

## Prose

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## The forms of literary prose

*The expansion of the vernacular*

In Cinquecento Italy the vernacular finally asserted itself alongside Latin as a widely used medium for literary prose. Confidence in the vernacular grew as it was cultivated by leading literary figures. Its use was further encouraged by the increase in the number and output of printing presses: this development made more easily accessible the texts which were regarded as models of good usage, and it provided new opportunities for writers of widely differing social and geographical origins to gain fame and fortune from work aimed at a readership more varied than that of the age of manuscripts. Vernacular prose was used for all types of subject matter – from fictional narrative to the study of politics, history, social and personal relationships, art, and the vernacular language itself – and for an increasing number of translations from Greek and Latin. As these new horizons were opened up, prose style became more varied. Some writers were indebted to the model of Trecento Tuscan prose; others developed a more agile, informal manner which set out at times to capture the flavour of speech. Prose writing was, however, still by tradition principally the preserve of men, in contrast to lyric poetry, in which women were increasingly finding a voice.

The flourishing of prose was accompanied by a process of standardisation of the literary language during the first half of the century. Around 1500 almost all authors from outside Tuscany were using a type of vernacular which varied to some extent from region to region, indeed from author to author. They owed much to the stable model of the great Trecento Tuscan writers, particularly Boccaccio, but they introduced elements of Latin spelling, syntax and lexis in order to lend greater dignity to the younger language. They were also influenced by the usage of their own region, especially when this usage coincided with Latin spelling. Local influence was certainly much more limited than in prose of a practical nature, and one should not underestimate the degree of uniformity achieved at the start of the century; but the blend of Tuscan, regional and Latin ingredients still varied according to personal choice. Moreover, the introduction of Latin elements betrayed a lack of confidence in the authentic character of the vernacular.

Here, for example, is an extract from a draft dedication of the *De natura de Amore* by Mario Equicola (1470–1525), a native of southern Lazio who subsequently settled at the court of Mantua. Writing probably between about 1505 and 1508, he explains that he refuses to imitate Tuscan when his own vernacular possesses or tolerates an alternative form which is closer to Latin:

Non observo le regule del toscano se non tanto quanto al latino son conforme et le orecchie delectano, però *de* et *di* troverai senza lo articulo, *Dio* non *Iddio* benché sequente vocale; in modo che dove li imitatori de la toscana lingua totalmente ogni studio poneno in lontanarsi dalla lingua latina, io ogni cura et diligentia ho usato in approssimarme ad quella: se 'l latino dice *obligatione*, mai non dirrò io *obligatione*, se 'l latino *homo* non io *huomo*.

(I observe the rules of Tuscan only insofar as they conform with Latin and delight the ears. Thus you will find *de* and *di* without the definite article, *Dio* not *Iddio* even after a vowel; so that where the imitators of the Tuscan language strive to distance themselves from Latin, I have used every effort to get closer to it. If Latin says *obligatione*, I will never say *obligatione*, if Latin has *homo* I will not use *huomo*.)

This type of language, which refused to restrict itself to any one region and shared the legacy of Latin, was also associated with the language spoken and written in the courts of Italy and was therefore termed by some the *lingua cortigiana*.

But Equicola's passage, with its attack on 'imitators of Tuscan', shows that certain non-Tuscans had begun to reject this hybrid language, which had no firm roots and no great writers, in favour of a Tuscan model. To the exasperation of native Tuscans, this model did not take into account the living language of Tuscany but was that offered by Boccaccio in prose and Petrarch in verse. The polemics on the merits of these different viewpoints form an important part of the Italian *questione della lingua* (language question), and themselves make up a considerable proportion of the prose output of the century.

