

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power

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Words For/Against Power Pietro Aretino's Poetical Devices as Demystification of the Present

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Abstract Investigating the *Ragionamento* (1534) and the *Dialogo* (1536), this paper aims at reviewing Pietro Aretino's relationship with power, both political and cultural. The author takes advantage of his poetical abilities as means of self-affirmation and political blackmail, developing between Rome and Venice a new poetic language, in which metaphor takes on a value that is anything but literary. Aretino wants to establish a concrete relationship with the recipients of his texts through the very act of writing. To do so, he credits the idea of a physicality and complete reality of all the elements that make the message possible, creating political images that reveal the vile nature of the corrupted authority.

Keywords Pietro Aretino. Power. Metaphor. Image. Sex.

When Pietro Aretino was inevitably forced to leave Rome in October 1525, he had greatly foreseen the imminent despair the city was bound to suffer, and never did he refrain from condemning the political and moral *status* of the Papal court.

While the Venetian residency played a pivotal role in shaping Aretino's artistic output from the 1530s,¹ his time in Rome holds particular importance for his intellectual growth. Throughout this time, except for the early iteration of *La cortigiana* (1525) which falls within his later creative period, there is a noticeable absence of surviving

1 On this topic, see the thorough proceedings of the 2018 Venetian conference *Pietro picture Arretino* (Bisceglia, Ceriana, Procaccioli 2019), as well as the most recent and comprehensive anthology on Pietro Aretino (Faini, Ugolini 2021).

compositions that demonstrate literary consistency. Indeed, Aretino's artistic decisions during this era were mostly shaped by the political and sociological environment that surrounded him, and by his strategies for engaging with influential figures in positions of authority (cf. Crimi 2019).

Being close to a neophyte and a financially disadvantaged intellectual, Aretino seemed to be on the sidelines of influential official appointments, which usually favored individuals with either noble lineage or literary acclaim. Aretino likely recognized quite early that, given his absence of inherent or circumstantial qualifications that bestow social privilege, he needed to play different cards than those employed by esteemed intellectuals of renowned stature. Without the ability to provide economic and social assurances, Aretino had to depend on attributes of an alternative kind, such as literary production being a product of naturally gifted individual genius – a notion he explicitly explores in his later epistolary. He defined genius as a natural quality capable of remedying the injustices wrought by fortune and nature, aiming to rebalance the prevailing societal disparities, driven by both historical and social considerations.

The political satire from the author's Roman period, mostly voiced by the only public *persona* assigned with such role which is Pasquino, is of particular significance as it helps define his relationship with power (cf. Procaccioli 2006; Faini 2017). In the 16th century, State, instead of functioning as a public service, was frequently perceived as the personal domain of the ruling prince. Thus, opposition to power inherently meant opposition to the individual wielding it, effectively personifying authority; conversely, any affront directed at the individual constituted an immediate challenge to authority itself. Satire was therefore more direct and held immediate practical implications. In this context, the author's role grew in strength when confronting the state's representatives because, by using a potentially dangerous weapon, he not only showcased his literary skill but also publicly denounced the prevailing authority on an ideological level.

At a time when the increasing exploitation of the sale of indulgences, the profitable appointment of new cardinals, and the imposition of new taxes by the papacy had stirred scandal in both Italy and Europe, Aretino's satires were a means of holding the powerful accountable for their actions, while also providing an outlet for public frustration with the political and moral shortcomings of the ruling class (Falaschi 1977, 20).

The exercise of this political instrument suggests that Aretino must have contemplated the agency of words as a means of influence: since satire targeted a wide audience and carried profound consequences, words in satirical compositions were akin to weapons that inflicted metaphorical wounds, if not literal ones. Written in a direct and unequivocal language, the poet-Pasquino practices a form

