

## **A Companion to Anticlassicisms in the Cinquecento**

# **Classicism and Beyond / Il classicismo e oltre**



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## **Vol. 1**

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## 3 Alternative Classicism

### Dante as a Counter Model in Italian Renaissance Literature

The following pages will present aspects of the critical and productive reception of Dante in the sixteenth century as acts of deviation from dominant classicist allegiances such as Petrarchism (especially Bembism), the Horatian and rhetorical tradition of stylistic unity and, later, Aristotelian Poetics and its reception. This deviation can, but need not necessarily take on a directly opposing form, however, in all cases it will be an alternative choice of model, hence the term ‘alternative classicism.’

The reception of Dante’s work, and of the *Commedia* especially, in Italian Renaissance literature has been extensively studied, and in many of the explorations of this rich and complex field, the question of whether or not Dante was regarded as a possible model author by poets and literary theorists of the sixteenth century is touched upon.<sup>1</sup> This question is, however, rarely developed systematically with an eye on examining Dante’s role as an alternative model or a counter-model.

In three steps, this will be attempted here: in the first section, the main arguments of the theoretical debate on Dante are briefly redrawn. The second section analyses some examples of writing modelled on Dante’s works. The third part examines more closely two ways of viewing Dante as different from the mainstream, both of which emerged throughout the course of the century and became prominent towards its end: Dante as a ‘phantastic’ author on the one hand and, on the other, new manners of appreciating Dante’s poetic ‘harshness’, which can be found in literary theory, poetic practice, the fine arts and music.

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1 Of fundamental importance: Barbi 1975 [1890], Rossi 1930, Hathaway 1962, Weinberg 1961, Dionisotti 1965, Mazzacurati 1967, Vallone 1969, Mazzacurati 1977, Parker 1993, Gilson 2005, Gilson 2018 and the anthology edited by Caesar 1989, especially 250–259.

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**Note:** Each of the persons named contributed to the research and wrote a chapter of his/her own. Any credit for these chapters should go to them, any errors are mine, as I revised the texts. F.M.

## 3.1 Alternative Classic or Outcast? The Theoretical Debate on Dante

The debate surrounding Dante's status as a classical author and on the nature and value of his poetry and poetics is, of course, one of the great theoretical discussions of the sixteenth century and has been explored by critics and historians of literature since the 1890s. It will be summarized briefly here, with a focus on the question of whether or not Dante could be viewed as a model for good writing. As indicated above, this chapter will stop short of the final stage of this debate, as this produced some remarkable innovations, which merit a chapter of their own (see chap. 3.3).

### 3.1.1 Canonizing Petrarch, Ostracizing Dante: From Leonardo Bruni to Pietro Bembo

In the fourteenth century, a considerable number of commentaries and manuscripts with glosses of Dante's *Commedia* were produced, and the poem was studied and analysed in universities and public places. In the first three decades after the poet's death, many commentators treated the *sacro poema* as a canonized and authoritative literary work, partly in an attempt to hide the fact that they were really defending a highly controversial text against severe criticism with regard to its politics and philosophy (Parker 1993, 29–33).

This situation changed in the fifteenth century when Dante was generally accepted to be one of the greats and commentaries tended to present his work according to the needs and ideologies of the audience they were written for. This is evident in the politically motivated fight before and after Francesco Filelfo's lecture on Dante as a defender of republican liberties against tyrants in Florence in 1431, culminating in a knife attack on Filelfo by the Mediceans in 1433. Nearly half a century later, in 1481, Cristoforo Landino's commented edition attempted to reclaim the *Comedy* for purposes relating to Medici cultural politics, Florentine Neoplatonism and the affirmation of Tuscan linguistic and political hegemony (Parker 1993, 53–57, 89 and 94).<sup>2</sup> This feat was performed, amongst other things, by superimposing the biographical fact of Dante's exile on the linguistic 'foreignness' of previous print editions and commentaries:

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<sup>2</sup> In 1478, Poliziano's *Commentarium* on the Pazzi conspiracy uses Dante's *Inferno* for Medicean politics by putting the Pazzi in hell. See Föcking 2019a.

Questo solo affermo, havere liberato el nostro cittadino dalla barbarie di molti esterni idiomi, ne' quali da' comentatori era stato corrotto; et al presente chosì puro et semplice è paruto mio officio apresentarlo ad voi illustrissimi signor nostri, accioché per le mani di quel magistrato, el quale è sommo nella fiorentina rep., sia dopo lungo exilio restituito nella sua patria, et riconosciuto né Romagnuolo essere né Lombardo, né degli idiomi di quegli che l'hanno comentato, ma mero fiorentino. La quale lingua quanto tutte l'altre italiche avanzi manifesto testimonio ne sia, che nessuno nel quale apparisca o ingegno o doctrina, né versi scripse mai né prosa, che non si sforzassi usare el fiorentino idioma (Landino 1481, 1r.–1v. = Landino 2001, 1, 221).

The performative force of the new Florentine annotated edition is supposed to bring the exiled poet home to Florence and thus to heal the rift between him and his city. Landino's commentary generally extols the virtues of Medicean culture, and Dante becomes its most prized asset (Lentzen 1985, Gilson 2005, especially 164–168).

In Filelfo's 1431 lecture, however, there exists an early trace of a different strand of Dante criticism, one which went on to become prominent in humanist circles. Filelfo reported that certain "ignorantissimi" were of the opinion that the *Commedia* was read predominantly by cobblers and bakers, in other words that its vernacular and possibly humble language rendered it too popular and thus unworthy of serious attention by intellectuals (Filelfo 1901, 23). An early trace of this tradition can be found in Franco Sacchetti's *Trecentonovelle* (CIX), written during the final years of the fourteenth century, in which a fictional 'Dante' protests against the idea of leaving his works to simple artisans (Föcking 2019a, 40–41). The most prominent example of this point of view was Leonardo Bruni's statement in his *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum*, which had been in circulation in manuscript form since the beginning of the fifteenth century, according to which Dante should be left to "lanariis, pistoribus atque eiusmodi turbae" (to wool workers, bakers and suchlike) and, in fact, be removed from the "concilio litterarum" altogether (Bruni 1952, 70). A positive version of this tale also existed in sixteenth century Florence, one describing a Dante who is as important to everyday life as bread and wine (Barbi 1975, 260).

The main difference between these two versions can be grasped in the expression *concilium litterarum* in the quotation from Bruni above: at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Dante reigns supreme in environments characterized by the oral reception of poetry, but in the 'councils of men of letters' rather than of spoken words, his position is more contested. Early examples of a more critical attitude on the side of the *litterati* are to be found in statements by Poliziano and Pico della Mirandola, who introduce a systematic opposition between Dante's rich and profound content matter and his rough and harsh style (Gilson 2018, 17). The grammarian Giovan Francesco Fortunio, while consistently treating Dante as

a model Tuscan, frequently criticizes Dante's liberties, as well as any errors made in his texts, in his *Regole grammaticali della volgar lingua* of 1516 (Mehlretter 2010, 39).

This critical attitude is especially pronounced in writings by the Venetian intellectual Pietro Bembo, in whose dialogue *Prose della volgar lingua* poetic form reigns supreme – a poetic form conceived of in terms of the written word and its elitist tradition.

For Bembo, the existence of written poetry becomes the criterion for what can truly be called a language: “Non si può dire che sia veramente lingua alcuna favella che non ha scrittore”, as one of the characters of the dialogue, Giuliano de' Medici, puts it (Bembo 1989, 110).<sup>3</sup> It is true – and even of fundamental importance – that Bembo's approach is in a way phonocentric, as much of the discussion in the *Prose* relates to the sound of language and of poetry, but it is at the same time graphocentric (Robert 2007) in that this sound is conceived of as a kind of ‘written sound’, painstakingly elaborated upon by generations of writers over centuries of written tradition. This is also borne out by Bembo's presentation of Petrarch's poetry (which Bembo had edited based on authoritative manuscripts) in the famous 1501 portable Aldine edition of classical authors: it lets the text's typography shine on a page unencumbered by annotations, rendered auratic by a new font (later known as Italic), whilst at the same time structured by diacritic signs that allow a smoothly flowing declamation of its beautiful sounds (Mehlretter 2009, 146 and 2010, 41).

As is well known, Bembo opts for a vernacular Ciceronianism and therefore posits Petrarch as the *sole* model for vernacular poetry, as the latter epitomizes the balance of *suavitas* and *gravitas*, which is the essence of Ciceronian elegance (Regn 2006, 182 and 2020, 142–154). It is precisely this elegant balance that Dante, according to Bembo, fails to produce. Dante rarely, if ever, achieves the painstakingly elaborate and evenly maintained ‘written sound’ that Bembo seems to be looking for, as his poem is thought to contain a heterogeneous mixture of ugly, harsh or pedantic forms. To be sure, Bembo prepared Dante's text as well as Petrarch's for the *ottavino da mano* edition by Aldus Manutius and applied the same philological care to this task. But the very title he chose for the book edition, *Le terze rime di Dante*, suggests a collection of heterogeneous materials rather than a unified work (as well as assuming a critical distance

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the existence of ‘two or three crowns’ and the debate over Dante versus Petrarch, see Jossa 2011. For a critical appraisal of Bembo's *Prose* see Mazzacurati 1967, Dionisotti 1968, Sabbatino 1995, Kablitz 1999, as well as various articles in Morgana/Piotti/Prada 2000, Dionisotti 2002, Mehlretter 2009, 126–160, Mehlretter 2010, Gilson 2018, 46–54.



from medieval ideas of what a *comedy* might be). Bembo in his literary practice did make occasional use of Dantean elements and techniques (Marx 1998, Accardi 2012), but his theory all but excludes them.

Bembo's criticisms will be further discussed and elaborated upon below (3.1.4.2.). As will be seen, they by no means remained uncontested, but it needs to be stressed that Bembo's position was very influential in intellectual circles, and he was followed by, amongst others, Tomitano, Della Casa and Ruscelli.

### 3.1.2 The Ambiguities of Savonarola and the Piagnoni

In Florence, Dante was at the centre of Medici cultural politics. When the Medici were overthrown and Savonarola's theocratic republic took over, times were difficult for poetry and the arts, as the famous preacher condemned anything vain, pagan or sensual. For Savonarola just as for Thomas Aquinas, literature was the lowest form of knowledge or art (Girardi 1952, 419). Even though it could have a positive effect if it presented moral examples, in Savonarola's opinion its sensual components were to be avoided at all costs, especially by young people (Savonarola 1982, 266). In the famous bonfire of the vanities of 1497, pagan books, as well as Petrarch's and Boccaccio's works, were burnt, but there is doubt as to whether Dante's *Commedia* or his *Monarchia* were among the 'victims' (Weinstein 2011, 218; Schnitzer 1901).

Savonarola's followers, however, the so-called Piagnoni (or 'lamenters' of their sins), were more interested in literature and especially in Dante. Some of them took him up as a model for their own writing; we will discuss the case of Fra Benedetto da Firenze below (in 3.2.2.1).

Girolamo Benivieni, an intellectual at the Medici court and a follower of Savonarola's for some time (Ott 2018), was active both as a poet and a Dante scholar; in 1506 he was responsible for an important edition of the *Commedia*.

In 1500, after Savonarola's fall and execution, Benivieni published a collection of 100 of his poems with his own annotations, *Commento di Hieronymo Benivieni sopra a più sue canzone et sonetti dello Amore et della Belleza Divina*. The genre of this work harks back to Dante's *Vita Nova*, *Convivio*, and, most of all, to Lorenzo de' Medici's Neoplatonist *Comento sopra alcuni dei suoi sonetti*, but the number of poems chosen, 100, clearly alludes to the 100 cantos of the *Divine Comedy*. Moreover, the commentary is divided into three parts, just as Dante's epic is, and many details allude to Dante (Roush 2002). On the other hand, the motif of repentance, which is central to the *iter* of the lyrical subject, seems to echo the way in which it is used in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. In fact, many of the poems hail from an earlier period in Benivieni's life, one during which he was

interested both in Petrarch and Florentine Neoplatonism. Huss 2008 showed how Benivieni transformed these Petrarchist and Ficinian materials into a religious discourse influenced by Savonarola and his followers by changing parts of the poetic text and adding comments to that effect in the paratext. The final result of this transformation is, however, a kind of self-cancellation of the poetic writing: Benivieni's commentary condemns his own literary act of lyrically addressing God as presumptuous and arrogant (Huss 2008, 257). The ultimate conclusion to this would be to condemn Dante's *Comedy* on the same grounds, but Benivieni stops short of this. On the contrary, six years later he penned a new edition.

Benivieni's 1506 edition of the *Comedy* is a direct answer to Bembo's Aldine of 1502 (imitating its layout and italic typeface), but, as Roush 2002 shows, not finding many arguments to counter Bembo's excellent philological work, it shifts to ideology and performativity: Benivieni adds a "Cantico [. . .] in laude dello eccellentissimo Poeta Dante Alighieri" in *terza rima* to the paratextual apparatus, in which he proclaims himself to be a "poetic descendant of Dante" (Roush 2002, 53), making the great Trecento poet confer upon him the status of authorized editor and commentator. This is very much in line with Dante's own performative techniques of self-authorization (Nelting 2014 and 2015).

Benivieni's Dante speaks directly to Florentine readers of the early sixteenth century, who find themselves in the complex political landscape of the post-Savonarolian republic. The *capitolo*, which is full of near-quotations and allusions to the *Commedia*, stages an encounter between Benivieni and Dante's ghost and seeks to reconcile a Neoplatonist reading of the *Comedy* (in the fashion of Landino) with the anti-papal Christian concerns dear to the Piagnoni. This latter position is particularly strong in 'Dante's' final prophecy to Benivieni at the end of the "Cantica", in which he takes up Beatrice's saying in *Purgatorio* XXXIII, 34–35: "Sappi che'l vaso che il serpente ruppe / fu e non è" (Alighieri 2007, II, 967), an image that can be read as a denial of the very existence of the Roman Church as a meaningful political institution (Mehlretter 2005, 137), and exhorts the city of Florence to direct its course towards God (Roush 2002, 62). Dante is presented "as a kind of Savonarolan prophet utilizing Florence in a message of renovation" (Gilson 2018, 41).

Benivieni's edition is important with regard to the canonization of Dante, and his "Cantico" is surely an example of a text based on the model of the *Comedy*, but its form of imitation is more of a pastiche than an act of creative appropriation.

### 3.1.3 The Dante Apologists

#### 3.1.3.1 Two, Three or Numerous Fountains? Liburnio, Castiglione, Trissino, Folengo

In 1526, one year after Bembo's *Prose*, Niccolò Liburnio published a kind of primer for aspiring poets of the kind soon to become very popular, especially in the field of Petrarchism, the *tavole* of recommended expressions and procedures (Mehltretter 2009, 160–165). His chosen title, *Le tre fontane*, can be read as a direct contradiction of Bembo's 'two fountains' of Tuscan elegance, Petrarch and Boccaccio. For Liburnio, Dante must be included as a third fountain, and he incorporates a defence of Dante into the end of his book. This implies that Bembo's radical ideal of homogeneousness is not generally shared by his contemporaries, it suggests at least an option of stylistic plurality.

As in the early sixteenth century the theory of poetry is almost always bound up with that of language, this constellation links with the vexed *questione della lingua*, discussion of which is particularly heated in the 1520s. As is generally known, Castiglione (at least in theory, if less in the practice of writing) and Trissino opposed Bembo's proposal of Petrarch's Trecento literary Tuscan as the sole model and advocated, instead, a mixed *lingua cortigiana* similar to Dante's own ideas in *De vulgari eloquentia* (discovered and translated, incidentally, by Trissino). This means that Dante is involved in the *questione* in two ways: not only is the question of his inclusion in, or exclusion from, the canon of model authors at stake, but the fate of his own concept of an eclectic literary language as well – and it is important to bear in mind that the very eclecticism of Dante's style and language is one of the reasons that Bembo deauthorized Dante. This is, then, a quarrel over plurality versus unity.

In 1527 Teofilo Folengo published a sequence of three *silvae*, *Il Chaos del Triperuno*, which stages a "mistilinguismo programmatico" (Daniele 2013, 82) within a poetic and sometimes cryptic intellectual autobiography of the author. Triperuno, a trinitarian figure of the authorial self, bears the *vestigia trinitatis* that make him a created being, but at the same time, he incarnates three linguistic and stylistic options under the heteronyms of Merlino (the champion of Folengo's famous Maccaronean, which is in itself a threefold amalgamation of Latin, Tuscan and Mantovano), Limerno (an anagram of Merlino; his style can be described as a half-hearted and, in part, even ironic adaption of Trecento Tuscan) and Fùlica (characterised by a more cumbersome and captious theological register). These three are fountains "oltra le tre del mio Liburno" (Folengo 1977, I, 183), that is: beyond the *Tre fontane*, Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, espoused by Niccolò Liburnio and perhaps even beyond the personal genius of Teofilo Folengo himself,

to which the form *liburno* (rather than *Liburnio*), ‘speedy vessel’, might allude (Mehlretter 2010, 15).

The unity Folengo nevertheless aspires to is not of a linguistic or stylistic order: it is guaranteed by the figure of Christ and hence not only a synthesis of unity and Trinity, but, more importantly, a spiritual, religious unity beyond the reach of human cultural politics or poetic norms. It can therefore be mentioned in an unashamedly ‘pluralistic’ stanza, which begins with Petrarch and Dante, and ends with a reference to Ariosto:

Vedrò, se'l debil filo non si taglia  
 nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita,  
 quel raggio, ch'ora il senso m'abbarbaglia,  
 con vista più vivace e più spedita.

[. . .]

di Lodovigo attendo il stile e l'arte.

(Folengo 1977, I, 381)<sup>4</sup>

### 3.1.3.2 Mere Apology

In the North, Bembo's influence remained strong, even though followers of the Cardinal such as Trifone Gabriele moved towards a more independent and cautiously positive assessment of Dante's style (Gilson 2018, 56–59). Dante apologists, especially in Tuscany, addressed two topics in particular: the claim that Dante was ‘obscure’ was countered by ever-more detailed commentaries, which sought to elucidate the more difficult passages (Gilson 2018, 97), whereas stylistic critique was often countered by attempts to show that Dante's style was not so far away from Petrarch's elegance after all. It is only later that Dante was credited in any detail with a different, more individual kind of writing, which could then become a counter model – as opposed to the earlier attempts to refute the Bembist critique of Dante, which are more apologetic in nature.

Two main arguments were proffered by the apologists of Dante's style: the first, an extenuating argument, explains away the rougher expressions and sounds of the *Commedia* by highlighting the early stage of development of the language in Dante's time. In relation to this, his writing is shown to be remarkably refined, as pointed out, amongst many others, by Giovan Battista Gelli (Weinberg 1961, II, 826). A more philologically profound version of this argument

<sup>4</sup> The first verse alludes to Petrarch's canzone 37 “Si è debile il filo” (Petrarca 2004a, 198), the second to the very first verse of Dante's *Commedia*, the last to Ludovico Ariosto.

was put forward by Vincenzo Borghini: He tried to show how stylistic criticisms of Dante failed to take into account the historical norms of Trecento Tuscan, which, according to Borghini, Dante did adhere to (Gilson 2018, 129).

The second of these main arguments is simply a flat-out contradiction of Bembo's verdict, usually on the grounds of a completely contrary reading experience. Thus, Gelli claims that Dante writes "leggiadramente", using a term that Bembo reserves for Petrarch (Gelli 1551, 146; Gilson 2018, 101). In his lectures at the Florentine Academy, Gelli often recurs to Petrarch to elucidate points in Dante, and vice versa. In this way "Gelli aims to undermine Pietro Bembo's criticism of the *Comedy's* imperfect language as well as his merely stylistic approach to Petrarch" (Pich 2015, 171). A more specifically Florentine form of argumentation will be described in the next paragraph, and it relates to Medici cultural politics.

### 3.1.3.3 Tuscan Cultural Hegemonism and Purità: Gelli and the Florentines

When the Medici returned to power, much of their earlier cultural politics were once again taken up, including the cultivation of Dante. After 1525, the date of publication of Bembo's *Prose*, when Petrarch and Petrarchism was very much en vogue, in particular in the north of Italy, embracing Dante became something that could be used to underline a specifically Florentine literary profile. It is true that Dante and Petrarch were both of Tuscan origin (and, in their different ways, exiles), but the logic of competition with the north rendered Dante especially useful to the Florentines. It is therefore not surprising that the specifically Florentine diatopic features of Dante's language as well as his *dottrina*, which seemed of so little interest to the Bembists but was central to Landino's Neoplatonist interpretation of the *Comedy*, remained the principal points of discussion on Dante in Florence in the new century.