The fact that so much time and energy were devoted to the *questione* shows that much was at stake. Firstly, the new ideas on Tuscan challenged conventional views on the subordinate status of the vernacular with respect to Latin, the main language of education and of humanist culture. Even if only a few diehards still argued that Latin was inherently superior, it was nonetheless generally assumed that the vernacular was poorer without Latinising traits; but now it was being suggested that the younger language could follow independent rules and yet rival its ancestor. Secondly, the debate touched on the raw nerve of patriotism. Non-Tuscan writers resented the suggestion that they should now remove from their usage the features distinctive of the literary traditions of their own states. Tuscans themselves resented the implication that Tuscan birth no longer conferred a privileged linguistic status. Thirdly, the *questione* threatened to make writing a more difficult business for everyone: if

a Trecento model were to be adopted, writers would have to learn a new grammar and vocabulary, often quite different from their own, and then try to re-create a language nearly two centuries old.

The most influential proponent of imitation of the Tuscan Trecento best style was the Venetian nobleman Pietro Bembo (1470–1547). He came to believe that, if the vernacular was to fulfil its potential as a noble and enduring language, writers had to imitate rigorously what were acknowledged to be the most illustrious models, without any contamination from Latin or dialect. He put his Tuscanising principles into practice in his *Asolani* (1505), and justified his doctrine of imitation in the vernacular in his *Prose della volgar lingua*, published in 1525, which mark a watershed in the history of the Italian language. An author, he argued, should write for posterity and should therefore choose the best available language. For Italians, this meant the written model of Boccaccio and Petrarch, which Bembo went on to describe in detail. His analysis complemented the *Regole grammaticali della volgar lingua* by Gian Francesco Fortunio of Pordenone, the first printed grammar of the vernacular (1516). Although the use of Trecento Tuscan was apparently anachronistic, it offered a clearly defined model, unlike the *lingua cortigiana*, and rose above the political instability of the Italian courts, indeed of the whole peninsula.

However, Bembo's principles met at first with strong opposition among non-Tuscans and Tuscans alike. Count Baldesar Castiglione (1478–1529), a Mantuan, eloquently defended in *Il libro del cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*, 1528) his refusal to imitate either Boccaccio or contemporary Tuscan and placed language firmly in a social context. The speakers in his dialogue raise the topic of language in the course of discussing how the courtier must avoid affectation in his behaviour. Unlike Bembo, Castiglione linked writing closely with speech and suggested that it would be affected to use archaic words in either medium. In any case, meaning and clarity of expression were more important than form. One should therefore base one's language on current practice, after having carefully chosen from different sources words which have 'some grace in pronunciation'. The resulting language would be 'Italian, common, copious and varied' (I, 35). Tuscan could be one of the sources used, but Castiglione preferred Latinising forms such as *populo* and *patrone* to the 'corrupt' Tuscan *popolo* and *padrone*.

Giangiorgio Trissino of Vicenza (1478–1550) called his written and spoken language 'courtly', but, like Castiglione, also used the adjectives 'Italian' and 'common', insisting in his dialogue *Il Castellano* (1529) that the language of Dante and Petrarch contained such important contributions from other regions of Italy that it could not properly be termed Tuscan. Trissino was a speaker in the *Dialogo della volgar lingua* written, probably at about the same time, by Pierio Valeriano (Giovanni Pietro Bolzani, 1477–1558) of Belluno. In the *Dialogo* Trissino defends his views on the limits of the contribution which Tuscan should make to the literary language, but is also presented as more

balanced in his appreciation of Tuscan than some other northern Italians. Like Castiglione, Valeriano attached importance to speech as well as to writing.

By about 1530 the purist views associated with Bembo had gained wide acceptance throughout most of the peninsula, although Tuscan writers were rather slower to follow Bembo's line. They believed that there was a continuity between Trecento and Cinquecento Tuscan, and that their own knowledge of Tuscan was naturally better than that which outsiders could gain through study. In the 1520s Tuscans had been outraged at the boldness with which northerners were appropriating and even laying down rules for a language which Tuscans regarded as their own heritage. The Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli reacted in his *Discorso intorno alla nostra lingua* (1523 or 1524) to Trissino's adjective 'Italian' and to the way in which the Vicentine was using Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* to show that the greatest Florentine poet had advocated a poetic language which was not Florentine but 'courtly' (*curialis*). Claudio Tolomei of Siena (c. 1492-1556) argued in favour of the Tuscan (rather than narrowly Florentine) nature of the literary vernacular in *Il Cesano* (drafted by 1529). Tolomei, the first writer to study Italian phonology in any detail, recognised the primacy of verbal over written communication. The importance of their living language was the cornerstone of the approaches to the *questione* of the Florentines Pierfrancesco Giambullari (1495-1555), Giovan Battista Gelli (1498-1563) and Carlo Lenzoni (1501-51).

