DOSSIER

XI ENCUENTRO DE INVESTIGADORES EN POÉTICA MUSICAL DE LOS SIGLOS XVI, XVII Y XVIII

23 AL 27 DE NOVIEMBRE DE 2020

Silvestro Ganassi and Pietro Aretino's Talking Cards: a New Reference on the *Fontegara's* Author

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Abstract

This paper brings to light and comments on a quotation still little discussed in the biographies of Silvestro Ganassi dal Fontego (1492-c. 1572), author of three fundamental works for 16th century music studies: *Opera Intitulata Fontegara* (1535), dedicated to the recorder and the art of diminution, *Regola Rubertina* (1542) and *Lettione Seconda* (1543), dedicated to the viola da gamba. The quotation in question is found in *Dialogo di Pietro Aretino nel qvale si parla del gioco con moralità piacevole*, published in Venice in 1543 and later known under the title *Le carte parlanti*. This book is a defense of the use of cards as a recreation activity, but also presents a catalog of human typologies. It culminates in the elaboration of the perfect player, a rhetorical exercise very dear to the Renaissance. This new reference reminds us of and amplifies the understanding of another one, present in the *Dialogo della Pittura intitolato l'Aretino* (1557), by Lodovico Dolce. This paper's scope is to briefly analyze and contextualize the presence of Silvestro Ganassi inside Aretino's dialogue.

Keywords: Renaissance; Silvestro Ganassi; Pietro Aretino; Music and Literature

Resumo

***Silvestro Ganassi e as cartas falantes de Pietro Aretino: uma nova referência sobre o autor da* Fontegara**

Este artigo traz a público e comenta uma citação de época ainda pouco trabalhada nas biografias atuais sobre Silvestro Ganassi dal Fontego (1492- c. 1572), autor de três obras fundamentais para o estudo da música do século XVI: Opera intitulata Fontegara *(1535), dedicada à flauta doce e à arte da diminuição,* Regola Rubertina *(1542) e* Lettione Seconda *(1543), dedicadas à viola da gamba. A passagem em questão encontra-se no* Dialogo di Pietro Aretino, nel quale si parla del giuoco con moralità piacevole*, publicado em Veneza em 1543 e conhecido posteriormente com o título* Le carte parlanti. *A obra é uma espécie de defesa do uso do baralho como atividade de recreação, mas também apresenta um catálogo de tipologias humanas cuja discussão culminará na confecção do jogador perfeito, exercício retórico muito caro à cultura do Renascimento. Esta nova referência nos remete e amplifica a compreensão de outra bem conhecida, presente no* Dialogo della Pittura intitolato l´Aretino *(1557), de Lodovico Dolce. Pretendemos no escopo deste artigo analisar e contextualizar brevemente a presença de Silvestro Ganassi dentro do conteúdo deste diálogo de Aretino.*

Palavras-chave: *Renascimento; Silvestro Ganassi; Pietro Aretino; Literatura e Música.*

Recibido: 03/12/2020

Aceptado: 18/12/2020

Cita recomendada: Tettamanti, G. (2020). Silvestro Ganassi and Pietro Aretino's Talking Cards: a New Reference on the *Fontegara's* Author. *Revista 4'33". IX (19)*, pp. 116-126.

Silvestro Ganassi is considered today one of the most relevant authors for the study of 16th century Italian instrumental music. Despite his importance, until 2019 there was not a detailed biography with deep research in the Venetian archives and a great deal of inaccurate information was dispersed in several articles. The passage that we will work on here appears only in this new biography (Pasquali, 2019) but we have known it for some time. The scope now is to analyze its content in order to better understand the significance Ganassi had within the written universe of his contemporaries.

The reference found in the *Dialogo di Pietro Aretino, nel quale si parla del giuoco con moralità piacevole* (1543) is older than other known printed quotations, except for the poem by Folengo (1526), and it is the first mention of Ganassi as a painter, in the very same year in which the author refers to himself, in the title page of the *Lettione Seconda* (1543), as *desideroso nella pictura* instead of *sonatore della Ilustrissima Signoria di Venetia*, as it appeared in the *Fontegara* (1535).