In fact, the weekly lectures by members of the Florentine Academy on Dante and Petrarch instituted by Cosimo de' Medici in 1541, and especially those by Benedetto Varchi and Giovan Battista Gelli, focussed strongly on this latter point, turning both authors into something akin to poet-philosophers. Gelli tries to show how Dante "brings together artistry and learning" (Gilson 2018, 146).

Apart from reclaiming Petrarch from the northerners (Gilson 2018, 98) and illustrating difficult passages from Dante's *Comedy*, this unified treatment of the two Tuscan masters destroys the distinction between Petrarch the stylist and Dante the inelegant philosopher, which is fundamental to the Bembist view. A similar, complementary effect is created, incidentally, by Giovanni Andrea Gesualdo's commentary on Petrarch dating from 1533 with its strong emphasis on

philosophical doctrine (Mehlretter 2009, 193). Lattanzio Benucci puts the two Tuscan poets on the same footing in every respect (Vallone 1969, 130).

Giovan Battista Gelli is of particular importance in the context of the *Accademia Fiorentina*. He tries to refute Trissino's claim that the *De vulgari eloquentia* is an authentic work by Dante, not least because Dante's championing of a mixed courtly language in this tract would threaten Florentine claims to linguistic supremacy (Gilson 2018, 100).

One of the main arguments put forward by members of the Accademia is the appropriateness of Dante's language for the expression of his chosen ideas (Gelli 1551, 146). In accordance with an emerging concept which will later become important for the work of the *Accademia della Crusca*, Vincenzo Borghini praises the 'naturalness' and 'purity' of Dante's Florentine (Borghini 2009, 61–62). In this view, the language used by Dante is in itself pure for the very reason of being Florentine rather than mixed. The criterion for purity thus shifts from conformity with an idea of elegance extracted from the textual tradition, as in Bembo, to conformity with living linguistic usage.

### 3.1.4 Theoretical Aspects of the Dante Debate

The above outline of the debate on Dante contains many arguments that are of a general, a pragmatic or an apologetic nature. There are, however, a few more specifically theoretical aspects which will be briefly redrawn in the following paragraphs.

#### 3.1.4.1 The Genre of the *Commedia*

The title of the *Commedia*, together with its narrative structure, provoked doubts as to its genre and poetics throughout the sixteenth century. Some readers took the title as a genre description and linked it to the plot structure of a comedy. An example is Girolamo Zoppio (1583, 65), for whom, similarly to the explanation in the *Epistle to Cangrande*, “la fine, et la resolutione d'una favola in giocondità, et contentezza” marked the text out as a 'comical' one, though he also considers the option of likening it to the philosophical dialogues of antiquity (Zoppio 1583, 10–11; Alighieri 1993).

Others based their classification more on the narrative mode of the text and classed it as an epic – some such as Gelli (see below 3.1.4.4) even went so far as to label it as an epic in the Aristotelian sense. But, at the same time, Gelli identified passages within the text that were similar to some within Greek comedy

(Gilson 2018, 152), thus justifying its title and so drawing the conclusion that it was a heroic poem, with satirical elements mixed in (Gelli 1887, II, 294), for which the criteria of Aristotelian poetics did not really apply. Pietro Bembo, in the title of his 1502 edition for Aldus Manutius, opted out of this discussion altogether by calling the work *Le terze rime di Dante*, a generic plural that put metrical structure at the centre and, by the plural form, suggested more of a collection than a unified work (Alighieri 1502).

### 3.1.4.2 Aptum and Style

It is characteristic of Bembo's aestheticist attitude that his explanation for what he believed to be Dante's stylistic failure was based upon his view that the philosopher and poet had made the wrong choice with regard to the relationship between words and things; in a famous passage of the *Prose*, he states:

Ma se dire il vero si dee tra noi, che non so quello che io mi facessi fuor di qui, quanto sarebbe stato piú lodevole che egli di meno alta e di meno ampia materia posto si fosse a scrivere, e quella sempre nel suo mediocre stato avesse, scrivendo, contenuta, che non è stato, così larga e così magnifica pigliandola, lasciarsi cadere molto spesso a scrivere le bassissime e le vilissime cose; e quanto ancora sarebbe egli miglior poeta che non è, se altro che poeta parere agli uomini voluto non avesse nelle sue rime. Che mentre che egli di ciascuna delle sette arti e della filosofia e, oltre acciò, di tutte le cristiane cose maestro ha voluto mostrar d'essere nel suo poema, egli men sommo e meno perfetto è stato nella poesia. Con ciò sia cosa che affine di poter di qualunque cosa scrivere, che ad animo gli veniva, quantunque poco acconcia e malagevole a caper nel verso, egli molto spesso ora le latine voci, ora le straniere, che non sono state dalla Toscana ricevute, ora le vecchie del tutto e tralasciate, ora le non usate e rozze, ora le immonde e brutte, ora le durissime usando, e allo 'ncontro le pure e gentili alcuna volta mutando e guastando, e talora, senza alcuna scielta o regola, da sé formandone e fingendone, ha in maniera operato, che si può la sua Comedia giustamente rassomigliare ad un bello e spazioso campo di grano, che sia tutto d'avene e di logli e d'erbe sterili e dannose mescolato, o ad alcuna non potata vite al suo tempo, la quale si vede essere poscia la state sí di foglie e di pampini e di viticci ripiena, che se ne offendono le belle uve. (Bembo 1989, II.20, 175–178)

It was because he happened to have chosen such diverse and difficult topics that Dante was tempted to use such an abundance of inelegant words. Had he chosen content appropriate to his stylistic possibilities, he would have been a better poet. Form precedes subject matter in Bembo's criticism of Dante, and the traditional hierarchy of matter and style is thus reversed. In light of this argument, it is not surprising that Bembo, though a cardinal within the Roman Church, chose the love lyric as the dominant genre for his own literary production; the choice of Petrarch's style as the most elegant seemed to entail having

to write about the same subject matter as the bard of the *Sorgue* (Mehlretter 2009, 159).

In the sentences from the *Prose* quoted above, the contents of the *Commedia* are clearly of secondary importance. But Bembo's argumentation could also be read as simply distinguishing a poet of form (Petrarch) and a poet of *dottrina* (Dante), justifying both possibilities. Even though Bembo and the Bembists preferred form over content, subsequent writings on Petrarch (like Gesualdo's 1533 commentary) tried to show that Petrarch mastered both, and subsequent Dante apologists likewise tried to demonstrate that Dante's writing possessed both doctrine and beauty.

As pointed out above in 3.1.3.1, some apologists simply contradicted Bembo's verdict of inelegance. Gelli insisted on the appropriateness of every single one of the various stylistic registers used for the wide variety of subject matter presented in the *Comedy* (Weinberg 1961, II, 827), and this, according to him, quite naturally resulted in a form of "decoro" that comprises "quando stile basso, quando mediocre, quando alto, quando dolce, quando aspro, quando facile e quando duro" (Gelli 1556, 38). It is important to note that the three levels of stylistic aptum here become seven due to the addition of four qualities – akin to the seven 'ideas' of Hermogenes' *Peri heurseos* or Trissino's sevenfold adaptation of it (see section 3.3.2.2 below, in which the special history of the term *aspro* with reference to Dante will be sketched). This sevenfold system is not only more 'pluralistic' than the tripartite gamut of rhetoric, it is also more flexible and less hierarchic, as it includes qualities such as *dolce/aspro* or *duro*. Gelli, moreover, stresses the force that even low words such as *biscazza* (criticized by Bembo) or *merda* (Gilson 2018, 165–167) can have.

Other stylistic arguments include an appreciation of Dante's ability for "vivid visualization" (Gilson 2018, 112), as in Giambullari's part of Lenzoni's *Difesa della lingua fiorentina e di Dante*. Here, the aptness of language is no longer a question of elegance, but, rather, of rhetorical effect, of *enargeia*: "ponendo altrui le cose dinanzi a gli occhi" (Lenzoni 1556, 46).

### 3.1.4.3 Dante, Aristotelianism and the Great Debate in the Secondo Cinquecento

From an Aristotelian perspective, a major charge that can be brought against Dante's poem is its abundance of episodes. Against such views, Giovan Battista Gelli stresses that Dante gives us "una pura e sola narrazione" of the poet's spiritual journey and that the many characters he meets provide us only with illustrative *favole* and exemplary *casi*, which are, moreover, well-ordered within the



general framework (Gelli 1887 I, 37), even though the criteria of Aristotelian poetics do not really apply to the *Comedy* (Gilson 2018, 167). Similarly, Alessandro Sardi calls Dante a perfect poet, as he narrates a single true and illustrious action amplified by secondary “*narrationi favolose*” (Sardi 1586, 114).

Giambullari, in his part of Lenzone's *Difesa della lingua fiorentina e di Dante*, states in a somewhat general manner that Dante's *Commedia* is to be regarded as an heroic epic of the type extolled by Aristotle (Lenzone 1556, 46). Utilising a topical comparison popular since Boccaccio's time and developed via Trissino and Gelli, Lenzone places Dante above all other poets except perhaps Homer and Virgil (Lenzone 1556, 40; Colombo 2007). Benedetto Varchi, in his roughly contemporary, posthumously published dialogue, *L'Ercolano*, echoes this comparison, which will be resurrected in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (from Vico 1852, 41–43 onward), but he goes one step further and puts the Tuscan above the Greek poet. (Varchi 1995, II, 844–845; 974; Vallone 1969, 150–167).

In 1572, the *Discorso di M. Ridolfo Castravilla*, argues the opposite and condemns Dante, in particular with regard to some of the central tenets of Aristotelian poetics, thus igniting the great Dante debate of the end of the century. Antonio degli Albizzi and Filippo Sassetti in particular countered Castravilla's position with more thorough readings of Aristotle's text (Weinberg 1961, II, 842–847; Gilson 2018, 138). Important aspects of Jacopo Mazzoni's long and complex defence of Dante against Castravilla's criticisms will be discussed in chapter 3.3.1 below.

## 3.2 Imitatio Dantis: Dante as an Alternative Model

The actual practice of Imitatio Dantis in the fifteenth century reacts to some of the problems and potentials sketched out in chapter 1, but in many cases the aspects of Dante's writing that are taken up belong to other categories, such as metric, a certain conception of the didactic and/or religious epic, or single concepts, images and formulations.

### 3.2.1 Dante within the Plural Field of Terzina Writing; Machiavelli (Sascha Resch)

One way of choosing Dante as a model is to adopt the typical metric form of the *Comedy*, the *terza rima*. This form can mark a more extensive imitation of Dante in a given work, or it can be used independently of such a choice of model, especially since there is also a strand of this tradition – relating to *terzina* poetry written by Boccaccio and Petrarch and to the genre of the *capitolo* – that departs from Dante’s prototype in many respects.<sup>5</sup>

#### 3.2.1.1 Forms and Practices of Terza Rima Writing

The *terzina*, which probably has its origins in the *serventese*, was coined by Dante as an epic stanza, but was not defined terminologically until some time after him (Vecchi Galli 2008, 44), initially primarily by the term *terzetti*. In the sixteenth century, the *terzina* was also used as a metrical form for the elegy and the eclogue.

Large-scale encyclopaedic poems with an allegorical component were one of the main fields of application of the *terza rima*, and in this genre a line of tradition continues from Dante’s *Commedia*, Boccaccio’s *Amorosa visione* and Petrarch’s *Trionfi* into the Cinquecento. Important texts in the Trecento are Fazio degli Uberti’s *Dittamondo* and Federico Frezzi’s *Quadriregio*, in the Quattrocento Matteo Palmieri’s *Città di vita*, and finally in the first half of the Cinquecento Giovanni Filoteo Achillini’s 100-canto didactic poem *Il Fedele*.

An important metrical exception among these didactic poems is *L’Acerba* by Cecco d’Ascoli, which was written in the Trecento: Cecco openly deviates from Dante’s model by, among other things, undermining the rhyming pattern used by Dante, combining as he does two tercets into six verses, which involves superimposing a twofold structure on Dante’s tripartite system (Ferrilli 2016).

Another important field of application of the *terza rima* was within narrative historiography. One of the most influential historiographical *terzina* poems is probably Antonio Pucci’s *Centiloquio* from the late Trecento. Equally significant within this tradition are Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Decennali* dating from the beginning of the Cinquecento. Even though this type of *terza rima* poetry does have a connection to the *Commedia* and the *Trionfi*, in that the latter repeatedly integrate

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<sup>5</sup> These observations are based on Peirone 1990; Fubini 1962, 185–188; Bausi/Martelli 1993, 90; Beltrami 1993, 91.

historical elements, a considerable distance exists between true historiographical texts and the narrative poems written by Dante and Petrarch: while in the *Commedia* and the *Trionfi*, the historical elements are woven into the overall allegorical (or, from a modern point of view, even fictional) text, the historical narrative is clearly the dominant level of content in works such as the *Centiloquio* or the *Decennali*. Accordingly, when assessing this type of text, one must take a certain detachment and independence from the models into account.

Yet, in Machiavelli's case, historiographic *terzina* writing can take on a Dantesque hue when it comes to denouncing failure or baseness. Thus, in the *Decennale Secondo*, Machiavelli describes the effect of the truce between the Emperor Maximilian and the Republic of Venice in 1508 and, in particular, the cession by the Empire of the towns of Gorizia and Trieste to the Serenissima, which was to be followed by a treaty between the Emperor and France against Venice (Liege of Cambrai), in a Dantesque satirical style:

onde Massimian far triegua volve,  
veggendo contra i suoi tanto contrasto,  
e le due terre d'accordo si tolse;  
le qual di poi si furono quel pasto,  
quel rio boccon, quel venenoso cibo,  
che di San Marco ha lo stomaco guasto  
(*Decennale Secondo*, 130–135,  
Machiavelli 2012a, 60)

The somewhat drastic metaphor of the cloying effects of the two cities gobbled up by the Venetians, and especially the combination of such a physical image with the more abstract metonymy for the Republic of Saint Mark's, reminds readers of Dante of passages like *Purgatorio* XVI, 129, in which the Roman Church is said to tumble into the mud by confounding two ways of governing itself and others (Alighieri 2007, 2, 486).

One of the most important lines of tradition of the *terza rima* is without a doubt the writing of so-called *capitoli*. This term, which appears in its Latin form in some early *Commedia* manuscripts and prints (such as Dante 1472) and consistently in Petrarch's *Trionfi*, is used in the period after Dante and Petrarch to refer to individual cantos or chapters that are not part of a larger epic poem. The prevalence and popularity of the *capitolo* is likely to have been largely due to its thematic openness.

The *capitolo* reached a first productive peak in the first half of the quattrocento; indicative of this is the strong presence of this rhyme scheme among the participants of Leon Battista Alberti's *Certame coronario* (Peirone 1990, 50–51).

The compass of content matter of *capitolo* poetry ranges from love to enco-mia, lamentation of the dead and religious themes to polemics and didactics and then on to *impossibilia* and finally (in the 1520s) to paradoxical praise in the *Poesia Bernesca* (Schulz-Buschhaus 1975; Schulz-Buschhaus 1993). Capitoli commenting on Dante's *Commedia* also existed (Peirone 1990, 68–73; 83–89). Due to this detachment from larger epic contexts and the pluralisation of the subject matter, it is problematic to associate *capitolo* poetry in principle and without further inspection with any given author's possible choice to imitate Dante.

In addition, the *terzina* was also used as an equivalent of certain metrical forms of classical antiquity. As early on as the first half of the quattrocento, Lorenzo Spirito Gualtieri translated the hexameters of the last five books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* into vernacular tercets. In the second half of the quattrocento, more *volgarizzamenti* appeared; for example, Bernardo Pulci translated Virgil's *Bucolica* into the vernacular, using the form of the *terza rima*. Other examples are Bastiano Foresi's translation of Virgil's *Georgica* under the new title *Ambitione*, Battista Guarini's translation of Plautus' comedy *Menaechmi*, and Giorgio Sommariva's translations of the pseudo-homeric *Batracomiomachia* and Juvenal's satires.

This type of *volgarizzamento* not only ensured that the ancient models were updated in modern language and that the *terza rima* became the modern counterpart of the ancient elegiac distich (Beltrami 1993, 274; De Maldé 1996; Huss et al. 2012, 238–248), but also expanded the thematic and stylistic scope of the *terzina* once again. In the wake of the *Bucolica* translation, independent bucolic poems were written in *terza rima*, including *Corinto* and *Apollo e Pan* by Lorenzo de' Medici, as well as the *Pastorale* by Pietro Jacopo de Jennaro.

An even more productive and effective field of activity in the long term arose through the aforementioned translation of the Juvenalian satires by Sommariva (with a prehistory of *terza rima* satire around 1400). Subsequently, the *terza rima* advanced to become the leading rhyme scheme of this text genre, for example in poems written by Antonio Vinciguerra, Lorenzo de' Medici, Lodovico Ariosto and Luigi Alamanni (Galbiati 1987). Niccolò Machiavelli's *Asino* also shows strong satirical features in combination with an allegorical style, which some scholars have interpreted as a satire on Dante (Sasso 1997b) – a hypothesis that requires differentiation, however (Marietti 2011).

Finally, the revival of classical elegy in the vernacular also makes use of the *terza rima*. Theorists such as Vincenzo Calmeta attempted to distinguish systematically between elegiac *terzine* and the heroic ones of the *capitolo* as early on as the beginning of the century, but this was not ultimately successful, especially since the *capitolo*, as has been shown, is thematically and stylistically very variable (Calmeta 1959, 52; Huss et al. 2012, 246).

The comparative ease with which the tercet can be mastered made it a popular form even among occasional poets (Peirone 1990, 90), but it nevertheless retained a latent streak of the elitist or aristocratic because of its potential for incorporating intellectual debate or virtuoso play (Gorni 1993, 100). In Carlo Dionisotti's view, it is also linked through Dante to the idea of a pre-Medicean, 'ancient' Florence, which could explain Machiavelli's choice of the *terzina* for the *Decennali* (Dionisotti 1980, 252).

### 3.2.1.2 The Stylistic Value and Status of the Terza Rima

Theoretical discussion of the *terzina* mostly relates to its suitability for epic poetry. Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio (1554, 95–96) states that he preferred it instead of the *ottavarima* as an epic metre. Antonio Sebastiano Minturno mentions it (under the term *serventese*) together with the *ottavarima* and blank verse as one of the three metres of heroic poetry (Minturno 1563, 263). Benedetto Varchi (1859, 717) expresses a similar opinion, while Giovan Giorgio Trissino prefers blank verse for his *Italia liberata da' Goti*. Francesco Patrizi is similarly sceptical about the *terza rima* in the heroic register. While he is willing to concede that Dante did indeed use the "terzetto" for a "materia grave", in general he considers the rhyme scheme less suitable for the heroic than for the elegiac (Patrizi 1557, unnumbered page). Similarly, Girolamo Ruscelli views the tercet as an elegiac rather than a heroic metre and even expresses doubts that Dante's *Commedia* can truly be called a heroic poem, since the author speaks in the first person throughout (Ruscelli 1558, 97–98).

Torquato Tasso has more practical reservations about the *terza rima* in the realm of the heroic. The three-line-stanzas are too short to accommodate the larger units of thought required for the heroic style – but precisely because this style is conceptually more expansive, it also requires a greater number of resting points than the chained tercets allow:

Il terzetto ha troppo stretto seno per rinchiudere le sentenze de l'eroico, il quale ha bisogno di maggior spazio per spiegare i concetti: ed oltre a ciò non ricerca una catena perpetua, né i riposi così lontani, come sono nel capitolo, ma, spiegando i suoi concetti in più largo e più ampio giro, spesso desidera dove acquetarsi (Tasso 1977, 2, 374).

Thus, on the one hand, the *terzina* can be read, with regard to its origin, as a sign referring to its actual founder Dante, but on the other hand, it is not bound to the genre tradition of the *Commedia* either in terms of content or at the level of genre and style. It can have an affirmative effect with regard to the classicist orientations of the Cinquecento if it appears as the equivalent of ancient forms

such as the eclogue and the elegy, but it can also mark an alternative orientation in a form leaning towards that of Dante – but only if it appears in connection with other characteristics that reinforce this.

