

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



“E poi in Roma ognuno è Aretino”: Pasquino, Aretino, and the Concealed Self

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Volume 40, numéro 1, hiver 2017

Comedy, Satire, Paradox, and the Plurality of Discourses in Cinquecento Italy

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086307ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v40i1.28452>

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Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Faini, M. (2017). “E poi in Roma ognuno è Aretino”: Pasquino, Aretino, and the Concealed Self. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 40(1), 161–185. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v40i1.28452>

Résumé de l'article

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“E poi in Roma ognuno è Aretino”: Pasquino, Aretino, and the Concealed Self*

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This article explores Pietro Aretino's pasquinade production as a crucial phase in the construction of his public and literary persona that is characterized by a peculiar effacement of the author's voice. The article then focuses on issues of anonymity and authorship in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with special attention devoted to the connections between the pasquinade and Burchiellesque traditions and the idea of the author that emerges from them. In particular, the article reflects on ideas of the mask, and of literature as a game in which pre-existing materials are ceaselessly reassembled. These views are ultimately reconnected to a sceptical view of reality as fundamentally ungraspable.

Cet article explore la production de pasquinades de Pierre l'Arétin comme une phase cruciale dans la construction de son personnage public et littéraire, caractérisé par l'effacement particulier de la voix auctoriale. L'article se concentre donc sur les questions de l'anonymat et de la présence auctoriale durant les quinzième et seizième siècles, et porte plus particulièrement sur les liens entre pasquinades et traditions burchiellesques, ainsi que sur la conception de l'auteur qui en émerge. Plus précisément, on y réfléchit sur la notion de masque et sur la littérature comme jeu où le matériel préexistant est continuellement réarrangé. Finalement, il apparaît que ces perspectives relèvent d'une vision sceptique de la réalité, laquelle reste fondamentalement insaisissable.

Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos [...] it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself.

Mary Shelley, Introduction to *Frankenstein* (1831)

1. Introduction: Aretino and Pasquino, once more

In recent years, scholarship has thoroughly explored Pietro Aretino's construction of his public image as writer and actor in the Italian and European cultural and political scene. The most accomplished of these works is Raymond Waddington's book *Aretino's Satyr*, in which the author sheds light on the multifarious ways in which Aretino managed to shape and circulate

* I would like to thank Professor Konrad Eisenbichler for his precious help with the English translations of Italian texts.

his public self.¹ Waddington shows how Aretino employed a series of cutting-edge editorial enterprises and at the same time literally multiplied his image, circulating it through paintings, woodcuts, prints, and medals. As Waddington suggests, Aretino was following in the footsteps of Erasmus, who, employing an analogous strategy, had successfully built his image as leading intellectual throughout Europe.²

Waddington's thesis applies particularly well to Aretino beginning in 1538, when he published his first book of letters. This was a crucial step in Aretino's career and a milestone in the genre. In this article, I would like to focus instead on the first steps of Aretino's literary path, a time in which the connection between the author, his masks, and his works is very complex.

In his introduction to the *Pasquillorum tomi* (1544), an anthology of Pasquinade (satirical) writings, the writer and reformer Celio Secondo Curione (1503–69) jotted down a sketchy history of malevolent satire (*dir male*) from Ancient Greece to contemporary Rome. He recalls the public ceremonies in which youngsters used to go through the cities on chariots, their faces dirty, speaking aloud the names of those who had done anything reproachable. Curione then recalls the ancient comedy, the satirical drama, and finally the contemporary habit of attaching leaflets containing satirical and anonymous poems onto the mutilated statue of Pasquino in Rome. Behind these practices was the idea that “within a free society, not only the bodies, but also the tongues should be free.”³ The history told by Curione is also one of a growing loss of liberty in satire, progressively more caged and forced to anonymity, and increasingly exposed to retaliation by those in power. Princes and rulers, writes Curione, have never been less inclined to accept the admonishments and corrections handed down

1. Raymond B. Waddington, *Aretino's Satyr: Sexuality, Satire, and Self-Projection in Sixteenth-Century Literature and Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); see also Susan Gaylard's chapter, “Banishing the Hollow Man: Print, Clothing, and Aretino's Emblems of Truth,” in her book *Hollow Men: Writing, Objects, and Public Image in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 123–59.

2. Lisa Jardine, *Erasmus Man of Letters: The Construction of Charisma in Print* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

3. “In civitate libera uti corpora hominum, sic etiam linguas liberas esse oportere”; Celio Secondo Curione, *Pasquillorum tomi duo*, ed. Damiano Mevoli and Davide Dalmas, vol. 1 (Manziana [Rome]: Vecchiarelli, 2013), 52–53. All unattributed translations throughout this article are mine.

by satirists than in the present age, where “everything is corrupted and terribly decayed” (“omnia corrupta, atque in deterrimo perlapsa sunt”).⁴

Pasquinade satire can be considered the peak of this historical process, since it is quintessentially anonymous and expressed through a collective mask—Pasquino—who embodies the voice of the people of Rome. Curiously enough, Curione overlooks the fact that only a couple of decades before, Pasquinade poetry had been entirely identified with a highly recognizable figure: Pietro Aretino. However, Curione fully accounts for the meaning of the mask of Pasquino in early Cinquecento Rome. Pasquino, he writes, played a civic role of moral instruction, while shielding those who did not dare publicly denounce the corruption of those in power. Finally, writing in the name of Pasquino meant committing oneself to the defence of freedom:

That maximum and most wise [Pontifex] considered that [...] if someone could not say certain things freely and overtly, this Pasquino ought to take on itself their complaints, making them known in his own, becoming a public censor of the habits and a life mentor and, at the same time, a messenger of everything, of serious and funny matters.⁵

In this article, I will reflect on Aretino’s identification with this statue and on how crucial issues like speaking truth to power, anonymity, and voicing public opinion influenced his later work and his conception of the meaning of being an author. It is worth reflecting on these matters not only because of their intrinsic interest, but also because the identification of Aretino with Pasquino needs a reassessment. It has become such a commonplace that the fact that only a few *pasquinade* can be confidently attributed to him is often overlooked, if not forgotten. It is very hard to discern, among the great number of *pasquinade*, which should be attributed to Aretino with any degree of certainty unless other information, such as references in letters or other writings, is available. No doubt this is partially an effect of the historical distance which keeps us from an exhaustive comprehension of the pasquinade codex. However, we know

4. Curione, 54–55.

5. “Existimavit summus ac prudentissimus ille [Pontifex] [...] si quae coram atque aperte alii dicere non sustinent, eorum indicationem Pasquillus iste in se susciperet, suoque nomine in vulgus efferret, essetque idem quasi quidam publicus morum censor, ac vitae magister omniumque seriorum pariter ac ridiculorum interpres” (Curione, 53–55).

that even Aretino's close associates were in some difficulty when it came to distinguishing his writings from those of others.⁶

How is it then that Aretino managed to build his literary career on such weak premises? And how can we use the case study of his life to grasp something of the meaning of being an author during the Renaissance?

