

Singing and Printing Chivalric Poems in Early Modern Italy

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Abstract

Between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, chivalric romances were much loved in Italy, both in popular and in learned contexts, and were one of the bestselling genres in the nascent printed book trade. Although traditional blockbusters and brand-new poems alike typically refer to the oral performance of a poet-singer, literary scholars tend to evaluate those references as part of a rhetorical strategy of fictive orality, as literary clichés derived from a performing practice supposedly confined to earlier periods. Nevertheless, upon closer inspection, many authors and texts prove to be linked with real oral performances. Several chivalric poems, in particular, were surely composed, sung, and even improvised by street singers, who also played a very active role in printing and selling them. The article aims to survey the most relevant evidence, thus reassessing the importance of orality in fostering and disseminating one of the prominent literary genres of Renaissance Italy.

Keywords: *Canterino, Chivalric Poems, Poet-Performers, Orality, Renaissance Italy*

1. *Introduction*

Italian late-medieval and early-modern chivalric poetry narrated the battles of Carolingian paladins, the adventures of Arthurian knights, the War of Troy, the deeds of Alexander the Great, of Aeneas, of Caesar and other legendary heroes of the past. In other words, it was a form of epic poetry. As such, it belonged to a tradition that had been intimately linked to orality since the dawn of time, so much so that research on oral poetry itself, as is well known, was born and has grown in close contact with that on epic traditions, both dead and alive, be it the Homeric poems, *Beowulf*, and the *chansons de geste*, or the poetry of modern-time Serbian *guslar*, West African *griot*, and Turkish *âşik*.¹

¹ For an introduction to the flowering of studies on orality in various cultures after the seminal work of Lord 1960, see Foley 1992. For the medieval period, see Reichl 2011.

Most Italian chivalric romances, in fact, are rich in references to a situation of performance in which a poet is singing his stanzas in front of an audience. Significantly, their traditional form is that of the *cantare*, a narrative poem in *ottava rima* whose oral delivery is implied by its very name, which simply means 'to sing'. Moreover, the bulk of external and internal evidence related to the Italian tradition is among the richest and most various in pre-modern Europe, and seems capable of significantly further our understanding of how orality and writing interacted in our literary past. Nevertheless, rather surprisingly, this opportunity is still largely to be seized. This essay aims to understand why it has not been so far and why it should be seized henceforth, by reassessing the most relevant evidence on the role played by orality in fostering and disseminating one of the prominent literary genres of Renaissance Italy.

The main difficulty with the Italian case is a very common one in the field of oral studies. Only living traditions can be experienced in their own ephemeral oral dimension. It is true that they can be studied not only on account of their intrinsic interest, but also for comparative purposes. Parry and Lord's fieldwork on South Slavic *guslar* was aimed at better understanding Homer, as is well known (see Lord 1960). However, regardless of how many analogies can be traced between past and present poems, the fact remains that the former only survive in writing. This fact inevitably influences our perception in favour of a literate-minded approach, which orientates our judgement when determining the most likely hypothesis about the nature and origin of a poem, and about the oral elements involved, if any. In fact, investigating the relationships between epics and orality in the past is always complicated and potentially undermined by the scarcity of surviving texts and of documents on their original contexts. This forces scholars to formulate hypotheses, and recommends them to take extreme caution when evaluating their plausibility. Scarce and decontextualized evidence is easy to misinterpret and does not offer much protection against one's own wishful thinking and preconceptions. Therefore, focusing on the empirical written nature of a poem appears to be much more cautious than speculating on its conjectural oral qualities.

This text-centred approach may be right in many cases, but it might turn out to be rather overcautious and ultimately counterproductive in others, especially when a substantial body of textual and contextual evidence proves that orality (and vocality, and aurality) played a very active role in the composition and circulation of a certain genre. In my experience, Italian chivalric poetry is a perfect case in point. In theory, literary scholars know well that, during the first centuries of Italian literature, the oral and the written dimensions were mutually, continuously, and deeply permeable; in practice, nevertheless, such awareness fades away into an inert historical background when examining specific texts and genres, which are interpreted only in

terms of written texts and of interactions between them.² Even if a poem abounds in references to a situation of performance, as it often happens, such references are interpreted as signs of fictive orality. For the sake of prudence, until proven otherwise, aural phrases and traits that point to recitation are considered void of pragmatic value, and explained either as relics of an earlier (or marginalized) practice passively echoed by some writers notwithstanding their loss of function, or else as rhetorical devices deliberately and artfully employed by other writers in order to conjure up for their readers the illusion of attending a spectacle that would never take place other than in their minds.

The general argument of fictive orality has been applied, in many different specific variants, to authors, works, and literary genres of various periods and places. For some of them it has proved to be a very useful hermeneutical principle, on condition that it allows for the fact that a decline of oral composition does not imply a decline of oral recitation. In other words, as many have objected, even when poems were no longer composed *during* performance, and therefore they were not strictly speaking 'oral poems', they could still be mainly composed *in order to* be performed, at least through reading aloud, and in this sense their orality was real.³

In Italy, an approach exclusively focused on literacy and sceptical about orality has been granted preponderant authority by influential philologists such as the late Cesare Segre, who since the 1980s severely opposed a broad application of Paul Zumthor's arguments for a rediscovery of medieval *vocalité* (and of its effects of *mouvance* and *variance*) and battled for decades against any interpretation of the *Chanson de Roland* in terms of oral-formulaic theory.⁴ In the specific field of chivalric *cantari*, leading specialists have detected a process of *letterarizzazione* ('literarization') that gradually shifts their production from piazzas to desks and their reception from recitation to reading (see De Robertis 1966, 438 and 1984, 22). Therefore, though acknowledging the

² For a criticism of this approach from the point of view of a cultural anthropologist, see Donà 2007. The most influential arguments against the privileging of text over voice remain those of Zumthor 1987 (but see also Zumthor 1983).

