

Pietro Bembo and the Erotic Lexicon

by Ann E. Mullaney

The works of Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) intrigue readers approaching them from various angles. Craig Kallendorf has put together a helpful annotated bibliography of many of these approaches at Oxford Bibliographies, Renaissance and Reformation (last modified June, 2017). To the studies listed here, one could add a few recent works, like Marco Faini's illustrated biography available in Italian and English, *Pietro Bembo: A Life in Laurels and Scarlet*, 2017. And an article I wrote, "Bembo's Attack on Dante," which contextualizes the Venetian's harsh condemnation of the *Commedia* in his *Prose della volgar lingua*, 1525, with glimpses into his motivations (www.academia.edu, 2017). Here, my aim is modest: to highlight passages in Bembo's literary texts which exploit the erotic lexicon so popular in his day.



For simplicity's sake let us begin with Bembo's first book, *Gli Asolani*, published in 1505 when was 35 years old. It is a work in dialogues and poetry set in Asolo, a town about 75 kilometers NE of Venice at the court of Caterina Cornaro. While Caterina, the Queen of Cypress, was quite real, the three young noble women and three young noble men who join in the conversations may or may not have been based on specific people. The narrator claims that the participants asked him not to reveal their actual names, if only "per torre alle vanne et sciocche menti de volgari occasione... di pensare cosa in parte alcuna meno che convenevole alla loro honestissima et interissima vita" ("to remove an opportunity for the empty and silly minds of the common crowd... to think something in anyway less befitting their extremely honest and integral life[style]," *Asolani*, 1505, p. 8 of the digital copy from Gallica, the French library site; the text is also available in the critical edition by Giorgio Dilemmi, 1991, pp. 82-30). The interlocutors soon decide that "Perottino" – who asked for this fictitious name because it was close to his real name – will present his views on the bitterness wrought by love, then Gismondo will defend the joys of love and lastly

Lavinello will address both sides.

Carol Kidwell, in her well-written and well-researched biography, *Pietro Bembo: Lover, Linguist, Cardinal*, offers a detailed summary of *Gli Asolani* (Kidwell, pp. 99-112). Here we will plunge into the passages which most obviously display the erotic lexicon. One such segment comes to a crescendo when Perottino shows himself to be adamant about his ability to stay alive even after *due manifestissimi morti* (two extremely conspicuous deaths). The explanation of this miraculous feat is developed across many pages, and must be quoted at length for one to get the feel of how Bembo operates. Please find the original text transcribed in Appendix 1; below is my literal translation:

It is a wondrous thing, O Ladies, to hear what I will now say, which, if it had not been experienced by me, I would scarcely dare imagine for myself, let alone tell about it. In lovers to die is not, as it is in all the other types of humans, the final agony, rather many times death is denied in such a way that one can rightly say that in extreme misery the happiest man is the one who is able to die. Because it often happens that (something which you Ladies have perhaps never heard, nor did you believe that it could be) even as these [men], vanquished by a great long agony, are near death, and they already feel their life going away little by little from their painful heart, the wretches feel such happiness and joy in dying, that this pleasure restores vigor in the weakened spirits – comforting the disconsolate soul all the more, the less they are used to having something that pleases it – which were going away unwillingly, and gives sustenance to the life that was faltering. Thus, however many times they return to the moment of death, returning to this pleasure just as many times, they can never arrive at that death toward which they are always running so eagerly. From my wishing to complain to Love about this matter, not long ago the following canzone was born:

When I think of the martyrdom, that you give me, Love, weighty and intense, I hasten to go to my death, thus hoping to finish my agonies. But then when I reach the passage, that is a haven in this sea of every torment, I feel such pleasure, that my soul gets stronger, thus I do not pass [through] it. Thus, living kills me, thus death restores me to life. O infinite misery, that brings about the one and does not cut off the other.