Answering these questions requires us to address such fundamental issues as anonymity, intellectual property, and the complex interaction between the author, his work, and his public. In order to properly deal with these complex problems, I will consider Aretino's works and compare the pasquinade tradition to that of so-called Burchiellesque poetry.

2. Becoming Pasquino

The disfigured and mutilated Roman statue of Pasquino acquired a new identity each year, when on the occasion of the feast of St. Mark, April 25, it was disguised under mythological costumes; the disguise became the subject of vernacular and Latin poems, circulated in both manuscript and printed form.⁷ When Aretino first arrived in Rome, around 1516–17, he too had no identity, and was ready to seize any opportunity to become whoever best suited his plans of self-promotion. The first step of this strategy, even before affirming an identity, was to deny his previous literary persona. I quote a passage of the dedicatory letter to Paolo Valdambrino of the *Lamento di uno cortigiano* (ca. 1522):

Poi che l'ambitione ha consumata tutta la speranza della sconsolata virtù,
è forza che le muse con buffoneschi essempli paschino in diverse maniere
il comune dispiacere: et però io, giustissimo censore d'ognuno, per non
essere tenuto in questa sedia vacante poeta da unquanchi et solinghi
et scaltri, con i quali si fa tante insalate a la Petrarchescha a le carte, ho

6. See my introduction in Pietro Aretino, *Operette politiche e satiriche*, ed. Marco Faini, vol. 2 (Rome: Salerno Ed., 2012), 13–15.

7. Ottavia Niccoli, *Rinascimento anticlericale: Infamia, propaganda e satira in Italia tra Quattro e Cinquecento* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005), 37–48; Angelo Romano, "La satira di Pasquino: Formazione di un genere letterario," in *Ex marmore: Pasquini, pasquinisti, pasquinate nell'Europa moderna*, ed. Chrysa Damianaki, Paolo Procaccioli, and Angelo Romano (Manziana [Rome]: Vecchiarelli, 2006), 11–34.

detto con libera lingua dieci parole, con licentia di maestro Pasquino, ch'altrimenti non sarei stato sì prosuntuoso.⁸

(Because ambition has worn away all the hopes of grief-stricken virtue, it is inevitable that the muses, using clowning examples, should nourish the general displeasure in various ways: and so I, everyone's most righteous censor, in order not to be considered, in this time of vacant see, a poet [that uses] *unquanche* or *solingo* or *scaltro*, [words] useful for making salads on paper in the Petrarchan style, I said ten words freely, with Master Pasquino's permission, for otherwise I would not have been so presumptuous.)

Why was Aretino so worried about being held “poeta da unquanchi et solinghi et scaltri” (a poet [that uses] *unquanche* or *solingo* or *scaltro*)? The answer may be that at that point, he was still largely a Petrarchist poet. Before the *Lamento*, his only printed work was the *Opera nova* (1512), a collection of poems in the courtly style of the late fifteenth century. The poet who composed the violent pasquinades of 1521–22 looks to distinguish himself from the poet who embraces the lyre on the frontispiece of the *Opera nova*. To stand out among the many Petrarchan poets, Aretino had to deny his previous body of work, of which very little survives. This did not mean abandoning his imitation of Petrarch, which Aretino practised throughout his career, despite his poetical claims. One need only think of the great political *canzoni* of the years 1524–25, or of some of the compositions that immediately followed the Sack of Rome, such as the solemn *canzone Italia afflitta*.⁹

Was Aretino's denial of his previous identity as a Petrarchan poet followed by the assumption of a new and recognizable poetic personality? I think the answer is, only partially. Aretino certainly became the most celebrated author of pasquinades, but his style is barely distinguishable from that of his fellow *pasquinisti*. What really set him apart was his brilliant strategy of self-promotion, which I will describe in what follows.

8. Aretino, *Operette*, 51.

9. Aretino, *Operette*, 148–58.

3. Poetry and anonymity in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries

The sonnet that gives this article its title helps us to understand Aretino's strategy:

Dice ognuno: "Io stupisco che 'l Collegio
non possa far tacer Pietro Aretino
e sí rinasco a sentir l'Aretino
predicar tutti i vizi del Collegio."

Oh credete voi bestie che 'l Collegio
non abbia altri pensier che l'Aretino
e che ei non rida quando l'Aretino
qualche sicurtà piglia del Collegio?

E poi in Roma ognuno è l'Aretino
ognun si mangia in pasticci el Collegio
e il piú tristo boccon n'ha l'Aretino.

Ma se la reverenzia del Collegio
non fusse stata ingrata all'Aretino
in ciel sarebbe a quest'ora el Collegio.

Pur a tempo è il Collegio
e se vol farsi schiavo l'Aretino
faccia or cubiculario l'Aretino.

Se non, Pietro Aretino
dirrà poi sei parole del Collegio
et ecco in rotta Pietro col Collegio.¹⁰

(Everyone says: "I am surprised that the College / is not able to shut up
Pietro Aretino / and I am so reborn on hearing Aretino / preach all the

10. Aretino, *Operette*, 70–71.

vices of the College.” // Oh, do you beasts believe that the College / has no other worries except for Aretino / and that it does not laugh when Aretino / takes it out on the College? // And then in Rome everyone is Aretino / everyone eats the College in his pasta / and the worst bite belongs to Aretino. // But if the reverences in the College / had not been ungrateful towards Aretino / the College would now be in the heavens. // Yet, the College is still in time / and if it wants to make Aretino its slave / let it now appoint Aretino a papal chamberlain. // If not, Pietro Aretino / will then say six words to the College / and this will break apart Pietro and the College.)

The poem has the same rhyme structure as Epilogue 2 of the *Sonetti sopra i XVI modi*, entitled *Questi nostri sonetti fatti a cazzi* (“These sonnets of ours made of pricks”)¹¹ and exhibits characteristic features of Aretino’s style: the obsessive repetition of his name, which works both as a sort of signature and a kind of advertisement; a combination of arrogance and victimhood; the request for rewards and the threat of revenge should they not be bestowed on him. Finally, Aretino admits his faults and ambiguously declares some mitigating circumstances. It is possible to find the same mocking request for forgiveness followed by a threat in another sonnet. It is a very well-known text, and in one manuscript (*Ottob. Lat. 2817* of the Vatican Library) is introduced by the rubric “Confessio Petri Aretini ad cardinales” (Confession of Pietro Aretino to the cardinals):

Savio collegio, *miserere mei!*
Peccavi, io lo confesso: ho detto male.
Ma qual fia sì indiscreto cardinale
che non assolva i dolci versi miei?¹²

(Wise college, have mercy on me! I sinned, I do confess it: I spoke badly.
/ But who will be such an indiscreet cardinal / that he will not absolve my
sweet verses?)