The action in Aretino's dialogue takes place in Florence and presents the historical character *Padovano Cartaro* [card maker] and the *Carte*, decks and taros made by him. Aretino addresses seven letters to Padovano;[1] in the first of these, July 1541, the writer thanked and praised the beauty of a tarot game and two packs of cards that he would have received as a gift from his most affectionate painter Alessandro, Padovano's brother. Aretino had always bragged about not knowing how to play, but now, moved by the beauty of such cards, regrets not being a player and promises, in the end, he is thinking of rewarding "kindness with kindness", probably referring to the writing of this dialogue-praise. In the following letter (1544), he again thanked the gifts sent by the Florentine friend and says he is ashamed of not having dedicated to Padovano his dialogue in which he "introduced him to speak". The other letters show an ever-closer friendship and the constant shipment of Tuscan playing cards and culinary delicacies, which probably brought to Aretino good memories of his youth. Praise to Padovano is constant, and in 1541, for example, he compares his friend's art with that of Michelangelo, and in 1552 he begins the text by writing: "To Padovano, card maker in art and king in soul".

[1] Letters: CXVIII (1541), CXCIII (1544), CCLXXXV (1545), DLXXVII (1550), DCXVIII (1552a), DCXXI (1552b) e DCLIV (1553). See: Aretino (2003)

The dialogue begins with Padovano, who finds the cards disordered (certainly the work of the devil), and complains about the time it would take to rearrange them, when, at a given moment, he is surprised by the cards who reply to the bad mood of its creator by calling him ungrateful. "Oh my God, the cards can speak!", exclaims Padovano. From there, a discussion of this fantastic scene (im)possibility permeates the whole plot, although not the only subject in this work. In one of the scenes on folio 35r, we find Ganassi with the Cards, who are trying to multiply their words and to enlarge the size of their vocabulary - despite some disbelief regarding their ability to do so - and, for those who do not believe in them (in the words uttered by the cards), they do it only because "they know nothing but to eat lasagna." The dialogue continues:

> Car. A pustule would come out if we did not tell you that, even when pedagogy daydreams about our talk, we, who are cards, not accepting the authority of Selvestro Ganassi dal Fondago who, following the carnival opinion, wants all things to speak, proving this by saying that the falling glass tells you it has broken down when it made into hundreds of pieces; we will reassure them with their testimony.
>
> Pad. The world is dumbfounded!
>
> Car. The Musician-Painter and divine Philosopher says that the door, when you hit it, lets you know that someone is looking for you; he says that the kilt who stinks of burning reveals the coal that consumes it. He says that the hatching chicken that lost the chicks calls them with the coo-coo-coo. He says that the chicken after laying an egg makes itself heard with its cackling. He says that the spatulas, forceps and forks [tell us] about the fire, what do we know?
>
> Pad. ha ha!
>
> Car. For he says that feeling cold, thirsty and falling asleep tells you to go warm, drink and sleep. He wants the itch to say "itch", and tiredness, "sit down."
>
> Pad. Answer who can.
>
> Car. In the event that the poor of nature and intellect rebut this [by saying] it is a ridiculous and ignorant brain's invention to put us into conversation, we shall say that it is as mad as what we have learned from them.
>
> Pad. You will make them stay up all night! [2]

[2] *Gli farete rimaner lucciole*. *Lucciola* means firefly, another word for the insect is *lucerna*, a term used in the 16th century to refer to the lantern, a very useful and necessary object for nocturnal studies.

