

Renaissance
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Aretino's Life and His Afterlife in England

Jackson C. Boswell

PIETRO Aretino lived from 1492 to 1556. In English-speaking lands, he is far better known for his tarnished reputation as a pornographer than he is by actual readers. This fame (or rather infamy) is based mainly on a few lascivious sonnets he wrote as a youth (about which, more later). He was also rather well known for three slim volumes of raw satire known collectively as *Il ragionamenti*. This work purportedly records the conversations of a couple of middle-aged women who talk frankly about the career opportunities open to females. A talented trollop tells her bosom buddy that society has but three roles for a woman: she must be either a nun, a wife, or a whore; and she proceeds to describe her own experiences in all three roles in graphic detail. Her life in a convent was a never-ending orgy of food, drink, and sex (indeed, the hypocrisy of life in the nunnery left her so disillusioned that she left after a few days). She regales us with stories of wives who easily deceive the most vigilant husbands and she concludes her narrative with explicit accounts of the pleasant life enjoyed by courtesans. These dialogues were not only a great commercial success but they also garnered considerable critical acclaim at home and abroad.

In Italy in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, however, Aretino's fame was more firmly based on his unfinished epic *Marfisa*, which takes up where Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* leaves off, and on his devotional works, which include *The Seven Psalms of David* (on which Sir Thomas Wyatt based his Lutheran-leaning *Penitential Psalms*),¹ *The Three Books of the Humanity of Christ*, *The*

¹ Raymond B. Waddington, "Pietro Aretino, Religious Writer," *Renaissance Studies* 20 (2006): 277–92.

Story of Genesis, The Life of St. Catherine of Alexandria, and The Life of the Virgin Mary (and for these he was called “the divine Aretino”). He was also admired for four witty comedies and a tragedy, *Orazia*, that is perhaps the best Italian tragedy of the sixteenth century; and for his carefully edited collections of over 3,000 letters to rich and powerful friends, enemies, and acquaintances. An eyewitness recounts what happened when a new volume of Aretino’s letters first went on sale in Rome:

I never saw such a press of . . . men striving to be the first to purchase your new book. A sign, ‘Letters of the Divine Pietro Aretino,’ was hung up. Suddenly there was a great crowd of people, followed by as much noise and jostling as there is in certain cities when, on Holy Thursday, they give alms to the poor. And so great was the sale that I can assure you that there were plenty who went off with empty hands.²

Although this son of a shoemaker from Arezzo began his own career as a mere servant in the household of a rich Roman merchant, Pietro gained overnight fame in Rome by publishing the “last will and testament” of Hanno, Pope Leo X’s recently deceased elephant, in which the beast bequeathed assorted portions of his anatomy to various princes of the Church with the proviso that they cease and desist the practice of their notorious vices, which he then proceeded to recount in detail. In this will, incidentally, England’s Cardinal Woolsey was pointedly left nothing at all; inasmuch as he was not resident at the papal court, Aretino said he could hardly be counted among the living. Naturally the publication was anonymous, but Pietro was not one to hide his light under a bushel, so the secret slipped out. The pleasure-loving Pope Leo X was diverted from his genuine grief over the death of his pet pachyderm, and he took Aretino into his service in order that he might write pleasant things about him and needle his enemies.

In his new position, Aretino cultivated sources high and low for gossip and perfected the art of the pasquinade, in which witty verses

² Bernardo Theodolo, qtd. in Thomas Caldecot Chubb, *Aretino, Scourge of Princes* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1940), 343. See also Brian Richardson, *Printing, Writers, and Readers in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 92–95.

detailing the latest scurrilous gossip were posted on a statue in a busy marketplace and therefore seen and read by many, collected by an enterprising printer, and thence spread throughout the city and beyond. He gained further notoriety by writing a series of sonnets that were published, along with sexually explicit engravings by Marcantonio Raimondi, of sixteen exceedingly lewd, anatomically correct drawings by Giulio Romano. Raimondi was condemned to death for gross indecency, but Aretino begged the pope to spare the life of a prodigiously talented artist and thereby created enemies that put his own life in danger. When his papal protector died and his successor, the painfully pure and devout Adrian VI, was elected by a political fluke, Aretino found it expedient to depart Rome, for he had written extensively in favor of the election of Cardinal Giulio de'Medici, the late Leo's nephew. An arch-enemy in the papal court ordered his assassination, but he survived five stab wounds and eventually found a refuge in the Serene Republic of Venice, and there he continued to reside for most of the rest of his life.