11. Danilo Romei has conclusively demonstrated that the sonnet is apocryphal: see Pietro Aretino, *Sonetti lussuriosi*, ed. Danilo Romei (2013), 62, 133, 138, online (PDF), <http://www.nuovorinascimento.org/n-rinasc/testi/pdf/aretino/sonetti.pdf>.

12. Aretino, *Operette*, 71–72.

The sonnet concludes with a cheeky palinode of the initial declaration of guilt:

Sí che, collegio bello,
perdonati di core all'Aretino
se Dio vi scampi e guardi da Pasquino.¹³

(So, handsome college, / forgive Aretino with all your heart / so that God
may spare you and keep you from Pasquino)

This passage can be compared to one coming from a sonnet contained in the *Opera nova* (n. 68), entitled “L'orrenda tuba el gran iudicio appella” (The fearful trumpet is calling for the great Judgment), a text of moral and religious content: “*Miserere peccavi, io non tel celo, / e ’nvoco penitenzia di tanto erra / sol per fruir el trionfante cielo*”¹⁴ (Have mercy, I sinned, I do not hide it from you / and I ask for penance for such an error / so as to merit triumphant heaven). This similarity shows the porosity and flexibility of Aretino’s early style and his pasquinade poetry: the same blocks of text could be shifted through different texts and acquire a new meaning in a new context.¹⁵

Returning to the sonnet *Dice ognuno*, it seems to me that its most significant lines are those of the first tercet: “E poi in Roma ognuno è l’Aretino / ognun si mangia in pasticci el Collegio” (And then in Rome everyone is Aretino / everyone eats the College in his pasta). Not only do they allude to the abundant circulation of pasquinade texts in Rome, but they also say something about the way these texts were circulated. The sonnet was written during the 1521 conclave that would appoint Hadrian VI. Aretino is already a well-known author of satirical verses, although he has not yet fully identified himself with the public role of—as Curione put it—*publicus morum censor* (public censor of manners) or, as Aretino will call himself later, *acerrimus vitium ac virtutum demonstrator* (fierce presenter of the vices and the virtues). This is the formula seen on the portrait executed in the mid-1520s by Sebastiano del Piombo, now

13. Aretino, *Operette*, 72.

14. Pietro Aretino, *Poesie varie*, ed. Giovanni Aquilecchia and Angelo Romano, vol. 1 (Rome: Salerno Ed., 1992), 63.

15. The same Latin expression returns, though in a simpler form, in the sonnet “Dive Magdalene dicatum” (Dedicated to the Holy Magdalene), the incipit of which is “Quel acceso desir ch’ogn’altro eccede” (That ardent desire that surpasses every other); Aretino, *Poesie*, 62.

in the Palazzo Comunale in Arezzo. The famous definition is doubled in the painting by the motto *in utrumque paratus* (ready to praise virtue and to blame vice), accompanied by two masks representing vice and virtue.¹⁶

However, it is undeniable that as early as 1521 the name of Aretino is universally associated with pasquinade satire, although we have no idea how this happened. The works attributed to Aretino before 1521 are scarce and of very doubtful origin. For example, Luca D’Onghia has recently shown that the *Farza*, traditionally attributed to Aretino, should not rightly be included in the corpus of his works.¹⁷ When Vittorio Rossi published the *Pasquinate di Pietro Aretino ed anonime per il conclave e l’elezione di Adriano VI* in 1891, transcribing them from the MS Magl. XXXVII 205 of the Biblioteca Nazionale of Florence, it generated a major scholarly debate. Such eminent scholars as Rossi himself, Domenico Gnoli, and Alessandro Luzio—at the time the leading experts on Aretino and the pasquinades—could not agree which and how many among the texts Rossi had published should be ascribed to Aretino.

In any case, shortly after the death of Leo X, anyone who wrote satire in the pasquinade style could shield themselves behind the name of Pietro Aretino. As the sonnet says, everyone was Aretino. Aretino was no longer—or not only—the Tuscan poet who arrived at the court of Agostino Chigi after an apprenticeship as poet and painter in Perugia. He had already become a synonym for a field of discourse, a poetical style, very much in the way in which Burchiello (1404–49) became a synonym for *poesia alla burchia*.

A sonnet in a Florentine manuscript, together with a reply to it, allows us to assess the implications of Aretino’s reputation. The MS Magl. VII 720 of the Biblioteca Nazionale of Florence contains a sonnet, the incipit of which is “Lorenzo Strozzi ha ’l titol dell’Amore” (Lorenzo Strozzi wins the Love prize). This sonnet is also in the MS *Barberiniano Latino 3800* of the Vatican Library, attributed to Cosimo Rucellai, and the MS *It IX 113 (6745)* of the Marciana

16. See Élise Boillet, “L’autore e il suo editore. I ritratti di Pietro Aretino nelle stampe di Francesco Marcolini (1534–1553),” in *Officine del nuovo. Sodalizi fra letterati, artisti ed editori nella cultura italiana fra Riforma e Controriforma*, ed. Harald Hendrix and Paolo Procaccioli (Manziana [Rome]: Vecchiarelli, 2008), 181–201, 186–87. On Sebastiano del Piombo’s portrait, see *In utrumque paratus: Aretino e Arezzo, Aretino a Arezzo. In margine al ritratto di Sebastiano del Piombo*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli (Rome: Salerno Ed., 2008).

17. Luca D’Onghia, “La ‘Farza’ è davvero di Pietro Aretino? Note linguistiche su un testo d’incerta attribuzione,” *Scaffale aperto. Rivista di italianistica*, 4 (2013): 115–37.

Library of Venice, introduced by the rubric “D’una brigata di gentiluomini al giardino de’ Rucellai” (By a group of gentlemen in the Rucellai garden). Recently, Alessio Decaria has spotted the sonnet in another manuscript, the MS *Ashburnhamiano 674* of the Laurenziana Library of Florence.¹⁸ The rubric in the Venetian version is particularly important as it points to the connection between the sonnet and the Rucellai family (with which Aretino had no personal relations), and because it suggests that the sonnet is the result of a collective effort. The sonnet reproaches the vices of a Florentine circle of friends. In the last line of the MS *Magl. VII 720*, the author claims primacy for himself in the field of *dir male*, thereby including himself among the defective companions he has scoured. In the same MS, the sonnet is followed by a response (most likely later), entitled “Guarda che mala sorte e mal governo,” the anonymous author of which turns upon Aretino himself: “O mio Pietro Aretino / perché non ho imparato de tuo tratti / di dir ben male di questi tristi e matti”¹⁹ (O my Pietro

18. Alessio Decaria, “Dintorni machiavelliani. Lorenzo Strozzi e un nuovo epigramma attribuibile a Machiavelli,” *Interpres. Rivista di studi quattrocenteschi* 32 (2014): 231–70, 261–69. According to Decaria, “si torna insomma a quella condivisione della poesia in un ambito circoscritto, allo scambio e al passaggio di carte a cartule fra amici, parenti colleghi legati da una frequentazione assidua e da comuni interessi per la letteratura” (267; we go back to a kind of poetry shared within a restricted circle, to the exchange and passage of papers and notes among friends, relatives, colleagues linked by an assiduous familiarity and by a shared interest in literature). The sonnet was mentioned also by Vincenzo Borghini in the MS *II.x.105* of the Biblioteca Nazionale of Firenze in a series of information on the so-called “raccolta Bartoliniana”; see Michele Barbi, *Studi di manoscritti e testi inediti*, vol. 1, *La raccolta bartoliniana di rime antiche e i codici da essa derivati* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1900), 42. I thank Alessio Decaria for pointing this out to me.