> Car. If we had not understood in their little books that the tower spoke to Psyche, that the clouds disputed with Socrates, that the bow spoke to Ulysses on the ship and that the cock spoke with Micilo, we would not have had the presumption to open the mouth.[3]

In this passage, we find several of Aretino's questions and opinions related to the literary discussions of his time. According to Cairns (1985: pp. 24-26 and 30), since his arrival in Venice in 1527, Aretino was surrounded by a large circle of young patricians interested in literature and the arts, many attracted by the *succès de scandale* of his literary reputation. This strategy connected him with the older influential members of these families in a kind of tacit agreement where information was exchanged (obtained by Aretino) for protection against the writer's countless opponents. That is how he secured the protection of Andrea Gritti until 1538 and achieved remarkable prominence in the 1540s, whose apex was the walk with Charles V in 1543. Since the publication of *La Cortigiana* in 1534, one notes in his works a particular type of autobiography, whose purpose was to launch his name and reputation. This technique would later find its most natural expression in the publication of his own letters to famous people, in the most successful 16th century image projection (Cairns, 1985: pp. 34-35). Aretino knew very well how to take advantage of the new 16th century fashion of inserting immediately contemporary reality into literary writings, immortalized in the maxim "not fable, not comedy, but true history,"[4] and thus he portrayed and parodied personalities he sincerely admired, often satirizing the person more than the subject itself (Cairns, 1985: pp. 9, 202 and 67).

Returning to the dialogue, the first question that strikes us in the passage starring Ganassi is the anti-pedantic position, whose first evidence is in the pejorative use of the word *pedagogaria*, common in Aretino. As Cairns (1985) explains, the figure of the Pedant appears for the first time

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[3] Car. *Ci si sarebbe postema, se non ci diceßimo, che quando pur la pedagogaria anfani circa il parlar di noi che siamo carte. non accettando l'auttorita di Seluestro Ganaßi dal fondago, che seguendo l'oppenione carnoualesca uuole, che ogni cosa fauelli, prouandolo con dire, che il bicchiere, che casca ti dice, ch'egli è rotto con il suo farsi di cento pezzi; gli acquetaremo con le loro testimonianze.* Pad. *Il mondo è asinato.* Car. *Il Musico Pittore, e Philosopho diuiníßimo; dice che la porta buβata ti fa sapere, che un ti dimanda, dice che la gonella, che puzza di abbrusciaticcio ti scopre il carbone, che la guasta. Dice, che la chioccia, che ha ismarriti i pulcini gli chiama con il có có có. Dice che la gallina doppo il far dell'uouo, lo fa intendere con lo schiamazzio. Dice, che le palette, le molli e le forcine dal fuoco, che ne sappiamo noi.* Pad. *ah, ah.* Car. *Ecco, dice egli, che il farti freddo, il uenirti sete, & il caderti di sonno, ti dice, che tu vada a scaldarti, a bere, & a dormire: uuole che il roderti, dica grattati, e lo straccarti, siedi.* Pad. *Rispondici chi puo.*
Car. *Caso che i poueracci e di natura, e di intelletto; isbaiassino contra lo eßere inuention ridicola, e da ceruello ignorante il mettere in ragionamento noi altre. Diremo, che tanto e di pazzia, quanto s'impara da loro.*
Pad. Gli farete rimaner succiole [lucciole]. Car. *Se noi non haueßimo inteso ne i libracci di tali che la torre favellò con Psiche, che le nuuole disputar con Socrate, che la prora parlò con Vliße in la naue e che il Gallo cianciò con Micillo, non haveremmo preso presuntione di aprirci bocca* (Aretino, 1545, f. 35r-v).
[4] *Non fabula, non comedia, ma vera storia.* This passage appears in the comedy *La Veniexiana*, see: Padoan (1967).

well delineated in *Il Marescalco* (ms. 1526, revised and published in 1533) and it will be developed and consolidated in the course of the 16th century, until it became a typical character in the *commedia del'arte*. For the author, the character is inspired, like several other questions in Aretino, in the work of Erasmus of Rotterdam, more specifically in the treatise *De pueris instituendis*, published in 1529 (but already circulating in manuscripts in Italy since 1509) and in the *Moriae encomium* [Praise of Folly] (1511). In his treatise (1529), Erasmus argues that a truly effective education of free men should be sweet and non-violent, the teacher should know how to charm and stimulate learning through the creative use of age-appropriate games, a conception radically different from the patterns inherited from scholasticism. In this way, to defend his position, Erasmus makes a harsh criticism, full of horrifying examples of teachers who use and abuse two physical punishment and humiliation mechanisms.