of expression in which vocabulary, rhythm, and themes are strongly influenced by the principles of immediacy and adherence to colloquial speech. This tone of voice allowed for a more immediate connection of the compositions to a broader audience, with whom Aretino engages through the most honest vernacular. When Aretino discusses these *tempi pessimi* (times at their lowest; Procaccioli 1997, 148), he paints a picture of significant discontent by attacking the court-san structure: in his *Lamento de un cortegiano* (1522 ca.) he addresses the Papal *corte fallita* ('failed court'; Faini 2012, 52) for not being able to provide any fortune or gratification, while directly taunting the cardinals for their impious behaviours in his *In cardinales* (Faini 2012, 64-5). These allegations are also employed in a more general moralizing tone, but the prevailing sentiment is one of diagnosis and accusation towards the societal afflictions. Only literature, the arts, and 'inventions' elevate the contemporary age, which nonetheless is not *buona come è bella* (as virtuous as it is beautiful, Procaccioli 1997, 343, Author's transl.): the world's illness stems from an imbalance between the products of the intellect and the socio-political structure. Aretino then employs art as a device for power and political blackmail, and the Pasquinian contribution serves as a privileged tool for advocating a new paradigm in the interaction between intellectuals and authority. Therefore, we cannot speak of Aretino in terms of political literature; instead, we should view his approach as a political exploitation of literature. In this sense, his obliged departure from Rome becomes of fundamental significance.

After his flight from the Papal court to the Gonzaga's Mantua, Aretino ultimately landed in Venice in March 1527. Here, a strongly anti-court ideology takes root in the author, which, following the Roman example, dictates that he should not place himself in the service of a single lord within the confined space of their own state. Aretino's goal now, therefore, is to engage in a professional activity that meets his needs for artistic autonomy while also receiving public and social resonance. In the Venetian *acque sicure* (safe waters; Procaccioli 1997, 288, Author's transl.), the polymath must have felt at ease with the republican ideals and free scope of action, which led him to achieve his independency as an artist in the cultural scene.² This is

² Aretino is not theoretically interested in the various forms of government, but his political judgment is consistently, as his usual approach, based on a sociological evaluation. In 1537, writing to Bernardo Navagero (Procaccioli 1997, 305-6), he praises the Republic of Venice, where "l'occhio del dovere che ogni ora guarda l'utile comune ne le occorrenze universali converte la malivolenza in amore" (the eye of duty that constantly watches over the common good in universal emergencies turns malevolence into love; Author's transl.). He also draws an institutional distinction between a republic and a monarchy, focusing on the condition of subjects. This reveals that his primary concern lies in considering the options between the court and its alternatives.

why, in a letter to Doge Andrea Gritti (Procaccioli 1997, 49-51), Aretino admits that he finally found his long-sought freedom in Venice, a city to which he devotes all his affection, as much as identifying it as the reason for his gained individual power and public influence, which will eventually lead him to be known as the 'scourge of princes'.

From his Venetian time, Aretino develops a more mediated and formally complex language, where the writer himself speaks no longer from the point of view of the prophetic Pasquino. Now, immediacy has been replaced by rhetorical reworking of his poetics. And it is not just a matter of vocabulary and rhythm, or of images and rhetorical patterns; fundamentally, there is a difference in approach that arises from a new perception of Aretino's own public role that the writer is called to embody, also in terms of a specific poetic innovation (Procaccioli 2009, 231).

Despite his recent elective affinities with the lagoon city, Aretino consistently kept his gaze fixed on Rome and its moral corruption, especially in his first years of literary production in Venice, in the aftermath of the Sack of Rome (1527). He addressed the event through various genres - prophecies, letters, poems, comedies, and dialogues - creating a wide range of depictions, stretching from deeply tragic to comically absurd (Goethals 2014). Among these, two texts in particular stand out as emblematic in their critique of authority for the themes they employ to challenge the powerful; they also serve as significant examples of the author's artistic maturity, thanks to Aretino's astute and eloquent use of poetic devices. Published in April 1534 and October 1536 respectively, the *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo* together constitute a unified and comprehensive work, each unfolding its narrative over three days. The first features a dialogue between two courtesans, the veteran Nanna and the young Antonia. Nanna, facing the task of guiding her teenage daughter Pippa toward her future, engages in a spirited exchange regarding the three potential paths of womanhood Pippa might undertake: should she choose to become a nun, a wife, or a courtesan herself? Drawing from her own experiences in each role, Nanna narrates her adventures to Antonia, dedicating each a day of the dialogue to delve into its merits and drawbacks, to determine the most favorable. After thorough consideration, Nanna and Antonia reach the consensus that Pippa's best path lies in the profession of a courtesan. Thus, in the second part, the conversation continues with Nanna imparting wisdom to Pippa about her prospective career and cautioning her about the treachery of men.