### 3.2.1.3 Machiavelli's *Asino*

Machiavelli is well-known for his political writings, amongst them *The Prince* (*De Principatibus*) and the *Discourses on Livy*, to mention only the most famous ones. Rather unknown are, in contrast, his writings in *terza rima*: today we know of about eight such texts that Machiavelli wrote, the two *Decennali*, five so-called *Capitoli* and the longest of these texts, *L'Asino*.

*L'Asino* is, on the one hand, a free adaption of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, which, in its turn, recounts the story of a man named Lucius, who is transformed into a donkey and experiences several adventurous episodes. On the other hand, even at a first glance, *L'Asino* intensely recalls the model of Dante's *Commedia*.

The text is organized into eight *capitoli*, each of which is made up of approximately 130 verses (the longest one, *capitolo ottavo*, counts 151 verses, the shortest one, *capitolo primo*, 121 verses). Though the *capitoli* thus mirror the 'typical' length of Dantean *canti*, it is difficult to say whether the text had been planned to adopt the complete structure of Dante's *Commedia*: *L'Asino* is an unfinished work, interrupted after the *capitolo ottavo*. Although there is speculation about the reasons that led to the text being abandoned (Ferroni 1975, 345; Sasso 1997b, 119–121), there isn't much evidence to back up any of these hypotheses. Equally vague remains the date of composition. While most scholars tend to believe it dates from around 1517, when Machiavelli mentioned *L'Asino* in his letter to Lodovico Alamanni on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1517 (Machiavelli 1999, 357), there is also another hypothesis. One cannot exclude that the text was composed within two distinct periods: the first five *capitoli* could have been composed around 1512/13, while the last three might have been written later, presumably around 1517 (Benedetto 1926, 20–21, and Martelli 1990, 15; 21).

Unlike the Dantean model, *L'Asino* starts with an explicitly proemial *capitolo* which determines the programmatic orientation of the text and which is, in terms of content, not directly connected to the rest of the text. It includes an exemplary narrative of a young man, who suffers from a habit of running around without control. A medical practitioner seems to have cured the young man, but his habit of running around abruptly reappears as he sees Via Larga in Florence: "Non si puotè questo giovin tenere, / vedendo quella via dritta e spaziosa, / di non tornar ne l'antico piacere" (*Asino*, I, 76–78, Machiavelli 2012b, 143). The

main message of this episode – which could be read from an autobiographic perspective (e.g. Sasso 1997b, 44–45) – seems to support the textual program of *L'Asino*: the narrator has stopped his<sup>6</sup> habit of jeering using cynical verbal attacks. But just as the young man of the episode couldn't abandon his habit completely, likewise the narrator's habit has reappeared, and he is going to once again make use of cynical criticisms due to the “tempo dispettoso e tristo” (*Asino*, I, 97, Machiavelli 2012b, 144). This way, it is made clear at the very beginning that *L'Asino* is going to place a strong emphasis on satire and the comic register, with ironic and often cynical nuances.

While the first *capitolo* has no direct connection to Dante's *Commedia* in terms of content, in the *capitolo secondo* one cannot overlook its Dantesque references. The protagonist finds himself at a gloomy location, which remarkably resembles the *selva oscura* of *Inferno* I:

[. . .] io mi trovai  
 in un luogo aspro quanto mai si vide.  
 Io non vi so ben dir com'io v'entrai,  
 né so ben la cagion perch'io cascassi  
 là, dove al tutto libertà lasciai  
 (*Asino*, II, 20–24,  
 Machiavelli 2012b, 147)

Like in *Inferno* I, a guiding character also appears in the *capitolo secondo* of *L'Asino* – we will call her *scorta* in order to avoid confusion with the guides in Dante's *Commedia*. The *scorta* is going to guide the protagonist through a seemingly transcendent world, a fact that directly refers to the *poema sacro*. But unlike Vergil or Beatrice, the *scorta* presents herself as a servant of Circe, the mythical magician: “Son al servizio suo [Circe] molte donzelle, / con le quai solo il suo regno governa, / e io sono una del numer di quelle” (*Asino*, II, 115–117, Machiavelli 2012b, 152).

In this way, the text enriches the basic setting of Dante's *Commedia* by using other well-known textual references, amongst them Homer's *Odyssey* or Vergil's *Aeneid*.

Another such textual reference is, as mentioned above, Apuleius' book of *Metamorphoses*. Alongside the general idea of a man being transformed into a donkey – which, in the fragment of *L'Asino* available to us today, is just announced, but never occurs – the sexual intercourse between the protagonist and his *scorta* also seems to point to the Apuleian hypotext, which gives clear

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<sup>6</sup> We use the masculine form as in *L'Asino* adjectives connected with the speaker's voice appear in masculine form, so it seems plausible to suppose the speaker's voice is a masculine one.

descriptions of Lucius and Photis' intimate relationship (e.g. II, 17, Apuleius 2008, 38–39). By combining the Dantean concept of the female guiding figure with the sexual aspect presumably inspired by Apuleius, *L'Asino* succeeds in provoking intense comic potential, including a parody of the spiritual nature of the love inspired by the guiding figure. Realization of this potential often verges on the obscene, but nevertheless remains in an allusive realm: “gustando il fin di tutte le dolcezze, / tutto prostrato sopra il dolce seno” (*Asino*, IV, 141–142, Machiavelli 2012b, 165). This way, obscenity is shifted towards an ‘eye-twinkling’ ironic kind of humour, a play with allusions.

After the *capitolo quarto* and its erotic intermezzo, the following *capitolo quinto* almost entirely consists of reflection set out in monologues: the protagonist expresses his thoughts while his *scorta* is temporarily absent. These reflections are centred on political theory, but they also contain general philosophical considerations. As the *scorta* reappears, in *capitolo sesto*, the protagonist is guided to a “dormitorio” (*Asino*, VI, 41, Machiavelli 2012b, 174), which, as the *scorta* explains, comprises several rooms, in each of which one kind of animal is located. These animals are former humans that have been transformed by Circe, in correspondence to the qualities or defects exhibited during their lifetime. For instance, “[s]alcun di troppa furia e rabbia abonda, / tenendo vita rozza e violenta, / tra gli orsi sta ne la stanza seconda” (*Asino*, VI, 61–63, Machiavelli 2012b, 174). This correspondence of lifetime traits and ‘destiny’ when being transformed notably echoes the Dantean principle of *contrappasso*, which is fundamental especially in the *Inferno*. At the end of the *capitolo sesto*, the protagonist is led into a special chamber, in which the *contrappasso* system previously explained by the *scorta* is surprisingly undermined, as there are various animals without any such distinction.

The following lengthy exhibition of various other animals, which constitutes almost the entire *capitolo settimo*, seems to combine a Dantesque show of sinners' souls and a *Trionfi*-like configuration, in parts appearing virtually grotesque. At the end, protagonist and *scorta* arrive in front of a huge dirty pig. This pig will be the main speaker in the *capitolo ottavo* in which, at first, the protagonist politely addresses the pig and offers to transform him back into a human being. But the pig refuses and delivers a highly rhetorized argument, which aims to show that animals are superior to humankind. This monologue can be seen as a free adaption of the Plutarchian dialogue between Odysseus and Gryllos (Plutarch 2001 and, e.g., Sasso 1997a), additionally nourished with other ancient elements, especially ones from Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* (especially VII, (1), 1–5, Plinius 2002, 1–3 and Ferroni 1975, 343–344). *Capitolo ottavo*, as well as the text of *L'Asino* as we have it in hand, end with the final statement of the *porcelotto*:



E s'alcuno infra gli uomin' ti par divo,  
 felice e lieto, non gli creder molto,  
 che 'n questo fango piú felice vivo,  
 dove senza pensier mi bagno e volto  
 (*Asino*, VIII, 148–151, Machiavelli  
 2012b, 193)

Apart from the parallels in terms of structure and content detailed in the above analysis, there are plenty of other points of contact with Dante's *Commedia*: numerous adoptions of textual fragments and lexical borrowings; even on a stylistic level one can see recurring approximations to the *poema sacro*, such as *similitudines* or periphrastic expressions, even astronomic ones. Nevertheless, *L'Asino* is not a *ré-écriture* of Dante's *Commedia*. In fact, Dante's *Commedia* seems to be only one (even though perhaps the most important) of its intertexts, while other textual references, such as the cases already mentioned of Apuleius, Plutarch or Plinius, but also Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, as well as Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, Pulci's *Morgante* or Ariost's *Orlando furioso*, play a similarly fundamental role in *L'Asino* as a whole.

Dante does serve as a model here, but the alternative afforded by it to, say, a possibly more Petrarchan style (as found in the *Trionfi*), belongs not to a programme of direct Dantism, but, rather, of a recreation of Dante's stylistic plurality in a new historical situation, with similarly satirical intent, but with a completely different ideological background.

### 3.2.2 Sacred Epics (Florian Mehlretter)

As chapter 3.2.1 showed, the *terzina* form is very flexible with regard to genre and content, at least within a certain range. This also means that it is not necessarily a result of a Dantesque poetics. Such a poetics becomes, however, highly relevant wherever the *terzina* is linked to sacred subject matter, not least because it was, after all, the sixteenth century that coined the epithet *Divine* for the *Comedy* and thus identified the religious substance of Dante's poem as its crucial trait. In this situation, a sacred epic, especially in tercets, would almost certainly have been read as a work very close to the Dantean tradition.

#### 3.2.2.1 Fra Benedetto Luschino da Firenze: *Cedrus Libani*

Chapter 3.1.2 above introduced the Piagnoni or followers of Savonarola and their literary interests. One of them, the Dominican friar Benedetto Luschino,

the son of a goldsmith and of little erudition (Vasoli 1989, 519), used the form of the *terzina* epic to recount the fall of Savonarola in 1498 and his own part in the events, under the Latin title *Cedrus Libani*. The only extant part, the first book of a work which remained unpublished and probably unfinished during its author's lifetime, was written in 1510 in prison (Luschino 1849, 59). This could be one of the 'popular' appropriations of the *terza rima* form alluded to in 3.2.1.1, but the religious subject matter and the overall epic form make a more specific reference to Dante more than likely.

The title alludes to the Lebanese cedar, a plant often mentioned in the Old Testament. The most prominent and relevant passage seems to be Psalm 91:13, "Justus ut palma florebit; sicut cedrus Libani multiplicabitur", which was used as a proper of the Mass and must therefore have been very present in the minds of monks like Benedetto or of his putative readers. Other passages often mention the height of the plant (Ecclesiasticus 24:17, Psalms 36:35, Isaias 2:13) or mention it as having been felled (Zacharias 11:12). A possible suggestion arising from this constellation could be that Savonarola was a just man who was felled, but whose justice will thrive on even after his passing.

The book can be divided into a first part, which relates the conversion of its author by Savonarola, and a second part, in which Savonarola's fall is recounted. The text stresses its truthfulness and autobiographical and historical reliability (Proemio, Luschino 1849, 60).

At the beginning, Fra Benedetto tells his readers of his ill-spent youth as a miniaturist and singer in late fifteenth-century Medici Florence, with its preoccupation for beauty and luxury. Before his conversion, he was immersed in this world of vanity, the corruption and godlessness of which he deplores and which reaches up even to the highest spheres of the Church and, indeed, to Pope Alexander VI himself. The authorial persona is part of this: "Così vivendo, in morte dimoravo" and: "l'alma mia, coll'altre, era smarrita" (Luschino 1849, 61). The path from perdition to light sketched out in the first *capitoli* coincides with the basic structure of Dante's *Commedia*, but of course, also with that of any other tale of conversion.

In this situation of darkness, God sends his servant "Ieronimo", that is, Savonarola, as a prophet (Luschino 1849, 62). The second *capitolo* condenses content matter from Savonarola's homilies into a powerful sequence of *terzine*, an apocryphal 'speech' by the famous preacher, which as such does not correspond to any known text from his pen. The prophet counsels the young man, and Benedetto duly joins the Dominican order.

The sixth *capitolo* is particularly interesting in that it describes a council of the demons of hell presided over by Lucifer. Seeing Savonarola's good works, Lucifer "latrava come rabido animale" (Luschino 1849, 77), a verse redolent of

Dante's (in turn Ovidian) Hecuba, who "latrò sì come cane" in *Inferno* XXX, 20 (Alighieri 2007, 1, 889), but resolving the stylistic ambiguity of the passage from the *Comedy* in a decidedly low, grotesque register. With "orrende strida" the Devil calls his demons and begins a remarkable speech with the allocution "O spiriti perversi", in which he explains his role in the history of the fall of man. Like Dante's Lucifer, Luschino's is tied in hell, but much more than the inactive and taciturn Satan of the *Commedia*, he relies on sending out demons to seduce mankind. In spite of this remarkable difference, his speech in Luschino's text at times touches upon the harsh comical style of certain passages of Dante's *Hell*:

Ma da quel tempo in qua, voi altri ho messi  
Per tutto el mondo, o spiriti villani,  
A ciò di Cristo la fede estinguessi.

E voi, mendaci, brutti e sozzi cani,  
Estinta non avete la sua fede.  
L'un dice: Oggi farò. L'altro: Domani.

Or novamente sento che si crede,  
Dentr'a Fiorenza, al gran Savonarola;  
El qual in verbo Dei predice e vede.

Era (lasso!) Fiorenza nostra ascola,  
Piena di sodomie, usure e giuochi:  
Or, per vostra mal guardia, al Ciel ne vola.

(Luschino 1849, 78)

The idea that Florence in particular might be a 'school' of diabolic misdeeds of all kinds reminds us of the introduction to *Inferno* XXVI. Lucifer ordains that the corrupt Church authorities be called upon to do away with the irksome prophet and condemn his doctrine. This implies that Savonarola's sentence in 1498 is a work of hell itself, and it is, as the editor of the text, Vincenzo Marchese (Luschino 1849, 59), points out, not by chance that the manuscript declares itself to have been written in 1510 under the new pontificate of the Savonarola-friendly Pope Julius II.

As is well known, public opinion turned against Savonarola and he was arrested (or compelled to give himself up to the authorities). In *capitolo* 8, this is treated in a mixed style of pathos and disdainful comedy that reminds the reader of Dante's style:

La plebaglia, pessima, tapina,  
Veniva drieto a quelli, saccheggiando  
La roba del convento a gran ruina.

E' figli del Profeta eran, cantando  
 Le litanie, avanti al Sacramento,  
 Di punto in punto el martirio aspettando.  
 (Luschino 1849, 83)

An important difference between Dante and Luschino can, however, be seen both here and in almost every other passage, in the limpid simplicity of the latter's style, close to oral usage and almost never posing a challenge to readers.

According to Fra Benedetto's version, a nobleman turned friar, Malatesta Sacromoro da Rimini, betrayed not only Savonarola, but also two of his followers, making him a threefold Judas, as the end of canto IX states:

Parte di Iuda furno tua pedate,  
 E se pur Iuda un Cristo dette preso,  
 Per te tre ne fur presi in dua giornate;  
 Per te l'un dopo l'altro fu sospeso!  
 (Luschino 1849, 87)

Whether or not this account is historically true, likening Malatesta to Judas as well as dwelling on the trinitarian number belongs to an underlying programme of depicting Savonarola as a perfect *imitator Christi* and, at the same time, a prophet; Savonarola is referred to as "il Profeta" throughout, and in *capitolo* 8, his capture is openly likened to that of Jesus (Luschino 1849, 84).

The eleventh and last *capitolo* summons up all the rhetorical devices Luschino's style could muster, but even so, the writing never attempts anything in the way of a 'difficult' or obscure style, as witnessed by the introduction of this chapter:

Silvestri faggi, et insensate piante,  
 Alpestri monti, e caverne oscurissime,  
 Comparite al gran foco in uno istante.  
  
 Menate vostre bestie ferocissime,  
 Rapaci lupi e leon rugienti,  
 Serpenti, tigri e viper crudelissime.  
 (Luschino 1849, 91)

The grammatical rhyme on *-issime* insists on the superlative, but is poetically rather weak. The simplicity of these verses could well be explained by the comparatively reduced literary education of the author (as he states in *capitolo* 4: "Scienza alcuna e latin non avevo", Luschino 1849, 73), but as a singer he was surely familiar with vernacular verse. The reason could therefore just as well be a conscious choice of a simple, approachable style such as that found in the New Testament.

After Savonarola's fall, Fra Benedetto had to flee to Viterbo, probably because he had defended himself with some kind of weapon and killed one or several assailants, but then returned to Florence to defend his prophet's memory and doctrine. Once there, he was expelled from the congregation and confined to a dungeon within the monastery of San Marco, most likely upon orders of the then vicar general of the Congregation, his enemy Malatesta Sacromoro. The reason for this was alleged to be homicide (Marchese in Luschino 1849, 50–51), perhaps in the context of Fra Benedetto's defense of Savonarola during the above-mentioned fights (Vasoli 1989, 531). At any rate, at the end of the text, he states: "Mi dolgo di mie colpe" (Luschino 1849, 95).

The slightly whining ('piagnone'), mild and uncomplicated *sermo piscatorum* of this *terza rima* epic is not only very far removed from more elaborate forms of poetry, but, in most of the verses, also from the accommodation of Dante's harsh 'low style' to versified historiography as it can be found in some of Machiavelli's *Decennali*. One might say: Dantesque *terzina* can open up a space of alternative writing which, in the case of Fra Benedetto, does not necessarily have to be, in itself, Dantesque.

### 3.2.2.2 Rewriting Dante: Francesco Gerini: *Fiore di Verità*; Tommaso Sardi: *Anima peregrina*

The subject of Savonarola inspired another epic in *terza rima*, unpublished during its author's lifetime and preserved in a single manuscript in the Bodleian Library (Oxford): *Fiore di Verità*, in fourteen *capitoli*, by Francesco di Giuliano di Piero di Gerino Gerini, composed around 1498 (Foligno 1926, 1). As opposed to Luschino's *Cedrus Libani*, Gerini's poem positions itself *against* Savonarola. It takes as its base the first ten cantos of Dante's *Inferno* and thus a text dear to Savonarola's followers. The Dantesque pretext is used, however, less as a stylistic model than in the fashion of a palimpsest or *ré-écriture*, adapted to the purpose of unmasking the Florentine preacher as a heretic.

After an incipit redolent of that of Petrarch's *Trionfi* ("Era nel tempo quando gli albucegli / son rivestiti di nuova verdura", I, 1–2, after Foligno 1926, 9), the epic subject relates that a Divine vision has been vouchsafed to him, in which Saint Augustine of Hippo took him on a tour of hell.

In an infernal swamp, the two travellers of the beyond see those who have abandoned hope. Having crossed it, they arrive at the gates of the city of Dis, which are adorned with a slightly modified version of the inscription known to the reader from the door of Dante's hell. Thus, Gerini transposes elements from the *Comedy* to slightly different positions. Similarly, at another moment in the

first canto, Gerini avails himself of a technique used by Dante with reference to the prophet Ezekiel (in *Purgatorio* XXIX, 100): he refers the reader to the greater authority of another text, in which further details may be found – in this case, the *Commedia* itself:

Non bisogna di lor parli piú note  
 Che'l vostro buon poeta vero lume  
 N'à dato tal che piú dar non si puote  
 (II, 22–24, after Foligno 1926, 13).

There are many more elements taken from the *Divine Comedy*, including the *nobile castello*, Minos, the storm in the zone of the *lussuriosi*, and various examples of *contrapasso*. In canto eight, the pilgrims arrive in the zone of the heretics, false prophets and soothsayers, and here the epic subject asks his guide of the future fate of Girolamo Savonarola, who claims to be a prophet. Augustine warns his disciple against believing in Savonarola's prophecies and predicts the preacher's violent end (VIII, 180–205 and IX, 28–51, after Foligno 1926, 24–25).

Cantos ten, eleven and twelve introduce a detailed list of heresies and heretics far beyond the rather restrained treatment of the subject in Dante's text. Canto thirteen adds a list of dangerous books. The epic subject then declaims the Creed, and Augustine, having counseled him on various aspects of religious life, leaves him. The narrator awakes and finds himself in Florence, where he witnesses Savonarola's death in the Piazza della Signorina; this atrocious tale fills the fourteenth, and last, canto. The text ends on a vernacular paraphrase of the *De profundis*.