In addition to the sadistic component, the satirized Pedant is often ridiculed by the other characters for his looks (sometimes spectral, because of over-study), for his stupidity, or his beyond normal devotion to classical writings. His speech is a Latin-Italian cocktail, or Latin-some Italian dialect, filled with quotations from the ancients, from humanistic grammar manuals, aphorisms and proverbs, with duplicate or triplicate declarations, giving a comic flavor of pedagogical exercise, inappropriate for the context (Cairns, 1985: p. 50). In Aretino's work, a good dose of anti-Ciceronianism, also inspired by Erasmus, is added to the character, sometimes called pedagogue, humanist or even philosopher, and the writer defends the imitation of multiple models and strongly criticizes the hard work (useless for him) of word collecting, done by those who defend the imitation of a single model, Cicero. "The real writer is a sculptor of meanings, not a miniaturist of words," he writes in the epigraph of a 1537 letter, addressed to Niccolò Franco (Aretino, 1913: p. 185). The single imitation is considered to be a simulacrum, empty, completely far from reality and the natural world; the influences of models serve only to the first steps, whose image corresponds to the role of parents and nurturers in childhood, but, after that, expression must be personal –"I imitate myself", he says in that letter. Excessive hours of study are also criticized for the sake of readiness, about which he often boasts: "It looks like my nature is made in that way, who spits out all its things in two hours." (Aretino, 2003: CLXXXIII).

While discussing this set of texts, it is important to mention a comedy by Aretino, written in 1544 and published in 1546, entitled *Il Filosofo*, whose nucleus, according to Cairns (1985, chapter IX), is already present in the *Carte Parlanti*. In this story, Plataristotele, the philosopher, is

sick, consumed by his work, dazzled by the love of knowing. When he is disappointed with the possibility of his wife's infidelity, a "living spirit" warns him and brings him back from hallucination to reality and, thus, the philosopher is "converted" from abstract speculation into the consciousness of his concrete duties as a husband according to the Erasmian-Christian ideal, and consequently, cured. In *Carte Parlanti*, the image of the philosopher is described as a "bald, thin, bearded, horrible, angry, with the brain on the countenance; where in the strangeness of the face, showed the craziness of fantasy."[5] This anti-example is opposed to true philosophers, in the opinion of Aretino, like Silvestro Ganassi, and the one mentioned by Cairns (1985, p. 215), Sperone Speroni. It is important to note here that in the various reviews of the *Carte Parlanti*, none considers the historical figure of Silvestro Ganassi and the meanings he could have in the passage. Cairns (1985: p. 214) only quotes the epithet "Musician, Painter and Philosopher" and Bolzoni (2014) calls him "illustrious unknown", almost as if he was just another anti-pedant tool created by Aretino.

Another point to be clarified in the quotation concerns the wonderful world of speaking objects, a matter abhorred by pedants, those "great donkeys, who call themselves learned", as it appears in the folio 25v and then, in our excerpt from the folio 35r "the world is dumbfounded [*asinato*]." We believe the reason why Ganassi was transformed into authority on giving voice to inanimate objects is the result of the "talking recorder", an image he created in *Fontegara*'s chapter 1: " I have had experience of this and I have heard other instrumentalists make the words understood with their playing, so that one could well say that all the instrument lacked was the shape of the human body, just as one says of a well-made painting, that all it lacks is breath."[6]

The connection is adopted by Lodovico Dolce, whose fraternal friendship with Aretino is more than proven, in the *Dialogo della Pittura* (1557). Ganassi was mentioned in this *Dialogo,* as an *auctoritas,* when there is a discussion about imitation and the capacity of the good painter to represent thoughts and affections of the soul through gestures and facial expressions; then painted figures seem to really speak, to shout, to cry, to laugh, etc. (Dolce, 1557: f.12r). The comparison between the arts, especially between music and painting, the concern with the imitation

[5] Car. *Venne uia il Philosopho, spelato, macilento, barbuto, orrido, collerico e con le ceruella in la sembianza; onde in la stranezza della faccia, mostraua il lunatico della fantasia* (Aretino, 1545: f. 54v).
[6] *& di questo ne o fatto esperientia & audito da altri sonatori farsi intendere con il suo sonar le parole di essa cosa che si poteva ben dire a quello instromento non mancarli altro che la forma dil corpo humano si come si dice ala pintura ben fatta non mancarli iolum il fiato*. (Ganassi, 1535, english: Dongois & Canguilhem, 2020).

of the human voice and the care with gestures during performance are also topics that permeate the didactic works of Ganassi.