³ In the latter sense, especially when referring to the 'shared hearing of written texts', one might rather speak of 'aurality', as suggested by Coleman 1996. An authoritative distinction between actual oral delivery and 'nonperformative' oral poetics expressed 'through the pens of authors engaged in ... private moments of composition' has been drawn by Amodio (2004, xv; see also 28-29); however, he does not seem immune from the objection of overlooking 'oral performance as a *goal* of writing or writing down' (Harris and Reichl 2011, 161). Further references in Degl'Innocenti and Richardson 2016, 4-7.

⁴ See in particular Segre 1985 (a later version, entitled 'Dalla memoria al codice', was published in Segre 1998, 3-9). This essay opened a quarrel against J.J. Duggan (1973) and other North American medievalists, one of whose major episodes, more than 20 years later, was the publication of Segre, Beretta and Palumbo 2008, a long negative review-essay to the three volumes of Duggan *et al.* 2005.

difficulty of establishing a clear chronology, it has been authoritatively argued that, by the mid-fifteenth century, most poems preserve 'only a fiction of recitation, codified in a series of formulas that refer to a performance that no longer exists, a mere homage to tradition' (Cabani 1988, 10-11).⁵ The theory of fictive orality has thus become received knowledge among many Italian medievalists and early modernists, who assertively classify every text of the fifteenth century as 'exclusively intended for reading' (Barbiellini Amidei 2007, 23) and, when confronted with poems exceptionally rich in oral features, strive to find them at least a 'more or less similar precedent' in other poems, supposedly 'literarized' (Morato 2011, 197).

Furthermore, what appears to be true for the fifteenth century seems even truer for the following one, when the divide between orality and literacy looks wider and wider and the latter appears to progressively supersede and overcome the former in almost every domain. This perception is particularly enhanced, as far as I can see, by the combined effect of two specific factors; namely, learned writers and printed books. Firstly, the more we move towards and into the sixteenth century, the more we find cultured authors who borrowed the traditional forms and structures of *cantari* and transformed them into literary masterpieces. The most famous is Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, first published in 1516, but the same is true for the poems of his predecessor Matteo Maria Boiardo (1441-1494), of Luigi Pulci (1432-1484), and of many other writers from the mid-fifteenth century onwards. Secondly, in exactly the same period, the poems old and new became even 'more written' than before, as they ever more often took the shape of printed books, soon establishing the hugely successful genre of the *libri di battaglia* ('books of battles').⁶ Precisely because they are artificially written gatherings of paper, printed books appear to be the furthest possible thing from oral poetry.

As a consequence, the Italian chivalric poems that were written and printed in the Renaissance appear to be confined to the realm of literacy. Nevertheless, appearances are often deceptive. If we leave received opinions aside and judge from the evidence available, the case of an author who writes a poem fictionalising for his readers a situation of recitation that would never take place is not very likely. As we shall see, it was still absolutely normal for those poems to be orally performed in both learned and popular contexts, by their very authors or at least in front of them (even in the case of Ariosto); and, what is more, many of them could even still be orally composed, during their performances, by the many poet-improvisers who authored chivalric poems in those decades.

If one takes into account the three interconnected points that I am going to examine in the following pages, fictive orality can hardly emerge as the most

⁵ Unless otherwise stated, translations are mine.

⁶ For a new analysis of an early Venetian bookseller's day-book that has fortuitously survived and is rich in chivalric titles, see Dondi and Harris 2016.

plausible hypothesis, to be held valid unless proven otherwise. On the contrary, rather than proving that an apparently oral poem was really orally performed, the issue should be proving that it was not. The three points are as follows:

Chivalric poetry was still commonly and primarily performed in public both in the fifteenth and in the sixteenth centuries.

Oral poetry and printed books were not at all on opposite fronts in the first decades of the Gutenberg era; on the contrary, they were very close allies.

Even from a textual point of view, the relationship between performed poems and printed ones could be much closer and more direct than we are used to thinking.

2. *And yet it is Sung. Evidence of Long-Lasting Oral Practices*

On the first point, there should be no need to say much. It is common knowledge that (at least) from the early fourteenth century onwards many generations of poets-singers relentlessly performed chivalric texts both in city streets and piazzas and in princely halls and gardens. Their activity is well documented throughout the early modern period by a wide range of records. These include archive documents, such as city statutes that established times and places of the performances, or simply tried to forbid them; judicial records that, though often referring to common offences, still inform about the activity of the defendant as a street singer; and account books of noble households, that record payments of inn bills and donations of gold pieces and robes to poets-improvisers who had entertained the lord and his court by singing chivalric poems (see Degl’Innocenti 2016). Evidence includes also sermons of preachers – or, more precisely, hostile sermons of rival preachers, who were competing with street performers for the same piazza audience, and condemned those *praedicatores diaboli* (‘preachers of the devil’) who committed the ‘capital sin’ of ‘singing of the paladins during Lent and holy days’, and blame the ‘listeners who crowd around them’ as soon as their bows start striking their violas (Degl’Innocenti 2016, 302 and Rospoche 2017). Further proof can be found in passages of letters and diaries that eye-witness (and ear-witness) some remarkable performance in urban or domestic spaces.