Gerini, an occasional writer with a middle class, secular background, makes little attempt to use Dante's *Comedy* as a model or basis for his own poetic creativity. Instead, he refashions and rewrites it as a polemic against Savonarola. In the same epoch, but over a longer period of time (1493–1515), the Dominican friar Tommaso Sardi elaborated and annotated another *terza rima* poem, entitled *Anima peregrina* and likewise unprinted, even though its author fervently wished for the publication of this work. There are several manuscripts, one of which is the poet's autograph preserved at Santa Maria Novella (Marino 1998, 7), where Sardi spent the greater part of his life. A stout supporter of the Medici family, he was critical of Savonarola's alleged prophetic gifts, but much less so than Gerini, who localized him in hell amongst the false prophets. In fact, in his poem Sardi puts Savonarola in Purgatory and stresses his intellectual qualities (Marino 1998, 50).

Like the *Divine Comedy*, Sardi's *Anima peregrina* consists of 100 cantos of *terzine* in three books. The epic subject is guided by Moses in the first book, by St. Paul in the second, and by a dog, the symbol of the *Domini canes* or Dominicans, in the third.

Moses and the narrator first have to pass through the four elements, each of which is associated with a capital sin and exemplified by a living being, which in some way has to be overcome by the epic subject. Sardi here dramatizes a sophisticated theological and philosophical analysis of the principal vices. After this, the two pilgrims meet the prosopopeia of death, *la Morte*, and learn about various aspects of man's ultimate destiny from her. The rest of the first book recounts the pilgrims' voyage through the seven celestial spheres to the Empyreum, replete with encounters and dialogues with various souls, from St. Paul, Virgil, Dante and Petrarch to Federico da Montefeltro and Piero de' Medici. Just as in Dante, these souls appear in the spheres of the stars which governed them most in life, without really having their being in these spheres.

The importance of the *Divine Comedy* as a model and pretext is very obvious from these observations, and yet it has to be stressed that Sardi, unlike Gerini, elaborates on this model in highly original ways, such as the details of each heavenly region (especially their gates, Nardello 2002, 125) or aspects of theology. Sardi's style takes up many Dantisms, but at the same time it is quite different from Dante's, with a certain tendency towards abstraction and abruptness, as demonstrated by the very first verses of the poem:

Somniferando asceti l'aspro monte  
 che ci conduce ad una eterna vita.  
 (*Liber primus*, I, 1–2, unpublished transcription by  
 Sascha Resch after: Sardi [around 1500], 11r.)

At the entrance to the Empyreum, Moses has to leave the epic subject, and in the second book St. Paul takes over, in order to guide the narrator through Limbo and Purgatory and the seats of the blessed and the damned. Only at this point do we enter the beyond in a more theological sense, the celestial spheres having been part of the material world.

The Dominican friar Sardi here corrects and in part contradicts Dante's theology of the afterlife. In a very original way, he describes this part of the pilgrimage as a fast double movement of descent and ascent, freed from the reins of material travel. Thus, moments in regions of hell alternate with visits to heavenly realms. In these *capitoli*, many theological questions such as the validity of the teachings of Origenes and the fate of children who die without baptism are discussed. Sardi adopts a more theologically orthodox ordering of the sins in hell than Dante's *Inferno* does, by adopting the limpid structure according to the Capital Sins used in the latter's *Purgatorio*. From *gula* in the highest region the pilgrims descend all the way down to *superbia*, where Lucifer dwells. In a remarkable scene situated at the bottom of hell, the epic subject, with the aid of St. Michael, makes Lucifer confess his sin of pride:

Allhora il domandai quando in cielo era  
 che peccato fu'l suo? e mi rispose[:]  
 amor proprio di se che troppo spera.  
 Et che sperasti? et ei[:] piu alte cose  
 di creatura farmi creatore[:]  
 virtù all apedir non corrispose  
 En ciel si fe per me cotal romore  
 che mecho primo tucti e mie sequaci  
 fumo scacciati dal divin furore.

(*Liber Secundus*, XXVIII, 16–24, unpublished transcription  
 by Sascha Resch after: Sardi [around 1500], 134r.)

This remarkably articulate Lucifer understands and explains his own sin, as opposed to the silent brooding of Dante's fallen angel, who merely chews on the bodies of the three greatest traitors in the history of man (*Inferno* XXXIV, 28–69). Such edifying theology entails, however, a somewhat bland reading experience, far removed from the horrors of Dante's hell. The rewriting offered by Sardi corrects Dante in a non-Dantesque style.

The third book of *Anima peregrina* then deviates completely from the narrative frame offered by the *Comedy* and offers discussions on questions of religion, including the Seven Sacraments, and of politics. It ends on a dedication to Giovanni de' Medici, the future Pope Leo X.

Sardi's poem is similar to Gerini's in that it is a rewrite of Dante's *Comedy* rather than a completely new work modelled on it. But the type of rewrite offered here is far more sophisticated and of a more 'dialogical' form: it is a correction of Dante's text.

### 3.2.2.3 A Superatio Dantis? Francesco Zorzi / Francesco Giorgio Veneto: *L'elegante poema*

The Franciscan humanist friar Francesco Zorzi or Francesco Giorgio Veneto is known to students of *Philosophia perennis* for his Latin poem, *De harmonia mundi totius cantica tria* (Schmidt-Biggemann 1998). Between 1536 and 1540, after a long period at San Francesco della Vigna in Venice, he spent his retirement in the San Girolamo convent at Asolo, composing an enormous vernacular *terza rima* poem on the history of salvation, over the course of 114 cantos and 18.000 *endecasillabi* (Maillard in Zorzi 1991, xv).

For his material, he drew not only on the *Divine Comedy* (the privileged intertext marked by the chosen metre), but also on sources from Greek, Roman (and Egyptian) antiquity and the Christian tradition, including the enrichment it received especially in the fifteenth century by the addition of Neoplatonic, hermetic



and Jewish sources and what came to be known as the Christian Kabbala (Mesnard in Zorzi 1991, vii). Similar to Sardi's *Anima peregrina*, the *Elegante poema* is accompanied by a commentary written by the author himself. Its title alludes both to the aspirations of its author and to its subject, the book of Creation and Divine History, which as God's work, must be elegant (see Zorzi 1991, 446).

In the poem, the history of mankind is not recounted in linear form. Instead, the poet receives answers to his doubts on 383 passages of the Old Testament, by twenty patriarchs and prophets, who speak to him on the hills of Asolo; unlike Dante, Zorzi reveals that all of this is fictional (Zorzi 1991, 9 and 27). Every element of the Old Testament text that is taken up is read from a perspective leading up to Christ and His work of salvation. This is why the author can claim that the plot of his poem is unified, in spite of the plurality of doubts treated by the elders and prophets (Zorzi 1991, 9).

The surprising choice of writing not 100 cantos (like Dante), but 114, can be read as a gesture of surpassing the *Divine Comedy* by following a deeper wisdom denied to its author: that of kabbalistic *gematria* or numerology. The *one* or *aleph*, number of Divine plenitude, is also the one hundred, and it becomes flesh in David, a figure of Christ. David is the hand of God or *iad*, the numeric equivalent of which is fourteen (for this interpretation, see Maillard in Zorzi 1991, xxiii), hence 114 cantos.

The proemial canto sets the tone and sets out the implicit poetics of Zorzi's poem:

Vago al saper sempre hebbi'l mio desire,  
 Poiché da me fu tolto'l crasso velo,  
 Et che la mente cominciò a fiorire,  
 [. . .]  
 Et gli occhi al sommo sol alzai, che sgombra  
 Le tenebrose notti, et dona luce,  
 onde'l vero splendor almen s'adombra  
 (*Elegante poema*, I, 1–3; 10–13,  
 Zorzi 1991, 29)

The allusion to Dante's sun-clothed hill in *Inferno* I, 13–18 marks the differences between the *Comedy* and the *Elegante poema*: both look up to the sun (Dante: "guardai in alto", *Inferno* I, 16; Zorzi: "gli occhi al sommo sol alzai", *Elegante poema* I, 10), but Dante will fail in his aspiration (at least in the first canto), whereas Zorzi claims to have shed the errors of sensual youth and to have reached an understanding of the true splendour of the divine, if only 'through a glass, darkly' (*adombra*, cf. 1 Corinthians 13:12).

Zorzi goes on to explain that he, like Dante, will rely on spiritual guides, but he adds a Platonic note: what he will reveal in the following cantos came to him after a severe illness and is thus the product of “*furor santo*” (I, 15). He then distances himself from poets who sing of invented, vain things, even though, as he has stated in his preface (Zorzi 1991, 9) the action of his poem is a fictional one – but it is obviously intended that the Christian content matter revealed in it is not. This distancing includes the poets of earthly love (I, 16–18). Zorzi then evokes the sweet hills around Asolo (as a synecdoche of the beauty of Creation), where the epic subject is accosted by the first guiding soul, Adam:

Ecco da destra parte cinta intorno  
 Di relucenti raggi un’ombra lieta,  
 Venir ver me, con viso grav’e adorno,  
 Com’huom, che nel veder suo, mal s’acqueta,  
 Per subita apparenza mi cangiai,  
 [. . .]  
 Et ella con benigni aspetti sui  
 Disse, Son l’alma a prieghi tuoi mandata,  
 Per scioglier et snodar li dubbi tui,  
 Primo dotato fui di alma non nata,  
 A sembianza di quel vero lume,  
 Per cui fu mia virtù poi riformata

(*Elegante poema*, I, 34–38; I, 58–63,  
 Zorzi 1991, 31–32)

Zorzi takes up typically Dantean techniques like the pseudo simile (verses 37–38) or the periphrastic riddle with which a new character entering the scene announces himself (lines 61–62). At the same time, as a Venetian, Zorzi writes literary Tuscan, as stipulated by his friend Bembo. His writing is more erudite and at the same time clearer than Sardi’s. This is quite clearly an independent work in the tradition of Dante, but emulating him and occasionally distancing itself from the *Comedy* by virtue of its different philosophical and theological content.

Unlike the influential *Harmonia mundi*, the *Elegante poema* remained unpublished, not least because its author died at the moment of its completion, in 1540. But in any case, the new spirit of religious orthodoxy established, first, by the Protestant Reformation and then, by the Catholic Counter Reformation, was not propitious to the plurality of traditions and sources employed by it, even though, according to Mesnard (in Zorzi 1991, viii), French authors such as Guy Le Fèvre de la Broderie or Jean de la Ceppède remarkably wrote texts that make one think they might well have seen a copy of the Venetian’s vernacular poem.

### 3.2.3 The Presence of Dante in the *Romanzo*. Ariosto, Tasso (Matteo Cazzato)

The Italian *ottavarima* romance has medieval roots and, in its early modern evolution, follows a path much of its own, via Pulci, Boiardo and Ariosto, the recodification of the genre as a heroic poem in works by Trissino, Alamanni, Giraldi or Pigna (Jossa 2002) to Torquato Tasso. At the same time, it is in constant contact with developments in other genres and, as will be seen, Ariosto and Tasso occasionally use Dante's *Commedia* as an alternative model.

#### 3.2.3.1 Ariosto

Ariosto is famous for his virtuosic juggling with different discursive models, such as Petrarchism or the semantics and rhetoric of the Latin love elegy, and their systemic interferences in his *Rime* and in the *Orlando furioso* (Hempfer 1988, 1989, 1991, 1993a). This makes him a perfect exponent of the reflection on the 'plurality' or 'pluralization' of discursive worlds that lies at the heart of some recent definitions of renaissance *episteme* (Hempfer 1993b, Hempfer 2010b, Höfele 2013).

Within this choice of models, Dante has an important role, as has been shown in numerous studies of Ariosto's use of linguistic materials from the Tuscan poet (Ferroni 2008; Ferroni 2012, 83–84), as well as in studies on intertextuality in the *Furioso* in general.<sup>7</sup> If it is true that Ariosto intervened in the poem's language on several occasions in order to get closer to the model established by Bembo, it is also true that Dante's language remains an important point of formal reference, just as it had been in the tradition from the *cantari* up to Ariosto's predecessor Boiardo.<sup>8</sup> But, in a similar manner to the case of Petrarch and Petrarchism, the literary interrelation between Ariosto and Dante pertains not just to the linguistic aspect, but to all levels of a rich intertextual dialogue.<sup>9</sup>

Ariosto takes up typical Dantesque elements such as prophecies, descriptions of the supernatural world, characters with a hellish or heavenly aspect, and

<sup>7</sup> It is impossible to list even the most important studies here. A selection must include: Ascoli 2001; Blasucci 1968; Brancati 2016; Cabani 2013; D'Alfonso 1987; Mariani 1981; Ossola 1976a; Segre 1966.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the most important studies on the earlier tradition are: Branca 1936, 7–20; Cabani 1988, 38–45; Melli 1958; Villoresi 2005; for Boiardo: Cavallo 1991; Cremante 1970; Sangirardi 1998.

<sup>9</sup> The various dimensions of Dantean intertextuality in the *romanzo*, especially what might be termed the ideological level and including Boiardo's use of early commentaries on the *Commedia*, are the subject of the ongoing doctoral thesis of this chapter's author, Matteo Cazzato.

narrative situations (Segre 1966). On the stylistic level, Ariosto tries to polish and contain Dante's expressiveness, which was so dear to Pulci (Cabani 2003), and reduces the pathos, which will later be taken up by Tasso (Blasucci 1968). Among the various linguistic Dantisms in Ariosto, one that is very particular and widespread is the repetition of "di qua di là di su di giù" (Alighieri 2007, I, *Inferno* V, 43) throughout the poem and with a particular concentration in its most turbulent place, the castle of Atlas; this expression becomes a linguistic indicator of the *entrelacée* movement of the text and the characters (Zatti 2011).

Dantean intertextuality in Ariosto is well known on the quantitative and formal level. But it is necessary to understand the hermeneutical implications of this intertextuality, and recent research has been moving in this direction (see in particular Bartoli 2017). The elements taken from Dante are not neutral. They tend to be refunctionalised, creating a complex and comprehensive intertextual network.

Some scholars have proposed the idea that Ariosto wanted to rewrite the *Commedia* (Bologna 1998), perhaps positioning himself as an alternative to the Florentine model (Haywood 1999). In the early modern competition for cultural primacy, Florence and Ferrara were opponents. Landino's 1481 commentary on the *Commedia* placed the city of Florence at a high cultural level by reclaiming Dante as its long-lost son (see above, 3.1.1). In light of this, Ariosto's rewriting of certain episodes of the *Commedia* (e.g. by presenting Astolfo as a traveller into the realm of the beyond: Sangirardi 2001; Zatti 1990; 2016) could be read as a politically aimed parody (Ricci 2002).

But beyond these questions of authority and politics, research into what may be termed the ideological level of Ariosto's use of Dante has only recently begun (Bartoli 2017; Johnson Haddad 1989). An example is the didactic dimension achieved by narrating Ruggiero's path to virtue and the function of Dante's version of the character of Ulysses therein (Ascoli 1987, 121–247; Picchio 1999, 2007).

Within the moral system of the Alcina episode (Ariosto 2001, cantos 7 and 8), the two poles, Logistilla and Alcina, can be compared to Dante's Beatrice and the siren of *Purgatorio* XIX (Alighieri 2007, II) respectively. Another mythical figure taken up by both Dante and Ariosto with moral implications is that of Hercules. Hercules can, according to tradition, deviate towards madness (the title of the *Furioso* seems to allude to Seneca's tragedy, *Hercules furens*). But there is also a positive side: Hercules as a hero who makes wise choices and whose strength is authentic, in opposition to Dante's Ulysses who employs trickery and acts in a presumptuous fashion. As a hero Hercules also vanquishes the monsters of Hell, and he has an important role within the discursive worlds of civil humanism and Neoplatonism.

In order to establish more firmly the background of such reusing of materials taken from (or in some cases: handed down via) Dante, it is important to consider the precise editions and comments used by Ariosto in reading the Florentine poet. In fact, Ariosto maintained friendly relationships with the scholar and philosopher, “Il dotto Celio Calcagnin” (Ariosto 2001, XLII, 90). Calcagnini was an exponent of esoteric and Neoplatonic thought and created some interesting glosses on the *Commedia* (Danzi 2012), but he was also in contact with Erasmus.

Another Neoplatonic influence is, of course, Landino’s commentary, which the poet used. This can be seen in Ariosto’s use of a famous verse from the *Inferno*: “più che ’l dolore, poté il digiuno” (Alighieri 2007, I, *Inferno* XXXIII, 75). Ariosto uses it in his story of Norandino (“poté la pietà più che ’l timore”, Ariosto 2001, XVII, 48, 5) and in two other cases: “più de l’ostinazion poté il timore” (XXI, 54, 8) and “abbia in lei, più ch’amor, potuto l’ira” (XXIII, 7, 3). In the first of these quotations, rather than Dante’s struggle between two affects, we see a virtue prevailing over a negative emotion: *pietà*, which could be linked to Landino’s discussion of another virtue, temperance, in his comment on *Inferno* XXXIII, 75. In the other two cases, Ariosto follows the Dantean model more closely, but all three are linked to the subject of temperance introduced into this context by Landino.

It is instructive to mark the very different, religious use of the same verse by Tasso (1979) in *Gerusalemme Liberata*, II, 55, 6, where it is applied in a narrative context of religious war: ‘Faith prevailed over fear.’ As opposed to this, it can be argued that Ariosto’s use of that verse is dependent upon Landino’s reading of Dante. Landino connects it to the virtue of temperance, and temperance is indeed at stake when Ariosto reuses the verse, temperance respected or not respected by the characters involved in the various events. There could even be a connection to the age-long discussion of whether or not Ugolino alludes to cannibalism here (well-known modern commentaries discuss this, among many others one could cite: Scartazzini/Vandelli in: Alighieri 1938, 280, versus Chiavacci Leonardi in: Alighieri 2007, 1, 992). Landino evokes the possible cannibalism of Ugolino in order to deny it and contrasts it with the virtue of temperance promoted in his commentary (Landino 2001, II, 1002–1005). Ariosto then reuses this formula in episodes in some of which cannibalism – or a hint to it – emerges. Tasso, on the other hand, in his personal glosses to the *Commedia*, was silent on this well-known episode, as was Vellutello in his very morally-upright commentary.

It has to be stressed, however, that this moral and, in part, didactic use of Dante is only one of many dimensions of Ariosto’s glorious narrative machine, designed for engendering ‘discrepant interpretations’ (Hempfer 1987a).

### 3.2.3.2 Tasso

For an author like Torquato Tasso, Dante is a much more central model of reference. Quotations and reuses from Dante are present throughout his work. The early chivalrous poem, *Rinaldo*, shares with the *Commedia* a narrative structure of ascent towards maturity, but this gravitates much more towards romance and can, in fact, be read as a correction of Ariosto's multilayered, anti-classical model: Tasso recounts the adventures of a single knight in search of the necessary perfection that might win him the hand of his Clarice. The Aristotelian unity achieved by this structure, is, however, in danger of degenerating into a loose sequence of adventures. Tasso obviates this danger by putting a strong accent on providence and Divine order as the decisive factor, especially with regard to the supernatural aspect (Regn 1989; Regn 1991a, 368). Here, aesthetic and ideological unity converge.

In some of the fundamental episodes of the young paladin's training path like the Valle del Dolore and the Colle della Speranza in canto XI, Dantesque elements turn out to be more than useful for constructing a series of symbolic references to the ideological structure of the poem (Navone 2020), with its vocabulary hinting at a Dantesque (but at the same time, *romanzo*-like) scenography: "aspre pene" and "eterni stridi" (in Tasso 2012: XI, 5, 6), "incerta strada", "ombrosa valle" and "dritto calle" (XI, 48, 6–8), "tenebrosa e scura" (XI, 49, 3), "valle ria" (XI, 50, 1), "sospiri" (XI, 53, 4), "dritta via" and "nube oscura e ria" (XI, 58, 4 and 6). Tasso also offers us a sort of education in love in cantos IX and X, in which Rinaldo oscillates between the morally inferior love for Floriana and the right one for Clarice. In this context, Tasso reuses many elements from *Inferno* V, and we can compare "il lume di ragion loro adombrava" (IX, 9, 6) with "la ragion sommettono al talento" (Alighieri 2007, I, *Inferno* 5.39), "d'amar donna sì bella è pur costretto" (Tasso 2012, IX, 76, 8) with "Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona" (Alighieri 2007, I, *Inferno* V, 103). A very Dantean use of the adjective *tremante* for the dissolute behaviour of sensual lovers occurs in canto IX (Tasso 2012, IX, 79, 6; cf. Alighieri 2007, I, *Inferno* V, 136). Beyond the *Inferno*, Tasso takes up a basic scheme from Dante's *Vita Nova* in a vision in which Clarice appears to urge the paladin to complete his path of growth (Tasso 2012, IX, 82; Alighieri 2018, 28, 93–94).

