Overview

During the early part of the Quattrocento, often called the “century without poetry,” the literary interests of Venetians were limited. They were focused largely on humanistic endeavors, including the translation of major works into the vernacular, and there was little development of vernacular genres. The Serenissima was more preoccupied with governance activities—both on the mainland, where it consolidated the governance of its state, and “di là dal mar” [across the sea], where it maintained a maritime state—and a fervor of international commerce. With the exception of the university city of Padua, the mainland towns’ literary activities were associated with the courts of the lords deposed by the Venetians and therefore declined after Venetian conquest. The villa culture that would later offer an alternative was still in the early stages of development. These factors notwithstanding, authors both in Venice and in mainland towns maintained a continuous if low-level activity in a variety of literary genres. As the century moved to a close and the population returned to and even exceeded its pre-Black Death levels, literary and theatrical activity increased significantly. Venice assumed a primary role in the fledgling printing industry, meeting the needs of the growing population with its large number of youth, including university students.

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1 The section on 15th-century literature, here and below, draws heavily upon Armando Balduino, “Le esperienze della poesia volgare,” in Girolamo Arnaldi and Manlio Pastore Stocchi, eds., Storia della cultura veneta, 6 vols (Vicenza, 1976–86) [hereafter SCV], vol. 3 (1981): Dal primo Quattrocento al Concilio di Trento, part 1, pp. 265–367 [vol. 3 is divided into 3 parts, of which the first two are cited in this essay as 3.1 and 3.2]; for humanism, see especially Margaret King, Venetian Humanism in an Age of Patrician Dominance (Princeton, 1986). Translations, unless otherwise noted, are those of the present author.

A distinctive characteristic of Venetian literary endeavors of the 15th century was the simultaneous adaptation of Tuscan with its literary genres and the development of local genres in the local language. From the earliest years of the century, Venetians purchased and copied manuscripts of the works of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio (known collectively as the Three Crowns) and maintained personal connections with Tuscan authors. Particularly favored was Petrarch, who had spent lengthy periods in Venice and Padua, concluding his life in Arquà and leaving important manuscripts of his work and numerous followers in the region.

A central figure in these literary activities was Leonardo Giustinian. In addition to collecting humanistic and vernacular manuscripts and copying Petrarch’s manuscript of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (also known as the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch’s major contribution to vernacular lyric poetry), Giustinian wrote lyric poetry that mingled popularizing and learned genres in a language blending Venetian features with Tuscan ones. His works addressed Petrarchan love themes and religious topics, at times using similar tropes for both. Often still predominating in his works is the sung origin of the lyric, as well as an unusual characteristic of Veneto poetry, a dramatic structure and implied dialogue giving it a theatrical dynamic. The servile relationship with the beloved expressed in Giustinian’s poetry displays archaic feudal features influenced by the popularity of chivalric poems in the region, where they were much loved as entertainment and political commentary, and perhaps by the recent acquisition of mainland feudal holdings by leading patrician families including his own.

Quattrocento Venetian authors favored a range of other genres as well. Interest in theater burgeoned over the course of the century. Given impetus by the discovery of 12 lost comedies of Plautus in 1426, this renewed activity expressed itself in presentations of classical plays, then new plays imitating them written in Latin, and finally new vernacular plays. The romance with its faraway places, lightly veiled erosicism, exotic cultures, and magical happenings appealed to the Venetian experience and imagination. Closer to hand were various mainland genres such as the *mariazo* or peasant marriage play popular especially among those attending the University of Padua or spending various periods on the mainland. Other popularizing entertainment genres also flourished among students at the University of Padua, the only one Venetians were allowed to attend, including the obscene, the goliardic, and the *burlesco* (a kind of satire) of Tuscan origin. Also common was *maccheronic* comedy based on bumpkin