Censures of Love

Love was one of the most popular themes of medieval and Renaissance poetry. Linked to morality, philosophy and theology, it is discussed in various censorship files of the Congregation for the Index. The Index offers enough material to understand how and why the poetic depiction and interpretation of love played a role in censorship. In regard to its laws, aside from Rules VIII and IX, Rule VII of the Index of 1564 is believed to have had an immense impact on literature. In order to protect the faith (“fides”) and good morals (“boni mores”), this law prohibited all books in which lascivious or obscene things (“res lascivas seu obscenas”) were treated, narrated or taught on purpose (“ex professo”).¹ Since, like Rule IX, this prohibition was very broad, such books were generally prohibited but their titles did not have to be listed nominatim in the Index. Only Latin and Greek works by classical authors were to be treated with special indulgence and permitted because of their elegance and style. This seems tolerant, but there were implicit restrictions.

A draft of Rule VII, indirectly recalling the constitutions of the Council of Florence of 1517/18 (section De magistris deque hereticis Christianae fidei scandalizantibus)² makes clear that exceptions were not to be made for works such as the dialogues by Lucian of Samosata, Ovid’s Ars amatoria and Martial’s epigrams.³ The reception of classical texts was further restricted inasmuch as young people were not allowed to read classical poetry containing lascivious or obscene elements or listen to it being read aloud.⁴ The general privileged treatment did not apply to translations of the classics; in fact, the Latin language could, to a certain degree, protect Catholic texts from censorship because the number of readers familiar with Latin was much smaller than that of readers of vernacular books. But this was not the rule. Robert Bellarmine suggested that certain Latin Renaissance poetic works should be put on the Index

² Cf. Chap. 1.1.
³ Cf. Regulas generales, in Concilii Tridentini tractatuum, 605.
nominatim, such as Giovanni Pontano’s *Lepidina*, *Hendecasyllaba*, *Tumuli* and *Epigrammata*.5

As demonstrated above, the Clementine *Instructio de correctione librorum* of 1596 (§§ iii and iv) shows tolerance towards ‘ancient’ Catholic authors. It ordains that works written before 1515 were not to be corrected, regardless of the language in which they were written. In order to explain and correct sections in which the ancient Catholic authors had erred or sinned, comments (*scholia, adnotationes*) were to be inserted, but the original texts were not to be altered.

But what is meant by the vague expression “lascivious or obscene things” (“res lascivae seu obscenae”)? Unlike other laws, Rule VII does not only refer to “words” (“verba”), it also speaks of “things” (“res”). “Things” may be defined as anything that exists.6 In addition to texts, “things” could refer to illuminations, images, engravings, (that is, *libri muti*), and even music scores. Manuel Bertolini notes that the Roman *Indexes* of 1559 and 1564 do not contain music scores, probably because he has not found prohibitions expressed nominatim.7 The wording of Rule VII does not, however, appear to actually exclude music scores. Not only was the writing and reading about love of a certain nature considered dangerous, singing such love songs was also a danger as the souls of poets, singers or listeners were engaged in uncouth thoughts, which, it was believed, had the potential to excite libido.8

It is therefore plausible that Constabile emphasized that the May 1574 prohibition applied to songs of an immoral nature.9 This prohibition automatically concerned music books such as the madrigal scores that had been widely used since the 1540s; thus, collections of music scores are listed in the category of *Libri volgari sospetti* by Di Dio in his unofficial manuscript *Index*.10 Furthermore, the *Index* of Parma of 1580 includes a section *Libri di Musica* with

6 See the entry ‘res’, in *Vocabularium Iurisprudentiae Romanae*.
8 Cf. the letter from Sirleto to Cervino of 7 February 1546, *Concilium Tridentini Epistularum*, p. 1, Complectens epistulas a die 5 martii 1545 ad Concilii translationem 11 martii 1547 scriptas, collegit, editi, illustravit Godofredus Buschbell, in: *Concilium Tridentinum* (Friburgi Brisgoviae: Herder, 1916), t. 10, 934 at n. 5, and 574.
10 See Vatican, *ACDF*, Index XIV.