Aretino affirms that Silvestro follows the "carnival" opinion, in a clear allusion to the poem *Il Contrasto di Carnevale et la Quaresima*, written, according to Manzoni (1881: p. XII), by a *perugino* in early 16th century. It is a moralizing dispute with medieval roots between Carnival (and its followers, succulent meats) and Lent (with its typical food of abstinence: chickpeas, onions and garlic). This poem had already been evoked at the beginning of *Carte Parlanti* (1545: f.3r), when Padovano, disconcerted, searches in his mind references to justify the supernatural fact of the talking cards: "Then, as in the comedy of *Ipocrito* (1542), things of today speak as in the time when the feathered ones flew?"[7] The phrase is a direct reference to the Conflict's first *stanza*: "In the time when the feathered flew, all things knew how to speak, and this was granted by fate, who had authority to do so, because it was endowed with all the virtues".[8]

In the *Ipocrito*, the poem is quoted at the end of Act IV, when Brizio suspects that he found his twin brother, Liseo, analyzing the path full of misunderstandings that Liseo's family's jewelry, the money, and Brizio's emeralds made in the story. The conclusion is uttered by the voice of Tanfuro, Brizio's servant:

> *Tan:* Did the miracle of the time of the rupture between carnival and lent return, where they knew how to speak the chickpeas, lentils, onions and leeks? And I observed this, eating in the tavern in Rome, because the playing of the *piffari di castello* and the shots of the artillery told me, without my needing to get up from the table, not only that cardinals have passed but also how many of them did [...]
>
> *Bri:* So according to you all things have their own language? [...]
>
> *Tan:* Look that the reversal, first of the chain and the pearls, then, the upheaval of the emerald and the money, told us what people of this land could not say. [9]

[7] Pad. *Adunque, sì come dice la comedia de Lo Ipocrito, le cose d'oggidi fauellano come al tempo che uolavano i pennati?* (Aretino, 1545, f. 3r).
[8] *Al tempo che volavano i pennati tutte le cose sapevan parlare, e questo fu concesso da e' fati ch'avean autorità poterlo fare, perché d'ogni virtute eron dotati* [...] (Manzoni, 1881, p. 5).
[9] Tan. *Gli è tornato il miracolo che fu al tempo della rotta del carnesciale e de la quaresima. Onde sapeuano parlare i ceci, le cicerchie, le cipolle & i porri? & questa cosa considerai a Roma mangiando ne la hostaria, peroche il sonar de i pifari di castello, & il trar de l'artegliaria mi diceua senza aleuarmi da tauola non solo che passauano i cardinali, ma quanti anchora?* [...] Bri. *Dunque secondo te, ogni cosa ha la sua lingua?* [...] Tan. *Guardate, che la girandola prima de la catena, e de le perle, & poi il riuolgimento de lo smeraldo, e de i danari ci ha detto quello che non ci ha saputo dire el popolo di questa terra* (Aretino, 1542, p. 106).

In the *Carte Parlanti*, according to Giaccone (1989: pp. 231-236), what puzzles Padovano, a cultured man born at the time of the great discoveries, is precisely the fact that the speech of objects can only be conceived within the literary world (and our card maker still does not know he is a literary character). Even so, according to the canons of the fantastic, such an event would only be permitted through divine and supernatural intervention, just as described in the *Contrasto*'s first *stanza*. However, the cards deny any celestial origin or connection with a supposed demonic magic, as Padovano believes in the beginning. On the contrary, its creator is an ordinary man, the writer, capable of knowing and judging human actions, capable of distinguishing vices and virtues and pointing out praiseworthy and shameful behaviors. The cards themselves are neither good nor bad, they are only the writer's expressive language tools, who through them communicates and witnesses, in this case, the actions of men who play.