Dante is of even greater importance for the *Gerusalemme liberata*. The episode relating to Olindo and Sofronia in canto II of this epic presents a teaching of just love. What is particular is that *Inferno* V is used as a model in an anti-phrastic way, as Dante had offered an anti-exemplum of love in that canto. Various lexical elements and images of the story quote from Dante's narrative of Paolo and Francesca, but they are re-functionalized so as to exemplify positive values, as opposed to those shared by Dante's two damned lovers.

In canto IV of *Gerusalemme Liberata*, there is an entire infernal phenomenology built on Dante's Hell, but in many ways in an antiphrastic form, in that Satan becomes an active, rather than a passive, force. The ongoing active danger emanating from the prince of Hell (as Counter Reformation teachings would have it) is dramatized by the amplification from Dante's "il gran nemico" (Dante 2017, I, *Inferno* VI, 115) to Tasso's "gran nemico de l'umane genti" (Tasso 1979, IV, 3). Tasso also borrows a model for using direct speech in narrative in the *Commedia*, in order to build an engaging rhetorical dimension full of pathos and dynamism (Scarpati 1987b).

Particularly striking examples of the use of elements borrowed from Dante in Tasso's Christian epic can be found in the episode of the forest of Saron (Scarpati 1987b; Bianchi 1999) or in the episode in which the crusaders try to overcome the limits of sight in the face of the pitfalls of beholding Armida's beauty in canto IV of *Gerusalemme Liberata* (Confalonieri 2018). The leader of the Christian army, Goffredo, is presented as an example of *milita Christi* with the words: "molto egli oprò col senno e con la mano" (Tasso 1979, I,1). This takes up a Dantesque formula ("fece col senno assai e con la spada", Alighieri 2007, I, *Inferno* XVI, 39), recontextualized into the new context of the epic story (Villa 1999).

Similar to Dante's, but less strict in its theological rigour, is the layer of allegorical meaning Tasso ascribes to his poem in an allegorical paratext or *allegoria* written later on, similar to those published for many romances (Hempfer 1983; Jossa 2022, 241–250). He uses this form of allegory first as a shield against censorship, but later it becomes a productive procedure in its own right (Fingerle 2022 and Morace 2011).

In his final complete rewriting of his epic, the *Gerusalemme conquistata*, an attempt at balancing narrative structure and ideological system, especially religion, can be observed throughout (Ardissino 1996, 53–78). On the textual level, this is testified in the poem by the increase of allegorical digressions, both by the expansion of those already present and by the introduction of new ones. Goffredo's dream in particular reveals itself to be closely linked to Dante's *Paradiso*, in lexicon, style and other structural aspects. The layout of the episode, the iconography of its scenes, the image of the golden staircase, is Dantesque (Alighieri 2007, III, *Paradiso* XXI). Tasso uses Landino's commentary, but his reception of Dante takes place in a different, Counter-Reformation context, in which other commentaries than that of Landino became more important, especially religiously orthodox ones with a clear moral message. This is especially the case for Vellutello's 1544 commentary, which can be placed within the context of the first catholic reactions to the Reformation, before the proper Counter-Reformation (Dalmas 2005; Gilson 2018, 175–208). Tasso may have

come to know it in his early years, when he moved in Venetian and Paduan circles, but it is interesting to note that he did not own a copy of it, whereas he had one of Landino's (Bianchi 1997, 1998; Squicciarini 2020). But even so, he moved in circles in which Dante's *Commedia* was being read in a different way than its Neoplatonic reading around 1500, and his use of the Tuscan poet reflects this.

A very different kind of close link between Dante and Tasso can be found in Tasso's creation epic, *Il mondo creato*, which is partly a ré-écriture of Du Bartas' *La Sepmaine*, doing away with much of the reformation theology of the French text. Here, in a poem that has little in common with the subject matter treated by Dante, Tasso functions as a virtuoso *poeta theologus* just like the Tuscan bard, yet remains at pains to stay within the confines of counter reformation theology (Mehlretter 2021).

The presence of Dante in Tasso's works, then, is not only an effect of poetic memory or an attempt to adopt a particular stylistic model, it works as a point of reference, a dialogue partner, and is based on – in part – common values, as the two authors share a concept of poetry as knowledge of the divine (Ardissino 1996, 129–158). But Dante as an epic poet is clearly subordinated to the more important model of Aristotelian theory of the epic, as developed in Tasso's *Discorsi*.

### 3.2.4 'Heterodox Dantism': Folengo (Florian Mehlretter)

In 3.1.3.1, Teofilo Folengo has been introduced as a champion of stylistic and linguistic pluralism, which, in the context of the Cinquecento debates, can in itself be taken as a pro-Dantesque gesture. And indeed, in the dispute between the followers of Petrarch and of Dante, he takes the side of the latter, referring to him as "Omer toscano" in his 1526 romance, *Orlandino*. His argument to support this is taken from Pico and Bembo (see above, 3.1.1) in that Dante is declared to be the poet of sense and Petrarch the poet of words, but Folengo turns it on its head: just as faith is superior to good works, Beatrice is superior to Laura (III, 17–19 in: Folengo 1991, 71–72; Jossa 2011, 44). The theological implications of this comparison connect Folengo's statement to the religious debates of his time (Goffis 1993, 410). In fact, it is not just the option of 'plurilingualism' that connects the two poets, but also a deep interest in religious matters (Folengo was, in fact, a monk who left his order for some time and re-entered it later).

Thus, in the thirteenth book of Folengo's macaronic comic epic in hexameters, *Baldus*, of 1517 a parody of Dante's celestial spheres is laid out. According to Goffis (1993, 412) this is not directed at Dante's art, which Folengo cherishes,



but at the theology of a hierarchy of the heavens. There is also a Ulysses figure in this poem, the pirate Lirone, who explores an underworld of devils (book 20 to 23), and a kind of ‘answer’ to Dante’s Branca Doria, Caposeccus (book 24). Goffis (1993, 413) treats these dialogic phenomena as ‘deformations’ of Dante’s well-loved text, aimed at making theological points such as the one relating to predestination (in the case of Caposeccus). Folengo’s ‘heterodox Dantism’ (Goffis 1993) uses the *Commedia* as a vehicle for a general critique of Christendom for its abandonment of the Gospel, the vanity of attributing to itself what only Christ can do, and the sin of trying to define the mysteries of God by theology. Obviously, the two poets would not have seen eye to eye in all of these cases, but they do in their strong criticism of the Roman Church.

As stated in chapter 3.1.3.1, the macaronic language championed in *Baldus* becomes one of three idioms in Folengo’s 1527 *Chaos del Triperuno*, a work that echoes the general form of ‘Dante’ the pilgrim’s path of salvation in the *Comedy* in the shape of an exit from the labyrinth and a return to a purer faith, by way of crossing several forests or *selve* (like Dante’s *selva oscura*). The term *selva* alludes, at the same time, to a literary genre, the *silva*. The book is constituted by three such *silvae*, a trinitarian structure that can be compared to that of the *Comedy*. The three heteronyms of the author, Merlino, Limerno and Fùlica, are at the same time intradiegetic characters who, throughout the course of the work, converge in the Triperuno, the trinitarian figure of the title. The intricate and often obtuse plot can be read in (at least) three ways, exemplified by the three female commentators presented at the outset: as a biography (as in Folengo’s niece’s interpretation), in an anagogic sense (his mother, Paola) and in a more generally allegorical or epistemic sense (his sister, Corona) – clearly an adaptation of Dante’s idea of imitating the four senses of scripture in his poem. An important moment of the biography encrypted in the text is the protagonist’s courtship of Galanta, an allegory, in Antonio Daniele’s words, of “la caduta nella perdizione amorosa”, but at the same time of the author’s flirt with Aristotelianism rather than theology (Daniele 2021, 178) – just as Dante’s error in *Inferno* I and *Purgatorio* XXX could be read both as an erotic and a philosophical one. Goffis (1995, 128) points out that Folengo takes evangelical, Erasmian and neo-Augustinian attitudes, although he never openly embraces Protestantism. Goffis even refers to the *Chaos* as an “eterodossa *Commedia*.” As opposed to Dante’s poem, however, Folengo’s *Chaos* distances itself from rational, systematic forms of theology, opting instead for the truth of the Gospel alone (Goffis 1995, 135).

On a biographical level, there is also a strong element of invective against Folengo’s personal enemies within the Church (Daniele 2013, 93) and of the depravity of the clergy (Daniele 2021, 192), another aspect Folengo has in common with the Dante of the *Commedia*.

In the end, Triperuno finds unity over and above the plurality of his styles, heteronyms and identities, in Christ. Kneeling before Him, he is saved by Divine Grace from the labyrinth of error. This – partly Dantesque – subject matter is treated in the freest possible manner, not only linguistically in the three registers realized under the three heteronyms, but also as regards metrical form. Folengo writes true *silvae* in a prosimetric mixture of dialogue, narration and various metrical genres, thus carrying the mixed style, for which Dante was criticized in the 1520s, to an extreme.

Another work by Folengo needs to be mentioned here, as it is in some ways stylistically even closer to Dante's: his *terzina* epic, *La Palermitana*, written in old age, probably unfinished, and never published during the author's lifetime.

It is true that the *terza rima* writing here harks back to Petrarch's *Trionfi* as well as to Dante, and the subject of a sacred history from the Creation onward is quite different from that of the *Commedia*. Teofilo narrates his fictional pilgrimage to Palestine and his meeting with a community of hermits there (led by the monk Palermo mentioned in the title), with whom he attends a sacred performance of the history of the world, from the Creation to the birth of Christ and the appearance of the Church. But it could be argued that the idea of a revelation of sacred history in the form of a play as the central event of a pilgrimage can be linked at the very least to the *Purgatorio* (and by the middle position of this *cantica* within the *Comedy* to the work as a whole). This becomes clear when we appreciate the sheer length and weight of the divine pageant and subsequent ritual play in the last four cantos of *Purgatory*, during which Dante not only repents and re-enters the community of the saved, but learns of the true nature of history and the apocalyptic future, which he is then ordained to reveal to his readers (Mehlretter 2005).

The first of the two books Folengo managed to finish ends with Palermo's death at the sight of the tools of Christ's Passion. The second book takes up the events of the New Testament up to the Song of Simeon.

There are some interesting and very concrete Dantean echoes in certain passages of the text, especially in those parts in which Folengo criticizes the Church of his day, just as Dante did for his own time. Thus, Goffis (1995, 142) points out that at the opening of the second canto from book I of the *Palermitana*, Folengo takes up both the general trend and the syntactical structure of a passage from Dante's *Paradiso* (XXVII, 40–42): Dante's "Non fu la Sposa di Cristo / allevata dal sangue mio [. . .] / per essere ad acquisto d'oro usata" becomes:

– Io mai non scesi dal mio ciel sereno  
qui ad esser uomo e, di monarca tanto,

nascer in grembo a povertà sul feno  
 perché, Babel, tu, scelta al maggior manto,  
 al maggior scanno d'Aron e di Mose,  
 Sodoma fossi e avessi nome santo  
 (Folengo 2006, 250)

In this late work, then, it is no longer the mixed style associated, amongst others, with Dante, but instead, in a certain fashion, Dante's language as such that becomes Folengo's model.

### 3.3 New Perspectives towards the End of the Century

During the second half of the sixteenth century, the debate on Dante took on a more theoretically complex form, one which included some innovative poetological aspects. Even where these are the results of misunderstandings or tendentious readings, they open up new perspectives on Dante and establish him as a possible model of aesthetically advanced kinds of writing.

#### 3.3.1 Phantastic or Icastic? Dante and the Debate on Mimesis (Mazzoni, Tasso)

In 1572, a hitherto unidentified author, probably using a pseudonym, circulated in manuscript form a *Discorso di M. Ridolfo Castravilla nel quale si mostra l'imperfettione della "Commedia" di Dante contro al "Dialogo delle lingue" del Varchi*, a refutation of Benedetto Varchi's statement that Dante is greater than Homer. Castravilla (2018) criticized the *Commedia* for not being a classical epic imitating action in the Aristotelian sense, but, rather, the dream vision of a private individual (Gilson 2018, 136). One year later, Jacopo Mazzoni took Dante's side, trying to invalidate some of Castravilla's arguments in his brief *Discorso in difesa della Commedia*, which he lengthened in 1587 into a vast tract of seven books, the *Difesa della comedia di Dante*.<sup>10</sup>

These two texts go far beyond mere apologetics (and are therefore treated in this chapter rather than in chapter 1), opening as they do a new perspective

<sup>10</sup> The most important aspects of this debate are to be found in Barbi 1975, 37–56; Vallone 1969, 59–170; Weinberg 1961, chapter 16 and 17, especially II, 831–837; Gilson 2018, 136–138.

on the nature of literature. To be sure, the innovations contained in them are often based on apologetic rhetoric and even misunderstandings (as will be seen in Torquato Tasso's perceptive comments on them), but they nevertheless make of Dante a prime exemplar of a new kind of writing, which doubtless contributed to the poetics of the Italian baroque.

### 3.3.1.1 Mazzoni's Dante and 'Phantastic Imitation'

Mazzoni's approach is based on an eclectic Platonic-Aristotelian theory of *mimesis* (Gigliani 2010, 6), which includes elements taken from the tradition of rhetoric. Thus, his concept of verisimilitude as a likeness of truth or "simulacro del vero" (Mazzoni 1982, 9) is closer to the rhetorical tradition than to Aristotle's idea of verisimilar imitation as an exemplification of general truths by the depiction of a particular action. Mazzoni combines this rhetorical concept, however, with Plato's notion of *eidola*, which he strips of its negative ontological implications. *Mimesis* is a rendering of *eidola* or mental representations that stand in a relation of similarity to elements of the real world. It is of little moment if this similarity turns out to be superficial or even deceptive, as long as the *mimesis* produces the desired effect on the reader.

Developing Francesco Patrizi da Cherso's interpretation of Plato's *Sophist* in the former's *Della poetica, la deca disputata* (Patrizi 1586, 75–85) and turning it on its head, Mazzoni develops a sophist concept of poetry (for which he is later criticized by Patrizi in his posthumous *Deca ammirabile*, see Scarpati 1987a, 241). Generally speaking, imitation, according to this theory, can be *icastic* (a depiction of something that is in itself to be considered real) or *phantastic* (a creation of an invented image that shares similarities with real objects, but does not refer to one – see, with due differences, *Sophist* 266e, Plato 1921, 452–453). The first named can also be called *poetica*, whereas only the second is to be taken as *poesia* in the true sense (Mazzoni 1982, 71). Following both Plato and Aristotle, Mazzoni then distinguishes between a type of imitation that makes use of the actor's body (dramatic *mimesis*) and a type based on narration. Both of these types can be either phantastic or icastic, resulting in a fourfold paradigm of dramatic-icastic, dramatic-phantastic, narrative-icastic and narrative-phantastic (Mazzoni 1982, 34; more detailed in Mazzoni 1587, 399).

Mazzoni stresses that not just phantastic, but also icastic imitation creates *eidola*, adding particulars, similes or other fictitious elements to the general image. This seems close to Torquato Tasso's (roughly contemporary) concept of *concetti* as the particular perspective in which an object is represented by the choice of particulars or by adding tropes (Tasso 1977, II, 338–341), but Mazzoni

adds what can be considered a sceptical and at the same time a sophist twist to it (Gigliani 2010, 7; Katinis 2018, 122): any rendering of an image, whether of a real or an imagined object, includes an element of fiction, and therefore even icastic poetry contains in it something of the phantastic. In a way, phantastic *mimesis* thus appears to be the fundamental or primary form of poetry; this is also mirrored by Mazzoni's use of the term *poesia* for phantastic poetry only (Mazzoni 1982, 71).

From a rhetorical and, indeed, sophist perspective, Mazzoni prefers credibility to truth and values a pleasing effect on the reader higher than a faithful representation of the outside world. If for Plato (*Sophist* 239e, Plato 1921, 348–349), the 'false' is the material of the sophist, it follows for Mazzoni that "poetry is sophistic art" (Katinis 2018, 115). Against Plato's negative verdict, Mazzoni therefore seeks to reevaluate the sophists, relying especially on Philostratus (Moreschini 2015, 264).

According to this view, the elaboration of credible phantastic images and, in the case of icastic poetry, of the particularizing images that render it partly akin to the phantastic, is the core of the poet's art (Mazzoni 1982, 41). One can depict something in a low and common manner, but that is best avoided. On the other hand, one can make lowly objects appear great and sublime, and Dante is a past master of this. In his works, even the lowest things are "meravigliosi e divini per una artificiosissima evidenza" (Mazzoni 1982, 43). The use of the rhetorical term *evidenza* in this context suggests that credibility is best attained by creating an illusion of presenting the object itself; it depends chiefly on a superficial similarity between the visual image that is evoked and its object, not on plausible demonstration or analysis. But on the other hand, mere rhetorical verisimilitude would be insufficient for poetry; there has to be *meraviglia* as well for there to be *poesia* (Mazzoni 1982, 78). This concept of 'marvel' seems to be the point of coincidence of the phantastic (and therefore surprising) image, the striking moment of evidence, and a general striving for effect.

The poetics of verisimilitude by evidence can also refer to images that render abstract entities palpable to the sensual imagination, as in Dante's image of the Trinity in *Paradiso* XXXIII, 115–120, a poetic technique Mazzoni (1982, 69) much commends. This is one of three general conclusions Mazzoni draws from his introductory observations in the *Difesa*. The second is that the poet has to prefer untrue, but credible things to true but incredible ones, an argument in a way inherent in Aristotle's distinction (in *Poetics* 9, 1451a, Aristotle 1995, 58–59) between the philosophical, general truths relevant for the poet and the particular factuality of history, but not in this way developed by the Stagirite himself. In Mazzoni's rhetorical or sophist framework of verisimilitude as outward similarity to reality, however, this preference does not make quite as much sense as in

Aristotle's argument. Aristotle's statement, according to which the preference for what can plausibly happen over what has actually happened makes the poet more of a philosopher than the historian, would be all but incomprehensible, if plausibility were to be taken as mere superficial likeness.

Mazzoni seems to be quite conscious of this, as becomes apparent in his third conclusion, which according to him follows on from the first two: the preference for credibility rather than truth makes the poet a sophist (Mazzoni 1982, 70). This can be read as an anti-Aristotelian gesture, because it mimics Aristotle's argumentation, replacing, however, the term 'philosopher' by 'sophist' – and, implicitly, replacing Aristotle's concept of verisimilitude with a more rhetorical version, predominantly geared to effect. In the third book of the *Difesa*, Mazzoni (1587, 395) goes as far as to say that the true poet takes “la bugia per soggetto.”

The poet, then, aims for a marvelous, delightful effect in the reader by creating images. This can happen either in the icastic mode by the special way of presenting a given object, or in the phantastic mode by inventing entities that do not exist in the real world, but are in a way similar to aspects of reality as to be credible – with the phantastic being the more fundamental of the two. This is, however, not a passive process as in a dream, it is a creative activity, at best an active daydream. Mazzoni is at pains to refute any idea that Dante's *Commedia* could be the account of a mere dream and even attributes to Dante a theory of poetic creation as phantastic invention in this fashion. In order to do this, he reads the adjective *alta* in *Paradiso* XXXIII, 142 (“A l'alta phantasia qui mancò possa”, Alighieri 2007, III, 927) as a defining, rather than an ornamental, attribute: Dante would thus have distinguished between ordinary imagination and the higher form of intellectual imagination used by the poet (Moreschini 2015, 276).

Dante is credited here with a particular force of invention 'ex nihilo', which, in the case of Mazzoni, is no longer presented as a product of divine furor – as opposed to Landino's 1481 commentary (Landino 2001, I, 258; Gilson 2005, 188) – but as a 'sophist' technique. It is, however, necessary to add that none of this makes Mazzoni a theorist of phantastic literature in the modern sense. Dante may, in Mazzoni's interpretation, have invented images and even entities and actions in order to convey theological and philosophical truths, but the foundations of Dante's world, the Creation and the Christian beyond and afterlife, are not themselves presented as phantastic inventions. And yet, Mazzoni's insistence on *bugia* and *meraviglia* certainly derive new poetological options from his special reading of Dante, which will become more relevant in the literature after 1600 (see below, 3.3.1.3).