Street performances of singers of chivalric tales are also portrayed in diverse literary anecdotes, often written by learned authors who made fun of their gullible audiences, but in so doing also exalted (if unintentionally) the street-singers’ ability to mesmerize them. Such is the case, for instance, of the humanist Poggio Bracciolini, whose *Facetiae* 82 and 83 tell the humorous tales, respectively, of the man who gets home from the piazza in speechless despair and barely finds the courage to confess to his worried wife the daunting news he just heard from a ‘cantor’, that the paladin Roland is dead; and that of the man who ruins himself by paying day by day a special reward to a street entertainer who sings the deeds of Hector, if only he postpones the instalment

in which the Trojan hero must die (Bracciolini 1995, 88-91). Finally, accounts of the recitation of texts can be found in forewords and rubrics of manuscripts and printed books, as well as in other paratextual materials, including the remarkable visual evidence supplied by book illustrations, and in particular by some popular woodcuts that depict real and fictional poets, both ancient and modern, in the guise of street singers playing their *viola* in front of an audience (Degl'Innocenti 2011).

3. *Who Wants to Buy what I Sing? Selling Printed Books and Performing Oral Poetry in the Piazza*

The mention of books leads us to the second point. Once verified that reciting and listening to a poem was as common and normal as writing and reading it, we could nonetheless wonder whether the invention of print – which is commonly identified as the capital enemy of oral practices – did change anything in this landscape, and in its soundscape. The answer is yes, of course. But not in the sense of marginalizing oral practices. Actually, at first it was rather the contrary.

In a context of mixed orality such as the Italian one, a synergy between the written and the spoken word had already been active for centuries before the invention of print. Books were employed as models and sources by professional oral entertainers already in the age of manuscripts, and handwritten copies of their poems were often circulated. What made the difference, in all likelihood, was the price. Printed books were far cheaper than manuscripts, and this could make them appear as very promising wares to poet-performers who were already accustomed to earning their living by selling literature. Printers, on their part, had much to gain in letting their products be circulated and promoted in squares and marketplaces and other public spaces by singers of tales who were able to gather and mesmerise large crowds of listeners of oral poetry, and easily turn them into buyers of printed poems.

In late fifteenth-century Florence the art of printing itself was first imported by the most famous street singer of his age, Antonio di Guido (see Böninger 2003), and the account books of printing shops such as the Ripoli press (based in a convent near Santa Maria Novella) were soon dotted with names of charlatans and street singers (*ciurmadori* and *cantimpanca*) who repeatedly bought dozens of copies of popular books, including many short chivalric romances, for the evident purpose of selling them during their performances (see Burke 1998). By the early sixteenth century, it was far from unusual for *cantimpanca* to do business also as regular publishers and booksellers: such is the case, for instance, of the Florentine Zanobi della Barba, who published no less than 30 titles in the 1500s and 1510s (see Villoresi 2007), and of numerous peers of his in central and northern Italy, like Paolo Danza, Ippolito Ferrarese, Francesco Faentino, Jacopo Coppa

called 'Il Modenese', and Paride Mantovano called 'Il Fortunato'. Venice, the rising capital of Italian book trade, was an important hub in the activity of many of them, but most street singers were itinerant performers, who crisscrossed the peninsula singing and selling their own poems and those of more famous authors, especially the most fashionable ones, such as Ariosto and Pietro Aretino.⁷

Some of them were marginal figures, but some others were able to make their own way right to the epicentre. Jacopo Coppa, for instance, was a typically protean street entertainer, particularly famous for his medical and cosmetic products, and for his ability in advertising them. He achieved success in cities as diverse as Naples, where he ingratiated himself with the Viceroy Don Pedro of Toledo; Venice, where he found the protection of Caterina Cornaro and applied for medical licenses; and Florence, where the great favour that he gained at the court of Cosimo de' Medici was largely due to the healing of the Duke's favourite dog and to a whitening toothpaste which endowed the Duchess Eleonora (daughter of Don Pedro) with the brightest of smiles. Medical charlatanism was not only a key to success with noble patrons, but also a very important aspect of his multifaceted itinerant activity in the piazzas. Another essential facet was singing poetry, and it is significantly on Coppa's ability as a performer of poetry that Pietro Aretino opened a famous letter of October 1545 that proclaims him 'un dei primi ceretani del mondo' ('one of the world's best charlatans') and wittingly develops upon his figure a half-serious eulogy of the charlatans' craft, and of their ability to gain the attention, admiration, and trust of their listeners:

[Io] non pur sopporto, ma in tutto mi rallegra d'essere in bocca de i ceretani ... Quale è quello infacendato, quale è quel bisognoso e quale è quello avaro, che al primo tocco de la lor lira, al primo verso de la lor voce e al primo iscorinar de la lor merce, non si fermi, non s'impegni e non si scagli nel conto del comperare le ricette, i bossoletti e le leggende ch'essi donano con la vendita sino a queglii che son certi che niente vagliano, che niente importano e che niente dicono?⁸

The alluring and mesmerizing power of the *cantimpanca* is here described at its best: even if many people know that nothing of what they sing or sell is really worth it, upon first hearing their music and their voice, everybody stop, gather around and listen to them, in a sort of mirroring trance, pulled and

⁷ See Salzberg 2010 and 2014, Petrella 2012, and Rhodes 2015.

