



TEXTUAL
MASCULINITY
*and the
Exchange of Women
in Renaissance Venice*



COURTNEY QUAINANCE



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TEXTUAL MASCULINITY AND THE EXCHANGE OF
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Writing the Whore in Renaissance Venice

Ma perch'io sento il presente all'odore,
un'operetta in quel cambio galante
vi mando ora in stil ladro e traditore
intitolata: la *Puttana errante*,
dal Veniero composta mio creato,
che m'è in dir mal quatro giornate inante.

Because I can smell the gift coming,
I am sending you, in courteous exchange,
a little work in dishonest and perfidious style,
entitled *The Whore Errant*,
composed by Venier, my creation,
who is four days ahead of me when it comes to speaking ill [of others].

Pietro Aretino, "Capitolo al Duca di Mantova," 1530¹

In 1530, Pietro Aretino wrote from Venice to Federico II Gonzaga, the newly named duke of Mantua. Although Aretino cloaked his request in witty satire, he made no bones about the purpose of his missive. It had been over a month since Aretino had heard from Gonzaga, and he was beginning to worry that his long-time benefactor had abandoned him: "Has the hour come when I must die of cold and thirst, to atone for my sins? What shall I say? What shall I do?"² The solution to the dilemma, Aretino writes, came to him in a dream. If all went according to Aretino's plan, the duke would soon provide his faithful servant with "a suitcase bursting with silver, along with that other item I asked for a short time ago."³ In other words, Aretino needed cash, and he hoped the duke would provide it.

To sweeten the deal, Aretino sent Gonzaga a gift, carefully chosen to appeal to his patron's tastes. The gift was a poem entitled *La puttana errante* (The Whore Errant), penned by a man Aretino called his "creation," a young Venetian patrician named Lorenzo Venier. As its title suggests, *La puttana errante* capitalized on the popularity of chivalric epics such as Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, first printed in 1516 and a best-seller throughout the century and beyond. But instead of Ariosto's male knight errant, Venier's poem features a woman who sets out from her native Venice on an epic quest across the Italian peninsula to "farsi puttana errante" (make herself a whore errant).⁴ Her sexual odyssey culminates in Rome, where she is paraded through the streets in mock triumph with a "corona di cazzi" (crown of cocks) on her head.⁵

Aretino's strategies for obtaining patronage included traditional techniques such as presenting and dedicating his works to his intended patrons.⁶ But he was a shrewd observer of both individual and public taste, and his literary offerings were usually chosen to appeal to both. What better gift for a man like Federico Gonzaga – a man who appreciated both novelty and explicit sexuality – than a new poem, still in manuscript, recounting the exploits of a fictional whore? By the time Aretino presented Gonzaga with *La puttana errante*, he had been cultivating the duke's favour for some time. The two men had met in February 1523, when Aretino arrived at the Gonzaga court in Mantua with a letter of recommendation from the Cardinal Giulio de' Medici in hand.⁷ A few weeks later, Gonzaga begged the cardinal to allow Aretino to remain in Mantua, adding that he could not bear to part with "the elegance of the compositions, the diverse discourses, and the sweetness that abounds in [Aretino]."⁸ Aretino returned to de' Medici's service in April, but Gonzaga would continue to solicit his latest writings during his absences from the court throughout the 1520s. "I beg you to allow us to enjoy some of your compositions," Gonzaga wrote in 1524 to Aretino, "especially when you create something that might delight us."⁹

When Aretino returned to Mantua in 1526, he joined Giulio Romano, the Roman artist and architect whom Gonzaga had engaged to remodel and decorate his new summer palace, the Palazzo del Te.¹⁰ A few years earlier, Giulio and Aretino had both been major players in what would turn out to be one of the biggest editorial scandals of the century. It all began in Rome in the early 1520s, when Giulio made a series of sixteen drawings of couples engaged in as many sexual positions.¹¹ In 1524, the printmaker Marcantonio Raimondi created a set of

engravings based on Giulio's drawings, collectively known as *I modi* (The Positions). Shortly thereafter, as Giorgio Vasari would recount, the images turned up "in the least likely places one could imagine" and Raimondi was imprisoned, presumably for his role in circulating such unseemly material.¹² Giulio Romano, by then safely ensconced at Federico Gonzaga's court in Mantua, was seemingly untouched by the scandal.