Thereafter Florentines reconciled patriotism with an acceptance of Bembo's views. Benedetto Varchi (1503-65), in his diffuse dialogue *L'Ercolano*, printed in 1570, defended the literary achievements of Florence since the late Quattrocento and claimed that it was best to learn a language from well-educated native speakers, while reading the best writers as well; yet he acknowledged that it was Bembo who had shown how to write well in Florentine and that one should not write in the same way as one spoke. Vincenzo Borghini (1515-80) and Lionardo Salviati (1539-89) both studied Trecento prose in close detail, as Bembo had done, but also found strong elements of continuity with contemporary usage which, Salviati believed, shared the 'sweetness' (*dolcezza*) of the Trecento language.

These discussions would not have taken place without a widespread confidence in the worthiness of the vernacular in relation to the classical languages. In the 1530s Sperone Speroni of Padua (1500-88) defended, in his influential *Dialogo delle lingue*, the validity of any vernacular for the transmission of knowledge. His ideas were an important source for Du Bellay's *Deffense et illustration de la langue françoise* (1549). Varchi saw the vernacular as more beautiful than Greek and Latin, but had to admit that Greek had more resources and that both Greek and Latin had more famous writers. The belief that the vernacular could surpass the classical languages (even if it had some ground to make up in terms of quantity), and the desire to liberate the vernacular from its long subjection to the older languages, were among the motives behind the large numbers of translations into vernacular prose which

were made and printed between about 1540 and 1560, and the corresponding decline in the study of the originals.

The standardisation and spread of vernacular prose were not just dictated by an élite of men of letters: they were also encouraged by the practical needs of the printing industry, particularly that of Venice, easily the major Italian publishing centre. A book printed in an average print run of a thousand copies would need to be saleable as widely as possible, and strongly regional forms would limit its success. At the same time readers expected the language of their texts to conform with what was considered to be correct, even if this correctness conflicted with what the author had originally written. Editors normally revised the language of texts quite freely, especially that of post-Trecento prose works, but on the whole did not slavishly follow purist principles. Among the majority of users of the vernacular there was still a strong prejudice against the wholesale imitation of Trecento Tuscan. In practice, Bembo's rigorous ideals were modified in the course of the century by concessions to contemporary usage of the type for which writers as disparate as Castiglione and Gelli were pleading.

Tedious and hair-splitting though some of the contributions to the *questione della lingua* were, the debate had long-term consequences of the utmost importance for Italy. For the first time, all Italian states shared a literary language which was adopted almost universally (although the use of dialect was preferred in some types of verse and comedy); and since unification this language has become the basis of spoken Italian. But the implications were not just linguistic. Standardisation acted as a stimulus to vernacular literature; only a few authors complained that the new formality was crushing spontaneity and the living contribution of their region. Italian cultural activity as a whole now became more broadly based, taking on a relatively collective character instead of being centred on a court, a city, or at best a region. The shift away from linguistic pluralism mirrored a more general tendency of Cinquecento Italian society and culture to move towards uniformity, a tendency seen especially in the ruthless imposition of religious orthodoxy by the Counter-Reformation and in the dominance of much of a hitherto fragmented but independent peninsula by the Holy Roman Empire.

#### *Rhetoric and form*

Humanism influenced the forms of Cinquecento vernacular prose through the study of rhetoric and the flourishing of two genres of classical origin: the dialogue and collections of letters by a single author. One of the reasons for the importance of rhetoric in the Cinquecento was that oratory played an important part in public life, for example in the contexts of political decision-making, diplomacy, the law, civic ceremony, academies and the Church. Many of the leading prose writers wrote to be heard, not just to be read; some were renowned for their oratorical prowess.