Niccolò Franco, another polygrapher with Erasmian influences and Aretino's former friend, in his *Pistole vulgari* (1539), publishes a trilogy known as the "Letters of the Lantern" [*Lucerna*]. The first one, whose sender is the author, contains some questions addressed to his lantern, which never responds. In the second letter, we finally find the answer of the lantern in the form of an extensive and acid criticism against the activities of various professionals and finally, in the third one, addressed to Giovanni Giustiniano da Candia, a translator and contemporary of Franco, we find the refutation of a supposed critic to the previous letter, in which Giustiniano accuses the author of having made a grave error when putting the lantern walking, "because lanterns do not walk". In this letter, Franco warns that, in fact, the lantern is an allegory of studying and refers us to the "Lantern of Aristophanes", a proverbial expression that, to someone insightful, means a "wise judgment acquired through long study". Further, he concludes:

> And this can be seen by those who are not blind, while I pretend to be wondering, as Pedants say, that is, writing to the Lantern, as ignorant do not know, I pretend that the Lantern, that is, the acquired judgment with study, responds and tells me what it saw. Seeing the world, I am not mistaken, as you said, because I have not yet had gout, so that walking is forbidden to me. [...] I can also say that my Lantern made its journey through me. [10]

[10] *E per ciò si può uedere da chi non è senza occhi, ch'io mentre mi fingo lucubrare, come dicono i Pedanti, cioè sicriuere a la Lucerna, come non sanno gl'ignoranti, e fingo, che la Lucerna, cioè il giudizzio acquistato con studio, mi risponda, e mi racconti ciò, ch'egli hà uisto: uedendo il mondo, non hò errato, come uoi dite, e che non hò haute le gotte ancora, onde l'andar mi sia uietato. [...] io anche ui posso dire, che la mia Lucerna hà fatto il uiaggio suo co'l mezo mio* (Franco,1614, f. 200v e 201v).

In the *Adagia* (Erasmus of Rotterdam, 1533) we find two expressions related: "It has a flavor of the Lantern" [671] and the "Lanterns of Aristophanes and Cleantes" [672]. The first concerns a thing that has been thought and elaborated accurately, for scholars usually work at night in the light of the lantern when they wish to obtain better results. The second refers to two specific lanterns that have become proverbial thanks to their owners' extraordinary assiduity in study (Rotterdam, 2013, p. 741). In the *Carte Parlanti*, in our excerpt from folio 35, Padovano makes a comment suggesting the cards, with all this speech, will make Pedants to lose sleep (*Gli farete rimaner lucciole*), that is, they will spend evenings in light of lanterns, in search of philosophical and abstract explanations to justify the unjustifiable, because they are not able to perceive, like Giustiniano, the author's figurative language.

To conclude, the common point of all these works, the one that allows verbal and rational testimony of different objects, concentrates on the experience and on the ability to observe the world developed by their authors. Aretino, therefore, analyzes human character from individual behaviors through card game; Franco, through the behavior of men in face of study. Finally, Ganassi observes and learns from his peers the qualities of beauty and goodness, virtues that, according to the *Regola Rubertina* (Prologue), mean to play well, correctly and with good posture; and whose excellence manifests itself through the way musical instruments "speak". In other words, through the way the instrumentalist is able to imitate human voice and communicate his or her art. From a biographical point of view, the passage definitively brings Silvestro Ganassi closer to Aretino's circle of friends, bringing with him figures such as the Doge Andrea Gritti, dedicatee of the *Fontegara*, the Strozzi-Capponi family, dedicatees of the *Regola Rubertina* and the *Lettione Seconda*, and, opens a new range of possible friendships, for example with Titian, Aretino's dear friend, who in the same year of the publication of the *Regola Rubertina* painted a portrait of Ruberto Strozzi's two-year-old daughter, Clarissa. And perhaps, others, from which we can understand how well related and esteemed our musician was in the cream of the first half of the 16th century Venetian artistic society.

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