ARETINO'S SATYR

Sexuality, Satire, and Self-Projection in Sixteenth-Century Literature and Art

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Acknowledgments

My entrapment with Aretino began in July 1984, when I bought a medal with an interesting reverse. Checking the numismatic literature on it, I was surprised to find that no one thought it meant what seemed obvious to me. This led to an article on the medals of Aretino and other essays investigating the iconography of certain medals and the motto on them. Aretino continued to be a roadblock detouring me from other projects; and, eventually, I had to accept that the distractions were not scattered researches, but pieces of an emerging book. At that point, it became necessary to learn more about Aretino's career and works, a ten-year project as it proved. My own discipline is English literature; and, conscious that I was trained as neither an Italianist nor an art historian, the Renaissance adage that the cobbler should stick to his last ('Ne sutor ultra crepidam') has echoed in my mind throughout. Compounding the handicap, I have inherited from my northern England ancestors a tongue that refuses to make recognizable Italian sounds, causing me to feel rather like the one-legged tap dancer from *Broadway Danny Rose.* Nonetheless, I have gotten by with a little help from my friends, and always relied on the kindness of strangers, many of whom have become friends in the process.

Charity does begin at home, I can attest. I am indebted to a number of Davis colleagues for assistance and encouragement: Everett Carter, Dennis Dutschke, Gus Foscarini, Seymour Howard, Adrienne Martín, David Nutter, Onnaca Heron, Jeff Ruda, Peter Schaeffer, Winfried Schleiner, and David Traill. I have relied heavily on the highly professional staff of Shields Library, particularly the indispensable Interlibrary Loan Department. I thank Clinton Howard, then Associate University Librarian, for expediting acquisition of the *Edizione nazio-*

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sively revised, were published previously as articles in *Renaissance Quarterly, English Literary Renaissance, The Medal,* and in the festschrift, *Books Have Their Own Destiny.* I am grateful to the editors and publisher for permission to reuse this material. During the later stages of preparing the book manuscript, I had the help of excellent research assistants, Michael Jackson, Lauren Rochholz, Kirsten Lunstrum, and Sean McDonnell. At the University of Toronto Press, my editor, Ron Schoeffel, has been exemplary for his professionalism, efficiency, and enthusiasm. Margaret Burgess imposed order on an unruly manuscript and Anne Laughlin expertly guided the book through production.

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Kathleen M. Ward, who has lived with Aretino nearly as long as did Caterina Sandella. As well as being my indispensable in-house computer expert, she has remained unfailingly interested, cheerful in black moments, has served as a sounding board, and contributed some of the best ideas. Kathie will understand why she shares billing with our friend, the late Peter V. Marinelli, my first cicerone in Italian studies. When I began writing about Aretino, Peter said, 'You've already achieved a *succès d'estime.* Are you now trying for a *succès de scandale?*' Later he remarked, 'I can see that you're having some very necessary *fun* with this stuff.' And it has been fun. A final debt: Lacey, Manchester Terrier and loyal companion, supervised the writing to the end, then, if Martin Luther can be believed, departed for a better place.

Introduction

This study of Pietro Aretino (1492–1556) examines his use of new media and new literary kinds to project a construct of self that, invariably, overwhelms any individual work.[1] Although he long has been branded a talented, but amoral, upstart with a colossal ego, there have been some flickers of recognition that Aretino mythologizes himself:

> When Aretino says that horses, a canal in Venice, and girls are all named after him, that he is the secretary of the world, he projects an image of himself as a giant ... Aretino emerges as an Italian Gargantua, forever eating at banquets, imbibing splendid wines, enjoying the pleasures of the couch. His letters are his *Vita*, and their publication assured the fame of his life.[2]

The concept of mythologizing the self takes one into the disputed territory of identity formation. In recent years some theorists have claimed that *self*, a sense of personal or individual identity, is an anachronistic imposition for humans in early modern times or, more radically, that identity always is a cultural construct. Such ideas would have seemed strange to people living in the sixteenth century, who firmly believed that they had an interior identity, a soul, and an exterior one, the social presentation that, indeed, was a cultural construct.[3]