While the *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo* have conventionally been labeled as pornography, this is true to the understanding that in the early modern period, pornography was often employed to depict a world turned "upside down" (Findlen 1996, 53). Its marked satirical elements made it a subtle device for tracking evolving social

hierarchies and the instabilities of intellectual and political norms within the intricate web of courts that constituted Renaissance Italy. Indeed, by delving into the most suitable professions for women and the education of younger generations of females, the two dialogues overexpose vivid explicit imagery in order to criticize the social customs and political climate among sixteenth-century Italian states (Talvacchia 1999, IX). These encompass the role of women and their mistreatment by men, corruption within the Church, the hypocrisy of marriage, and how courtesans skillfully exploit the vanity of their clients. Excluded from Aretino's critiques are only the Venetians: residing in a republic that was renowned for its contentious relationship with the institutional church and radically distinct in its governance from Rome, they were involved in practices considered more upright. In stark contrast to the courtly atmosphere of Rome, Venice prided itself on being a city of boundless opportunities and freedom, all firmly rooted in the principles of republicanism.

The two dialogues, then, deserve much more than the reputation of a pornographic masterpiece, which for centuries would be the main source of Aretino's poor standing among the prudens. By using pornography as a vehicle to attack everything from clerical piety to the vicissitudes of court life, Aretino exposed the vices of the upper classes to an indiscriminate readership, something that he had nonetheless been known for since his Roman days.

The first organic text in which Aretino explicitly aims at making an accusation against power and corruption of moral judgment is the aforementioned comedy *Cortigiana* of 1525. Regarding the coeval Rome under Leo X as a new Babylon (Aquilecchia, Romano, Romei 1992, 63.7) the work presents us with an image of a degraded and corrupted city, placing its perspective on a sociological plane, and astutely documenting, through the actions of the courtiers, the distortion of society. The vivid evocation not only of monuments, churches, and taverns frequented daily by the Roman public, but also of distinctly named characters from various social strata, intensifies the immediate connection with reality. This creates a powerful juxtaposition between the theatrical fiction and the truths of real life. *La cortigiana* is not just a literary work; it stands as a revolutionary literary manifesto within the political and cultural context of its time. It signifies a bold challenge to a society that would soon forcefully expel the author from the city.

Revised and published in Venice in 1534, following a process spanning at least a year (Larivaille 1997, 441 fn. 26), the second edition of this work attests to the rapid consolidation of the author's position that had occurred in the meantime, along with reflecting his newfound greater freedom of expression. Aretino aims to perpetuate a narrative of the papal city as the "coda mundi" (Aquilecchia, Romano, Romei 1992, 237.1), scattering in the comedy a more irreverent

portrayal of Roman decadence, where references to the times of Leo X coexist with others from after 1527 (cf. Damiani 2014). Furthermore, now firmly established in Venetian territory, the author explicitly celebrates the uniqueness of Venice and its cultural life.

Throughout the comedy, Aretino's attitude of sharp criticism towards social norms and political culture becomes more entrenched. While both the *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo* follow a similar critical path, it is in the dialogues that the significant use of sex as a means of social analysis makes its debut. Sexual intercourses among the clergy, lustful adultery and convenient prostitution in Aretino become vehicles through which to metaphorically interpret the internal corruption of power structures, morality, and essentially, the ethical norms imposed by a courtly society. The author's sentence, in these terms, is indeed clear from the very declaration of intentions in the letter *al suo monicchio* (to his darling monkey; Rosenthal 2005, 3), which opens the first dialogue:

se non credessi che la fiamma della mia penna di fuoco dovesse purgare le macchie dioneste che la lascivia loro ha fatte nella vita d'esse. [...] Onde spero che il mio dire sia quel ferro crudelmente pietoso col quale il buon medico taglia il membro infermo perché gli altri rimanghino sani.³

If I did not believe that the flame of my fiery pen would clean away the shameful stains which their lewd behaviour has left on their lives. [...] Therefore I hope that my book will be like the scalpel, at once cruel and merciful, with which the good doctor cuts off the sick limb so that the others will remain healthy. (5)

Sex and its abuses in these works stand as a structuring principle, asserting their author's expressive freedom: through his audacious literary intentions and his scandalous approach to nature, he stressed the need to depart from the prevailing models of his time. To achieve this, Aretino employs a theatrical narrative voice, Nanna, who takes on the roles of both a character and the author's *alter ego*. She simultaneously embodies the roles of spectator, actress, and director, thus overlaying the account of past events with their current presence, always adopting a mimetic language and a declared adherence to reality.