### 3.3.1.2 Tasso's Critique of Mazzoni

In his *Discorsi del poema eroico* of 1594, Tasso takes up some of the positions of his earlier *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* of 1587, amplifying and correcting them. In the *libro secondo* of this new tract, he includes a critique of Mazzoni's *Difesa*, the first part of which had been printed in 1587, the year of Tasso's earlier *Discorsi*. Tasso proposes an eclectic Platonic-Aristotelian approach, enriched by many elements derived from other authors of antiquity, but at the same time adopting a resolutely Christian perspective.

The second book of the *Discorsi* deals with literary invention and the question of verisimilitude. Perhaps surprisingly, instead of departing from Aristotle's idea of the philosophical nature of poetry as opposed to history, which derives from the poet's art of exemplifying general truths rather than recounting particular accidents (*Poetics* 9, 1451a, 35–1451b, 26, Aristotle 1995, 58–61), Tasso compares literature to oratory. Like the rhetorician, the poet has to start with *inventio*, and literary invention means the selection of suitable material for his art. This allows Tasso to address more directly an issue that in Aristotle is presented in a more ambiguous manner: should the poet look for existent or nonexistent entities and facts as objects of his activity (Tasso 1977, I, 170–171)? Put like this, Tasso's preference for existing material seems the evident choice, as it would be counterintuitive to 'find' what does not exist (similarly, in his *Apologia della Gerusalemme liberata*, Tasso 1977, I, 83–86). In a second, more Platonic form of this ontological argument Tasso states (following a line of reasoning put forward by Francesco Patrizi da Cherso in the fourth book of his *Della poetica, la deca disputata*): "quel che non è, non si può imitare" (Tasso 1977, I, 176; for the background of this argument see Patrizi 1586, 75–85). Consequently, Tasso attacks Robortello's (1548, 2) and Piccolomini's (1572, v) comments on Aristotle's *Poetics* for stating that the poet is more concerned with "il falso che il vero" (Tasso 1977, I, 178).

In a more Aristotelian vein, Tasso subordinates the *vero* to the *verosimile* as its most plausible form, when he states that in an age in which all great deeds have been recorded in written history, a supposedly great deed that is not reported in books (being fictitious) is as a result less credible and thus less likely to induce emotional reactions such as pity and terror (Tasso 1977, I, 175–176). Here, an argument clearly elaborated within an Aristotelian framework touches the more sophist concern of the semblance of truth and its effects on the reader – without, however, giving up Tasso's prime concern for reality.

There are thus several points of view under which a poetics of the phantastic and the nonexistent has to be rebutted. Explicitly addressing Mazzoni's *Difesa*, Tasso states: "Però io non posso concedere né che la poesia si metta sotto

l'arte de' sofisti, né che la perfettissima specie di poesia sia la fantastica." If fictions are to be included, they have to be probable, and in that case, fiction can be the object of literature, but not "in quanto egli è falso, ma in quanto è probabile; ma il probabile, in quanto egli è verisimile, appartiene al poeta" (Tasso 1977, I, 179). It is thus not the invented character of inventions that render them fit for poetry, but their aptitude to exemplify general truths – an option of fiction that seems inherent in Aristotle's argumentation, even if it is not overtly featured there. The sophist, on the other hand, is not interested in the probable, but only in the *seemingly* probable, which is not to be considered truly probable and thus fails to produce verisimilitude (Tasso 1977, I, 180 and 188).

Tasso allows that poetic *enthymemata* based on logical fallacies and false premises can occur in playful, witty love lyrics (as in contemporary madrigal writing including, one might add, his own), but the most perfect forms of poetry do not follow such sophist usage. Especially the higher forms like the epic have to deal with entities of the real world – not, for example, with centaurs, harpies and cyclops such as abound in the chivalrous romances by the likes of Ariosto. Mazzoni's argumentation, according to Tasso, is based on faulty reasoning (Tasso 1977, I, 181).

This does not mean that in Tasso's view only visible or palpable entities may be 'imitated' by literature. His idea of reality includes intelligible beings like angels, the divine supernatural, and devilish machinations. And in this perspective, Dante is, of course, an icastic rather than a phantastic poet, and a poetry of the marvelous remains possible within Aristotelian categories (Tasso 1977, I, 183–185, 190 and 192). Thus, not only does Mazzoni's deduction of a poetics of the phantastic from Dante's work appear erroneous, not even his reading of Dante itself can, in Tasso's view, be considered appropriate.

### 3.3.1.3 From the Phantastic to the Bizarre (Marino, Tesauro)

At this point, it is necessary to add a few brief observations on the possible effect of the 'phantastic' on baroque literature beyond the year 1600.

In the aftermath of the counter reformation, it would clearly have been difficult to establish a form of literary representation that would eschew God's creation as its object in favour of nonexistent entities. Yet various developments, of which Mazzoni's plea for the phantastic is but one, contributed to a taste for the unusual, the striking, the strange and the bizarre. In this situation, the solution favoured by authors like Giovan Battista Marino and Emanuele Tesauro consists in an ingenious equation between the world created by God and the capricious inventions craved by both the poets and the reading public: in Marino's "La



pittura” from his collection of *Dicerie sacre* (1614), the Creator himself is presented as a bizarre artist, and earthly artists can and should follow His example (Regn 2000, 359–382 and Regn 1998). According to Tesauro’s theory of metaphor in *Il cannocchiale aristotelico* (1670, 267), it is the task of the poet to find and identify the surprising analogistic structure of the world itself and forge it into surprising images. Dante, however, is no longer one of the principal models of this trend, which is anyway based more on innovation than on tradition.

What both of these baroque authors (along with nearly all of their contemporaries) do share with Mazzoni is, however, the stress on the effect of *meraviglia*. The aim of poetry, according to this view, is not so much the representation of any truth or reality as its effect on its reader. As can be seen in baroque writing, this opens up the possibility of playing with falsehoods and paralogisms and making of poetry a self-referential game (Scarpati 1987a, 249) – even though this was presumably not Mazzoni’s intention when he set out to defend Dante.

### 3.3.2 Asprezza

The following chapter shows how a particular stylistic quality in Dante, which we will term *asprezza* (‘harshness’), is discussed and imitated by sixteenth-century Italian authors and how this process contributes to an awareness of stylistic options beyond mainstream Petrarchism. It could even be argued that, paradoxically, High Renaissance attempts at decanonizing Dante in favour of Petrarch on stylistic grounds, especially for his ‘harsh’ writing, indirectly contributed to this new option, for which Dante becomes a kind of alternative model towards the end of the century (Mehltretter 2022).

The choice of the term *asprezza*, which will be used in this chapter to cover certain aspects of this alternative kind of writing, is motivated by Dante’s own strategy of highlighting the adjective *aspro* as a poetological term in the first verse of one of his *canzoni petrose*, and by the fact that at the end of the sixteenth century, the composer Luca Marenzio uses this very *canzone* for the programmatic opening of his last, aesthetically complex book of madrigals (1599). Two other terms besides – and to a certain degree parallel to – *asprezza* will appear in the discussions reported in the following pages: *gravità* and *terribilità*. The three concepts are by no means identical, but it is important to note that in the contexts in which they will appear, each one of them stands in direct opposition to concepts like *dolcezza* or *piacevolezza*. The various terms are thus elements of a structured field of oppositions and analogies, a rough sketch of which will be given here.

After a brief examination of Dante's own theory and practice of harshness, its reception and transformation in the Renaissance will be outlined, before the final part of this section will analyse the intermedial role of Dantean harshness between literature, fine arts and music in the years immediately before and after 1600.

### 3.3.2.1 Dante's use of harshness

In Dante's works, almost the whole range of meanings of the word family derived from the Latin *asper* is present (Onder 1970). From antiquity onwards, use of the word shows a tendency towards metaphorical extension of meaning, often motivated by the common element of unpleasant sensual experience, as in a harsh surface, a rough sea, a hard winter, a tart wine or a raspy voice. In late antiquity, any non-periodic sound or noise could be considered harsh (Macrobius 1970, 103–107). In language, such a quality can originate from *hiatus*, as Cicero writes in the *Orator ad Brutum* (XLIV, 150, Cicero 2002, 47). But for Cicero, not just rough sounds can constitute *asperitas*; harshness can equally well be a result of the semantics and pragmatics of direct invective (*De Oratore* II, 53, Cicero 1995, 193–194).

For his 1599 book of madrigals, Marenzio chose a *canzone* of Dante's which unites these two forms of *asprezza*: harsh sound (especially by a clustering of consonants) and direct reprimand. The text in question, "Così nel mio parlar voglio essere aspro", is one of a group of poems referred to as the *petrose* since the nineteenth century, a cycle of four *canzoni* about physical desire dedicated to a stubborn lady who is consistently compared to a stone (*pietra*, hence *petrose*).<sup>11</sup> In many ways, this group constitutes a complement and an opposite to the 'sweet new style' ("dolce stil novo", *Purgatorio* XXIV, 57) that characterizes much of Dante's lyrical output, especially in the *Vita Nova*. Whether its formal harshness is a consequence of its theme (Cudini in Alighieri 1979b, XXV) or its contents are a by-product of its deliberately rough form (Contini in Alighieri 1970, 149), there is a strong element of metapoetic reflection implicit in this poem, and it could even be read as a poetological allegory (Foster and Boyde in Alighieri 1967, II, 258–259).

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<sup>11</sup> Carducci 1865 and Imbriani 1882 were the first to argue in favour of considering the four poems as one group, but it will be shown below that at least one sixteenth century reader, Della Casa, may have believed the same. It should be added that "Così nel mio parlar" seems to stand somewhat apart from the other three compositions. On the other hand, it was a particularly visible *canzone* of Dante's in the early modern period, as it is the first composition in the part dedicated to Dante's *canzoni* in the *Raccolta Aragonesa* and its tradition (Barbi 1915, 236).

The first stanza sets harsh consonants against a background of a more homogeneous blending of hard and soft sounds, but stresses the importance of *asprezza* on the semantic level; the *fronte* reads as follows:

Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro  
 com'è negli atti questa bella pietra,  
 la quale ognora impetra  
 maggior durezza e più natura cruda,  
 e veste sua persona d'un diaspro  
 tal, che per lui, o perch'ella s'arretra,  
 non esce di faretra  
 saetta che già mai la colga ignuda.  
 (Alighieri 2014, 421)

In further stanzas, the harsh element prevails, combined with stylistically 'low' vocabulary. Thus the *fronte* of the fifth stanza:

Così vedess'io lui fender per mezzo  
 il cuore a la crudele che 'l mio squatra!  
 poi non mi sarebb'atra  
 la morte, ov'io per sua bellezza corro:  
 ché tanto dà nel sol quanto nel rezzo  
 questa scherana micidiale e latra.  
 Oimè, ché non latra  
 per me, com'io per lei, nel caldo borro?  
 (Alighieri 2014, 422)

The harsh consonant clusters, which characterize parts of this poem, stand out from more even stylistic surroundings, which are the result of a “tempering of harsh and smooth” (Durling and Martinez 1990, 167). This latter idea can be traced back to Dante's theory of style in *De vulgari eloquentia* (II.vii.7), in which he calls for a mixture of groomed (*pexa*) and unkempt words (*yruta*, Alighieri 1979a, 198), in order to avoid blandness. With reference to this ideal, “Così nel mio parlar” with its clusters of rough sounds constitutes, as it were, the outer boundary of the acceptable.

It is important to note, however, that the harshness found in this *canzone* corresponds, in some passages, to a decidedly low stylistic register, and rises to the heights of the sublime in others. This ambiguity characterizes Dante's use of harshness in general.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the third *canzone* of the *Convivio*, “Le dolci rime d'amor”, treats a question of the philosophy of society (whether nobility is

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<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed version of this analysis, see Mehlretter 2022. For Bembo, see note 4 above.

grounded in birth) “con rima aspra e sottile” (Alighieri 1995, IV, v. 14, 253) and hence in an elevated style. The beginning of *Inferno* XXXII (“S’io avessi le rime aspre e chioce”, v. 1) seeks a harsh and even ugly sound for the lowest reaches of hell, but still invokes the muses, because what seems to be needed here is a difficult form of speech that is not necessarily ‘low.’ On the other hand, the comic performance of harsh sound and aggressive invective in *Inferno* XXX, 118–129 is couched in a decidedly low register, and listening to it is even, in Virgil’s words, “bassa voglia” (v. 148).

The Renaissance reception of Dante’s *asprezza* reduced this ambiguity and viewed the quality of harshness from a more classicist perspective. Pico della Mirandola uses the adjective *asper* in a letter to Lorenzo de’ Medici in which he shows himself to be critical of Dante’s style (Gilson 2018, 267, n. 76). This led, after a period of partly negative views of the Sommo Poeta culminating in Bembo, to a positive reevaluation of his poetic originality in the second half of the sixteenth century.

### 3.3.2.2 *Asprezza* as a Quality in its own Right (*Rhetores Graeci*, Bembo)

In 1508, the Venetian printer Aldus Manutius published an anthology of ancient Greek rhetorical and poetological texts known today as *Rhetores Graeci*. Amongst other writings, it features Hermogenes’ *Perì heurseos*, in which a quality of harshness (*trachytes*), based on semantics, certain figures of speech and rough sounds, is a subcategory of greatness (*megethos*), one of seven basic ‘ideas’ or principles. Its neighbouring quality is vehemence (*sphrodotes*), whereas on the higher level of the seven ‘ideas’, its principle, greatness, is close to that of graveness (*deinotes*). From this perspective, harshness can be aggressive, but it remains sublime (Patillon 1988, 112–113). Renaissance authors such as Scaliger, Minturno, Delminio or Bartolomeo Cavalcanti generally choose as Latin or vernacular equivalents for *trachytes* terms like *asperitas* or *asprezza*. Scaliger places *asperitas* partly in direct opposition to *suavitas*, rendering it largely equivalent to *gravitas* (Grosser 1992, 41 and 81).

Gian Giorgio Trissino, in 1529, in the first part of his *Poetica*, adapts this seven-fold system to his predominantly Aristotelian framework (Huss et al. 2012, 32) and likewise believes that *asprezza* occupies a space within which both magnificent grandeur (exemplified by the beginning of Dante’s *Paradiso*) and vehement invective exist. Having edited (and translated) the first modern printed version of Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia* in the very year of publication of his own *Poetica* (1529), he equates aspects of Hermogenes’ *trachytes* with Dante’s ‘unkempt words’ (*yr sute*; Trissino 1970, 30–33). He thus paves the way

towards a future reappraisal of Dante's specific style, which, however, only came into its own after Bemboism had its heyday (to be discussed below).

Another work included in Manutius' *Rhetores Graeci* was even more influential: *On elocution* by pseudo-Demetrius of Phalerum. In this text, harshness is decidedly an element of the sublime style. Torquato Tasso took up his view in the second half of the sixteenth century.

But the mainstream of the first half of the century followed Pietro Bembo's aestheticist view in his *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), which devalued Dantean harshness. As has been shown in chapters 1.1 and 1.4.3 above, Bembo set up a single authority for verse poetry, Petrarch, (and Boccaccio for prose writing) and decanonized Dante as a writer, who, though strong on doctrine, was weak on elegance, writing as he did about 'base and vile things' with the aid of a partly archaic, latinizing, crude, dirty and ugly vocabulary (Bembo 1989, II, V, 137–139 and II, XX, 175–178). Within the traditional threefold hierarchy of styles, Bembo was interested only in the sublime and the medium registers, all but ignoring the low and the comic. Rough sounding, humble words are thus excluded, whereas harsh sounds of the sublime kind are extolled. Bembo thus avoided the ambiguity of high and low that characterized Dante's poetics of *asprezza*, moving closer to the line of ps.-Demetrius; it is no coincidence that he eschewed both the term *asprezza* and Dante's concept of 'hirsute words' (which found its way into print anyway through Trissino only four years after the publication of Bembo's *Prose*). Instead, Bembo opted for the term *grave* to cover all techniques of grave and sublime writing, including (noble) consonant clusters (Bembo 1989, II, XVII, 166–169).

Like Dante, Bembo called for a style that oscillated between two basic qualities, but as opposed to Dante's, his were both firmly rooted inside the sphere of classical elegance: poets should move between *gravità* and *piacevolezza* (Bembo 1989, II, IX, 145–147), two qualities derived from Cicero (*Orator* LIV, see Regn 2006, 33). These should be used with a preponderance of *gravità* in the sublime style, and a stress on the *piacevolezza* in the medium register, but both should be present in good writing, for the sake of variety. It is important to note that Bembo thus introduced two stylistic tendencies, not three, and that they are linked to the high and the medium genres. In this system, there is simply no third slot for an ugly and rough comical style.

But precisely with his almost exclusive emphasis on the grave character of austere sound (following ps.-Demetrius), Bembo at the same time, perhaps unwillingly, opens up a future option for a new appreciation of harshness as an aesthetic quality, which, as will become apparent, will also paint Dante in a new light in the second half of the sixteenth century. At the same time, Bembo's idea of a mixture of *gravità* and *piacevolezza* removes *gravitas* somewhat from

the discussion of style registers. It transforms it, instead, into an aesthetic quality within a harmonious interplay, which, in Bembo's opinion, Petrarch (rather than Dante) masters particularly well. From this perspective, aesthetic qualities can become author-specific rather than system-related, and this, too, is later taken up in favour of Dante.

### 3.3.2.3 *Asprezza* and the Sublime: Giovanni Della Casa, Torquato Tasso

With Bembo, the stylistically low version of harshness becomes all but invisible, and this constellation leads to a new practice of sublime *asperitas* in the middle of the sixteenth century. This happens not just in epic or tragic writing, but also in the higher forms of lyric poetry, not least because the latter genre often takes the lead in the development of poetics in the Italian High Renaissance. The main exponent of this new stylistic tendency is Giovanni Della Casa, whose innovations in lyric poetry have been justly characterised as a programme of complication and new graveness, especially for the sonnet (Schulz-Buschhaus 1991).

Della Casa's poetics of graveness has often been described without reference to Dante, but Dante does have a role in it. In fact, Della Casa seems to be one of the first readers of Dante to spot the cyclical character of the four *petrose*, as can be seen in a group of four sonnets on Livia Colonna, written "ad istanza" of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (*Rime* 41–44, Della Casa 1997, 130–137). This little cycle can be read as an answer to Dante's four *canzoni*, as it is full of 'stony' vocabulary (Scarpa 2003, 141–144). The word material in question is, to be sure, derived from the name of the lady ('column') and thus harks back to Petrarch's network of semantic systems derived from the name of Laura. But Della Casa makes the most of the harsh potential of his rocks, stones and marbles by combining them with lexical Dantisms and clusters of consonants. A brief example from the first of the sonnets may suffice. This is the *sirma*, which features a hiatus ("pioggia asprezza") in the middle of a poetologically charged final verse on the accretion of harshness:

Qual dura quercia in selva antica, od elce  
frondosa in alto monte, ad amar fôra,  
o l'onda che Caribdi assorbe e mesce,  
tal provo io lei, che più s'impetra ogniora  
quanto io più piango, come alpestra selce  
che per vento e per pioggia asprezza cresce.

(Della Casa 1993, 130–131)

Each of the four sonnets features the word *aspro* in a prominent position, and in the middle of Della Casa's sonnet cycle we are told, in a similarly poetologically-charged verse as the one quoted above, that the effect of all this is *grave* (Della Casa 1993, 133). These are sublime *petrose*, avoiding as they do any possible low, erotic or comic overtones. They are thus quite in line with the univocally 'high' idea of harshness prevalent since Bembo and the *Rhetores Graeci* (Mehltretter 2022). This situation opens up the possibility of looking at Dantean harshness from a different point of view, and it is not by coincidence that contemporaries such as Mario Colonna compare Della Casa with Dante (Afribo 2001, 16). Della Casa's interest in Dante is further witnessed by his annotations in an edition of the *Commedia* from 1529 (Scarpatti 1987b).

Torquato Tasso admired Della Casa's graveness and elaborated a theory of styles that could account for the presence of sublime matter and style in sonnets. But in his own lyrical output Tasso tends to stick to a medium register and even to stress the mellow sweetness he associates with the semantics and rhetoric of lyrical poetry (Regn 1987c, 220). In fact, in a sonnet written in answer to Della Casa's Colonna cycle, "Io mi credea sotto un leggiadro velo" (Tasso 1976, I, 79–80), he 'downgrades' the harsh sounds and the corresponding semantics to a mere admixture in the interest of variety and decidedly 'lyricizes' the content matter taken over from Della Casa (Regn 1987c, 88; Mehltretter 2022). For Tasso, *asprezza* is a key element of the sublime register, suitable for epic and tragedy rather than for lyric poetry.