His sources of information throughout Italy continued to provide him with ample grist for his mill, and he ground out scorching satiric verses about the vices of the high and mighty from his haven in tolerant Venice. Soon, instead of being a suppliant courtier whose fate depended on the whim of a rich patron, Aretino found himself courted. Many a prince had the foresight to send him costly gifts *not* to publish, not least of whom was Henry VIII. Thomas Nash tells us in *The Unfortunate Traveller* that the English envoy to Venice paid Aretino a pension of 400 crowns a year (over \$100,000 in today's currency) in order that his "cause should be favorably heard." The records show that Thomas Cromwell wrote himself an *aide memoir* to send Peter Aretino a reward for services rendered;³ shortly thereafter, Edmund Harvel, England's ambassador to Venice, sent the king a note. He wrote that Pietro Aretino, "much famous for his wit and liberty of writing in th' Italian tongue," had asked him to send this book of his letters "lately printed and dedicate[d] to your Majesty, whom he venerates both for the 300 cr[own]s you before gave him and for your virtues. He has long been persecuted

³ *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, in the Reign of Henry VII*, ed. James Gairdner and R. H. Brodie, 37 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1862–1932), 15:71 (no. 195).

by the Roman prelates, whose detestable vices he has scourged with his vehement and sharp style. The man is poor, and depends only on the liberality of princes. He expects some small reward from [Your Grace] whom, in return, he will glorify with his pen in spite of the Roman prelates.”⁴

If the price was right, Aretino would indeed glorify his benefactors. For which, he is sometimes called the first public-relations man. He was quite up-front about it: pay-up or he would publish the unvarnished truth; for which he was called a blackmailer (and worse). If, however, he saw that a prince was transgressing, he would publish a frank open letter calling on him to reform his ways; for this, Ariosto admiringly called him “the scourge of princes” in *Orlando Furioso* (46.105), and the apt epithet has stuck. He vociferously defended the rights of working men (and women) and was famously liberal in charitable giving to those who had suffered reversals of fortune. Moreover, instead of straining for a high literary style, his works were written in the language really spoken by men. He was easy to read and easy to understand, so naturally he was adored and defended by mobs of the unwashed.

When he was chided by the learned lady Vittoria Colonna for wasting his talent, Aretino responded: “I have to consider the tastes of our contemporaries; amusement and scandal are the only things that pay; people burn with concupiscence as you burn with an inextinguishable angelic flame.” He noted that he had sent a serious book to François I^{er} five years before and was still awaiting an acknowledgment; however, the year before he sent the king a copy of *Cortigiana: or, The Way of Courtiers* (a satire on Castiglione’s work) and by return post received another gold chain. So he asked: “Why write serious books at all? After all I write for my bread.”⁵

Aretino’s works were printed in several Italian city-states and translated in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, and Spain. More often than not, engraved portraits graced the title pages of his works, and his became one of the best-known faces in Europe. The English, however, were reluctant to publish him openly. In 1584 and 1589, the London bookseller John Wolfe

⁴ Ibid., 17:462 (no. 841).

⁵ Qtd. in the anonymous review of *Women of the Renaissance* in *The Literary World* (23 November 1906), 404.

commissioned John Windet to print several parts of *Il ragionamenti* in Italian, but although printed in London the title pages claim they were printed in Melagrano and Bengodi (the first would be Pomegranate and the latter a fictitious place invented by Boccaccio). *Quattro comedie del divino Pietro Aretino* was published in 1588 without credit to printer or bookseller and with no place of publication noted. Even John Hawkins's translation of *A Paraphrase upon the Seaven Penitentiall Psalmes* was published abroad in 1635, again in deep anonymity. Nevertheless it is clear Aretino's works were not unknown to many English readers.