⁸ 'Not only I tolerate, but I really rejoice in being in the mouth of charlatans ... Whoever is so busy, so needy, or so mean, that at the first stroke of their lyre, at the first call of their voice, at the first display of their wares, he would not stop, engage and let himself be carried away by the idea of buying the recipes, the tins, and the stories which the charlatans donate for sale even to those who know for sure how worthless, fruitless, and meaningless they are?' (On Coppa, see Refini 2016).

dragged along by 'la calamita de le chiacchiere, di che gli diluvia la lingua' (Aretino 1999, 325-327).⁹ The art of these charming entertainers hinges upon the sounds of their voices as well as on the meanings of their words. Far from being art for art's sake, however, theirs is put at the service of a commercial activity. Now, if one takes a closer look to the wares they peddled, in a jumble with soap bars, perfumes, quack remedies and tins of ointments, one also finds 'stories' and 'ballads' ('leggende' and 'cantafavole', as Aretino says), which they both sang and sold. The letter was reportedly occasioned by the fact that Coppa had been heard singing some of Aretino's poems on the bench 'in su la piazza di Ferrara, cantando in banca':¹⁰ a piece of news that makes the author even happier than being praised by Apollo himself 'nei chiostri di Parnaso, poetizando improvviso'.¹¹ Reference is also made, though, to Coppa's initiative of dedicating those poems to Sansovino, another of Aretino's friends, without the author's consent: this must have happened in a printed edition unrecognised so far, and yet possibly to be identified with one of the unsigned reprints of the *Capitoli del signor Pietro Aretino, di messer Lodovico Dolce, di m. Francesco Sansovino*, published in the 1540s.¹² Jacopo Coppa, in fact, was not only an itinerant charlatan, street singer and bookseller, but a publisher as well – and a particularly resourceful one, at that, considering that he was able to lay his hands even on some tasty unpublished works of Ludovico Ariosto: namely, the monologue known as the *Erbolato* and, more importantly, his collection of lyric poems, the *Rime*, published by Coppa in Venice in 1546 and reprinted by others dozens of times in the following decades (see Casadei 1992).

Being a noticeable publisher was not at all exceptional for an Italian *cantimpanca*. The most striking example is almost certainly the Zoppino. In the first half of the sixteenth century, a charlatan that goes under this name appears in several satirical works of Pietro Aretino, Teofilo Folengo, Francisco Deligado and others, doing business in various capacities, from the street singer to the pimp. His most important literary biographer is once again Aretino, who many times insists upon the irresistible attraction of his street performances. In the *Dialogue* of Nanna and Pippa, Zoppino is a paradigm of the charlatans' mastery in entralling the audience and playing with the dynamics of pleasure-postponement. At a certain point, Nanna needs a comparison that would make clear to Pippa how a courtesan should play her lovers along by allowing them to foretaste the joys of love just up to the

⁹ 'the magnet of the chatter, that pours down from their tongue'.

¹⁰ 'singing on the bench, in the piazza of Ferrara'.

¹¹ 'in the cloisters of Parnassus, improvising verse'.

¹² See EDIT16-*Censimento nazionale delle edizioni italiane del XVI secolo* (<<http://edit16.iccu.sbn.it>>), entries number 2430 and 2436. I am most grateful to Neil Harris for this suggestion.

point in which the business gets serious, and then suddenly refusing them, so that they will ever be at her mercy thereafter, ready to pay any price in order to resume their intercourse. This is exactly the same trick, she explains, employed by the *cantimpanca* Zoppino:

NANNA. Non ti ricordi tu, Pippa, quando il Zoppino vendette in banca la leggenda di Campriano?

PIPPA. Mi ricordo di quel Zoppino che quando canta in banca tutto il mondo corre a udirlo.

NANNA. Quello è desso. Hai tu in mente il ridere che tu facesti sendo noi dal mio compar Piero, mentre con la Luchina e con la Lucietta sue lo ascoltavate?

PIPPA. Madonna sì.

NANNA. Tu sai che 'l Zoppino cantò ... la storia fino a la metà: e come ebbe adescata la turba ben bene, voltò mantello; e inanzi che si desse a finirla, volse spacciar mille altre bagattelle ... Il dire 'non voglio' e 'non posso' in sul bel del fare, sono le ricette che vende il Zoppino, nel lasciare in secco la brigata che smascellava, stroncando la novella di Campriano. (Aretino 1969, 161-162)¹³

The comparison with a prostitute may not have been most flattering – and one could well imagine Aretino's amusement in setting it up – but it is undoubtedly apt. Not by chance, the characteristic technique that Ariosto (and Boiardo before him) derived from the *cantimpanca*, of choosing always a suspenseful moment for abandoning a narrative strand and switch to another one, or simply close the *canto*, has been wittily dubbed 'cantus interruptus' (Javitch 1980). The acclaimed street entertainer Zoppino (whose audience, we learn, included a noteworthy feminine component), first grips his listeners by telling an amusing tale, thus making sure that no one would leave before the end, and then suspends the story in the thick of it and starts an endless sequence of advertisements (any resemblance with modern-time TV channels is by no means coincidental), peddling all sorts of stuff, and in particular – precisely as Coppa – his recipes and stories. Once again, we have a charlatan who is also both a story-teller and a book-seller. This time, the book is *Campriano contadino*, a popular *novella* in *ottava rima* about a cunning peasant who outsmarts some rich town merchants in a series of funny pranks. On other