19. See Alessio Decaria, “Radici comiche di Machiavelli poeta,” *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 191.1 (2014): 1–35, where the author shows how also the contrary could happen: that a text originally by Aretino was attributed to Machiavelli. This is the case with the madrigal “Madonna i’ ’l vo pur dire,” attributed to Machiavelli in the same MS *Magl. VII 720*. As Decaria observes: “è importante rilevare che un testo di questo tipo potesse circolare sotto il nome di Machiavelli in anni non lontani da quelli in cui egli fu attivo: quella al Segretario fiorentino doveva essere dunque un’attribuzione ritenuta credibile almeno dal compilatore del manoscritto, che sembra operare in ambienti ben forniti di carte machiavelliane” (30; it is important to note that a text of this sort could circulate under Machiavelli’s name in years not far away from when he was active: the attribution to the Florentine Secretary must have seemed credible at least to the compiler of the manuscript, who seems to be operating in a context well provided with Machiavelli’s papers). On the Orti Oricellari see Rita Maria Comanducci, “Orti Oricellari,” in *Machiavelli. Enciclopedia machiavelliana* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2014), 261–65.

Aretino / why did I not learn from your strokes / to speak well evil of these wicked and crazy [people]).

One might surmise that primacy in the field of *dir male* as claimed by the author of the first sonnet led the author of the response to identify him automatically as Aretino, or at least, to invoke Aretino's authority, in spite of the fact that in Florence, among those who could aspire to primacy in *dir male* was no less than Niccolò Machiavelli (as suggested by the prologues to his comedies *Mandragola* and *Clizia*), certainly much closer to the Orti Oricellari than Aretino. I assume that in this case existing materials were re-used at some point and updated by introducing a reference to Aretino; moreover, the text of the first sonnet seems to be open to interventions and innovations by copyists or perhaps its authors (the *brigata*).

This is largely in line with the processes of transmission of lyrical poetry of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as Emilio Pasquini has reconstructed them. Sonnets were often perceived as *res nullius*, copied and simultaneously elaborated via a series of variations by “piccoli maestri” (small masters) who preferred “lavorare su una struttura data piuttosto che affidarsi all’alea della pagina bianca” (to work on a given structure rather than entrust themselves to the uncertainty of the blank page). Pasquini recalls how, in the Quattrocento, “alla tensione ideale di solitari creatori si è sostituito un artigianato piú o meno anonimo”²⁰ (a more or less anonymous artisanship replaced the ideal tensions of solitary creators). Within these poetical workshops, existing texts were rewritten via a series of variations on fixed patterns: as Pasquini pointed out, Burchiello was a crucial juncture in this development of Italian poetry, not only because his sonnets met the same fate but because he and his school appropriated a number of other authors’ sonnets and circulated them in altered forms. In short, in the second half of the fifteenth and throughout the sixteenth century, the connection between a poetical text and its author was greatly weakened, and a vast series of poems of devotional, religious, political, and moralistic inspiration could be appropriated by readers and copyists and be renewed. Intellectual property and the authenticity and originality of a text were of little, if any, importance.

20. Emilio Pasquini, *Le botteghe della poesia. Studi sul Tre-Quattrocento italiano* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1991) 47, 73.

A similar pattern applied to pasquinades. Aretino and his friend Anton Lelio are only the best known of a cluster of other authors of satirical poems. In the workshop of Roman pasquinade poetry, sonnets were composed, circulated, passed hand to hand, manipulated, and altered. What matters, more than trying to pinpoint an unlikely individual “voice,” is identifying the stylistic features of the genre and its common traits. Pasquinade poetry is highly unstable and, like the tradition studied by Pasquini, escapes Lachmannian philological rules: each variant introduces new meaning and points to different cultural and ideological voices. In this open textual tradition, every sonnet could be made actual, adapted to a different context, even turned upside-down. For example, sonnets could undergo the introduction of one or more *code* (added stanzas) by another author, or by a zealous copyist, that radically changed their overall meaning. A nice example is the sonnet “Piacevi monna chiesa bella e bona,” of which two versions are known: one by Aretino, in which the “code” expresses a pro-Medicean message; the other by Anton Lelio, in which the added tercets are hostile to the Medicis.²¹ One might legitimately ask whether Anton Lelio or Aretino should rightly be considered the author of the sonnet, but the point is that they both should be.

4. The elusive author

Aretino was able to see in the mechanism of production of (semi)anonymous poetry—and its uncontrolled circulation, re-working, and re-appropriation—a formidable means for his self-affirmation. Far from hindering or threatening his reputation as author, this peculiar way of conceiving poetry contributed enormously to the spread of his reputation as both prodigious poet and scourge of princes. I quote here a few passages that I have also considered in the introduction to my edition of Aretino’s *Operette politiche e satiriche*. The first is a letter from Aretino to Vincenzo Rosso in 1545:

Come figliuol carissimo, se bene la di voi memoria è sí profonda son certo che le cose già di mio si recò a mente, se le ricordano ancora; imperò la prego a farmene copia. [...] E Dio volesse che le altre tali e tante, che vanno disperse, fossero riposte in lo erario del vostro ingegno; che mi riposarei

21. Aretino, *Operette*, 68–69 and 298–99.

l’animo molto confuso da almeno quattrocento sonetti satirici de i quali non ho copia veruna.²²

(As a most beloved son, even though your memory is so profound, [yet] I am certain that you still remember my works; so I beg you to send me a copy. [...] If, God willing, my many other lost works had been stored in the treasury of your mind, my spirit, confounded by the loss of at least four hundred satiric poems of which I have no copy at all, would rest at peace.)

The second passage comes from Giovanni Alberto Albicante’s *Abbattimento poetico* (1539), a violent attack on Aretino:

Et forse che questa cogliona età non cacava nelle brache sentendo i Pasticci maledici posti a Pasquino, et quegli c’haveano dell’arguto; era tanto impoverita la manigolda poesia, ch’il volgo a romores gridava alla Fiorentina: «Cotesto è dell’Aretino», onde venivano in publico ogni giorno mille bagatelle sotto il vostro divinissimo nome, delle quali vi sete inricchito senza tema d’esser rovinato per l’altrui filastocole.²³

(And perhaps this asshole age did not shit its pants hearing the damned Messes that were placed on Pasquino and those that had some wit; knave poetry had become so impoverished that the rubble, going on hearsay, yelled out like the Florentines: “This one is Aretino’s,” so that a thousand bagatelles came out every day under your most divine name, which have all enriched you without fear of being ruined by someone else’s nonsense rhymes.)