And what more can one say here, if not that for certain, the lot of lovers is so extremely miserable, that they, while living, since they are lively, cannot stay alive and while dying, since they are dying, cannot die. I certainly do not know what other juice I could squeeze from such a new absinthe of Love, if not this: be content, young Ladies – whose well-being is always dear to me – to learn how bitter it may be by listening to it being discussed, rather than by tasting it. But, O power of this God, I don't know whether more harmful or wondrous (I turn my discourse to you, Lisa, you who marveled that he was thus held as a God): Love is not content with this praise, nor does he wish it to be the pinnacle of his miracles, because one could argue, that not without any reason for life does one live in this way which I said, likewise with lovers, in the same way one does not die without any [reason] for death, because just as the tedium of living may cause death, even so the joy that they feel in dying, may be enough to cause life; sometimes it happens in someone that not only is he unable to die without having any reason for life, but that he makes it so that, assailed very fiercely by two very conspicuous deaths, he lives from these [deaths], as though from two lives. Still even to myself, O Ladies, this very thing which I am saying seems beyond all manner strange, and yet it is true; certainly, if it had not been so, then I would now be out of infinite other pains whereas I am in them. Now, how this operation takes place (since you wish thus and it pleases you) should be clear to you in these rhymes:

You placed me in fire, to make me perish before my time, Lady, and because this affliction seemed slight to you, with tears you redoubled my languishing. Now I wish to tell you, take away one of the torments, because I cannot die from two deaths. Given that the humor that comes from the eyes protects me from the burning, and in order that the great weeping not dissolve the heart, the flame makes it so that it dries and burns it. Thus, as often as the one takes away affliction, the other gives it back to me; and the same thing that helps me makes me worse. Because if it pleases you so to see this hardy flesh – that is to my dismay and yours so lively – in ashes, why ever give it that which helps it? Your infinite desire heals its wound, whence I remain in painful life. And I am not complaining about you, as much as about Love who involves you in this, rather, about myself that I

still don't dissolve. But what can I do? Love rules his court with laws unjust and wrong. Whoever saw such a fluke: a man keeping himself alive with a double death?

Does it seem to you, Lisa, that it is fitting for these miracles that their maker be called a God? Does it seem to you that not without reason those first men gave him such a name?)

The playful insistence functions as camouflage: Bembo so dazzles the reader that the purport of his words is attenuated by their sheer volume. If one approaches his writings in the 21st century bearing in mind the Titian portraits of the Venetian as an elderly cardinal, known for his learned editorial work on classics, his pedagogic Petrarchism, his normative grammar, his sober history of Venice, his somewhat high-minded letters to Lucrezia Borgia and the theatrical presentation of Platonic love assigned to him in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, one assumes that here the author is merely being thorough in his description of love. However, if one considers Bembo's explicitly erotic Latin poems, his suggestive Italian *Rime*, his obviously sexual rhyming couplets (*Motti*), his friendships with poets of erotic verse and his affairs with numerous women including the young, married adolescent who would bear him three children, then one assesses the passage quoted as a display of genteel erotica. One could re-translate the long passage above using the coded meanings: highlights would include *penoso cuore, cor* (pained heart, heart); *spiriti* (spirits), *carne arditata* (burning flesh) as phallus; *vita* (life) as the viability of the phallus; *morte* (death) as orgasm, and since it is so very manifest, ejaculation; *polve* (ash) as what is left of consumed flesh. However, it may be better to read a short clever example of the staying alive theme so dear to our author. Bembo sent the following madrigal to Maria Savorgnan in 1505, and included it in an unpublished version of *Gli Asolani*:

È cosa natural fuggir da morte,
 E quanto può ciascun tenersi in vita.
 Ahi crudo Amor, ma io cercando morte
 Vo sempre, e pur così mi serbo in vita.
 Che perché 'l mio dolor passa ogni morte,
 Corro a por giù questa gravosa vita.

Poi, quand'io son già ben presso a la morte,
 E sento dal mio cor partir la vita,
 Tanto diletto prendo della morte,
 Ch'a forza quel gioir mi torna in vita.

(It is a natural thing to flee from death, and for one to hold himself alive as long as he can. Ah, cruel Love! Well, I am always seeking death, and yet this is how I keep myself alive. Because since my pain surpasses every death, I rush to set down this weighty life. Then, when I am already quite near death, and I feel life going out from my heart, I take such delight in death, that willy-nilly such making merry returns me to life.)

Gli Asolani [Q] 1.14, quoted from Giorgio Dilemmi's transcription, p. 33.