In a letter to his friend Battista Zatti, published well over a decade after the uproar in Rome, Aretino claimed to have been personally responsible for convincing the Pope to release Raimondi.¹³ In the same letter, Aretino dramatizes the tale of the genesis of the *sonetti lussuriosi*, sixteen sexually explicit sonnets he wrote to accompany Raimondi's engravings: "After I obtained Marcantonio's freedom from Pope Clement ... the desire came to me to see the figures ... and I was touched by the same spirit that moved Giulio Romano to draw them."¹⁴ When exactly Aretino began to work on the sonnets is unclear, as is the date they first appeared in print.¹⁵ But it seems likely that Aretino drafted and circulated the sonnets while he was still living in Rome, where they were probably part of the reason the papal datary Gian Matteo Giberti ordered Aretino's assassination in July 1525. Aretino survived the attempt on his life and wisely left Rome for good. For a year or so, he was in the service of the famous *condottiere* Giovanni de' Medici (delle Bande Nere). When Giovanni died in Mantua, Aretino remained there, joining Giulio Romano at the Gonzaga court. In any case, the sonnets must have been complete by 1527, when Aretino sent a gift he described as "il libro de i sonetti e de le figure lussuriose" (the book of sonnets and lascivious figures) to the Paduan *condottiere* Cesare Fregoso.¹⁶ Written in dialogue form, Aretino's sonnets give voice to the couples represented in Raimondi's engravings, who take turns commenting on the sexual acts in which they are engaged.

Like the drawings that inspired Aretino's sonnets, many of the frescoes Giulio designed for the Palazzo del Te feature nude bodies both male and female. The main banquet hall is adorned with episodes from the story of Cupid and Psyche, a tale that can be traced back to the *Metamorphoses* of the Roman writer Apuleius. On one wall, Cupid reclines with a languid Psyche, her buttocks and breasts turned invitingly towards the viewer. The daughter born from their union, Voluptas (Pleasure), peeks out from between her mother's legs. Intertwined with the story of Cupid and Psyche are representations of other famous mythological lovers. Nearby, a voluptuous Venus is shown bathing

with a heroic Mars. In the next scene, Venus restrains Mars, who brandishes his sword as he pursues Adonis. In one of the lunettes, Jupiter in the form of a serpent ravishes Olympias, who raises one arm over her head in alarm even as she parts her legs obligingly. As Bette Talvacchia has argued, the explicit sexuality of these frescoes was moderated by the mythological frame in which it was presented.¹⁷ The drawings that became *I modi*, on the other hand, were scandalous precisely because they lacked such a frame.

At least one art historian has argued that Aretino was involved in the narrative program for the Palazzo del Te frescoes, perhaps as adviser to Giulio Romano.¹⁸ Direct evidence for this is sketchy at best, but what is clear is that Aretino and Giulio had a mutual interest in erotic imagery and its uses. Even after Aretino left Mantua, he continued to curry Gonzaga's favour, in part through attempting to provide the duke with works of art and literature in accordance with his taste.¹⁹ In 1527, a few months after settling into his new home on the Grand Canal in Venice, Aretino wrote to assure the duke that the sculptor Jacopo Sansovino was in the process of creating for him "a [statue of] Venus so realistic and so full of life that she will fill the thoughts of anyone who looks at her with lust."²⁰ Gonzaga would reply that Aretino's description of the statue made him even more eager to receive it.²¹

Given the abundance of eroticized images of the female body with which the duke surrounded himself, Aretino's decision to present his patron with *La puttana errante* was a strategic choice. In the end, it also appears to have been a fruitful one. About a month after Gonzaga received the poem, he wrote to thank Aretino for his "divine compositions" and to assure him that compensation was on its way in the form of "alcune cosette" (a few little things).²² In this exchange between writer and patron, the fictional body of the *puttana errante* was clearly valuable currency.