Finally, a passage from an undated letter from Ludovico Dolce to Aretino:

È venuta qui in casa nostra una lettera la quale dice generalmente male di tutti i Signori e Monsignori, e ha tale iscrizione: «Pasquino al Rosso buffone dell’Olim Cardinale de’ Medici». Onde ne sono nati duoi giudicii

22. Pietro Aretino *Lettere*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli, vol. 3 (Rome: Salerno Ed., 1999), 423n542.

23. Giovanni Alberto Albicante, “Abbattimento poetico,” in *Occasioni aretiniane*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli (Manziana [Rome]: Vecchiarelli, 1999), 97–129, 124.

sopra lo autore di essa lettera. L'uno è che tiene per fermo esser cosa di vostra Signoria. L'altra lo nega in tutto.²⁴

(A letter has arrived here at our house that generally speaks badly of all those Lords and Monsignors, and has this inscription: “Pasquino to Rosso the clown of the deceased Cardinal de’ Medici.” There are two opinions on the author of this letter. One is convinced that it is Your Lordship’s. The other denies it completely.)

From these texts, we gather how Aretino had his satirical works circulated: he neither bothered to keep a record of how many of them he had composed, nor remembered having composed them at all (which made them easy to plagiarize). On the other hand, works by other writers were attributed to him, to which he silently gave his consent (and it should be noted that no importance is attached to matters of individual style or quality). In short, here was a style of poetry that could be found in endlessly replicable texts, attributed to Aretino by the *vox populi*, with no critical examination. What mattered was quantity, rather than the quality of any single text. As the letter by Dolce eloquently shows, it was virtually impossible, even among people closely associated with Aretino, to distinguish the texts penned by him. Modern scholarship has confirmed this impression: when it is suggested that a pasquinade be attributed to Aretino, all the major scholars in the field—Giuliano Innamorati, Giorgio Petrocchi, Paul Larivaille, Danilo Romei—only reluctantly resort to stylistic criteria.

5. Pasquinade and Burchiellesque poetry

The name “Aretino” had become a kind of label identifying a genre, a style, a kind of literature—and as such, it was partially autonomous from Aretino’s physical persona. Many of these features are common to Burchiellesque poetry. Throughout the Cinquecento, these genres frequently overlapped and even came to coincide in the eyes of readers. Before considering some of these cases of overlap, I shall note that Burchiellesque poetry is a fairly codified genre compared to the much more variable and polymorphic pasquinades. The term “Burchiellesque” refers exclusively to vernacular sonnets, whereas pasquinades

24. *Lettere scritte a Pietro Aretino*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli, vol. 1 (Rome: Salerno Ed., 2003), 347n368.

can be either Latin or vernacular, prose or verse, and are generally pluri-stylistic, pluri-linguistic, and characterized by recourse to various metrical schemes. From a philological point of view, both genres are fairly open, exposed to copyists’ innovations. However, while a *vulgata* of Burchiellesque poetry formed precociously, and Burchiellesque texts were arranged into recognizable sequences, pasquinade texts are scattered in manuscripts, divided into neither groups nor sequences.

Michelangelo Zaccarello has called for a distinction to be made between Burchiello’s historical and textual personalities, suggesting that he remained “una maniera immediatamente riconoscibile [...] per tutto il Rinascimento”²⁵ (a style immediately recognizable [...] throughout the Renaissance). Aretino himself had found this manneristic trait in Burchiello’s poetry, which fostered the serial appropriation of the genre, and had formed a negative opinion of it. In a letter written in 1540, invoking the two fundamental categories of his own poetic theory—art and nature—Aretino charged Burchiello with stealing others’ art (implicitly boasting of his own entirely natural inspiration):

e piú risplende il vestir de i cenci propri, che il rilucere de i drappi che si rubano. Che aviam noi a fare con quel che non è nostro? [...] E perciò ciascuno che pazzeggia col poetizzare, devrebbe piantarsi in uno stile di suo patrimonio, e con quello dar fuoco a le girandole de gli stessi ghiribizzi, lasciando abbaiare le frenesie del prossimo ne i figli loro. Ecco il Burchiello (le cui fanfalughe si leggeranno sempre, da che sempre scuffiò il pane de la sua farina) fu ladro per arte e non per natura. E che sia il vero, egli rubbacchiò per mostrare a i ceretani esser non men male il furar le cappe a i vivi che le fatiche a i morti.²⁶

25. “Premessa” to *I sonetti del Burchiello*, ed. Michelangelo Zaccarello (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 2000), viii.

26. To Giovanni Santa Giuliana, Venezia, 12 december 1540; see Pietro Aretino, *Lettere*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli, vol. 2 (Rome: Salerno Ed., 1998), 255n226. This passage has been recently interpreted in rather divergent ways by scholars; according to Giorgio Masi, “pur avvicinandosi il Burchiello ai *ceretani*—il bersaglio è un altro, la sua non originalità (evidentemente rispetto all’Orcagna); qui il poeta barbiere è addotto come esempio negativo nella peculiare contrapposizione aretiniana fra *arte* e *natura*” (though Burchiello is compared to *ceretani*—the target is another, his non-originality [evidently with respect to Orcagna]; here the barber poet is indicated as a negative example of Aretino’s contrast between *art* and *nature*). See Giorgio Masi, “La zuffa del negligente. Il commento doniano alle *Rime* del Burchiello,” in *La fantasia fuor de’ confini. Burchiello e dintorni a 550 anni dalla morte (1449–1999)*, ed.

(it is more resplendent to wear one's own rags than to shine in stolen cloths. What have we got to do with what's not ours? [...]) And so everyone who goes wild writing poetry should establish himself in style of his own making, and with that set fire to the spinning wheels of these same whims, letting the frenzies of other people bark at their own children. Here is Burchiello (whose yarns will always be read, who always made his bread with his own flour), he was a thief for art and not by nature. This is true, for he stole to show the charlatans that it was no less an evil to steal capes from the living than labours from the deceased.)