The very first reference to Aretino in an English-printed book is found in George Gylpen's 1579 translation of Philips van Marnix van St. Aldegonde's *Bee Hive of the Romishe Church*, in which the Dutchman cites Aretino's authority as a writer about sodomy:

[In the court of Rome] they write bookes of Sodomitrie, and all maner of incontinencie, and esteeme them for a godlie matter: like as have done, the Bishoppe Monsenr de la Casa, and Petro Aretino. There do they keepe common schooles, and dispute, whether Matrimonie is better than Sodomitrie. [In a shoulder note, he adds] Johannes de la Casa, Archbishop of Beneventa, hath written a booke in commendation of Sodomitrie, calling it, A godlie worke, & saying, That he tooke great delight in the same, and used no other bedfellow! . . . Petrus Aretinus hath bin likewise a great friend to Popes, and hath published many bookes, wherein he treates of many matters such as bawdrie, and caused manie filthie and unseemelie pictures to be made at Venice, and sundrie sortes of bysseeping to be printed, and made a booke and exposition upon the same.⁶

Just what "sundrie sortes of bysseeping" might be is a mystery, for *bysseeping* is not to be found in *OED* and the editors of *OED3* speculate that it may be a misprint for *bysleeping*, meaning heretical or unnatural behavior.

In 1579 Aretino is again linked with sodomy in the gloss to Spenser's *Shephearedes Calender*. In "January," Spenser writes that Hobbinol seeks to obtain Colin's love with daily suit and gifts of kids, cracklings, and early fruit, but Colin disdains them and re-

⁶ *The Bee Hive of the Romishe Church* (London, 1579), fol. 323v.

gifts them to Rosalind. Lest the reader mistake Hobbinol's motives, the passage is glossed: "In thys place seemeth to be some savour of disorderly love, which the learned call paederastice. . . . But let no man thinke, that herein I stand with Lucian or his develish disciple Unico Aretino, in defence of execrable and horrible sinnes of forbidden and unlawful fleshlinesse."⁷ *Unico Aretino* may be translated as *the one and only, the unique Aretino*, and in his defense, it may be said that he did not advocate "forbidden and unlawful fleshlinesse" but simply reported that it took place in venues high and low. Gabriel Harvey, Spenser's good friend, to whom he had dedicated *The Shepheardes Calender*, links the "Divine Aretino" with "worthy Ariosto, excellent Tasso, sweet Petrarch . . . four famous heroic poets as valorously brave as delicately fine."⁸ In another place he writes that until "unico Aretino" wrote, "Arte was a Dunse."⁹ Harvey was, however, ambivalent about Aretino: he coined the expression "to Aretinize" in order to express his loathing of Nash's *Choice of Valentines*, but Nashe (called by Thomas Lodge the "English Aretine")¹⁰ shows a greater appreciation for Aretino's genius than most of his contemporaries when he writes:

[T]his Aretine . . . was one of the wittiest knaves that ever God made. If out of so base a thing as inke there may be extracted a spirite, he writ with nought but the spirite of inke, and his stile was the spiritualtie of artes, and nothing else. . . . His penne was sharpe pointed like [a] ponyard. No leafe he wrote on, but was like a burning glasse to sette on fire all his readers. With more then musket shot did he charge his quill, where he meant to inveigh. . . . He was no timorous servile flatterer of the commonwealth wherein he lived. . . . Princes he spared not that in the least point transgrest. . . . If lascivious he were, he may answere with Ovid . . . My lyfe is chaste though wanton be my verse. Tell me . . . what good Poet is or ever was there, who had not had a little spice

⁷ *The Shepheardes Calender* (London, 1579), 2.

⁸ *Gabriel Harvey's Marginalia*, ed. G. C. More Smith (Stratford-upon-Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1913).

⁹ *Pierces Supererogation: or, A New Prayse of the Old Asse* (London, 1593), 10. Spenser and Harvey seem to have picked up the epithet "unico Aretino" from Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*.