Textual Masculinity

This book explores how men in sixteenth-century Venice consolidated their bonds with one another through the creation, circulation, and consumption of literary fictions of women. Aretino's gift to Gonzaga is a ready example of this paradigm; that same gift also marked the beginning of his collaboration with the vast network of writers in sixteenth-century Venice that is my particular focus here. By the time Lorenzo Venier died in 1550, his brother Domenico had become one of the most

influential literary patrons in the city, and the family palace in Santa Maria Formosa had become a gathering place for a heterogeneous group of writers who included both Venetian aristocrats and foreign-born intellectuals of the middling sort.²³

Not the least of these was Aretino, whose direct connections to Domenico can be traced back to at least 1537, when he extolled the patrician's developing literary talent in a letter: "the flowers of your youth will ripen in their autumn into the sweetest fruits that have ever been tasted."²⁴ Aretino's letters to Domenico are found in all six volumes of his letterbooks – a distinction shared only with another patrician poet named Federico Badoer, Domenico's childhood friend and a literary man himself. Aretino wrote to both patricians in 1538 to exhort them to come and visit him more often.²⁵ By the mid-1540s, Aretino was well-integrated into the group of poets who gathered at Domenico's house, with whom he shared stylistic and thematic affinities.²⁶ When Aretino died in 1556, it was Domenico who wrote the epigraph engraved on Aretino's tomb in the church of San Luca – a tomb he would share with two other writers who were also members of Domenico's circle, Girolamo Ruscelli and Lodovico Dolce.²⁷

The Venier salon's literary network was vast, extending well beyond the Venetian Republic to include many of the most illustrious writers of the day – Bernardo Tasso and his famous son Torquato, the influential Florentine academician Benedetto Varchi, and the poet and playwright Annibale Caro, who was based in Rome. Domenico Venier and his cohort were renowned among their contemporaries for the elegant verse they published in the highly successful *Rime di diversi* series of lyric poetry anthologies inaugurated by the Ferrarese printer Gabriele Giolito in 1545.²⁸ Venier's own poetry first appeared in print in the third volume of the series, published in 1550, alongside verse by Aretino, Girolamo Parabosco, and many other writers connected to the salon – their first appearance in print as a group. For the public arena of print, the group composed high-toned sonnets, often in dialogue with one another, on conventional themes such as patriotism, the deaths of literary greats, and the beauty of women. Their love poems featured fictional female beloveds, who, like Petrarch's Laura before them, were evoked through fragmentary, disembodied images: strands of golden hair, ruby-red lips, eyes like stars, and snow-white hands.²⁹ These images of stylized female beauty and purity, published throughout the sixteenth century and well beyond, were instrumental in solidifying the salon's renown as a centre of poetic excellence well beyond the confines of Venice.

Another aspect of the salon's literary activity was just as instrumental in consolidating relationships among its members, although it was not for the wider public to see. Even as they lamented the unattainability of chaste ladies in print, Venier and his cohort wrote and exchanged among themselves poems in Venetian dialect featuring hyperbolically promiscuous whores. In doing so, they were participating in a flourishing culture of manuscript exchange of dialect poetry. That culture has received scant critical attention, especially from scholars writing in English. Yet without considering dialect production, our understanding of early modern attitudes regarding gender, sex, and love is incomplete. In the dialect poems, too, women are represented in fragments. But while the ladies of the love sonnets are characterized by the surface perfection of their chaste bodies, the whores of the dialect poems are composed of defiled body parts available to all: a gaping vagina, sagging breasts, and skin marred by the pustules of disease. On the surface, these two strands of writing about women appear to be diametrically opposed, but that was so only on a stylistic level. Whether high or low, public or private, the texts penned by the Venier circle are preoccupied with preserving ideals of feminine beauty and comportment, aligning beauty with resistance and unattainability. At the same time, they reinforce normative modes of masculine behaviour and access to power, which is acquired through the cultivation of connections not with women but with other men.

Until the 1990s, what little secondary scholarship there was on sixteenth-century Venetian dialect poetry was silent regarding Domenico Venier's contribution to this phenomenon, perhaps because Venier's moralizing eighteenth-century biographer Pierantonio Serassi had cast his subject as a paragon of virtue.³⁰ Yet a codex in the British Library, rediscovered by Martha Feldman and discussed briefly in her *City Culture and the Madrigal* (1995), proves that Venier was in fact an avid composer of dialect poems. The codex preserves a lengthy poetic dialogue in dialect between Venier and another patrician named Benetto Corner, composed in the 1540s.³¹ Taking the form of an erotic diary, the exchange chronicles the relationship between the two poets and Elena Artusi, a woman with whom they both claim to have had a sexual relationship.

In the opening sonnet, Venier highlights the triangular relationship between the three protagonists, boasting that while he has "za chiavà" (already screwed) Artusi in the past, his friend Corner "adesso la chiava" (is screwing her now).³² As the fictive chronology unfolds, we are