Yet in the Cinquecento, Aretino and Burchiello were often compared, and often through the implicit (or explicit) medium of Pasquino. I quote here two passages from the *Piazza universale* by Tomaso Garzoni. The first comes from discourse 88, “De’ maldicenti, detrattori e murmuratori”:

Ècci una professione d’alcuni uomini incivili e mal creati, anzi di demoni infernali, che non fanno altro dal matino alla sera che, con pessima lingua, lacerar questi e quell’altro, far ridotti nelle botteghe, tenere scola nelle piazze e conventicole pubbliche e private, dimostrandosi dell’Accademia dell’Aretino, del Burchiello, del Bernia e del Franco, per non dir della scola di Pasquino e di Marforio, tanto son’usi a sfodrar contra tutti egualmente l’insana lingua, piena del tossico e del pestifero veleno della maladetta detrazione.²⁷

Michelangelo Zaccarello (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2002), 169–93, 173n11. According to Corsaro (“Burchiello attraverso la tradizione a stampa del ’500,” in *La fantasia fuor de’ confini*, 127–68, 141), “tradotto nei termini della poetica aretiniana, i furti di Burchiello sono per via di *arte*—ovvero la componente ‘negativa’ della scrittura letteraria—ma non per natura (la vera e unica fonte di ispirazione), tanto che il poeta rubò ai «vivi» per ostentare la sua bravura, rifiutando il saccheggio delle antiche scartoffie. Burchiello diventava in sostanza un soggetto emblematico di ‘immedesimazione’ e di rispecchiamento al quale il principe delle nuove lettere non disdegnava di applicare i principi della sua propria poetica” (translated in terms of Aretino’s poetics, Burchiello’s thefts are through *art*—that is, the “negative” component of literary writing—and not nature [the true and only source of inspiration], so that the poet stole from the “living” in order to show off his skill, and refused to sack ancient piles of papers). Burchiello substantially becomes an emblematic subject of “identification” and “mirroring” to whom the prince of the new letters [Aretino] did not disdain to apply the principles of his new poetics).
27. Tommaso Garzoni, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo*, ed. Paolo Cherchi and Beatrice Collina (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), 1052.

(There is a profession of uncivil and badly created men, I should say infernal demons, who from morning to evening, with the most evil tongue, do nothing else but rip apart this man or that, they gather in shops, hold class in piazzas and public and private conventicles, and show themselves to belong to the Academy of Aretino, of Burchiello, Berni, Franco, not to mention to the school of Pasquino and Marforio, so accustomed are they to unsheathe their tongue equally against everyone, full of venom and the pestilential poison of damned denigration.)

The second is from discourse 154, entitled “De’ poeti in generale, e de’ formatori d’epitaffi e pasquinate in particolare”:

Non son quelli c’hanno facoltà d’alzare e abbassare chiunque gli pare con le rime loro, mentre o lodano o vituperano le persone a lor piacere? [...] Onde è nato che quell’empio dell’Aretino fu detto flagello de’ principi, quel ribaldo del Franco fu sí caro compagno di Marforio e di Pasquino, e quel iniquo e sporco Bernia col Burchiello non furon differenti da Bavio e Mevio.²⁸

(Are they not those who have the ability to raise and lower whomever they please with their rhymes when they praise or revile people at their pleasure? [...] So it happened that that godless Aretino was called the scourge of princes, that scoundrel Franco was such a beloved companion of Marforio and Pasquino, and that wicked and filthy Berni along with Burchiello were not any different from Bavio and Mevio.)

The text is followed by a long tirade against Pasquino, “inimico de’ precncipi e signori del mondo” (enemy of princes and lords of the world). These passages present, as Antonio Corsaro has suggested, a series of poets united “nel segno della proverbiale irriverenza e sconcezza” (under the sign of proverbial irreverence and indecency); the list seems to hint at a “passiva codificazione entro il dominio della scrittura di biasimo e di maldicenza” (passive codification in the domain of a prose of censure and malicious rumours), which could be considered a consequence of the Counter-Reformation time when Garzoni

28. Garzoni, 1481.

was writing.²⁹ Burchiello, like Pasquino, was considered one of the muses of *dir male*. Consider the dispute between Burchiello and Leon Battista Alberti. Or think of the ten Burchiellesque sonnets known as *mattaccini*, inserted in Annibal Caro's *Apologia degli academici di Banchi di Roma contra messer Lodovico Castelvetro* (1555, but published in 1558), a series of violent sonnets against Caro's enemy, Ludovico Castelvetro. In the fiction of the work, the sonnets are sent to Castelvetro by Pasquino himself. According to Enrico Garavelli, Burchiello features in the *Apologia* not in opposition to Petrarch but rather as his carnivalesque double, a sort of *Doppelgänger* who ridicules the abstruse ideas of pedantic philosophers, poets, and commentators. Burchiello thus functions as a "contestazione del dogmatismo letterario" (protest against literary dogmatism) and represents an "auctoritas del paradosso e della parodia" (authority on paradox and parody).³⁰ In the *Apologia*, Pasquino tells Castelvetro how ser Fedocco, one of the characters in the work, had told him of a dream in which he had met both Burchiello and Petrarch and, following their instructions, had decided to attack Castelvetro with a series (*corona*) of Burchiellesque sonnets. These sonnets, extracted from their original context, were included in the censored 1597 edition of Burchiello's sonnets published in Vicenza by the heirs of Perin Libraro.³¹

Another, more complex text in which one finds a correspondence between Burchiellesque and Aretino's pasquinade and satirical poetry is the *Rime del*

29. Corsaro, "Burchiello attraverso la tradizione a stampa del '500," 151.

30. Enrico Garavelli, "Presenze burchiellesche (e altro) nel *Commento di Ser Agresto* di Annibal Caro," in *La fantasia fuor de' confini*, 195–239: 221, 238. See also Enrico Garavelli, "'Perché Prisciano non facci ceffo'. Ser Agresto commentatore," in *Cum notibusse et commentariibus. L'esegesi parodistica e giocosa nel Cinquecento*, ed. Antonio Corsaro and Paolo Procaccioli (Manziana [Rome]: Vecchiarelli, 2002), 57–77.

31. As Carlo Alberto Girotto points out, "Naturalmente questa estrapolazione fa venir meno la portata che questi *Mattaccini* avevano all'interno dell'*Apologia* del Caro: i sonetti non adombrano più la polemica intercorsa tra il Caro e il Castelvetro, ma diventano un repertorio di immagini stravaganti e di espressioni senza senso, che molto risentono, anche a livello puntuale, della tradizione della poesia alla burchia" (Naturally, this extrapolation undermines the weight of the *Mattaccini* within Caro's *Apologia*: the sonnets no longer point to the debate between Caro and Castelvetro, but become a repertory of extravagant images and expressions devoid of sense that very much echo, even in detail, the tradition of poetry *alla burchia*); in *Rime del Burchiello commentate dal Doni*, ed. Carlo Alberto Girotto (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2013), 369. On the influence of Burchiello on later poetry, see Giuseppe Crimi, *L'oscura lingua e il parlar sottile. Tradizione e fortuna del Burchiello* (Manziana [Rome]: Vecchiarelli, 2005).

