CHAPTER 1

Control of Literature as a Strategy of Catholic Reformation

*Motives and Modes of Influence*

La materia de’ libri par cosa di poco momento perché tutta di parole, ma da quelle parole vengono le opinioni del mondo che causano le parzialità, le sedizioni e finalmente le guerre. Sono parole sì, ma che in conseguenza tirano eserciti armati.

**Paolo Sarpi**

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the influence of poetry was being debated by the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–1517). The mandate of the Council, convened by Pope Julius II, was to lessen conflict between Christians by bringing about reforms that would both increase the number of members of the faith and combat errors and heresies. The role of poetry in reform politics emerges from two decrees issued by the Council under the Medici Pope Leo X, the successor of Julius II: *Apostolici regiminis* (1513) and *Inter sollicitudines* (1515). They reveal that the control of poetry, its study and publication was considered important for the Catholic Reformation. *Apostolici regiminis* was a significant step towards controlling and influencing not only the Church’s faith but also its knowledge base, while *Inter sollicitudines* supplied an instrument for this control by introducing universal pre-censorship in the Roman Church in 1515.

The *Apostolici regiminis* declares that Satan, “the sower of cockle” (“zizaniae seminator”), “the old enemy of the human race” (“antiquus humani generis hostis”), is responsible for misinterpretations of the Catholic faith, and that these misinterpretations were being adopted by philosophers in support of their respective philosophies. One such misinterpretation centered on the mortality of the soul. The Council “condemns and repudiates” (“damnamus & reprobamus”) anyone who denies the immortality of the soul, insists on the existence of a single soul for all human beings, and expresses doubts about the Catholic faith in this respect. All statements contravening the Catholic

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1 Parts of this chapter have already been published in my article ‘Philologie, Übersetzungen und das Dekret *Inter sollicitudines* zur Vorzensur (1515)’, in Christoph Strosetzki (ed.), *Übersetzung—Ursprung und Zukunft der Philologie?* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2008), 195–212.
truth are defined as “false”. The decree rejects the possibility of ‘double truth’, the theory that an idea proven incorrect in theology could still be considered true in philosophy. All philosophers teaching publicly were compelled to teach only Catholic “truths”, and, when dealing with heterodox positions, they were obliged to point out the fallacies. This measure was possibly put into place due to the insistence of some philosophers that the mortality of the soul was supported by philosophy.

The *Apostolici regiminis* refers to poetry twice in the context of education, both times in connection with philosophy, and as a potential source of heterodox ideas within the faith itself. The decree metaphorically explains that in order to successfully combat errors about the faith it does not suffice to merely sever the errors at their roots; rather, it is necessary to destroy the roots altogether in order to prevent errors and heresies from blooming once again. These dangerous roots are described as “infected” (“infectae”), products of Satan’s seed contaminated by his ill will. According to the decree, the roots of poetry and philosophy were infected, rendering them instruments of Satan.

Education was considered an instrument that could be used to combat such errors. The Council strove to control educational institutions and admonish philosophers in their teaching. It decreed that if members of religious and secular orders wished to study philosophy or poetry at universities or other public institutions for periods of longer than five years, they were to embrace the study of theology or canon law so that the “infected roots” of philosophy and poetry could be “cleansed”. Poetry was to be controlled, as it was considered a source of heterodox and heretical ideas and beliefs.

Education, especially the teaching, studying and understanding of philosophy and poetry, became a conduit for Catholic reform. Given that the study and interpretation of poetry was exclusively the domain of members of secular and religious orders, one might question the importance of examining the degree to which the *Apostolici regiminis* influenced the censorship of profane poetry and literature. Aside from the obvious fact that a large number of clergy were teachers of laypeople, one can find an answer to this question by examining a program for church reform entitled *Libellus ad Leonem X*, which two Camaldulensian monks, Piero Querini and Paolo Giustinian, presented to Pope Leo X shortly after his election. There is debate among critics as to the degree to which the *Libellus* influenced the *Apostolici regiminis* because the

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