To feel the full weight of the pride Perottino and Bembo take in this wondrous achievement, one could reread *Gli Asolani*, where it permeates many dialogues and poems, or at least sections 1.13-17 (section numbers were established by Carlo Dionisotti for his monumental 1960 UTET publication, *Prose e rime di Pietro Bembo*). The sexual life-death theme is also taken up in other poems of the *Rime* which Bembo published later, some of which will be discussed below.

Gli Asolani showcases other treasures of the erotic lexicon. Here I will present three multifaceted gems. The first is distinguished by an extremely long build-up of warnings and cautions, by the fact that the whole passage of about 1500 words was eliminated after the 1525 edition, and by the use of the code word *fede*. The segment divides itself into four parts: 1) the initial move by Gismondo to introduce his topic, 2) the countermotion verbalized but not taken by his female listeners, 3) Gismondo's description of an enjoyable encounter with his lady which however, 4) ends in copious tears on her part after he asks her to think about how she would feel if he were dead, the original is in Appendix 2.). After extolling the delights of love and exclaiming how extremely difficult the holy forces of Love are to investigate even with [just] his thought, Gismondo continues,

But I pray you, by that virtue which – while lodging in the soft breasts of each of you – keeps your sweet and sympathetic hearts most cheerful, that, since I don't believe I can express with words the sweetness of my [heart], felt by it already in

the past in such a case, nonetheless, be content that I discourse about it what little I will be able to, however it may have happened. Still, if it might appear to you in this discourse that I might take even a tiny step beyond what you ladies usually demonstrate to men that you are desirous that someone take when speaking, leave these appearances to other occasions, and when you are in the chambers with the Queen, resume your severe honesty, which is required to be [severe] more in the doing of deeds, than in the speaking or hearing words. Furthermore, the inviting setting of this greenery and the licentious occasion of the wedding and the proposed charming subject matter induce me to give more rein to my wandering tongue, than I would do in other conditions. Therefore, listen to me, because I beg you to.

“If I believed,” said Madonna Berenice turning to her companions again, “that Gismondo, after being forbidden, would keep himself from saying the things that he seems to be getting ready to reveal to us, I would say that we should forbid him from doing it, and I would be the first who would forbid it of him. But seeing as how that once it has gotten into his mind to tell us things, if we allow him to, he will say them, and if we do not allow him to, he will say them anyway, it seems to me that it would be a lesser evil to eliminate the notion of volition, if it seems so to you, rather than to lose while contesting it.

“It seems to us as it seems to you,” the two young women respond, and having more to say, Sabinetta added, “But I would really advise you, Gismondo, that you take care not to say anything that [if] repeated could cause you dishonor. Because Lisa will want to recuperate from the blow that you gave her and she would eagerly pay you back tit for tat, if you let yourself be caught, since I see her full of spite. Nor will it do you any good afterwards to say that we women usually show men we are desirous of honest discourse.”

Then Gismondo turning toward Madonna Berenice said, “Madonna, I am more afraid of her than of bad fortune. Do you see how she takes back up what a man says? But you, pretty young lady, don’t be concerned, as I am willing to follow your advice.” And having furnished these words, he began the following [words] in this way.

Gismondo is toying mercilessly with these ladies. The buildup goes on for so long that,

like Gertrude to Hamlet we may exclaim, “Ay me, what act/ that roars so loud, and thunders in the index?” Yet the act is as expected, although expressed with a boldness that is indeed shocking. Without further ado, Gismondo tells it like it was:

<p>— Era il tempo di mezza estate, et havea il giorno, il quale purissimo si mostrava per tutto il cielo, già mezzi e suoi dispendi varcati, quando nelle camere della mia donna, già fattami per lunga pruova della mia calda fede meno selvaggia che ella da prima non m’era, in vaga et sola parte ella et io sedevamo ragionando; nelle quali camere per le aperte finestre d’oriente et di tramontana entrava un soave venticello, con gli stremi suoi orezzamenti ferendoci sì dolcemente, che il caldo della stagione non si sentiva.</p>	<p>“It was the time of mid-summer and the day – which was showing itself to be very clear across the whole sky, already having passed through half its allotments – when in my lady’s rooms, with her having already been made less fierce toward me through long proof of my warm faith, she and I were sitting and talking in a charming and solitary spot, in which rooms, a gentle little breeze was entering through the windows opened to the east and to the west, striking us so sweetly with its last wafts, that we did not feel the heat of the season.”</p>
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Asolani, 1505, Gallica, pp. 115-7; *Dilemmi*, 2.24, pp. 158-9 and LXXX-LXXXII.