Burchiello comentate dal Doni (Poems by Burchiello with a commentary by Doni; 1553, but most likely begun in 1547). As Giorgio Masi has insightfully pointed out, in this work Doni shows a strategy of self-fashioning strongly inspired by Aretino, starting with the dedication letter, in which he thanks the painter Tintoretto for having painted his portrait. In this way, Doni duplicates the Aretino–Titian relation and proceeds to insert a series of references to Aretino’s world. According to Masi, throughout the text, “l’Aretino è ineludibile termine di paragone” (Aretino is the unavoidable term for comparison).³² The appropriation of Burchiello, it seems, was a crucial step in Doni’s ability to compete with Aretino, and build a public image comparable to his.

As we have seen, Aretino, Pasquino, and Burchiello were indissolubly connected. The year before Doni published his *Comento* to Burchiello, Anton Francesco Grazzini had edited *I sonetti del Burchiello e di Messer Antonio Alamanni* in Florence, for the publisher Giunti. In the introductory sonnet, the corpus of Burchiello’s works was compared (according to a humanistic cliché) to a disfigured body. This body bears a striking resemblance to Pasquino’s:

Com’è possibil mai? Pur son stato
Gran tempo, colpa degli Stampatori
Ignoranti, assassini e traditori,
Lacero, guasto, ferito e storpiato.
Chi m’havea mozzo i piedi e chi tagliato
Le braccia, e cincischiato entro, e di fuori.
Hor sano e salvo e purgato gli errori
Tornato son nel mio primiero stato.³³

(How is this ever possible? And yet for a long time I have been ripped off, spoiled, wounded, and distorted, thanks to ignorant, murderous, traitorous printers. Some had cut my feet, some had cut my arms off and tampered with me inside and out. Now, safe and sound and purged of errors, I have returned to my former state.)

32. Masi, “La zuffa del negligente,” 177–79. On Doni’s comment, see also Giorgio Masi, “Filologia ed erudizione nel *Comento* del Doni alle *Rime* del Burchiello,” in *Cum notibusse et commentaribusse*, 147–76.

33. *I sonetti del Burchiello e di Messer Antonio Alamanni alla burchiellesca* (Florence: Giunti, 1552), c. Aiiijv.

This disfigured and mutilated torso—the works of Burchiello—surely recalls the equally disfigured torso of Pasquino. It is possible to make direct comparisons between the two. For example, consider the description of Pasquino in a pasquinade directed against Aretino, circulated in Venice and entitled *Dolente et affaticato nel cammino* (Aching and tired from my journey; possibly written in 1535), but which certainly refers to the aftermath of the Sack of Rome):

Dolente et affaticato nel cammino
 Da Roma guasta, saccheggiata et presa
 Venuto son io qui per mia difesa
 Il povero et sciancato di Pasquino.³⁴

(Aching and tired from my journey, I come here from wasted, sacked, and captured Rome to defend myself, the poor and lame Pasquino.)

One could also compare Grazzini's sonnet to some passages describing Pasquino in Aretino's works, such as one from the *frottola Pas vobis, brigate* (Peace be with you, fellow friends), where Pasquino introduces himself: "i sono il poverino / vostro mastro Pasquino, ignudo e scalzo" (I am your poor master Pasquino, naked and barefoot).³⁵

6. Doni, Burchiello, and the effacement of the author

The connections between Burchiellesque and pasquinade poetry were thus numerous and complex, and centred on two issues: the role of political satire and the role and status of the author. Doni seems fully aware of these connections in his *Comento* to Burchiello's poems. In his notes to sonnet 135, "Io porto indosso un così stran mantello" (I wear such a strange mantle), he writes:

Alcuni comentatori voglion che non sia del Burchiello questo sonetto:
 sia come piace a loro, che importa che sieno o non sieno? Debbe forse

34. Marco Faini, "Due pasquinade contro Pietro Aretino in un manoscritto Oliveriano," *Studi Oliveriani* 5–6 (2005/2006): 175–81, 178.

35. Aretino, *Operette*, 125.

esser questo un testo d’Aristotile, che se vi mancasse una parola ogni cosa andrebbe a rovescio? Che gran caso a creder che sia o non sia! A le *Pandette* sarebbe di qualche importanza, ma in questa burchielleria, a dire una cosa per un’altra, rilieva pochi denari.³⁶

(Some commentators argue that this sonnet was not written by Burchiello. Be it as they like, who cares if the sonnets do or do not belong to him? Is this a text by Aristotle, such that, should a word be omitted, everything in it would be turned upside down? How important, believing that a sonnet does or does not belong to him! That would be important if we were dealing with the *Pandectae*: but in this Burchiellesque work, saying a word instead of another makes little change.)

Doni makes the case that for the kind of poetry that Burchiellesque is, the problem of authenticity is not a sensible concern; nor is the scrupulous preservation of an allegedly original text (“che se vi mancasse una parola ogni cosa andrebbe a rovescio,” meaning that the alteration of texts is tolerable). The “correct” attribution of texts is irrelevant, and so is the attempt to respect the author’s will (“dire una cosa per un’altra”). Doni is apparently well aware that the textual tradition of Burchiello is inevitably exposed to contamination, corruption, and innovation. Moreover, he seems to acknowledge that Burchiello is no more than a “textual identity,” a name that identifies a genre, as is the case with Aretino and the pasquinades.

Yet Doni’s opinion is more sophisticated. In his commentary to the first sonnet, he writes:

Ben è vero che sotto nome del Burchiello ne furon composti molti contro a quello stato di quei tempi, da questo e da quell’altro cittadino. Che non fossero del barbieri è chiaro per i testi che io ho trovati antichi et originali, e perché un povero poetante come lui non sarebbe ito armeggiando con le repubbliche, né harebbe scherzato con cose tali che eran di stato. Però quelli adunque si metteranno fuori che son veramente suoi, e gli altri si porranno da parte.³⁷

36. Girotto, ed., 199.

37. Girotto, ed., 22.

(It is true that under Burchiello's name many sonnets were composed by this or that citizen that attacked the corruption of the time. Yet, it is clear from some ancient and original manuscripts I found that these sonnets were not written by the barber. Besides, a poor poet like him would not have dealt with Republics, nor would he have joked about political matters. Therefore, I will publish only those sonnets that truly belong to him and discard all the others.)

The overlap between the Burchiellesque and the pasquinade is not complete. Burchiellesque poetry, in Doni's view, does not deal with political matters. This is one of the criteria that might lead to the construction of a reliable corpus of Burchiello's poetry. However, this philological concern, though expressed by Doni in the very first lines of his work, is actually remote from his mind. Rather, Doni points to a weakening of the relation between the author and his work, one which was common to a large part of early sixteenth-century literature and which contributed to undermining the reader's trust in both author and text.³⁸ Rarely has this idea been expressed with such theoretical awareness. I quote a passage from his work *I marmi* (1553):

Avete voi a rubar sempre da questo e quell'altro autore sì spensieratamente?
non sapete voi che *Oficina Testoris* non è da essere spogliata, sì malamente,
né la *Poliantea* da voi? Chi v'ha insegnato a rifare i libri vecchi e tramutare
il nome.³⁹

(Do you always have to steal from different authors without giving a thought to it? Don't you not know that Textor's *Oficina* or the *Poliantea* should not be so clumsily stripped by you? Who taught you to rewrite old works and change the name?)