This self-presentation was a matter of absorbing interest both to the Roman courtiers among whom Aretino first attracted public notice and to artists determined to enhance their social stature, a group with whom he had a lifelong affinity. A generation before Aretino's birth, the mutability and vulnerability of the social identity received a remarkable public demonstration in the *beffa* or practical joke that the

architect Filippo Brunelleschi played upon an acquaintance, the woodworker Manetto. In an elaborate conspiracy, Manetto was deprived of his own identity and convinced that he had become someone named Matteo. Locked out of his house and denied by relatives, friends, and clients, Manetto was dispossessed of his craft and imprisoned for debt; religious and temporal authorities, a priest and a judge, confirmed his new identity. Only when he fully accepted that he had become Matteo was the process reversed and, equally disconcertingly, Manetto divested of his new identity. Responding to a 'picture of self-alienation, which is more terrifying and cleverer than anything in Pirandello,' Mary McCarthy extolled the genius of Brunelleschi, who 'found the way to calculate the vanishing point, [and] could make a bulky man vanish or seem to himself to vanish, like a ball juggled by a conjuror, while still in plain sight.'[4]

Mediating between the interior, spiritual identity and the exterior, social identity would have been what rhetoricians called *ethos*, the moral essence or nature that an orator or writer would project to his audience. For Italian males who did not profess to be humanists, *ethos* likely was subsumed by a more multivalent term, *virtù*, which encompassed personal ethics or code of values, strength of character, and natural endowments – including, for artist or writer, his particular genius.[5] The two terms are parallel in that they describe a complex of innate and learned qualities that is internal, but manifested externally in honour or reputation – reception and public perception, in other words. This is the area of self-projection in which Aretino operated, and the subject of the present investigation. Aretino inverted Brunelleschi's vanishing act; like the conjuror pulling a rabbit from a hat, he made something where there appeared to be nothing. To be exact, rather than a rabbit, he produced a satyr. The term 'self-invention' would be appropriate, since, as in the rhetorician's process of *inventio*, he selected and combined commonplaces, *topoi*, staples from literary and artistic traditions, to create a public image. Despite knowledge to the contrary, however, we tend to think of rhetoric as simply a verbal art; and 'self-projection' perhaps better extends to the variety of graphic media that he exploited, as well as suggesting the aggressiveness of the campaign.

The opening chapter situates Aretino's role as a prophet of sexuality in a climate of religious heterodoxy and in the reclamation of erotic art from antiquity, showing that he early assimilated the literary personae of Pasquino and Priapus, and discusses the *Sonetti lussuriosi* as a pre-

cursor of his art criticism. Chapter 2 documents the stigmatizing of writing for the printing press as prostitution and Aretino's initial difficulty in transforming himself from court poet to *poligrafo*, a versatile writer for the vernacular press. Particularly in the *Lettere* he made the transition by modelling himself on Erasmus, from whom he learned how to project a portrait in print. Chapter 3 examines the visual portraits in two media, the woodcut author-portraits that were a highly important feature of the books Marcolini printed for him and the portrait medals that Aretino commissioned and distributed lavishly. Chapter 4 concerns the satyr imagery on the reverses of certain medals, announcing his intertwined sexuality and identity as a satirist. Chapter 5 traces his co-optation, again probably from Erasmus, of two cherished humanist commonplaces, the interrelated concepts of *serio ludere* and the Silenus of Alcibiades. It proceeds from the style of serious play to contemporary satyr art to portraits of Aretino stylized to resemble a satyr, evoking Alcibiades' description of Socrates – grotesque without and divine within. Finally, it takes up the other side of Alcibiades' analogy, Socrates as Marsyas, by reinterpreting the ceiling painting of *The Contest between Apollo and Marsyas*, which Tintoretto painted for Aretino's apartment. Aretino is represented as a judge and decides, I suggest, in favour of the satyr. An Epilogue looks at Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas* as a retrospective dialogue with Tintoretto and Aretino.

Unlike Flaubert's parrot or Lord Rochester's monkey, Aretino's satyr is entirely figurative, the personal device (*impresa*) that he chose to justify his profession of satirist through the satyr's legendary sexuality and truthfulness, later modifying and dignifying it with the Socratic satyr roles, Silenus and Marsyas. This subtle, allusive image construct seems to have been successful, understood and appreciated, in his own time, but it barely outlived the century. The mythic resonances soon were lost; and, although the sense of a powerful personality endures, the satyr identification flattened to a one-dimensional caricature of lasciviousness.