This is the target at which the censoring arrows are directed. It seems innocent enough if one does not grasp that *fede* (faith) is code for phallus. If the phrase “già fattami per lunga pruova della mia calda fede meno selvaggia che ella da prima non m’era,” (“having been made less fierce toward me through long proof of my warm faith than she had been earlier”) is innocent and does not mean something sexual why would the three female characters have set off alarm bells? What really makes Gismondo’s sketch of midday delight stand out is indeed the elaborate 400-word prelude. The passage is eliminated for the 1530 “second edition.” It constitutes the longest cut. Eliminated but not forgotten: a passage may gain fame by being seen as risky, and at any rate it remained

available in the first nine printings of *Gli Asolani*. The times were changing: Bembo acknowledges the increasing austerity [of the dawning Reformation age] in a letter from July 1530 to Vittore Soranzo asking that a couple of accompanying sonnets not be shown to anyone except his friend Carlo Gualteruzzi, “not only because they were composed just now, and I may change them, but also for this, that they do not contain subject matter for these years, and I think one day I’ll place them among my youthful writings,” letter quoted by Dionisotti in reference to the sonnet *Viva mia neve*, quoted here below, p. 53, note).

The next section under examination forms part of a very rich hymn to Love which would benefit from careful analysis, but for our purposes here, one need only broaden the concept of celebration to include orgasm:

Crescono ogni giorno le dolcezze, avanzano ogni notte le venture; né per quelle che sopravengono, mancano o scemano le sottostanti, anzi, sì come belle nevi da belle nevi sopraggiunte, più fresche et più vive si mantengono in quella maniera, così de gli amorosi sollazzi, sotto le dolci coperture de gli ultimi, più dolci si conservano e primieri. Né per le vecchie le nuove, né’lle d’hoggi per quelle di hieri menomano et perdono della loro forza giamai, anzi, sì come novero che s'accosti a novero, vie maggiore somma fa, che soli et da per sé far non possono fare, così le nostre feste, poste et aggiunte altre con altre, più dolcezza ci porgono ciascuna senza misura, che fatto non harebbono da per loro. Sole bastano, accompagnate crescono. Una mille ne fa, et delle mille in brieve tempo mille ne nascono per ciascuna. Sono aspettate giocondissime, sono non aspettate venturose. Sono care agevoli, ma disagevoli vie più care, in quanto le vettorie con alcuna fatica fanno il triumpho maggiore. Donate, rubate, guadagnate, guiderdonate, ragionate, sospirate, lachrimate, rotte, reintegrate, prime, seconde, false, vere, lunghe, brevi, tutte sono dilettevoli, tutte sono graziose.

(Every day pleasures grow, every night occasions abound, nor for those that arise, do those underlying die off or diminish, on the contrary, like beautiful snows supplanted by beautiful snows, they keep themselves fresher and livelier in that way, just so with amorous pleasures: under the sweet coverings of the last, the first preserve themselves as sweeter. Nor do the new diminish the old, nor are those of today [diminished] by those of yesterday, nor do they ever lose their

force, on the contrary, as one number adds itself to another it makes a much greater sum than they can make alone and by themselves, so too our celebrations, laid out and joined the ones to the others, offer more sweetness, each one beyond measure than they would have made by themselves. Alone, they are sufficient, accompanied they grow. One [celebration] makes a thousand, and of this thousand in a short while, a thousand are generated for each. Expected, they are extremely joyful, unexpected they are fortunate. Effortless, they are dear, but not effortless, they are even dearer in so far as victories acquired with some effort make the triumph greater. Bestowed, stolen, earned, rewarded, reasoned, longed for, cried for, broken off, restored, first, second, false, real, long, brief – all are delightful, all are lovely.)

Asolani, 1505, Dilemmi, 2.33, p. 178; cf. Gallica, p. 144.