¹³ NANNA. Don't you recall, Pippa, when Zoppino was selling on the bench the story of Campriano? / PIPPA. I remember that Zoppino whom everyone run to hear when he sings. / NANNA. That's the fellow. Do you recollect how you laughed when we were visiting my good old friend Piero, and you listened to him together with Luchina and Lucietta? / PIPPA. Yes, my lady. / NANNA. You know that Zoppino sang the tale up to the midway point; and when he had gathered a mob about him, he would turn his cape inside out and before getting set to finish the tale, he wanted to peddle a thousand other trifles ... Well, saying 'I don't want to' and 'I can't' just at the sweet climax, are in fact like the recipes that Zoppino gets down to sell, when he leaves the delighted crowd high and dry by cutting short his story of Campriano'. Translation (amended) from Raymond Rosenthal's version in Aretino 1972, 178.

occasions, though, the story sung and sold by Zoppino is a chivalric one: case in point, in Aretino's *Dialogo del giuoco*, having 'promesso al popolazzo di ammazzar Ranaldo', the well-beloved Paladin, in the next day's show, he finds a listener who begs him: 'Deh togliete questi cinque carlini e non l'aammazzate!' (Aretino 2014, 327).¹⁴ This is clearly a revamp of Poggio's *facetia* 83, but if it seemed easy-fitting for Zoppino, it means that his activities included the recitation of series of chivalric *cantari* over many days.

Chivalric titles are abundant in the annals of a famous namesake of his, the publisher Niccolò d'Aristotele de' Rossi from Ferrara called Zoppino, who cherished this genre so much that he engaged many young promising authors, restored the text of Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato* by getting back to its first complete edition, and was the first to produce a complete series of woodcut illustrations for Ariosto's *Furioso* even before its final edition of 1532, thus paving the way for many publishers to come (see Harris 1987, 88-94 and 1991, 87-92 and Caneparo 2008). He mostly published cheap and yet well-crafted popular books: collections of rhymes, entertaining stories, and bestsellers past and present, almost exclusively in the vernacular, and also manuals on various subjects (including embroidery designs) and books of recipes as well. Furthermore, albeit mainly based in Venice, his itinerant activity spread all over the peninsula, through a network of local bookshops and editions commissioned to local printers on the eve of important fairs. Among other things, it is also worth mentioning that in 1512 he was the first publisher of Aretino himself, and kept on reprinting his works also in later years.

It is hardly surprising, then, that scholars have long wondered whether the two Zoppinos could ever have been one and the same person (Degl'Innocenti 2008b, 196-197). Until very recently, though, the most common answer has been scepticism. The publisher Zoppino was one of the most enterprising and productive ones of the early sixteenth century, a respectable businessman whose activity lasted for more than forty years (1503-1544) and whose annals, recently published, fill up a volume of 355 pages.¹⁵ The idea of identifying him with a crafty peddler has appeared awkward to many, and would probably be still deemed so, if it wasn't for a couple of recent discoveries. Although two Zoppinos have long been part and parcel of the historical account, in fact, the one and only real Zoppino has been lately healed from his multiple personality disorder by means of some Ferrarese and Venetian archive records which unequivocally refers to Niccolò Zoppino as a publisher and *cantimpanca* at the same time (Cavicchi 2011, 282 and Rospocher 2014). Of course, even if Aretino's characters are always grounded in real life, one

¹⁴ 'promised to the mob to kill Renaud', 'Here, take this five coins, but, please, don't kill him!'

¹⁵ Baldacchini 2011 (reviewed by Harris 2013). Interestingly, Harris suggests that Zoppino may also have been the printer of some of the numerous unsigned editions of Aretino of the 1530s and 1540s.

should always account for the literary nature and the ridiculous register of his portraits. Nevertheless, no matter how fictive some details may well be, what is not fictional but factual beyond doubt is the symbiosis that linked book publishing and street performances in early modern Italy at all levels of the two professions, and in the persons of their leading exponents.

Such links can be substantiated also through material objects. That is, of course, through printed books. The most conclusive document about the hybrid profile of Zoppino, made public by Massimo Rospoche a few years ago, is a Venetian record related to his conviction for having publicly sung and sold ('cantaverint in bancho publice et vendiderint') in his native Ferrara, in 1509, a poem against Venice (2014, 349 and 357). That poem was in all likelihood a very rare *Barzoleta*, a booklet of 4 pages (just half a sheet of paper folded in two) survived in two copies only, in London and in Turin, in whose last strophe the poet encourages the bystanders to buy a copy of the text at the end of the performance: 'Chi vorrà sta frotelina ... / metta mano a la scarsella: / dui quattrin tragram di quella / al Zopin li ponga in mani' (Zoppino 1509?, Aiiiv).¹⁶