In good part this failure was the result of Aretino's success in the presentation of self. As an aspiring court poet in Rome, he studied the regnant model of behaviour, Castiglione's *Cortegiano*, and especially took to heart the lesson of *sprezzatura*: 'we may call that art true art which does not seem to be art; nor must one be more careful of anything than of concealing it' (1.26).[6] The pose was well understood in Rome; as a Venetian *poligrafo*, Aretino converted it into a complicated double-bluff, affecting the role of an artless naïf, a natural, untutored

genius. He wanted to be seen, like the satyr, as an embodiment of nature. His considerable erudition always was apparent to his literary and artistic inner circle, and is evident both in his appropriation of major humanist genres (letters, dialogues, sonnets, 'New Comedies') and in the extensive intertextuality (allusions, echoes, parodies) of his works. Nonetheless, his incessant attacks on pedantry, academism, and 'high' literary culture, his insistence that his writing is spontaneous and unstudied, his proclaimed aesthetic, 'follow nature,' all had their effect on his outer audience. The assertions of artlessness were accepted at face value in much the same way that the satyr image was understood only literally. This means that the self-mythologized 'Aretino' really may have been of an age and not for all time. 'But,' as Jacob Burckhardt wisely said, 'historical criticism will always find in Aretino an important study.'[7] Before undertaking that study, however, it will be helpful to review Aretino's career and the misapprehension to which it has been subject – that is, the interrelated issues of biography, reception, and reputation.

Aretino's Life and Afterlife

Amid all the momentous public events of 1492 was a completely unnoticed private one that would come to have considerable significance, the birth of 'il divino' Pietro Aretino.[8] The son of a cobbler, Luca del Tura and Margherita ('Tita') Bonci, Pietro sometimes claimed to be the bastard son of a local nobleman, Luigi Bacci. This probably was not true; the letters of his putative half-brother, Gualtieri Bacci, address him, after he became famous, as 'fratello honorandissimo.'[9] Whatever his paternity, he announced his independence by taking his surname from his hometown, Arezzo. In this he may have followed the example of an older poet, Bernardo Accolti, the 'Unico Aretino,' who now is remembered from Castiglione's *Cortegiano*.[10] More likely, however, he adopted the style of artists, who – like the itinerant jazz musicians early in the twentieth century (Tampa Red or Memphis Slim) – identified themselves by place of origin or work (Rosso Fiorentino, Giulio Romano). On at least one occasion, Tita Bonci had been an artist's model, representing the Virgin Mary in an *Annunciation*, a painting of which years later Giorgio Vasari, fellow Aretine and husband of a Bacci, to Aretino's immense pleasure made a gift copy for him.[11] The original event must have loomed large in a boy's imagination and may have first sparked an interest in art, if not a claim to immaculate conception.

By his late teens, Pietro was living in Perugia as a student, possibly an artist's apprentice, and published a volume of poetry, *Opera nova del fecundissimo giovene Pietro pictore Arretino* (1512). The title announced his new identity, Pietro Aretino, and proved uncannily predictive in a number of ways. All his life he was conscious of being a new man, overleaping barriers of class and rank, creating a new profession (*poligrafo*), exploiting new technology and media to produce innovative work; if not highly productive ('fecundissimo') when a young man, he made up for it in his maturity. Finally, that oddly placed epithet 'pictore' (painter), tucked between Christian and adopted surname, claims an intimacy as part of his identity, an unexpected revelation from a young poet. The combination of interests, literature and art, did prove to be his destiny.