In the very first of the three sections that make up the work, where Nanna recounts her youthful experiences in the convent, a refuge for the most audacious sexual practices of the clergy, a true mastery of

3 From here on, all the Italian quotes regarding the *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo* reference the Italian unified edition of both texts by Giovanni Aquilecchia (1969).

description and narration emerges. When her interlocutor Antonia asks her to speak freely and without shame, Nanna asserts that *l'onestà è bella in chiasso* (respectability looks all the more beautiful in a whorehouse; Rosenthal 2005, 36) and dedicates herself to systematically 'veiling' the ongoing passionate encounters she describes.

From the most primitive and bestial acts to the more sadistically refined ones, Aretino employs a rhetorical layer in his narration that prevented the most depraved acts from being too explicitly depicted, partly due to the censorship of the time (Larivaille 1997, 198-9). This leads the entire narrative to serve as a platform for continuous stylistic experimentation.

The atmosphere of heavy eroticism that pervades the convent lightens thanks to the proliferation of visual metaphors and comparisons. According to Antonia's terminology, these *oscurità* (obscurity; Rosenthal 2005, 45) not only do not diminish the poetic outcome, but instead introduce a multitude of vivid visual, tactile, and olfactory nuances far more evocative than the blunt repetition of sexual expressions.

NANNA [...] che posto il suo pennello nello scudellino del colore, umiliatolo prima con lo sputo, lo faceva torcere nella guisa che si torceno le donne per le doglie del parto o per il mal della madre. E perché il chiodo stesse più fermo nel forame, accennò dietrovvia al suo erba-da-buoi, che rovesciatogli le brache fino alle calcagna, mise il cristeo alla sua Riverenza *visibillum*.

NANNA [...] placing his paintbrush, which he first moistened with spit, in her tiny color cup, he made her twist and turn as women do in the birth throes or the mother's malady. And to be doubly sure that his nail would be driven more tightly into her slit, he motioned to his back and his favorite punk pulled his breeches down to his heels and applied his clyster to the reverend's *visibillum*. (Rosenthal 2005, 20)

Here the sexual act is undeniably present, yet it is never depicted using explicit language, even when openly portrayed. Instead, the deliberate cultivation of metaphorical audacity serves as a genuine expression of poetic intent. Regarding Nanna's discourse, Aretino might have defended his commitment to metaphorical expression in alignment with a moral objective: to elevate truth and condemn corruption (Procaccioli 2022, 373).

Nonetheless, Aretino persistently directs the reader's perspective toward his own, effectively 'framing' the visual description to highlight sensory perception. By positioning his viewpoint, and that of Nanna in this instance, as a crucial component of his poetic style, the author ensures that the reader not only empathizes but also delves

beyond the metaphor to vividly visualize what they are reading. As a result, the reader successfully steps into the narrator's shoes. This duplication or superimposition of the reader's perspective onto that of the writer guarantees an initial acceptance and empathy with the genuine emotions of the author (Waddington 2009, 113).

On the second day, which is dedicated to the Lives of Wives, a series of frescoes depicting everyday life follows the lamentable portrayal of the conventual world. This day is structured in the manner of those in the *Decameron*, as a critique of the crafty sixteenth-century legacy of the Boccaccian tradition. Love in its most mundane and primal forms remains ever-present, however, the instances of pure eroticism – along with their scandalous metaphors and comparisons – decrease, gradually giving way to apparent novellas. Yet, it is in the Lives of whores on the third day that Aretino's creative vigor reaches its utter effectiveness and originality. In the expressive tone of the narrator, which omits excessively crude and potentially censorable vocabulary while incorporating popular terms and expressions, the experiences of the preceding days harmoniously blend into an expressive balance.