Zoppino's urging is particularly effective to us because we know for certain that this specific book was publicly sung and sold, but it is common for similar references to appear in the final lines of popular pamphlets in verse. Among the possible examples, at least another one is directly connected with documented performances of a text. At the end of the eighth and last *canto* of his mock-chivalric *Libero del Rado Stizuxo* ('Book of the Furious Rado'), in fact, the renowned Venetian *buffone* Zuan Polo dismisses his audience with the advertisement of a special sale price: no more than two *marcelli* for a copy, and just a *mocenigo* for his friends (but the *mocenigo* was a coin worth twice as much as a *marcello*, and so the latter offer is just a joke).¹⁷ The first and only known edition of this work was published in Venice in 1533, and the author held the privilege to print it since January 1532 (see Salzberg 2014, 83). It is more than likely, therefore, that this edition was published by Zuan Polo himself, who would then sell it during his performances, even if its 46 leaves qualify it as a product less ephemeral than cheap pamphlets like Zoppino's *Barzoleta*. Actually, this is not only a likely supposition, but a documented fact, recorded by the diarist Marino Sanudo on the 10th of August of that very year 1533, when he attended in Piazza San Marco a performance of Zuan Polo, 'vestito da poeta con zoia de lauro in testa' (precisely as he is portrayed

¹⁶ 'Those who want this little book may simply put their hands in their pockets, take out [the modest sum of] two *quattrini*, and hand them to the *Zoppino*' (Zoppino 1509?, Aiiiv). I quote from the copy held in the British Library, 11426.c.93; the other one is in Turin, Biblioteca Reale, L.11.11.

¹⁷ 'Demilo vui per vostro chortexia / dui marcelli e portelo via. / E si xe qua qualche mio amico / non voio laltro che vn mocenigo' (Zuan Polo 1533, Miv).

in the woodcut on the title-page), who 'fè un sermon a tuti' and then 'dete fuora l'opera composta per lui a stampa di Rado Stizoso'.¹⁸ Even when they didn't become publishers in a general sense, street singers took care of having their own works printed and of selling copies of them.

4. *The Chicken or the Egg? Voicing Scripts and Scribing Voices During Oral Performances*

Voices and books were bound in perfect harmony and worked in spontaneous synergy in the piazzas of early modern Italy, as we have just seen. Fostered by chivalric poetry, it is this symbiosis between the written and the oral that Teofilo Folengo vividly, though disdainfully, evoked in the proem of his *Orlandino*, when he deprecated the ongoing public performances of old poems such as 'Trabisunda, Ancroia, Spagna, e Bovo' (that he'd rather burn or use as toilet paper) by means of an apparent synaesthesia, blaming the 'Di quanti scartafacci e scrittarie / oggidì cantar odo in le botteghe'.¹⁹

These pages and writings that turn into sounds and songs urge us to deal with the third and last point of this essay. How did recited texts and printed ones relate to each other? Obviously, it makes a great difference which came first, the voice or the book – but sometimes solving the dilemma is not much easier than with chickens and eggs.

The simplest case is that of a written version composed before the recital and simply sung from memory, or even read aloud, by the performer. Such is the case of some century-old poems which were still performed in the late fifteenth century, if we are to judge from a manuscript of the timeless *Spagna in rima* that a *cantimpanca* annotated with marginal warnings such as 'Questa [stanza] non bisogna dire più'.²⁰ After all, even *Orlando furioso*, when Ariosto was still working on it, was both regularly read aloud at the court of the duke of Ferrara, together with Boiardo's *Innamorato* (according to the diary of one of the duke's footmen, Agostino Mosti; see Dorigatti 2011, 34), and sung by mountebanks in the city streets in front of the author himself (according to the poet's first biographer and fellow citizen, Giovambattista Pigna).²¹ Oral communication was so congenial to chivalric poems that many of them may have been performed by their very authors in the first place: though usually disregarded, this is likely even in the major cases of Pulci, Boiardo, and Ariosto, and is almost certain for Aretino's *Marfisa*, which not only was

¹⁸ 'in the guise of a poet with a laurel on his head'; 'recited a text in front of everyone'; 'peddled the printed work composed by him of *Rado Stizoso*' (Sanudo 1879-1903, vol. LVIII, col. 542).

¹⁹ 'The many scrap papers and scribbles that nowadays I hear being sung in the shops' (*Orlandino*, I 17 1-2 in Folengo 1991).

²⁰ 'This [strophe] mustn't be recited any more'. See Strologo 2014, 44 and note 51.

²¹ See Pigna 1554, book III (*Scontri de' luoghi*), observation LII.

seized, modified, sung, published, and sold by itinerant street singers such as Ippolito Ferrarese in the 1530s and Cristoforo Scanello aka ‘the Blind Man from Forlì’ in the 1560s, but was also first made known through recitals given by Aretino himself in Venice and elsewhere (see Degl’Innocenti 2016, 320). Once acknowledged that such texts were commonly really performed, and written with the goal of being so, their frequent references to oral delivery prove to be functional to their performability, and there is no advantage in interpreting them as purely fictional.