While seemingly criticizing the contemporary editorial custom, Doni explains his own conception of literature. The typographical space makes all the forms of knowledge available and (virtually) coexistent; texts were

38. See Albert R. Ascoli, "Worthy of Faith? Authors and Readers in Early Modernity," in *The Renaissance World*, ed. John Martin (London: Routledge, 2007), 435–51; Carlo Vecce, "La crisi dell'autore nel Rinascimento," *California Italian Studies* 1.2 (2010), online, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8w30d0rx>.

39. Anton Francesco Doni, *I marmi*, ed. Ezio Chiòrboli (Bari: Laterza, 1928), 156.

assembled and disassembled, and this was no longer the result of the work of skilled philologists, but rather a serial exercise. If every text was no more than the result of a combination of existing materials, the very idea of author was wavering, and hence the central role of anonymity and of pseudonyms in mid-sixteenth-century literature and in Doni's own work. If, as Doni assumes, everything has already been written, plagiarism and the endless re-assembling of texts becomes a privileged, if not unique, way of conceiving literature. In this sense, Aretino's interpretation of Burchiellesque and pasquinade poetry seems to represent, if not embody, the spirit of the time. Like no other genre, they rely on the paradoxical connection between the effacement of the author and his multiplied presence on the literary scene. The dialectic of the sonnet from which I have begun has the flavour of a literary manifesto: while claiming that everyone was Aretino, Aretino obsessively repeated his own name, building his own myth.

7. Concluding remarks

In the chapter on Thomas More in his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Stephen Greenblatt has spoken of “a dream of a cancellation of identity itself.”⁴⁰ In *Utopia* (1516), More stages the conflict between irreconcilable forces, organizing them within an ideological and narrative frame at once clear and elusive.⁴¹ This has to do with More's self-perception, characterized by a conflict between “engagement and detachment” and a “perpetual self-estrangement”⁴² that leads More to hide behind different masks, often at odds with each other. At the basis of More's attitude towards his work is a conception of reality—best expressed, according to Greenblatt, in the *Dialogue of Comfort* (1534)—as fundamentally ungraspable and impossible to know. Reason must come to terms with “the conjectural status of all its operations and do a profession of faith.” It is only faith, guaranteed and grounded by a recognized institution (in More's case, the Catholic Church), that can put a stop to the fluctuation of thought between irreconcilable positions: “any assurance must be imposed from without, by an

40. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 32.

41. “More brings together then a near-chaos of conflicting psychological, social, and religious pressures and fashions them into a vision that seems at once utterly clear and utterly elusive,” Greenblatt, 57.

42. Greenblatt, 31.

individual or by an interpretative community with an interest in establishing a fixed point beyond the ceaseless oscillation of irreconcilable perspectives.”⁴³

Moving from early-sixteenth-century England to mid-sixteenth-century Italy, and in circles close to Aretino, one finds similar ideas expressed in the *Predica dei sogni* (A sermon on dreams) by Hypneo da Schio, *alias* Daniele Barbaro (1542). The text concludes with a series of sonnets on doubt, at the end of which faith is invoked as a rampart able to prevent reason’s inevitable slip into radical doubt.⁴⁴ Looking at Aretino’s works, we recall how in the comedy *Lo ipocrito* (written significantly in 1542, and dedicated to both the duke of Urbino and Daniele Barbaro), the character of Liseo affirms how “*nada es todos, salvo Iddio che è il tutto*” (everything is nothing, except for God who is everything). This sentence concludes a passage—in which it is obsessively repeated, with minor variations—in which Liseo seems to deal with the equivalence, and therefore with the irrelevance and futility, of all human things, and the impossibility of some stable and reasonable discourse on them:

Signori, poi che colui che ha fatto la comedia è stato sempre de la fantasia ch’io voglio esser tuttavia, so che gli faccio una grazia rilevata a dirvi che se la cantafavola vi è piaciuta l’ha caro, e se non vi è piaciuta, carissimo; avenga che nel piacervi appare il suo pensarci poco, e nel non piacervi il suo curarsene meno, peroché *todos es nada*, et essendo ogni cosa niente, tanto pensa a la lode quanto al biasimo, che certo *todos es nada*, e però chi more mora, e chi nasce nasca e, senza far piú conto del sole che de la pioggia, chi vol rovinar rovinì, e chi vol murar muri, che *todos es nada*. Ma da che *nada es todos*, salvo Iddio che è il tutto, me ne vado a vedere le pazzie nuzziali.⁴⁵

(Gentlemen, since the author of the comedy has always been as I would like to be, I know I am doing him a great favour in telling you that if this

43. Greenblatt, 25.

44. See “A Ghost Academy between Venice and Brescia: Philosophical Scepticism and Religious Heterodoxy in the Accademia dei Dubbiosi,” in *The Italian Academies 1525–1700: Networks of Culture, Innovation and Dissent*, ed. Jane E. Everson, Denis V. Reidy, and Lisa M. Sampson (Oxford: Legenda, 2016), 102–15.

45. Pietro Aretino, *Lo ipocrito*, in *Teatro*, vol. 2, *Il marescalco. Lo ipocrito. La talanta*, ed. Giovanna Rabitti, Carmine Boccia, and Enrico Garavelli (Rome: Salerno Ed., 2010), 155–338, 278.

yarn has pleased you he is happy, and if it did not please you he is most happy. That’s because he thinks little about having pleased you and he could not care less about not having pleased you, because *everything is nothing*, and since everything is nothing, he considers praise and blame the same, for certainly *everything is nothing* and so those who die die and those who are born are born, without appreciating sunshine more than rain, let those who want to ruin themselves ruin themselves, and those who want to build build, for *everything is nothing*. So, since *everything is nothing*, except for God who is everything, I’ll go see the marriage follies.)

It is possible that a certain impulse towards “self-cancellation” can be found in all of Aretino’s work, and particularly in his decision to hide behind masks that apparently cannot coexist and his Michelangelo-like attempt to build his identity “per via di levare” (by means of removal).

The author of pasquinades who finds his literary affirmation only (partially) silencing his authorial voice; the person who writes penitential works while at the same time penning pornographic works; he who seeks the applause and money of the great ones of the earth and he who reflects on the futility of things: all of this constitutes Aretino’s identity. Indeed, this self-fashioning (certainly related to the will to exploit the print market and to please the patron’s desires) seems to me to point to a disintegration of identity. In turn, this is related to a perception of a drastically dismembered reality (or to the idea of an unattainable unity, or harmony). The way in which Aretino affirmed himself on the literary scene should be located more in the precarious balance of reciprocally effacing identities, in the dialectic between cancellation and affirmation of the self, than in one of the masks with which he has been identified.