In Aretino's fully developed prose within the Lives of whores, the stylistic approaches previously experimented are interchanged, combined, and eventually merge into a lively and rhythmic carnivalesque excess, guided by the fragmented syntactical structures of everyday speech. The technical virtuosity, though still present, now takes on a more subtle role, resulting in a discourse that flows more effortlessly and feels more organic. This fluency eliminates the distinction between spoken language and written word, as well as any lingering gap between author and narrator. Aretino has now become one with Nanna. This authenticity in language also mirrors the authenticity in the scenic representation of society: Aretino's plurality of languages employed in the dialogue responds to the early realistic need for a language to suit the diverse range of characters portrayed, reflecting the existing varied social conditions and cultural backgrounds (Procaccioli 1993, 366).

It is in this adherence to reality that the three days of pure narration transform into a vast polemical allegory of society. The entire city of Rome emerges as the idyllic setting for what Aretino calls the *civiltà puttanesca* (whorish politeness; Rosenthal 2005, 145), marked by a past that reinforces its fate: *Roma sempre fu e sempre sarà, non vo' dir delle puttane per non me ne avere a confessare* (Rome always was and always will be – I won't go so far as to say the whore's plaything, so as not to have to say it again to my confessor; Rosenthal 2005, 150). Nuns, married women, and prostitutes, rather than merely representing *i tre strati delle donne* (the three conditions of women; Rosenthal 2005, 7) as the author ironically suggests in the title of the work, embody the primary categories that constitute the societal

decay, the *mondaccio* (filthy world; Rosenthal 2005, 7) denounced by Nanna from the very beginning. In the deceitful clergy that betrays its vows and its pious mission, in the respectable society that doesn't hesitate to betray marital bonds and all its norms, and in the rest of society that identifies personal interest as its only ideal, Aretino identifies the material failure of any religious, moral, and cultural canon.

Within this framework, the use of sex as a recurring theme in the dialogue further delineates the various levels of authenticity present in the work. Aretino liberates himself from classical paradigms by adopting an unsettling perspective provided by the explicit semantic register, which stands as both a representation and an embodiment of a new poetics grounded in the ideals of nature and naturalness. Also, as Nanna states in the first day of the dialogue, *si salva l'anima nei trionfi del corpo* (the soul shall be saved through the triumphs of the body; Rosenthal 2005, 17), the corrupted moral customs of Christianity do not allow the salvation of the souls anymore, but is sex that, in turn, permits redemption through the natural act of ecstasy. Aretino hereby denounces the decline of the monastic institution and states a completely new approach toward nature.

From this vantage point, the theme of sexuality emerges as both an embrace of an expressive style that mirrors the rhythm and sound of everyday language, and a deliberate condemnation of the decline of power.

Given its expansive depiction of the social landscape, the use of body and sex as tools for examination, and the expressive effectiveness of the language, the text extensively embodies Aretino's anti-academic and anti-classical inclinations. These tendencies, which were already *in nuce* in Aretino's earlier pasquinesque works, allow him to reach the pinnacle of his linguistic mastery.

Sex in the *Ragionamento* encompasses not only individual sexual desire, but also how it is experienced within society, particularly in the context of Medicean Rome. This perspective allows for a comprehensive understanding of the author's broader social commentary in the *Dialogo*, which, in a more daring manner, addresses the economic aspect of sex. Additionally, the strong unity of the first dialogue, fundamentally told by a single narrator who recalls the events with spontaneous vigor, is succeeded in the *Dialogo* by a more composite structure, built on the juxtaposition of diverse content, vocabulary, and styles.

The first day of the *Dialogo*, where Nanna *insegna a la Pippa sua figliuola a esser puttana* (teaches her daughter Pippa the art of being a whore; Rosenthal 2005, 157), logically follows the conclusion of the *Ragionamento*. The instructive tone adopted by the mother - the same that will later be preferred by the second narrator, the Comare, in the third day - immediately signals the shift in Aretino's approach, which is now more demonstrative and didactic than openly polemical.

What the Nanna imparts to her daughter, satirically referencing but not explicitly naming Baldassarre Castiglione's recent treatise, is a detailed handbook for succeeding in a world entirely driven by appearances (Larivaille 1997, 205).