In his *Discorsi del poema eroico*, Tasso describes the means and methods of sublime harshness in minute detail. Alliterations, hiatus, enjambments and clusters of consonants all contribute to *asprezza* and hence to grandeur and a majesty of style. Della Casa and Dante are past masters of this kind of writing, though in the case of the latter Tasso is unsure whether to classify these effects as "artificio o caso" (Tasso 1977, II, 316).

Harsh sounds have thus become unambiguous signs of sublime power; since Bembo, their low or comic side has become a marginal phenomenon. In this situation, Dante's roughness can generally be understood as a form of stylistic graveness comparable to similar qualities in other art forms; the cross-media reception of Dante at the end of the sixteenth century benefitted from this.

### 3.3.2.4 Dante and Harshness in the Arts (Marenzio, Michelangelo, Vasari, Alessandro Guarini)

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, Luca Marenzio's 1599 book of madrigals, his ninth and last, opens with a setting of the first stanza of Dante's

*canzone* “Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro,” thus establishing *asprezza* as the dominant quality of the entire work. In light of the shifts in poetics and of the reception of Dante in the High and Late Renaissance detailed above, this can be explained as a choice of grave, complex and sublime aesthetic options quite in contrast to some of the cruder aspects of Dante’s poem. Marenzio’s music echoes this reading of Dante by a decidedly ‘difficult’ style full of dissonances and chromaticism (Fabbri 1999; Gerbino 2018). As early as 1556, Carlo Lenzoni had compared Dante’s harshness to the use of dissonance in music (Lenzoni 1556, 59). The rest of Marenzio’s madrigal cycle favours the graver, more sublime works of Petrarch (such as the double sestina RVF 332, the *Triumphus Cupidinis* and the famous sonnet 35, “Solo e pensoso”), which stand out from the more harmonious notes generally associated with this poet, and pairs them with somewhat lighter versions of similar themes by contemporaries (Mehlretter 2020a, 221–223). Dante thus becomes a champion of sublime *asprezza*, as opposed to the mellow sweetness of mainstream Petrarchist love poetry.

There is an interesting parallel to this in the discussion on the fine arts, especially painting. Thus in 1553 Giovan Battista Gelli compares Dante to Michelangelo on the one hand, and the elegant love poets (like Petrarch and the Petrarchists) to Flemish landscape painters on the other (Gelli 1887, I, 361). Ludovico Dolce, in many ways a Bembist, pairs Dante with Michelangelo, and Petrarch with Raphael, in his *Dialogo della pittura* of 1557, but in the end both Michelangelo and Raphael must cede to Titian. His dialogue character ‘Aretino’ ascribes to Michelangelo a ‘terrible’ quality, especially as regards his rendering of the human form (Dolce 1557, 48r.; Gilson 2018, 348). Dante and Michelangelo can therefore be seen as parallel in that they eschew mellow sweetness, and even though Dolce does not pronounce himself in favour of this choice, in other contexts it could be valued as an achievement.

This is especially true of Vasari, who, in his *Vite*, crowns Michelangelo above all other artists. The adjective used by Dolce’s ‘Aretino’ to describe Michelangelo’s renderings of human bodies, *terribile*, and its noun, *terribilità*, is used with positive connotations in Vasari’s life of Michelangelo, e.g. for the character of Jonah on the ceiling of the Sixtine Chapel (Vasari 1568, VI, 48). It denotes the intensity of Michelangelo’s depiction of the body and its affects, but it can even be extended to art in general, as in “la terribilità dell’arte” (Vasari 1568, VI, 74) as opposed to shallow sweetness. Vasari does not use the term *asprezza* in this context, but he praises certain statues of antiquity, excavated a few years before, for their balance of *asprezza* and *dolcezza* (Vasari 1568, IV, 6–7).

If *terribilità* and *asprezza* are both in their own ways opposites of different kinds of (positive or negative) *dolcezza*, then Vasari’s Michelangelo is definitely



close to the harsh side of Dante. And indeed, Vasari links the two artists several times in his text. He praises Michelangelo for achieving, in the Sixtine Chapel, what Dante attributes to God's own art in Purgatory, thus ascribing the same ideals of forceful characterization to both of them (Vasari 1568, VI, 70–71). He stresses Michelangelo's familiarity with Dante's works (Vasari 1568, VI, 73) and identifies Dante as Michelangelo's model for his poetry (Vasari 1568, VI, 111).

In Vasari's remarks, then, while the concept of *asprezza* itself is of marginal importance, the notion of a parallelism between Michelangelo and Dante because of their grave and sometimes disturbing force, which avoids any pleasing smoothness, creates a framework in which Dante's austerity can be perceived as a quality in its own right. At a later moment in the ongoing discussion on the arts with reference to Dante's style, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, this body of thought is once again explicitly linked to the term *asprezza*.

In 1610, the younger Guarini, Alessandro, publishes in Ferrara a dialogue of the title *Il farnetico savio ovvero il Tasso*. In it, 'Tasso' is confronted with the Bembists' accusations against Dante, which he rejects with some familiar arguments: Dante uses harsh and low expressions where they are most able to convey the subject vividly. However, his repertoire also includes harmonic and euphonic phrases, for example in the Paolo and Francesca episode of *Inferno* V (Guarini 1610, 13–15).

The discussion becomes more interesting at the moment when stylistic alternatives are put forward, here with regard to both painting and music. As far as painting is concerned, Michelangelo is now an old master, but in his tradition stands "Tintoretto, Michelangelo de' nostri tempi." What remains, however, is the parallelism with Dante: "Alle figure di costui possiamo noi con nuova similitudine agguagliar i versi di Dante." Guarini's 'Tasso' also goes into Michelangelo's mode of representation, which brings out the hardness of the muscles; but he is not repelled by this, as the dialogue character of 'Aretino' in Dolce's earlier text was. Rather, this powerful version of the body is now an aesthetic choice more than equal to Raphael's loveliness (Guarini 1610, 25–26).

Michelangelo, Tintoretto and Dante are exponents of the forceful, sometimes negligent, brushstroke or verse and of a certain violence of emotion, whereas Raphael and Petrarch work diligently on the finesse and grace of their art (Guarini 1610, 26–27).

This comparison works for music just as well, as there are composers who aim more at elegant loveliness, and others who espouse harshness in the interest of *mimesis*:

il Petrarca è somigliante a quel Musico, il quale ne' suoi figurati componimenti con la dolcezza, e con la leggiadria, va spargendo il diletto, studiandosi sovra ogn'altra cosa di non offender l'orecchie, con isquisita soavità lusingandole; Dante poi a quell'altro è molto simile, che il suo diletto va rintracciando per altri vestigi; per ciò che vuol egli derivarlo dalla imitatione di quelle parole, ch'egli imprende a figurare con le sue note. E per conseguir questo suo fine, non teme durezza, non fugge asprezza, ne schifa l'istessa dissonanza, contra l'arte artificiosa (Guarini 1610, 13).

The *asprezza* of dissonance is, of course, the main analogy between Dante's *canzone* and its musical setting by Marenzio, which was the point of departure of this chapter. From Guarini's perspective, this harshness is a means of *imitatione*, but, interestingly, its stronger forms seem to be hard to reconcile with the rules of art. It is therefore "contra l'arte artificiosa", a new art that departs from the rules of tradition or at least neglects them. Dante

non teme di metter mano à voci dure, non usate, ed istrane; ne schiffa egli alle volte concetti umili, e molte fiate, a' gusti troppo delicati, stomachevoli, per meglio esprimere col mezzo di essi i più nobili, e gravi (Guarini 1610, 24).

– and he thus arrives at a new form of poetry:

la grandezza di lui nasce principalmente dal essersi sottratto con nuova sorte di poesia alla catena di certe regole, ed alla strettezza di alcune leggi. (Guarini 1610, 12).

The innovative gesture and the idea of breaking rules in this text are part of the new baroque aesthetics of the early seventeenth century. But the idea of a violent, harsh and somehow neglected art will not immediately bear fruit. Only much later, in the eighteenth century, a new generation of readers of Dante will rediscover this side of the Florentine poet and rethink their own neoclassical poetics on the base of it (see below, 3.3.4).

### 3.3.2.5 Michelangelo and Dante

As has been shown in 3.3.2.4, comparing Michelangelo to Dante was commonplace from the middle of the sixteenth century onward. Varchi, Giambullari, Vasari, Condivi and others tried to find arguments in favour of a deep affinity between the two artists, but in reality had little of substance to offer apart from the fact of Michelangelo's love of Dante as such (Armour 1998, 141–143).

A strong religious spirit can probably be attributed to both artists (Barolsky 1996) – or, at the very least, Michelangelo's adherence to the brand of Neoplatonism projected on Dante by Landino and his school (Friedrich 1964, 353) seemed to unite them in a common religious vision in the eyes of their Cinquecento

beholders. Yet only in a very few cases can one detect details of Michelangelo's representation of Divine subjects that could derive from Dante, such as the figure of Haman in the Sistine Chapel, who is shown crucified (as in Alighieri 2007, *Purgatorio* XVII, 25–27) rather than hanged, as in the Bible (Armour 1998, 144). As Peter Armour (1998) has shown, in many other cases, even where one would expect Michelangelo to follow Dante closely, there are strong differences in the way characters and events of the afterlife, the Last Judgment or Biblical History are rendered. Friedrich (1964, 355) stresses the difference between Dante's security in his own faith and Michelangelo's striving for a religious vision which he attained only in the asceticism of his old age. According to Aurenhammer (2018), Michelangelo took up elements from Dante, but transformed them consciously for his own purposes.

As regards their conception of nature and the calling of art and the artist, the two masters do have something in common, but even here, the differences are more interesting than the analogies. Thus, Dante stresses the transience of human art and its glory (Alighieri 2007, *Purgatorio* XI, 103–106), whereas Michelangelo, at least in a typically hyperbolic love lyric, claims to celebrate his lady in a way that will remain constant for a thousand years (Buonarroti 1960, Nr. 239, Armour 1998, 154). Nevertheless, for both artists, art is divine. As Peter Armour points out, the difference lies, as it were, in the direction of movement of their conceptions of art: for Dante, art follows God's daughter, nature (Alighieri 2007, *Inferno* XI, 97–105) and thus can be seen as 'descended' from God; for Michelangelo, "painting and sculpture are imitations of nature which strive upwards to conquer the transience of the natural world in the attempt to detect the Ideal Beauty dispersed throughout natural creation" (Armour 1998, 167).

In his poetry, even though Michelangelo's *concetti* and some of his rhetorical devices are of an eclectic Petrarchist kind (Friedrich 1964, 330; Armour 1998, 154–158), he does differ from mainstream Petrarchism stylistically – but this difference, while it has a strong anticlassicist bent (Friede 2016), cannot easily be described as Dantism. According to Hugo Friedrich (1964, 331), Petrarch remains the dominant outward stylistic model for Michelangelo, but at the same time he tries to distance himself from Petrarch's smooth elegance. Even if he does not actually imitate Dante in order to do this, he uses laconisms, cutting sounds, and eccentric metaphors reminiscent of the *Petrose*.

At the same time, Michelangelo's poems are more abstract than the verse of either Trecento masters. Even in Michelangelo's lower, burlesque register, there is almost never any sensual descriptive detail; just as he conceives sculpture as the art of taking away superfluous material, so can he be seen to reduce his lyrical discourse, from one version of a poem to the next, to a backbone of terse, hard speech (Friedrich 1964, 338). Few readers would judge Michelangelo's poetry to

be unsuccessful, but there has often been perceived a sense of fight against the linguistic material, sometimes ending in a stalemate (Friedrich 1964, 338).

The fact that many of Michelangelo's poems are unfinished has been commented upon in various ways: it may be due to the occasional nature of Michelangelo's writing as part of his "Life on Paper" (Barkan 2010), which almost never seems to have been undertaken with a view to publication, or Michelangelo may have believed that the thought he wanted to express required no further elaboration (Friedrich 1964, 343). This phenomenon has been compared to the famous *non finito* of some of his sculptures and may even have a spiritual background in the theology of Divine grace (Friede in course of print; see also Prodan 2014, Moroncini 2017) – but this is a religious concern that links Michelangelo more to contemporary confessional debates than to the world of Dante (see Ott/Aurenhammer/Föcking/Nova in course of print).

It has been claimed that Michelangelo tries to break up Petrarchism in search of a deeper pathos (Ferroni 2012, 144–145; Bruscaagli 2005, 84), perhaps similar to Dante's. Sometimes he develops a typically Petrarchist image like that of fire in a much more serious way than in Petrarch and his school (Friedrich 1964, 352), even giving it a Dantesque hue by using it as a symbol of poetic invention (Fenzi 2020, 402; Masi 2009a, 2009b, 2015). But in most of the (few) cases in which Michelangelo takes up lines or syntagms from the *Comedy*, he alters them in a more dialogical, distancing manner (Armour 1998, 161). Rarely can this be seen as modelling the new text on Dante's.

An interesting exception can be discerned in the madrigal "Ora in sul destro, ora in sul manco piede" (Buonarroti 1960, Nr. 162), in which Michelangelo asks his lady (Vittoria Colonna) a theological question about the degrees of happiness in Paradise. Even though, as Peter Armour (1998, 162) pointed out, "someone who knew the *Paradiso*" would have no need to ask this question, it is still a very Dantesque gesture, as 'Dante' first puts it to the inhabitants of the heaven of the moon and then suggests it silently to Beatrice, who answers it at length in *Paradiso* IV, 18–48. In both cases, the poet's lady is presented as a spiritual teacher, which is no common motif in early modern poetry.

Apart from such analogies and differences in content matter, one of the most striking characteristics of Michelangelo's poetry is its consequent avoidance of a stylized Trecento Tuscan as advocated by Bembo, and even though this does distance Michelangelo from Petrarch and the Petrarchists, it also results in a remarkable linguistic difference between his and Dante's language. Even his "lessico realistico ed espressivo" (Fenzi 2020, 383) and his characteristic way of mixing styles (Friedrich 1964, 378) are in reality quite different from Dante's. Perhaps one could say that eschewing the smoothness of the dominant models and working, instead, on the raw material of spoken Tuscan (Marazzini

2015, 129; Nencioni 1965), even beating it into strange and difficult syntactic forms, constitutes for Michelangelo a very personal form of expressive harshness, very different from Dante's *asprezza* in sound, but similar in spirit.

### 3.3.3 Cruelty. Tasso's Oblique Glance at Dante's *Asprezza* (Giulia Lombardi)

This chapter will follow Tasso's reaction to Dantesque harshness into the realm of epic poetry, as opposed to his theoretical discussion and lyrical avoidance of it detailed in 3.3.2.3. As discussed in the previous chapters, in the middle of the debate on Dante during the sixteenth century, the role of *asprezza* as a stylistic feature becomes central. In the following pages it will be argued that Dante's use of harshness as seen by sixteenth century theorists seems to relate to another term, which is not at the core of the discussions about literature and Dante in the sixteenth century and yet affords a specific poetological value that should not be underestimated: cruelty. As will be seen, Tasso 'translates' the harshness of Dante's lyrical *petrose* into epic cruelty.

The etymology of the Italian word *crudele*, which is almost synonymous with *crudo*, though less semantically flexible (for the slight differences between these two adjectives, see Pasquini 1970a and Pasquini 1970b), derives from Latin *crudus*, which means 'bloody, bleeding' and, in extension, 'uncooked, raw.' In its metaphorical significance and common lyrical use, the noun *crudeltà* and the adjective *crudele* mainly refer to love and qualify the struggles while being in love (regardless of whether this love is requited or not) as well as the codified feminine behaviour within the courtly game of love.

The Dantean *canzoni* known as *petrose* show a close link between *asprezza* and *crudeltà*. In fact, the terms *crudeltà* or *crudele* appear in almost all of the *petrose* where they serve to qualify the stubborn beloved lady, except for *Al poco giorno ed al gran cerchio d'ombra*. In *Io son venuto al punto della rota*, the adjective *crudele* qualifies the lady ("questa crudel che m'è data per donna", Alighieri 2011, v. 26, 459), who is referred to metaphorically as a "crudele spina" (Alighieri 2011, v. 49, 460), a painful stitch in the poet's heart. Similarly, in *Così nel mio parlar vogli'esser aspro* ("più natura cruda", Alighieri 2011, v. 4, 495; "la crudele che 'l [mio cuor] squatra", Alighieri 2011, v. 54, 496) and in *Amor, tu vedi ben che questa donna*, in which the lady appears as the personification and catalyst of all cruelties (Alighieri 2011, v. 6, 485: "d'ogni crudeltà si fece donna", "In lei s'accoglie [. . .] di tutta crudeltate il freddo", Alighieri 2011, v. 38, 486). Therefore, the theme of the *petrose* is not merely the poet's struggle to win a merciless lady, but

also her ruthless manner of not requiting the poet's love, an attitude which triggers his discursive *asprezza*.

Of all four poems, *Così nel mio parlar vogli'esser aspro* is the one with a particularly pronounced grammatical character due to the poet's stylistic and performative intention expressed from the first verse onwards. It ends on a *figura etymologica* of the verb *vendicare* ("vendicherei", v. 73, 497; "vendicar", v. 77), culminating in the last word of the last verse, with the noun *vendetta* (Alighieri 2011, v. 83, 497) directed at the lady. The 'revenge' imagined by the poet is the climax of his *asprezza*; the final dispute imagined in the last stanzas does not take place between the poet and Amor, but rather between the poet and the lady.

In the *petrose*, love ceases to be a courtly discursive game and is, instead, presented as a ruthless, exasperating battle. Consequently, the style and imagery used by the poet as a reaction to the lady's cruel attitude would be more appropriate to an epic poem than to a (love) lyric. In fact, non-metaphorical cruelty is an epic theme in Dante's *Inferno* in particular, in which the family of terms *crudeltà*, *crudo/crudele* and *crudelmente* occurs quite often (Cranston 1968) – to the point of being its "quasi parola dominante" (Pasquini 1970a), with a prevalent recurrence in the prominent canto 33, in which Dante visits Antenòra and meets the nobleman Ugolino della Gherardesca. The latter will tell Dante about his death by starvation, which is defined "cruda" ("come la morte mia fu cruda", *Inf.* 33, 19, Alighieri 2007, 983).

The link between harshness and cruelty in the sixteenth century, especially in the context of the debate on Dante, is very much of a stylistic nature. *Crudeltà* is often listed along with other terms of the semantic field of terribility, becoming a sort of synonym for *asprezza*. For example, while talking about harsh consonants like R, S and Z in his *Difesa di Dante*, Carlo Lenzone asserts that the *asprezza* of a word depends on the presence of those letters, qualified as "crude" (Lenzone 1556, 127–128). When discussing *asprezza*, Gian Giorgio Trissino, in a Dante quotation, mentions that words that are rather "irsute" contribute to the "vehemenzia" (Trissino 1529, VII and *passim*) of the discourse, which goes along with its *asprezza* (see 3.3.2.1 above for the connexion between Dante's theory of hirsute words in *De vulgari eloquentia* and the question of harshness).

Torquato Tasso will take up the question of harshness and cruelty as well as the 'harsh' version of the battle of love presented in Dante's *Petrose* and insert the whole complex in a decidedly epic, stylistically elevated frame, with a pointed reference to Dante and, at the same time, to the *romanzo* tradition of female knights in armour, who engage both in battles of love and in real battles.

Tasso's comments about Dante's oeuvre as well as Dante's influence on Tasso's oeuvre have largely been discussed by critics (Fubini/Negri 1970; Nolan

1985). It is noteworthy, however, how Tasso's use of Dantean *asprezza* within the *Gerusalemme liberata* evolves towards a representation of cruelty.

In a passage in the last canto of *Gerusalemme liberata* we follow the perspective of Soldano, and the narrator asserts that the war between the Saracens and the Christians, which has finally led to the victory of the Christians and to the deliverance of Jerusalem from the Saracens, was as an expression of the “*aspra* tragedia dello stato umano” (Tasso 1979, XX, 73, 476, emphasis mine). This utterance can be read both metonymically with regard to mankind in general and poetologically, as a justification of the text, which is coming to its end in these stanzas: not only are the battles between Christians and Saracens harsh in their literary representation, they also stand for the human condition, the ‘real’ harsh tragedy that Tasso's narrator describes to the very end in canto XX.

