Comparisons, or analogies, between changes in languages, on the one hand, and the plastic arts and architecture, on the other, can be very useful, even illuminating, provided one keeps in mind that the objects of study are different in kind. In this essay, I will use late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century views of the Italian or Tuscan vernacular as a living, autonomous language as an analogon for art, and argue that it is more fruitful to establish definitions of vernacular art on what contemporaries thought of as indigenous rather than on modern categories such as high versus low or folk versus polite. Three sixteenth-century texts by, respectively, Anton Francesco Doni, Antonfrancesco Grazzini, and Francesco Bocchi on Donatello’s statue of St. George at Orsanmichele in Florence, which these authors considered an icon of original Florentine art, will be discussed in order to show what range of vernacular meanings such an icon could bear.1

I

In Latin, the word verna was originally used to distinguish the home-born, house-bred slave from the more common servus, a slave who could, and often did, originate from far-away lands at the fringe of the Roman Empire.2 Vernacular was the language of those slaves. Although theoretically it could be any of the many dialects and languages spoken in the Roman world, in common parlance the sermo vernacula was a domestic form of Latin, because that language, at least in the West,

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Lex Hermans
was the *lingua franca* of the upper classes and the many bodies of civil and military administration. With the exception of Greek, the speakers of Latin considered the various dialects of the empire rough and definitely lower class, unfit for official use or civil society. Local officials were expected to express themselves in Latin; the use of dialect and non-Latin languages was probably discouraged. In any case, nobody destined for a public career would think of using his language of origin if it was not Latinate, let alone be boastfully proud of it.

A second, more generalized meaning of *verna* was ‘a common town-bred person’, whose Latin was presumably not much different from that of house- or town-bred slaves. Notwithstanding its observed or imagined coarseness, this language must have had the ring of authenticity, for Roman language theorists such as Varro used the adjective *vernaculus* in the sense of ‘indigenous’ – and Varro most certainly meant Latin – as opposed to *peregrinus* (‘foreign’). The various meanings of the two words amalgamated. For Romans the *lingua vernacula* was an average Latin spoken by local townsmen. In the late medieval and early modern European world, with its many regions and dialects, vernacular was the common language of a given region or province, spoken by all natives and inhabitants, irrespective of social class. On the Italian peninsula, it was usually called *volgare*, the language of the people, as opposed to Latin, the international language of the church, chanceries, and the intelligentsia.

In Italy (from here on I will use the name in its loose geographical meaning), the vernacular, and the Tuscan dialect in particular, enjoyed considerable standing. As early as the first decade of the fourteenth century, Dante praised the *volgare* as a natural and noble language, better suited to poetic use than the more formal Latin. He defined it as the language little children effortlessly learn from their wet nurse.

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3 Varro, *De lingua latina* 5.77: ‘aquatilium vocabula partim sunt vernacula partim peregrina’. On the implied coarseness of provincial Latin, see the remarks by the second century BCE Roman satirist Gaius Lucilius, who protested that he didn’t write for the refined intelligentsia of Rome, but for the public in Taranto, Cosenza, and Sicily (Cicero, *De finibus* 1.3.7; cf. Cicero, *De oratore* 2.6.25).


5 Alighieri Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* 1.1.2–3, ed. A. Marigo (Florence: 1937) 6–8: ‘dicimus, celeriter actendentes, quod vulgaram locutionem appellamus eam qua infantes assuefunt ab assistentibus cum primitus distinguere voces incipiunt; vel, quod brevius dici potest, vulgarem locutionem asserimus quam sine omni regula nutricem imitantes accipimus. Est et inde alia locutio secundaria nobis, quam Romani