However, although performances allowed for extempore variations and modifications, these poems were, strictly speaking, simply *vocally performed* and not *orally composed*. Yet, one of the most striking facts about chivalric poetry in early modern Italy is that many authors (and possibly most of them) were known and renowned for their ability to sing *all’improvviso*. They were capable, in other words, of composing their cantos *during performance*: more than three hundreds lines, to be sung in about one hour, for an average *cantare*.²² A comprehensive study of poetic improvisation in late medieval and early modern Italy is still lacking, but the cases investigated so far suggest that composing a narrative poem *all’improvviso* did not usually mean creating it *ex nihilo*, but rather assembling it on the spur of the moment through a recombination and adaptation of source materials such as set pieces and recurrent phrase-patterns (i.e. ‘themes’ and ‘formulae’, in terms of oral-formulaic theory) that had been stocked and organized in the poet’s well-trained memory.²³ Written texts were essential to this process of semi-improvisation in many ways: narrations in prose were employed as plot outlines, set pieces were elaborated in writing before memorizing them, one’s own formulaic repertoire was largely based on the works of the most influential writers, not uncommonly known by heart. As paradoxical as it may seem, then, even a process apparently originating in pure orality such as poetical improvisation did actually rely extensively on books.

All the same, the relations between the improvisational activity of many poets and the written and printed texts that go under their names still need to be explained. A possible scenario is what have been called a ‘performance at the desk’:²⁴ the poem is composed in writing by a poet-improviser who draws upon the same materials and techniques that he employs when composing in public;

²² For a provisional survey, that includes the already mentioned Antonio di Guido, Luigi Pulci, Niccolò Zoppino, and Pietro Aretino together with Niccolò Cieco d’Arezzo, Francesco Cieco da Firenze, Francesco Tromba da Gualdo, Giovambattista Dragoncino da Fano, Niccolò degli Agostini and Cristoforo l’Altissimo, see Degl’Innocenti 2014, 329-331 and 2016, 311-319.

²³ See Degl’Innocenti 2008a, 190-201 and 2014, 320-321; Ventrone 1993, 108-114; Wilson 2015, 292; on lyric poetry, see Richardson 2017.

²⁴ De Robertis 1984, 22 (‘esecuzioni al tavolino’).

it is a sort of *in vitro* reproduction, quill in hand in front of a blank page, of an actual oral performance, bow in hand in front of an audience: as such, it may be of some help in understanding the features of real performances, and yet, being more meditated and refined than them, it would differ from orally improvised poetry to an uncertain, but still significant, extent. Ultimately, these poems would fall within the same category of the vocally performable texts considered above, although their authors, when reciting in front of an audience, might have drifted away from the written version much more freely than those who were not skilled in improvising.

There are cases, nevertheless, for which such an interpretation is clearly inadequate. For instance, among the numerous itinerant singers cherished by the duke of Ferrara in the 1470s, and by Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga before him, is frequently mentioned a Francesco Cieco from Florence who 'dice in rima a lo Improviso', or 'canta de jesta in rima', which means 'who sings improvised chivalric tales in verse'. Like many other epic poets at the time (as well as at Homer's time), Francesco was 'Cieco', that is 'blind', and therefore writing could not be of much use to him. Nevertheless, he authored a long poem called *Persiano*, published in 1493 and reprinted no less than six times in the following century (see Bertoni 1929, Foster French 1937, Everson 1983). He could not create poetry other than orally, so how was his oral poetry ever turned into writing?

The answer is as simple as is usually overlooked. The crucial missing link is the custom of transcribing improvised texts along with their composition – that is, during their performance. Such practice of *reportatio* is well known for preachers' sermons, but the evidence that can be gathered from the early fifteenth to the late eighteenth centuries suggests that it was widespread also for poetry.²⁵ Predictably, at times the evidence refers to blind poet-performers, such as Niccolò Cieco d'Arezzo in the 1430s and Luigi Groto, alias the Cieco d'Adria, in the 1570s (for Groto see Carnelos 2016). Many other times, though, the improviser was perfectly able to see and, presumably, to write. The most impressive case is that of Cristoforo l'Altissimo, whose chivalric *Primo libro de' Reali* was printed posthumously in Venice in 1534, but – as many internal elements show – had been sung extempore in piazza San Martino, Florence, during a year-long cycle of 94 performances some twenty years before, in 1514-1515. According to the anonymous foreword, the 94 cantos had been copied from the poet's own voice, and the claim is proven true by the presence of very unusual and yet typically oral features in the text, such as details strictly related to the circumstantial context, including the date of the next show; repeat performances of set pieces, with minor contextual adaptations; barefaced perjuries about opinions expressed in earlier cantos, on-the-air mistakes, and memory leaks on the poet's part; deictic phrases such

²⁵ For some references, see Degl'Innocenti 2012, 110-112.

as ‘he did *thus*’, ‘in *this* manner’, ‘he hit him *here*’ ‘between *these* bones’, that are meaningless in the absence of the gestures which they originally referred to (see Degl’Innocenti 2008a, 34, 238 and 321-322).

When carefully reading a text, such features are relatively easy to identify. As far as they are not detected in other poems of the same genre, the case of Altissimo’s *Reali* could appear as one of a kind – if it wasn’t that other works of his do suggest rather the contrary. The Altissimo was a first-rate improviser who reached his acme in the 1510s, when his acclaimed piazza performances were witnessed by the publisher Bernardo Giunta in Florence and the diarist Marino Sanudo in Venice. Like most of his peers, he not only did sing but also published some of his works, and to that purpose he requested print privileges in both cities. In 1516, in particular, the *Signoria* of Florence granted him the privilege to print a war poem on a crucial recent battle, the *Rotta di Ravenna*. The text came out soon after that, with a title which informs that it was ‘copiata dalla viva voce ... mentre cantava’ (Altissimo 1516?).²⁶ The strophes of the *Rotta* were undoubtedly sung in the same piazza and in the same months as the *Reali* (probably in April 1515, when the instalments of the *Reali* appear to take a break), and most importantly they even made use, here and there, of the very same repertoire of set pieces (see Degl’Innocenti 2008a, 34 and 238). Yet, the *Rotta* does not present any of the extraordinary features listed above for the *Reali*. How did that happen? What made the difference? It was the author, in my opinion, who made it. No matter whether out of piety or of laziness, whoever edited the posthumous *Reali* was uncommonly conservative towards the transcriptions, but when the initiative of publishing his improvised poems was taken by the Altissimo himself, it is no surprise that in the act of polishing and transforming the transcriptions of his own oral performances in a text to be read in a book, he erased all the contextual references and incidental details that made sense for his past listeners but couldn’t make sense anymore for his future readers.