After leaving Perugia, he stopped for a time in Siena, then turned up in Rome no later than 1517, establishing himself in the household of Agostino Chigi, the influential banker and arts patron. The decoration of Chigi's villa gave him contact with a number of the most prominent artists in Rome; and Chigi's social and business activities afforded him easy entrée to the papal court. When Chigi died in 1520, Aretino was positioned to seek patronage from the Medici family, first Leo X and then, after the pope died, Leo's nephew, Cardinal Giulio de' Medici. Aretino already had launched himself as a court poet, writing satires and praises; but he became notorious in the papal conclave of 1521–2 with malicious pasquinades designed to discredit rivals to Giulio's candidacy. When Adrian VI was elected on 9 January, it became prudent for Aretino to absent himself from Rome; the elderly and ailing Adrian lasted only eighteen months, however, and Aretino returned in time to see Giulio elected as Clement VII.

Aretino's notoriety intensified when he involved himself with the scandal over *I modi*, the sixteen erotic engravings that Marcantonio Raimondi made from drawings by Giulio Romano. The engravings were banned and Raimondi jailed. Aretino helped obtain the artist's release and expressed his indignation by writing a set of poems, the *Sonetti lussuriosi*, giving voice to the engravings. This and continuing indiscretions earned him the enmity of the papal datary, Gian Matteo Giberti, who finally ordered his assassination in July 1525. Aretino survived, wounded, and left Rome for good in October. The next year was spent largely in the field with his friend Giovanni de' Medici, known as Giovanni delle Bande Nere (Giovanni of the black bands), the *condottiere* who, in November, was severely wounded fighting to repel the impe-

rial forces and died in Mantua with Aretino at his bedside. Federigo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, had sheltered Aretino during his earlier exile and appreciated his talents, so he once again took up the role of court poet, even commencing an epic in honour of the Gonzaga family. But papal disapproval made itself felt even in Mantua, and he soon departed for Venice where he found his home.

Inspired by the republic's atmosphere of freedom and energized by its famous printing industry, Aretino thrived. He formed a close friendship with Titian, staunchly promoting his work and writing sonnets to accompany commissioned portraits; Titian reciprocated by painting portraits of Aretino. Together with Jacopo Sansovino, the architect and sculptor, they constituted an artistic triumvirate. Conditioned by his experiences in writing for a limited audience, Aretino was at first slow to shake off the mindset of a court poet. In 1534, however, he teamed with Francesco Marcolini, a virtuoso who aspired to be a printer, and Aretino's career as the first *poligrafo* took off. Before Venice, except for two prose comedies circulated in manuscript, Aretino had written only verse; now he wrote predominantly in prose, publishing a remarkable variety of work: satiric dialogues about prostitutes and life at court, mock prognostications, biblical paraphrases, saints' lives, pieces of an epic, occasional verse, five comedies, even a tragedy. Undoubtedly his greatest success came from his letters (six volumes, 1538–57), of which over three thousand were printed, a number rivalling the bulk of Erasmus's Latin letters. The first vernacular writer to publish his correspondence, Aretino created an enormous vogue for books of letters. His letters are a medium of self-expression that anticipates Montaigne's essays in their candour; and their range is extraordinary: advice to princes, maledictions upon enemies, social notes to friends and patrons, literary and artistic criticism, narratives of everyday life. The partnership with Marcolini ended in 1545; and, whether Aretino became content to rest on his fame or lacked inspiration that the printer had provided, his most innovative work was behind him.

If the Roman years were fraught with dramatic incident, life in Venice, appropriately, was the stuff of comedy: love affairs and seductions, petty quarrels and betrayals, domestic farce and contentment, anxieties about money and professional reward. Aretino's only two departures during three decades of residence are a measure of his commitment to Venice. In 1543 he ventured onto *terra firma* to meet his greatest patron, Charles V; and, in 1553, convinced that the Aretine pope, Julius III, would create him a cardinal (thus equalling Pietro Bembo's achieve-

ment as a man of letters), he broke all his vows and returned to Rome, only to come back without the prize. When Aretino died in 1556 he was one of the best-known writers in Europe and, far and away, the most recognizable; three years later, his entire works were placed on the Index of Prohibited Books.