It may be an over-simplification to perceive Gismondo's grand litany of "feste" as pertaining to orgasms, but it is a travesty to ignore Bembo's brilliant use of erotic innuendo throughout his literary production. Thus, it seems advisable to err on the side of exposing the underlying meaning. A phrase near the end of the selection, "in quanto le vittorie con alcuna fatica *e con sudore* [added later] acquistate fanno il trionfo maggiore," ("in so much as victories acquired with some effort *and with sweat* make the triumph greater"), is annotated by the vigilant but discreet Dionisotti with an apt *strambotto* from Bembo's "*Rime rifiutate*" (p. 673), *Città con più sudor posta e cresciuta* ("A city set up and developed with more sweat"):

Vittoria con maggior perigli avuta
più care fa le rapportate spoglie.
E nave più da venti combattuta
con maggior **feſta** in porto si raccoglie.

(Victory gained with greater dangers makes the booty brought back more valuable. And a ship more beaten by the waves is welcomed into port with great **joy/ celebration.**)

Dionisotti, 12.3-6, p. 684.

The meaning of **feſta** [emphasis mine] cannot be anything other than the orgasmic arrival of the ship into port.

The final of the three gems to be presented here is the *canzone* "Solingo Augello"

(*Solitary Bird*) which comes at the end of what is now section 1.27; *Augello* is in uppercase in the 1505 edition. Telling the others that he had just composed the poem the day before, Perottino narrates three 12-line stanzas about a bird with whom he shares his love sorrows and pains, then he closes with a 3-line *congedo* that seems to be an abrupt rebuke to himself:

Che parli o sventurato?

A cui ragioni? a che così ti sfaci?

Et perché non più tosto piagni, et taci?

(What are you saying, O unfortunate one?/ Who are you talking to? For what are you undoing yourself?/ And why don't you just weep and keep still?)

Asolani, 1505, Gallica, pp. 50-1; cf. Dilemmi p. 113.

Dionisotti traces the many reworkings of this poem and its Petrarchan sources, saying that it was written before 1500, and appeared as a sonnet in the unpublished Querinian version of *Gli Asolani* (Dionisotti, pp. 686-7, 545-6, 554-5). The tercets of the initial sonnet appear written in code, especially the final two verses: “E ‘l cor in doglia et l’alma for di spene,/ Ne d’haver cerco men fero destino” (“And my heart in pain and my soul empty of hope, nor do I try to have a fate less fierce,” *Asolani Q*, Dilemmi, p. 54). The theme of the *alma for di spene* – the soul without hope which does not try to avoid its dramatic downfall – will be addressed below; for now our attention is focused on the ending of the *canzone* version of “Solingo Augello.” Very similar words are used in one of Bembo’s *Motti*: “Misero, tristo, a che così ti sfaci, et perché non più tosto vivi et taci?” (“Wretch, rascal, why are you coming so undone, hadn’t you better stay alive and keep mum?,” *Motti*, 25-6, Cian edition). In the context of the 312 rhyming riddle-like verses of the *Motti*, first published by Vittorio Cian from manuscripts in 1888, one perceives the addressee as the phallus. A number of couplets support this reading, here are four: “Come la neve al sol sparisce et fugge,/ così per voi quel tristo si distrugge” (“As snow from the sun recedes and runs, so for you that poor thing comes undone,” 9-10); “Che cosa è quel che sempre vive in fasce,/ et se non getta il pasto non si pasce?” (“What is that which always lives in sheathing, and if it doesn’t throw out its meal, doesn’t eat,” 301-2); “Et quel che tanto calca et si dimena,/ et spande il sangue et non taglia la vena?” (“And that which kicks so and thrashes about and sheds blood/ sperm and does not cut

a vein,” 303-4); “Et quel Signor, ch’ha duoi cagniuoli appresso et mai non entran nel giardin con esso? (“And [who is] that gentleman who has two little dogs by his side and they never enter the garden with him?,” 305-6). Thus, in addition to the brusqueness of the questions asked at the end of the canzone “Solitary Bird,” there is external evidence that Perottino meant to personify his own desolate “bird.” Although the poem was dropped from subsequent editions of *Gli Asolani*, it popped up in other works Bembo published, as Dionisotti indicated (page numbers cited above), and to these add p. 595, *Tanto è ch’assenzo e fele*, which displays the themes of languishing voluntarily, and being enmeshed like a bird.