The same might have happened with many other oral poems converted into books, whose oral traits were neither merely fictional nor simply functional, but rather genuinely factual. It is not easy to say how many, but it is worth bearing this possibility in mind.

After all, the degree of self-consciousness with which early modern street singers could perceive the hybrid nature of their own poetry, both oral and written, and embrace the cause of print culture could be surprising. One of the Altissimo’s lesser known texts, in particular, proves him capable of a subtle attention to the materiality of the book and of a precocious awareness of the revolutionary consequences of its mechanical reproduction. At the end of a collection of amorous poems that he published in Venice in the early 1520s, one finds a short poem entitled *Liber de se ipso loquitur* (‘The book talks about

²⁶ ‘transcribed out of the poet’s voice’

itself”), which plays with the possible double meaning of *libro* (which means ‘book’, but can also be read as a syncopated form of *libero*, ‘free’) in order to celebrate books as powerful means of free thought and free expression:

L'Altissimo poeta mi fe' libro ...
 Ognun mi pò squarciar, mordere e volvere,
 ma nissun mi può tôr l'eterno vivere.
 Ferro, ardor, vento, sol, pioggia, omin' e polvere,
 perch'io mi fo rimprimere e riscrivere,
 forza non han di potermi dissolvere.
 Quando le membre mie son rotte e livere,
 per le immense virtù ch'io porto e speculo,
 come Fenice torno al fin del seculo.

A mia posta mi scopro, orno, apro e chiudo,
 perch'io son libro; e s'io son nudo e sciolto,
 vo' più presto esser libro e sciolto e nudo
 che servo in drappo, in oro, in gemme avvolto.
 Quale i' sia, tristo, buon, facile o rudo,
 non curo altrui piacer poco né molto,
 ché satisfar solamente disio
 dua amici, li aditor, me, lauro e Dio. (Altissimo 1520?, 14r)²⁷

The most impressive stanza is probably the first one, a sort of hymn to the immortality of books. Notwithstanding the overwhelming list of their enemies (which rightly includes their worst enemy ever, mankind) and all injuries that can be inflicted on them, says the Altissimo, books will never die, because at the end of their life cycle, just as a Phoenix, they will be born again. Such (over-)confidence in the resilience of books could hardly be inspired by manuscripts that, once destroyed, can't be brought back to life; and the same is true for any single copy of a printed edition. What the poet had in mind, I believe, was rather the edition as a whole, as an entity made up of hundreds of identical individuals. Each of them can be broken apart,

²⁷ “The poet Altissimo made me {into a book / free}: ... / Everyone can tear me, bite me and turn me, / and yet no one can take my eternal life away. / Iron, fire, wind, sun, rain, men and dust / don't have the power to break me apart, / because I get myself reprinted and rewritten. / When my limbs are broken and loosened, / by the unlimited virtues that I carry and conceive, / like a Phoenix at the end of the century, again I can live. // As it pleases me I uncover, adorn, open, and close myself, / because I am {free / a book}; and if I am naked and unbound / I like better being {free / a book}, and unbound, and naked, / than being a slave, wrapped in cloth, in gold, and in gems. / However I may be – evil or good, easy going or rough – / I don't care much nor little to be liked by others; / because all that I want is to please / two friends, the listeners, myself, the laurels, and God’.

but the survival of the species is much more difficult to put at risk: as soon as a copy is reprinted (and the poet explicitly used 'rimprimerè'), hundreds of new copies will guarantee the eternal life of the book (in the sense, here, of the literary works that are printed and reprinted in it).

The book that speaks in these lines, however, is not only a printed artefact or a literary work: it is the poet himself, too, as the second stanza does make clear. The one that would rather be naked but free than rich but enslaved, in fact, is obviously the Altissimo – not to mention the unexpected 'listeners' of the last line. If this personified book can speak to listeners rather than readers, it is because it is the incarnation of an oral poet, a poet-improviser whose *voice* was one of the most popular ones of his age, but who was also able to imagine his own self as a physical *book*.

Altissimo's triumphal and defiant celebration of the eternal life of printed books could not but make a sharp contrast with the inherently ephemeral nature of his oral performances. When publishing and selling their books, street singers were conscious of, and confident in, the books' ability to spread and preserve their words through space and time. They were also probably confident that books would never be considered an alternative to their performances, as printed pages lacked too many of their most compelling aural, visual, and social components. If so, they were actually wrong, since printed books were in the end destined to marginalise the oral art of the *cantimpanca*. For certain, though, it is thanks to printed books and to their early alliance with oral poets that we can still read their words, and attempt to capture an echo of their voices.

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