Aretino long has had a bad press in English-language criticism. During his own period, there was admiration for the diversity of his talents, the *poli* of the *grafo*: he was praised for his rhetorical skills, his satire, his diplomatic abilities; and his religious writings were imitated. In *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), his disciple Thomas Nashe apostrophized, '*Aretine*, as long as the world lives shalt thou live.' This largely positive reception soon narrowed, nevertheless, into a reputation as pornographer and blackmailer. The shift is firmly marked by John Donne's *Ignatius His Conclave* (1611), a satire on the founder of the Society of Jesus. Donne matches rival 'innovators' – Copernicus, Paracelsus, Columbus, Machiavelli – against Ignatius Loyola to determine who has the best claim to a special place in Hell. The 'licentious pictures' (the *Modi* engravings persistently were attributed to Aretino himself) are dismissed for failing to add 'any new invention' to those of antiquity; but '*Peter Aretine*' is charged with blasphemy: 'one, who by a long custome of libellous and contumelious speaking against Princes, had got such a habit, that at last he came to diminish and disestemme God himselfe.'[12] Thirty years later, John Milton described him, with ambivalent fascination, as 'that notorious ribald of Arezzo, dreaded, and yet dear to the Italian courtiers.' By this time, Aretino already had become, for Englishmen, an Early Modern Henry Miller; indeed, something very like the atmosphere, a half-century ago, in which the green, Olympia Press paperbacks of Miller's novels were smuggled back from Paris, is evoked by an Italian-for-travellers handbook. In a sample dialogue, 'Stranger in conversation with a Roman Bookseller,' the stranger, no doubt sidling up and whispering, announces, 'I am seeking the works of A.' The bookseller explains that, alas, 'they are forbidden, both the *Postures* and *Discourses*, that imbracing of men and women together in unusual manners, begets a scandal, and the Inquisition permits no such matters.'[13]

Moral condemnation of Aretino rose to a fine art in the late Victorian Age. Titian's biographers, perhaps troubled by the influence he exerted over their great artist, assailed his character: 'Like a fungus on a dunghill he took advantage of a general corruption to live and to fatten, and he was not the less like a prosperous fungus because he happened to

be poisonous.'[14] The question of Aretino's relation to the 'general corruption' of the age was one with which John Addington Symonds wrestled: was he better or worse? cause or effect? 'How much of the repulsion he inspires can be ascribed to altered taste and feeling?' Trying hard to be objective, despite the 'loathing' that the 'indescribable nastiness' of the writing provokes, Symonds concludes, 'We must not suffer our hatred of his mendacity, uncleanliness, brutality, and arrogance to blind us to the elements of strength and freedom which can be discerned in him.'[15] In our own age, habituated to sexually explicit films and fiction and coarse language in popular music, we may be tempted to dismiss such character assessments as quaint. But, as recently as 1989, a senior scholar was provoked to this diatribe: 'He was in fact a pimp, pornographer, parasite, libeler, sycophant, and blackmailer, with a flashy, scurrilous wit and a major gift of impudence.'[16] Unmistakably, Aretino has a way of getting up people's noses. The problem of critical assessment is compounded because almost everyone has recognized that, whatever Aretino was doing, it was something different, something new, with a consequent fumbling for definitions. 'Pornographer, ' 'journalist,' and 'publicist' are among the labels that recurrently have been attached to him, all of them too broadly anachronistic (not to mention loaded) to be very useful in analysing his literary production, thus throwing the onus back on the author. Nonetheless, as with the 1525 attack in Rome, the attempted character assassinations left Aretino bleeding, but alive.

Some years ago, when the San Francisco Giants invited the Grateful Dead to play the national anthem on the opening day of baseball season, Jerry Garcia remarked wryly, 'Well, it's a little like bad architecture – or an old whore. If you stick around long enough, everyone gets respect, eventually.'[17] It has taken half a millennium – and, to borrow a phrase from Garcia, it has been 'a long, strange trip' – but in the past decade Pietro Aretino, himself a notable connoisseur of whores and architecture, has become respectable. Two clear signs of this status, both celebrating in 1992 the quincentenary of his birth, were the emergence of an *edizione nazionale*, the first volume of which was published that year, and an international conference, itself a Fellini-esque circus travelling from Rome to Toronto to Los Angeles. I judged that the process of rehabilitation was completed when, thumbing a copy of *The National Geographic* in a veterinarian's waiting-room, my attention was arrested by the epigraph to a story on art conservation: ' "Those things that do not suffer mortal death, Are swiftly conducted to their end by