The passages spelled out thus far show Pietro Bembo’s use of the erotic lexicon in some of the dialogues and poems of *Gli Asolani*. The use of coded language is just one aspect of this and of other works penned by Bembo. So while I do not disagree with Kidwell’s statement that “Bembo clearly intended *Gli Asolani* to be a serious philosophic contribution to the understanding of one of the most important forces in human life,” (p. 109), I do think Bembo considered one important force of his life to be mastery of the erotic lexicon. When glossing portions of Bembo’s literary production, it is advisable to consider referencing carnival songs and burlesque poetry of the era and the over 2,000 code words carefully annotated by Jean Toscan in *Le carnaval du langage: le lexique érotique des poètes de l’équivoque de Burchiello à Marino (XVe-XVIIe siècles)*. Before returning to the trail of the *Solingo Augello* indicated above, let me say a bit more about the *Motti*.

Anyone who reads the *Motti* can tell that the majority of them express sexual innuendo: I have translated them into English and provided basic annotations so readers from other fields may see this for themselves: www.academia.edu. These *Sayings* (which not surprisingly remained unpublished for nearly 350 years after his death) provide convincing evidence of Bembo’s transgressive word play but they also offer starting points for avenues of research that stretch beyond the burlesque code. For instance, his use of Arcadia as a toponym but also as a name for what sounds like a group of men who liked men: “S’io non m’inganno, giovane, al vedere,/ tu sei d’Arcadia? Sono al tuo piacere” (“If I am not mistaken, young man, from the look of it, you are from Arcadia? I am at your pleasure,” 293-4). This hint of Arcadia as code for homosexuality is important since Arcadian pastoral literature would soon flood Europe.

Other *Motti* also seem to allude to homosexual encounters, like the following, “Servi, non ti lagnar, ma soffri et taci,/ ch’ancor potrai salir se bene hor giaci” (“Submit, don’t complain, but suffer and keep still, because you will still be able to rise up if now you lie there,” 135-6). Two others seem to be similar in theme, “Chi va da lungi assai più s’avvicina,/ et non s’innalza ben chi non s’inchina,” (“He who goes far off draws much closer, and one does not rise up well who does not bow,” 167-8) and “Cerca pur al tuo legno un altro porto,/ che qui, fratello mio, tu parli al morto,” (“Go ahead and look for another port for your boat, because here, my brother, you are talking to a dead man,” 111-12). Of particular interest to me is a couplet that makes the word *maccheron* [macaroni in the early sixteenth century were like tortelloni or little dumplings] connote butt: “O Maccheron mio dolce, tondo et sodo,/ qual’è la cosa contraria del chiodo?” (“O my pleasing Macaron, round and firm, what is the thing opposite the nail?,” 51-2). I have found allusions to this connotation for macaroni in works by Teofilo Folengo and Agnolo Firenzuola, but none as clear as Bembo’s definition: for more information, please see my note at *Motti*, 51-2. A slightly corrected version of Cian’s text is available by Giulia Raboni, but there is still a need for further elucidation of the meanings.

Now back to the themes found in the first known version of *Solingo Augello*: the soul all out of hope and the allure of its plight. To recall the final tercet of that sonnet (the *Rime* will be cited from Dionisotti’s 1960 volume with the beginnings of the first lines in italics, Italian style):

Gli occhi bagnati porto e ’l viso chino
e ’l cor in doglia e l’alma fuor di spene,
né di aver cerco men fero destino.

(I bear my eyes bathed and my face bowed, and my heart in pain and my soul empty of hope, nor do I seek to have a fate less fierce.)

Solingo augello, 48.12-14, pp. 545-6 (and Dilemmi, p. 54).

