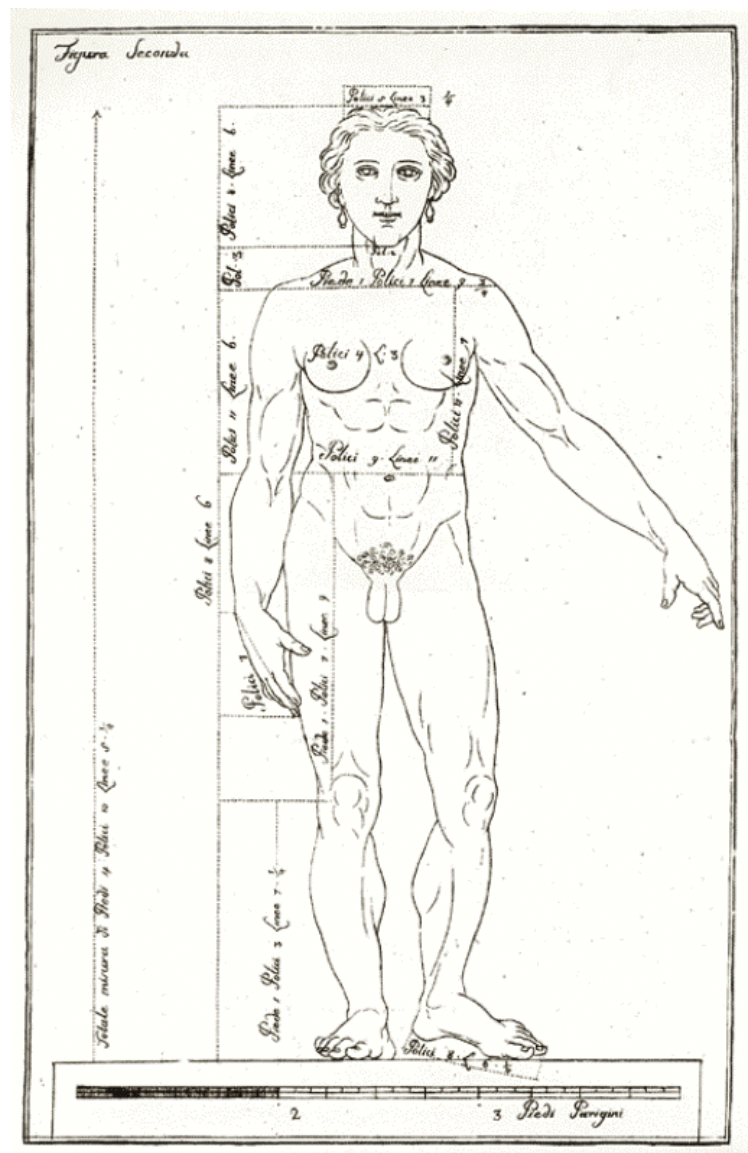


Illustration 4

The report allows each of us to follow through the process but removes any authority from us as individuals, as it did from Giacomina Foroni. Men of science have gone through the different stages and are sharing their conclusions with us. It is not for us, as readers, to agree

or disagree. A brave new world of physical and psychological studies is unveiled. The engravings included with the text are signed by a minor artist of the time, Felix Campi, who accompanied citizen Etienne-Marie Siauve – a Frenchman of the Mantua Academy, interested in all aspects of nature and progress – and undertook, we are told, to prepare precise sketches of the individual which, together with the measurements taken, offer a guarantee of absolute accuracy – he is an expert in his own right. The scale is visible on a couple of the plates [**Illustration 4**] and there are indications in the text of the size of various parts of Giacoma Foroni's anatomy. In accompanying the scientists' progress by reading the text, we are implicitly able to judge just as well as they were even though we only have two-dimensional drawings whereas they had the living individual before their eyes. In a sense, it is rather like a report on the resolution of a crime: we have the facts and then the explanation.

The case has a strikingly modern ring when one considers the recently announced choice of Swedish parents not to reveal to anyone the sex of their offspring in order for the child to be able to make up his or her own mind about his or her gender, regardless of his or her sexual organs. The question of the body as archive of its own identity, and of a case study as an archive of information for future researchers, is clearly at the forefront of the scientists' approach to Giacoma Foroni and of that of the translator, who calls for the foundation of an institution for individuals who are neither wholly male nor wholly female. The capacity to distinguish between gender and sex, without passing moral judgment, is an indication of attempts to use the body as a repository of objective information and to make science work towards understanding the individual⁶¹.

⁶¹ For a discussion of the way in which this case heralds a new way of looking at abnormal sexual organs, see C. Seth. For an evaluation of hermaphrodites in French texts, see P. Graille (*Les Hermaphrodites aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* and *Le Troisième sexe : Etre hermaphrodite aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*).

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