¹⁰ *Wits Miserie, and the Worlds Madnesse Discovering the Devils Incarnat of This Age* (London, 1596), 57.

of wantonnes in dayes? . . . Aretine as long as the worlde lives shalt thou live. Tully, Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, were never such ornaments to Italy as thou hast beene. I never thought of Italy more religiously than England til I heard of thee. Peace to thy Ghost, and yet methinkes so indefinite a spirit should have no peace or intermission of paines, but be penning Ditties to the Archangels in another world.¹¹

After this brief flash of appreciation, writers returned to portraying Aretino as a purveyor of smut. Ben Jonson repeatedly mentions Aretino in *Volpone*. There Sir Epicure Mamon exclaims rapturously about the “oval room” he plans to construct with the wealth of his alchemical gold and says he will fill it with such erotic artworks that will make those associated with Aretino to appear quite dull (2.2). The city husband justifies prostituting his wife to the decrepit Volpone by contrasting him to some young lecher who “had read Aretine, connd all his printes, / Knew every quirke within lusts laborinth” (3.7). Lady Politick Would-Be includes Aretino in a list of poets that the English love to imitate—including Petrarch, Tasso, Dante, Guarrini, and Ariosto—and says she has read all of them; then she adds, “But for a desperate wit, there’s Aretine; only, his pictures are a little obscene” (3.4). This afterthought is, of course, a coy allusion to Raimondi’s engravings, but these casual references in a popular play clearly indicate that the English groundlings were expected to recognize the name *Aretino* and get the point.

John Donne took up the cry of condemnation in *Ignatius His Conclave*, in which he satirizes Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuits and speculates about matters of protocol in Hell. Who will have primacy: will it be such “innovators” as Copernicus, Columbus, or Machiavelli, or will it be Ignatius himself? In the process, Donne condemns “blasphemous” Aretino as one “who by a long custome of libellous & contumelious speaking against Princes, had got such a habit, that at last he came to diminish and disestemme God himselfe.”¹² This last bit is an allusion to an epitaph allegedly penned by an irate bishop that Aretino had satirized mercilessly. The bishop wrote “Here lies

¹¹ *The Unfortunate Traveller: or, The Life of Jacke Wilton* (London, 1594), H1^{r-v}.

¹² *Ignatius his Conclave; or, His Inthronisation of Loyola in Hell* (London, 1611), 96–97.

the Tuscan poet, Aretino. / He slandered all but God, Whom he left out / because he pleaded, 'Well I never knew Him.'"¹³

In *Areopagitica* Milton declined to name Aretino outright but described him as "that notorious ribald of Arezzo, dreaded, and dear to the Italian courtiers. I name him not for posterity's sake, whom Harry the 8, nam'd in merriment his Vicar of Hell." Even so, Milton added, "[Y]et those books must be permitted untoucht by the licencer."¹⁴

When the Italian expatriate Giovanni Torriano wrote a series of dialogues for English travelers, he likewise declined to refer to Aretino by name, but simply calls him "A." In a conversation featuring a foreigner and a Roman bookseller, one can easily imagine the tourist creeping up to the vendor and murmuring: "I am seeking the works of A." "You may seek them from one end of the Row to the other, and not find them," replies the bookseller. "And why?" "Because they are forbidden, both the *Postures* and *Discourses*, that embracing of men and women together in unusual manners, begets a scandal, and the Inquisition permits no such matters, it condemns all such sordid things."¹⁵ The *Discourses* to which the bookseller refers is, of course, Aretino's *Ragionamenti*, and the *Postures* alludes to *I modi*, Raimondi's engravings with Aretino's verses. So we see that by the mid-seventeenth century, Raimondi and Romano were ignored and the pictures as well as the verses were attributed to Aretino.

In 1660–61 a newspaper called *The Wandering Whore* was being hawked on the streets of London. The title page promised that it would report the activities of London's "crafty bawds, common whores, wanderers, pick-pockets, night-walkers, decoys, hectors, pimps and trappaners."¹⁶ Despite all this promising material, the paper died after half a dozen issues, of which only a handful survive. Although early catalogers assigned authorship to Aretino, it appears that an English "translator" took the title from a work erroneously

¹³ Qtd. in Beverly Ballard, "Aretino," *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Italian Literature*, ed. Rinalda Russell (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997), 18.

¹⁴ *Areopagitica* (London, 1644), 13–14.

¹⁵ *Piazza Universale. With a Supplement of Italian Dialogues* (London, 1666), 80.

¹⁶ Thomason Tracts E.1053 (3) and E.1053 (8).