In the *Rime* which, for the record, contain many poems not involved at all with the erotic code, we find reiterations of these ideas, sometimes together, sometimes singly. In one sonnet, the poet compares himself to a *spalmata nave* (slathered vessel) that at first has easy sailing then hits a storm and although attended by *speme* (hope), is unsure

and fears the end. Once his lady holds him in anger/ ardor, his soul sighs and weeps and goes to its death before its time (*Si come quando il ciel*, 32.9-14, p. 533). In another, addressed to *Speme* (Hope), the poet asks why hope is reborn in the bottom of his heart if he has already uprooted it, *Speme, che gli occhi nostri*, 54.5-6, p. 550. *I chiari giorni miei*, 99.9-11, p. 588-9. The thematic lines blur as hope, death and rebirth are cyclical. One final vivid example of hope at work is warranted:

Surge la speme, e per le vene un caldo
 Mi core al cor e sì forte l'infiamma,
 Come s'ei fosse pur di solfo e d'esca.
 Né per questi contrari una sol dramma
 scema del penser mio tenace e saldo,
 C'ha ben poi tanto, onde s'avanzi e cresca.

(Hope surges and a warmth rushes through my veins toward my heart and inflames it so hard as though it were really of sulfur and kindling. But not for these tribulations does one sole dram dwindle from my tenacious and firm thought, which has so much then, that it advances and grows.)

Viva mia neve, 28. 9-14, p. 530.

When I first read Bembo's *Rime* forty years I was amazed that he wrote such explicit verse, and even more astounded that the critics overlooked his naughtiness. One has to read the scholarly work carefully to find mentions of this angle of Bembo's production. Dionisotti does signal some of the blatant passages. In the *Stanze*, for example, at a moment when Bembo is speaking for Love, he tells the ladies not to close the entryway to his [Love's] pleasures, adding:

Non basta il campo aver lieto et aprico,
 se non s'ara e sementa e miete poi:
 giardin non colto in breve divien selva,
 e fassi lustro ad ogni augello e belva.

Stanze, 30.4-8

(It is not enough to have a sunny and cheerful field, if then you don't plow and sow and harvest: an untended garden quickly becomes wild and makes itself a den for every bird and beast.)

Dionisotti notes, “Comincia qui, in contrasto coi motivi stilnovisti e petrarchisti, la predica di un amore umanistico quattrocentesco, non senza qualche tocco di franca galanteria cortigiana e popolareggiante” (“Here begins, in contrast with the stilnovistic and Petrarchan themes, the preaching of a fifteenth century humanistic love, not without a touch of frank courtly and folksy eroticism”), p. 663-4; note that *galanteria* in these contexts is a euphemism and does not mean gallantry. Until now commentary on Bembo’s use of erotic phrases has not gone much beyond occasional acknowledgements such as this, so one is left wondering how much of his code has actually been deciphered. The 50 *Stanze* Pietro Bembo and Ottaviano Fregoso recited at the court of Urbino during carnival festivities in 1507, contain a few more ‘gallant’ passages: stanza 45 begins “O quanto è dolce, perch’ Amor la stringa talor sentirsi un’alma venir meno” (“Oh how sweet it is at times to feel a soul/ phallus come undone because Love is squeezing it”); stanza 47 turns an allusion to the tale of separated humans (told by Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*) into a humorous sexual image:

Però che voi non sete cosa integra,
 né noi, ma è ciascun del tutto il mezzo:
 Amor è quello poi, che ne rintegra,
 e lega e strigne come chiodo al mezzo;
 onde ogni parte in tanto si rallegra,
 che suoi dilette e gioie non han mezzo:
 e s’uom durasse molto in tale state,
 compitamente diverria beato.

Stanze, 47.1-8

(Because you [women] are not an integral thing, nor are we, but each is half of the whole: Love is that which reintegrates them then and binds and tightens like a nail in the middle, whence every part becomes so happy that its delights and joys have no measure, and if a man endures a long while in that state, he will become completely blissful.)

On that happy note, I rest my case. Throughout every one of the editions of *Gli Asolani* which Bembo saw published – Dilemmi lists 15 publications of the text during Bembo’s lifetime – he refers over and over to the women and men in his dialogues as aware, savvy, discerning; a quick sampling from the 1553 edition yields “aveduti e

intendenti giovani” (1.1), “ben sappiamo quanto tra gli intendenti giovani sieno le tue rime lodate” (“well we know how much your poems are praised among the knowing young people,” 1.14), “sagge... donne” (2.2), “intendenti donne” (2.7), “avedute giovani” (2.13). Modern readers also need to be perceptive. I think that the material presented in this article constitutes the tip of the iceberg. Just as there have been helpful editions of coded works by some of his contemporaries (those for Francesco Berni, Giovanni Mauro D’Arcano, Francesco Maria Molza, Teofilo and Giovanni Battista Folengo, il Bronzino, Alfonso de’ Pazzi come to mind) there will likely be good analyses forthcoming for Bembo’s works. In the meanwhile, we may admire Pietro Bembo’s mastery of language, his brilliant adaptations of literary precedents, his honesty and tenacity in the realm of Love:

Mentre di me la verde abile scorza
 copria quel d’entro, pien di speme e caldo,
 vissi a te servo, Amor, si lieto e saldo,
 che non ti fu a tenermi uopo usar forza.