Even the condemnation of *poltronerie degli uomini inverso de le donne* (betrayals that men wreak on women; Rosenthal 2005, 231) in the second day - the one closest to the days of the *Ragionamento* due to its satire of male mentality, symmetrically aligned with the anti-feminine polemic of the *Lives of Wives* - is explicitly presented as a supplement to the education of the aspiring courtesan.

From a different but equally complementary perspective, the Comare's account of the perfect *ruffiana* (adulator) in the third day serves the same educational purpose. In fact, the concluding day seems to not only acknowledge but also surpass the previous defense of prostitution. It is as if Aretino discovers in the art of the adulator and in her ability to assert authority over both men and women indiscriminately, the most suitable weapon to confront the escalating hypocrisy of society.

What is most striking about the *Dialogo* is its highly systematic examination of human behavior and underlying social structures across the three days. The author achieves this by transcending his narrative role, bypassing the narrative filter of characters once again to directly address the reader. This immediate connection polemically portrays a way of living in which the 'art of fiction' is the only essential virtue. As a result, while one cannot speak of a true book against the principles of the *Cortegiano* (1528), the *Dialogo* can be viewed as a parodic departure from Castiglione's treatise. Rather than emphasizing the display of virtues believed to be authentic, it highlights the portrayal of superficial virtues:

NANNA Ma sopra tutte le cose, studia le finzioni e le adulazioni che io ti ho detto, perché sono i ricami del sapersi mantenere.

NANNA But above all study deceit and flattery, as I have told you, for these are the embroideries that adorn the gown of the woman who knows how to get by. (Rosenthal 2005, 178)

While both narrators, Nanna and later the Comare, reiterate the same views on language as previously expressed in the *Ragionamento* - a repulsion for overly formal speech and a desire for free expression in their own language -, and fill the narration again with imaginative metaphors, there is a discernible trend towards artificiality

in the *Dialogo*.⁴ This tendency largely coincides with the incorporation of a diverse range of literary references along the text: from the Virgilian episode of Aeneas and Dido at the start of the second day, to the medieval story of Renart and the *mulattieri* (muleteers), and even to Aretino's own poems composed in various periods. These additions turn the final two days into a patchwork of genres, styles, and tones, breaking away from the thematic, linguistic, and stylistic coherence that characterized the *Ragionamento* (Larivaille 1983, 97).

Despite a somewhat looser thematic and structural cohesion, and an anti-conformism made more unclear by the ironic revival of literary works, one must accurately assess a work that stands not as a mere extension or rejection, but as a progressively coherent evolution beyond the previously discussed dialogue. Such progression is, in fact, foreshadowed right from the dedication, in Aretino's newly declared intentions. The purifying *penna di fuoco* from the initial letter of dedication of the *Ragionamento* now morphs in the *Dialogo*'s dedication into a brush, a tool with which he endeavors to capture the essence of others with the same vitality that the remarkable Titian portrays various faces; *ritrarre le nature altrui con la vivacità che il mirabile Tiziano ritrae questo e quel volto* (describe other kinds of characters with the same vividness that admirable Titian portrays this or that face; Rosenthal 2005, 154). The moralizing Aretino, who once aimed to reform the world, has been replaced by an Aretino who is a *conoscitore dei costumi delle genti* (wise knower of the customs of the peoples; Rosenthal 2005, 154): a moralist less preoccupied with condemnation and more focused on depicting and laying bare the mechanisms of the world.

The *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo* are texts imbued with political undertones, critiquing a range of social injustices, and aiming to influence the real power dynamics among Italian states in the sixteenth century. Nanna is identified as the unifying focal point of a degraded historical reality, where the courtesan embodies both an intellectual and political figure in a fragmented world. It is her own perspective that holds significant dominance over every layer of society, allowing her to assert a position of control. Given her comprehensive understanding of the entire social spectrum, Nanna does not

⁴ Aretino himself is fully aware of the proliferation of metaphors in the *Ragionamento* and *Dialogo*, and he finds a way to emphasize it several times along the works: "Buone e naturali fai le somiglianze" (What apt and natural comparisons you make; Rosenthal 2005, 13); "Che similitudine che voi fate" (What a strange comparison you make; 165); "Voi fate le simiglianze bellissime" (You make some lovely similes; 191); "Son pur nuove di zecca le similitudine vostre" (Your comparisons are always brand new; 232); "Io non credo che la natura, che fa le cose da le quali toglie le somiglianze, sapesse come te trovare le similitudini" (I do not believe that nature itself, which makes the things from which you take your comparisons, would be able to discover so many likenesses; 350).