On a poetological level, the harsh tragedy was represented in the previous cantos through the comprehensive use of categories constitutive of the tragic genre (such as *hamartia*, cf. Regn 2014), the display of feelings and (as regards the dramatic nature of tragedy) by mentions of the aspect of *mise en scène* in some passages (e.g. XII, 54).

However, the more brutal scenes detailed within *Gerusalemme liberata* are chiefly characterized not by theatrical vocabulary, but by a use of *evidenzia* (Kemmann 1996), which is, according to Tasso, better suited to the epic genre than to other genres:

Si [. . .] dee usare l'ordine naturale di parlare [. . .] è in lei [i.e. narrazione] richiesta quella probabilità e quella che da' Latini è detta *evidenzia*, da' Greci *energia*; da noi si direbbe *chiarezza* o *espressione* non men propriamente; ma è quella virtù che ci fa quasi veder le cose che si narrano, la quale nasce da una diligentissima narrazione, in cui niuna cosa sia tralasciata. (Tasso 1977, 363).

The epic poem *Gerusalemme liberata* thus refers to several consolidated literary genres and plays with some of their characteristics and boundaries (Günter 1986; Stierle 1986; Regn 2014). Within this framework, Tasso pays tribute to Dante Alighieri not only by a conspicuous use of *evidenzia* similar to Dante's featuring of it in the *Commedia*, but also by evoking the specific constellation of *asprezza* found in Dante's *petrose* (Gibbons 2000). What is striking is that within the thematic complex contained in them, Tasso chooses to focus particularly on the cruelty of the beloved person. In the Dantean *canzoni*, this cruelty is in fact the reason why the poet expresses himself with harshness. Tasso takes Dante's lyrical setting apart and reassembles it in a specifically epic manner, in which cruelty has a central role and is, in fact, exploited on all its levels of significance.

It is true that Tasso's theoretical writings about the epic poem lack a targeted analysis of cruelty, as opposed to the remarkably specific treatment of *asprezza* as

a signal for *grandezza*, *gravità* and “un non so che di magnifico e di grande” (*Discorsi del poema eroico*, V, in Tasso 1977, 316–317). But while discussing *asprezza* and mentioning the use of it in Dante’s *Commedia*, Tasso recalls the episode of Ugolino: within the epical sublime, he singles out a particularly cruel example, and (as stated above) one that explicitly uses the adjective *cruda* for the manner of the count’s death. This may not be a poetics of cruelty, but it does show a suggestive conceptual vicinity, and despite the lack of a true theoretical discussion of it, a look at *Gerusalemme liberata* shows that Tasso’s prominent epic poem is based on a complex examination of the idea of cruelty. This amplifies what David Gibbons, addressing Tasso’s use of *asprezza*, has defined as a “general strategy of re-literalizing lyric metaphor” (Gibbons 2000, 94–95). Topoi of lyric imagery such as a war-like love (found in Dante but also in other poets) are translated into literal narrative and inserted into the context of the epic poem (Gibbons 2000, 86).

This is at its most obvious in the famous and intense duel in which Tancredi and Clorinda engage in canto XII, in which the semantic levels of love and war intermingle and display forms of cruelty in which both the traditional lyric aspects of the ‘cruelty of love’, as well as cruelty as a mere act of violence converge, and which will be treated below.

“Ahi quanto è crudo nel ferire” (Tasso 1979, III, 19, 55) – this is what Erminia responds when questioned by Aladino about Tancredi in canto III of *Gerusalemme liberata* while both characters observe the beginning of the first battle between the Christian and the Saracen troops from a hill. Erminia’s utterance – as well as the whole of the canto – plays a central role to a reading of the poem that takes the perspective of cruelty into account.

Allusions to cruelty within the *Gerusalemme liberata* relate primarily to scenes of violence: coarse brutality can be observed in battle scenes when the Christian and Saracen armies clash (in cantos III, VII, IX, XI, XIX, XX). More subtle violence is inflicted in the duels, which are essential to the poem’s architecture in many respects (in cantos VI, XII, XIX, XX). Finally, the cruelty of love, which involves the main female and male characters of the poem and pits them against each other (in cantos VI, XVI, XX). This last aspect proves an essential connecting element to the *romanzo* tradition and with some lyrical paradigms like the one in Dante’s *petrose*. There is an important nuance, however: in Tasso’s epic poem, it is rarely the lady who is cold-hearted and therefore cruel, but rather the male characters, the undiscussed heroes of the epic action, Rinaldo and Tancredi. Both are embroiled in impossible love affairs with Saracen women; these liaisons reflect the war in which the Christians are involved against the Saracens. In both kinds of battle, the winner will be the combatant who acts more cruelly. The adverb *crudelmente* is only uttered within the poem to refer to Rinaldo (Tasso 1979, V, 45, 107), making him one of the cruellest characters in the poem. In fact,



Rinaldo, the knight who would seem better suited than Tancredi to representing the *romanzo* hero (Güntert 1986a, 60–62), experiences an increase in strength and power over the course of the poem whose climax undoubtedly comes in the last canto when the Christians celebrate their victory over the Saracens. Here, Rinaldo plays a key role, acting far beyond the limits of accepted chivalric behaviour and therefore acting cruelly. Excited by the imminent victory, Rinaldo feels a thirst for blood, which leads him to perform acts that are both horrible and incredible:

Poich'eccitò de la vittoria il gusto  
 l'appetito del sangue e de le morti  
 Nel fero vincitore, egli fe' cose  
 incredibili, orrende e mostuose.  
 (Tasso 1979, XX, 54, 471)

Rinaldo's cruelty is judged by the narrator as coarse, brutal, monstrous. Hence his thirst for blood is gratuitous. But Rinaldo is also a cruel lover in the traditional sense. Involved in a love affair with Armida, he leaves her to return to war and to his epic destiny; the woman, who is herself a victim of "crudo Amor" (Tasso 1979, IV, 92, 94), will then address him as "crudele" (Tasso 1979, XVI, 44, 365 and *passim*) and begin to develop a desire for revenge ("[. . .] io vuo' vendetta", Tasso 1979, XVII, 46, 384). It is interesting to recall here that David Gibbons has compared precisely Rinaldo to Dante's stubborn "donna Pietra" (cf. Gibbons 2000, 96).

It has to be taken into account, however, that Rinaldo's behaviour towards Armida opens up a path of salvation to her. The cruelty of love transforms her from a diabolic *femme fatale* into his 'handmaiden' and thereby into an *ancilla Domini* (XX, 136). Violence and even cruelty thus motivate or energize a remarkable change of character and ethos in Armida. On a theological level, this can be read as a dramatization of the possibility, but also the difficulty of repentance and reversion afforded to sinners; on a poetological level, it seems to be one part of Tasso's answer to the path of conversion Ariosto sketches in the *Orlando furioso* for his character Ruggiero, the other, 'tragic' half being the fate of Clorinda at the hands of Tancredi.

In fact, despite Rinaldo being addressed openly as *crudele*, it proves even more fruitful in the context of cruelty to observe the character of Tancredi and the way he deals with cruel acts, as reported by the narrator as well as by other characters. Beside the popular and widely commented cantos VI and IX, a canto that gains a central role in this regard is, as previously asserted, the third one, in which the Christian paladin enjoys his entrance to the stage of war. At this point in the narration, the first battle is under way between the Christians and the Saracens, reported by the narrator from two perspectives: from the midst of the battle and from the hill where the emir Aladino and Erminia observe the battle from afar. In Erminia's utterance about Tancredi ("Ahi quanto è crudo nel ferire! a

piaga/ ch'ei faccia, erba non giova od arte maga", Tasso 1979, III, 19, 55) the ambivalence of the concept of cruelty is displayed. Cruelty is to be understood here, on the one hand, in a figurative sense and refers both to Erminia's unrequited love and to the literary tradition of the *piaga d'amore*, which had been the cause of the poet's *asprezza* in Dante's *petrose*. That being said, on the other hand, cruelty is also meant here in its literal sense: the fact that the "buon Tancredi" (Tasso 1979, III, 16, 55) is presented as a ferocious soldier. This latter one is, of course, the meaning conveyed to Aladino in the dialogue, whereas the metaphorical meaning is Erminia's secret, made available to the reader by the context. On the metaphorical level, Erminia assumes the role of the poet in Dante's *petrose*: rejected in love, she feels torn; Tancredi acts towards her in the way that the stubborn lady did towards Dante's lyrical subject.

Erminia's double meaning in her scene with the emir shows that, contrary to Rinaldo, whose cruelty is presented either literally or as a metaphor, Tancredi is the centre of a multi-layered construct of cruelty. Tancredi is embroiled in love stories with two Saracen women: Erminia and Clorinda. The relationship with Clorinda is highly complex and its complexity culminates in the well-known emotional duel that plays out in canto XII. A first anticipation of this duel is evoked in canto III, when Clorinda and Tancredi meet for the second time and duel for the first time – with Erminia watching over them from the hill. Canto III is thus of central importance to the poem's structure with regard to cruelty because all layers of metaphorical and literal cruelty meet here: Erminia's looks and feelings directed at Tancredi (without being reciprocated); Tancredi and Clorinda exchanging looks, feelings and swords. The swords announce the death of Clorinda by Tancredi's hand that will take place in the duel of canto XII. This first duel, far away from the battlefields where both armies are fighting, carries the same erotic semantic that will characterise the duel in canto XII (Regn 2014; 55; Güntert 1986a, 59; Zatti 1998, 168). In this sense, the third canto lays the foundations for a structure that will develop the different threads of cruelty within the poem.

Canto III is also important because of the presence of Argante, who violently kills here for the first time in the plot. In the final duel between Argante and Tancredi, which will take place in canto XIX, the crescendo of brutality and the duelling beyond any knightly art ("la pugna ha manco d'arte ed è piú orrenda.", Tasso 1979, XIX, 19, 429) will be particularly striking. Here, Tancredi will leave aside his "pietà" (Regn 2014, 157, n. 70) – or perhaps in this case his overload of pity, purged as he might be by the tragedy of killing Clorinda, which he has lived through. Tasso was in fact a follower of an interpretation of Aristotelian *katharsis* in the sense of the purgation of an excess of horror and pity (Regn 1983). This time, Tancredi achieves a "sanguigna vittoria" (Tasso 1979, XIX, 27, 431) not in a tragic, but in an epic fashion, yet equally brutal.

The tragic counterpart of this final victory is, as already indicated, the famous duel scene between Tancredi and Clorinda in canto XII. It shows Tancredi's consciously cruel way of fighting and, without his realising it, also his cruelty in love. At the same time, Clorinda is shown as equally violent and, moreover, disdainful with regard to him. The cruelty being disclosed here takes the paradigm of the battle of love and the imagery of Dante's "Così nel mio parlar" to the extreme.

Clorinda, who has only had rather minor appearances within the poem until now, gains a more precise profile as a fighter in canto XI (see comment on the canto in Tasso 2014), when the second terrible battle between the two armies takes place. Cruel herself in canto XI ("[. . .] desiosa di ferire, al varco/la bella arciera i suoi nemici attende", Tasso 1979, XI, 28, 254), she will die in canto XII, the victim of Tancredi's strength and unawareness, but also of her own provocative boastfulness about having burnt the siege tower of the Christians (XII, 61), in a scene that could be seen as the ultimate re-literalisation of the metaphor of cruelty in love within the poem.

On the one hand, the duel with Tancredi, which – similar to their first duel in canto III – takes place far away from a public scene and in the middle of the night, is a culmination of feelings that push both duellists to attempt to outdo each other in their physical brutality and violent emotions. On the other hand, the cruelty of love reaches a dead end: Clorinda and Tancredi are two sides in a love story that could never be fulfilled – and this might be interpreted as cruel enough. Furthermore, Clorinda, who, unlike Tancredi is well aware of the identity of her duellist, is consciously involved in a very subtle game of denial and provocation. Tancredi, on the other hand, cannot express his love to her because he is unaware of her identity; during the duel, he is *unable* to engage in the love game. This impossibility is amplified through his obsessive pleasure in hurting this Saracen soldier whose identity he does not yet know but whom he does know to be responsible for the burning of the tower ("Vede Tancredi in maggior copia il sangue/ del suo nemico, e [. . .] Ne gode e superbisce", Tasso 1979, XII, 58, 283). His tragic blindness culminates in *superbia*, which he will later regret. His *hamartia* in killing Clorinda makes him a tragic hero, guilty of cruelty against the person he loves (Regn 2014).

When, later on, Tancredi enters the magic forest to bury Clorinda, the motif of cruelty will be echoed (Tasso 1979, XIII, 8, 298). Addressed again as "crudel" (Tasso 1979, XIII, 42, 306) by an enchanted cypress, he is reminded of the gravity of his acts and loses control of himself. It is at this moment that the decline of this heroic character begins; the *selva* as a setting of this scene might be a nod to the opening of Dante's epic poem. It is important to note, however, that just like Dante's, this forest is a realm of evil (until its liberation by Rinaldo). The reflection on Tancredi's cruelty dramatized in it is truthful enough, but at the same time a diabolic machination, which draws Tancredi into the inactivity

of the tragically failed, rather than setting him free to fight as an epic hero. Only in the last canto will he regain part of his strength and lose the exaggerated “pietà” of the tragic hero, fight, and collapse exhausted.

Stylistically, Tasso takes up some of the sound qualities of Dantean *asprezza*, such as a hiatus, mitigated by elision, but exacerbated by a clash of consonants and strong monovocalism, in one of Armida’s speeches:

Che fa più meco il pianto? altr’arme, altr’arte  
io non ho dunque?

(Tasso 1979, XVI, 64, 370)

This is the moment in which Armida becomes Rinaldo’s enemy, because he has left her to pursue his epic project. Its cacophony marks her failure (without being in the least comic or low), but at the same time menaces a future revenge (foiled by love and repentance in the last canto). In the battle scenes, almost any stanza displays harsh sounds. A good example is this description of the female warrior Gildippe valiantly taking on Altamoro:

Non è chi con quel fero omai s’affronte,  
né chi pur lunge d’assalirlo accenne.  
Sol rivolse Gildippe in lui la fronte,  
né da quel dubbio paragon s’astenne.  
Nulla Amazone mai su’l Termodonte  
imbracciò scudo o maneggiò bipenne  
audace sì, com’ella audace inverso  
al furor va del formidabil perso.

(Tasso 1979, XX, 41, 468)

A very strong rhyme paradigm displays *muta cum muta* and *muta cum liquida* (with further consonant clusters within the verses), and several hiatus-like synalephas contribute to the effect of *asprezza*, but the noble vocabulary, the rhetorical devices and the *versi spezzati* of the second half firmly root these effects within the sublime style. It is perhaps not by chance that two stanzas further on, Tasso features an allusion to an expression in Dante’s *Inferno*, but whatever harshness may link Tasso to Dante, it is stylistically transposed upwards.<sup>13</sup>

Tasso’s admiration for Dante was known to his contemporaries; the younger Guarini, in his fictitious dialogue *Il farnetico savio*, explicitly ascribes to the dialogue speaker ‘Tasso’ an appreciation of Dante’s *durezza* and *asprezza* (Guarini

<sup>13</sup> The end of the octave reads: “[. . .] che lassi,/ sdegnando, uom che si giaccia, e guardi e passi.” (Tasso 1979, XX, 43, 7–8, 468). The allusion is to *Inferno* III, 51, “Non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa” (Alighieri 2007, 86).

1610, 13; see chap. 3.2.4 above). In the *Gerusalemme liberata*, this esteem is partially shown in his re-functioning of Dante's harshness towards a display of a tragic and an epic representation of cruelty. Thus, Tasso succeeds in adjusting the concept of *asprezza* in favour of its suitability within the noble genres, while he eschews it for his lyrical production (see above). This strategy might be read as a correction and appropriation of the tradition of *asprezza* within Tasso's classicist poetics as well as a contribution to dignifying Dante's epic qualities at a time in which the stylistic value of the latter's oeuvre has not yet been fully recognised.

### 3.4 Uncultivated Roughness: Towards a New Appreciation of Dante in the Eighteenth Century (Florian Mehlretter)

During the eighteenth century, new ways of appreciating Dante emerged, but most of them with little regard for stylistic aspects. Rather than discovering new sides to Dante, most critics modified or reversed traditional judgments on the features of his work that were already in focus (Auerbach 1929). Writers of the first, Arcadian phase, and especially Vincenzo Gravina (1708, 126) in his *Della ragion poetica*, still sought to integrate Dante in a classicist narrative of the kind proposed by early modern authors like Boccaccio (in the 14<sup>th</sup> book of his *Genealogiae Deorum gentilium*) or Lilio Gregorio Giraldi (in his 1545 *Historiae Poetarum tam Graecorum quam Latinorum Dialogi decem*) in that his sublime force is seen as an effect of the divine origins of poetry in general (Mehlretter 2020b, 52). Giambattista Vico, in an unpublished preface to a new Dante edition written around 1730 (and later known as "Giudizio sopra Dante"), elaborates a more secular version of this account, when he compares Dante's archaic strength to Homer's: both benefit from a coincidence of personal genius with an early stage of development in the history of their respective civilizations, when the fresh soil of culture is as yet fertile, as opposed to the tired, sterile later phases. This state of history is also propitious to the historical substance and reliability of their poetry, for before the advent of reflective thinking and, hence, the possibility of manipulating the truth, all poets are trustworthy historians. According to Vico, both Dante and Homer are therefore 'naturally sublime' poets and thus in no need to be taught by scholars of Longinus (Vico 1852, 41–43).

It is this link with the Longinian sublime that becomes productive in the second half of the eighteenth century and which led to a more aesthetically precise appreciation of at least some aspects of Dante's style. In 1769, Saverio Bettinelli

published his treatise, *Dell'entusiasmo delle belle arti*, which proposed a new brand of classicism (as opposed to this author's own earlier *Lettere Virgiliane*), privileging the sublime and the terrible (Mehlretter 2020c, 256–261). Poetic creation, according to this view, is based on enthusiasm or *furor*, and it is the mark of a genius to be able to attain to aesthetic perfection even in the midst of great emotional turmoil (Bettinelli 1769, 51).

Having read Longinus, Boileau, Addison and Burke, but disagreeing with them in some respects, Bettinelli developed his own theory of the sublime as of a terrible experience that shakes the soul. It is often triggered by the presence of natural phenomena, but also by mere thoughts of tombs, darkness, silence and such. This can likewise be achieved by art, and in this context, Bettinelli mentions Dante's Ugolino (*Inferno* XXXII and XXXIII) as an example (Bettinelli 1769, 122–123). The Ugolino episode is in fact one of the two most widely read parts of the entire *Comedy* in the nineteenth century (the other being the section on Paolo and Francesca in *Inferno* V).

In his conception of sublime heroes, Bettinelli (1769, 238) likewise focused on the terrible, with a new preference for grand, violent villains, brought to life and, especially, to form by the heroic, rapturous genius of the poet. With this idea of a strong, uncontrolled enthusiasm that nevertheless results in faultless form, Bettinelli faced a dilemma that has existed since Renaissance Platonism, between the idea of classical perfection and the disorder that might be associated with poetic rapture. In order to bridge this gap, he linked the seemingly inexplicably perfect and tasteful products of enthusiasm to a poetics akin to the Renaissance concept of *sprezzatura*, and thus a specifically aesthetic approach to irregularity:

Un non so che di selvaggio e d'incolto, come in Dante; dello sregolato e capriccioso, come nell'Ariosto; il feroce e lo smisurato in Tintoretto. (Bettinelli 1769, 90)

Dante's allegedly wild and uncultivated roughness is thus presented as an aesthetic quality in its own right, ennobled by the *je-ne-sais-quoi* formula sometimes used by Tasso to describe stylistic effects such as the sublime (Tasso 1977, II, 316). It is here paired with the seemingly irregular (or at any rate non-Aristotelian) poetics of Ariosto and the emotional 'ferocity' of Tintoretto, who is said to eschew classicist measure.

Thus, as early as in the middle of the eighteenth century, Dante is chosen as champion of a new poetics, which contained many elements later to be developed by the Romantics. It is important to note, however, that this new reading of Dante took up some key terms of Renaissance criticism, not just the concept of *furor poeticus* or of a partly Longinian sublime, but also the idea that Dante's rough style has its very own forcefulness and sublimity.