confine herself to defining solely the prerogatives of the female universe. Her unique perspective inevitably leads her to broaden the discussion to include men, conducting a thorough and perceptive analysis of the male world and psyche. This ultimately enables her to outline an effective record almost as comprehensive and reliable for both genders. Although, on one level, the stories Nanna recounts serve as a form of self-criticism that exposes the faults of women to men, Aretino implies more than once that a similar collection could be compiled from the lives of priests, monks, and laymen (Moulton 2000, 96). Both the *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo* frequently use the profession of the courtesan as a metaphor for other forms of employment and service in Renaissance Italy, including doctors, soldiers, courtiers, and grooms. This analogy serves to emphasize the parallel between courtiers and courtesans, suggesting that the relationship between words revealed even stronger affinities between the groups described (Findlen 1996, 99).

The close intertwining of the realities surrounding Nanna and the biographical dynamics of Aretino, as previously discussed, establishes a firm equivalence between the author and the narrator. However, this parallel relationship isn't solely defined by biographical aspects; it predominantly lies in the narrative extension of the dialogues. Aretino explicitly asserts the complete naturalness and spontaneity of his writing, demonstrating an absolute disinterest in any form of linguistic indoctrination. The language employed in these exchanges adheres to a poetics that dictates truth be unveiled through the language of nature, employing rhetorical devices and lexical tools that bring the written text as close to actual reality as possible. As stated by the author in the dedicatory letter to Bernardo Valdaura:

E quando io non fosse degno di onor veruno mercé de le invenzioni con le quali do l'anima a lo stile, merito pur qualche poco di gloria per avere spinto la verità ne le camere e ne le orecchie dei potenti a onta de la adulazione e de la menzogna.

And though I might not be worthy of any honor because of the inventions with which I infuse life into my prose, I do deserve some tiny mite of glory for having pushed the truth into the bedrooms and the ears of the powerful, rather than flattery and lies. (Rosenthal 2005, 155)

In the dialogues, Aretino as author, taking on the role of the Nanna as narrator, becomes the voice of a corrupted and unspeakable truth: this is why the language he employs is inherently metaphorical. Through this process, the integral relationship between word and image emerges throughout the text as a fundamental component of his writing (Procaccioli 2009, 219). This occurs both in the

broader sense where these two elements interact and mutually influence each other, as well as in the more specific sense where words are often transformed into images and vice versa. This imaginative intention of the written word will, eventually, characterize Aretino's account on the arts, rendering his own descriptions of the artworks "so essentially visual" (Shearman 1992, 208).

Furthermore, with the openly anti-Petrarchan aim of freeing the language from classical models and aligning it with the addressed social fabric, Aretino achieves a genuine praise of direct and explicit vocabulary, all in pursuit of the naturalness of his intentions:

COMARE Cento volte ho pensato per che conto noi ci aviamo a vergognare di mentovare quello che la natura non s'è vergognata di fare.

COMARE A hundred times I have tried to explain myself on whose account we must be ashamed to mention that which nature is not ashamed to create. (Rosenthal 2005, 317)

Therefore, it can be asserted that there exists an intimate, osmotic relationship between Aretino and his writing, as it harmonizes perfectly with his own identity. The naturalistic poetics implies that all aspects of the writer converge within the work, that is, everything he is naturally and ultimately, everything he possesses as an individual. The act of literary production is truly creative because it is absolute and total. This also means, above all, that the author employs a writing in which the intentions are declared: the *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo*, in this regard, are a perfect example.

Beyond reinforcing the growing symbiosis between the author and the narrator, which is increasingly implied by their linguistic inventiveness, the explicit acknowledgment of the decay of power in the dialogues, closely aligned with Aretino's daily concerns, gives the texts a blatantly autobiographical dimension, that retrospectively sheds a new light on Aretino's entire corpus. As a matter of fact, in the author's works, regardless of which, there always exists a complete correspondence between the individual and the overarching poetic, political, social, and artistic intentions. The topic does not matter: Aretino's texts consistently address the themes close to the author's heart, with a particular emphasis on that of language.

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