Or che ’l volger del ciel mi stempra e sforza
 con gli anni e più non sono ardito e baldo
 com’io solea, né sento al cor quel caldo,
 che scemato giamai non si rinforza,
 stendi l’arco per me, se vòì ch’io viva,
 né ti dispiace aver chi l’alte prove
 de la tua certa man racconti e scriva...

Dionisotti, p. 585-6

(While the able green husk covered what was inside of me, I lived full of hope and heat as your servant, Love, so happy and stable, that you needed no force to hold me. Now that with the years the turning of the skies weakens and confines me and I am no longer bold and brash as I used to be, nor do I feel that heat in my heart that abated never gets rekindled – Draw the bow for me, if you want me to live, and don’t let it displease you to have someone who writes and recounts the lofty proofs of your sure hand...)

July, 2019

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Appendix

1. Life and death: *Gli Asolani*, 1505, Gallica p. 30-32 ; Dilemmi, 1991, pp. 98-100.

Maravigliosa cosa è o Donne a udire quello, che io debbo dire: il che se da me non fusse stato approvato; appena che io ardisi d'immaginarlomi, non che di contarlo. Non è, si come in tuttellaltre qualita d'huomini, ultima doglia il morire ne gli amanti: anzi loro molte volte in modo è la morte dinegata; che già si puo dire che in istrema miseria felicissimo sia colui, che puo morire. Percioche avviene bene spesso, (il che forse non udiste voi Donne giamai, ne credavate che potesse essere) che mentre che essi dal molto et lungo dolor vinti sono alla morte vicini, et sentono già in se a poco a poco partire dal penoso cuore la lor vita; tanto d'allegrezza et di gioia sentono e miseri del morire; che questo piacere, confortando la sconsolata anima tanto piu, quanto essi meno sogliono haver cosa che piaccia lei, ritorna vigore ne gl'indeboliti spiriti, e quali a forza partivano; et dona sostentamento alla vita che mancava. Così quantunque volte essi ritornano in sul morire, tante in su questo piacere ritornando non possono giamai alla morte, a cui essi così disiosamente sempre corrono, pervenire. Del quale accidente volendo io con Amore ramarcarmi ne nacque non ha guari questa canzona.

Quand'io penso al martire,

Amor, che tu mi dai gravoso et forte;

Corro per gir a morte,

Così sperando i miei danni finire.

Ma poi ch'ì giungo al passo,

Ch'è porto in questo mar d'ogni tormento;

Tanto piacer ne sento,

Che l'alma si rinforza; ond'io nol passo.

Così il viver m'ancide:

Così la morte mi ritorna in vita.

O miseria infinita;

Che l'uno apporta et l'altra non recide.

Et che si potrà dir qui; se non che per certo tanto istremamente è misera la sorte

de gli amanti; che essi vivendo, percio che vivono, non possono vivere; et morendo, percio che muoiono, non possono morire? Io certamente non so che altro succhio mi sprema di cosi nuovo assenzo d'Amore, se non questo; il quale quanto sia amaro, siate contente giovani Donne, il cui bene sempre mi fie caro, di conoscere piu tosto sentendone ragionare, che gustandolo. Ma, o potenza di questo Iddio, non so qual piu o noievole, o maravigliosa: (a te volgo, Lisa, il mio parlare; la quale ti maravigliasti, perche egli sia cosi per Iddio tenuto): non si contenta di questa loda, ne per somma la vuole de suoi miracoli Amore: il quale, perche si poteva argomentare, che non senza cagione alcuna di vita si vive in questa maniera, che io dissi, da gli amanti altresì, come non senza alcuna di morte si muore; che si come la morte puo in loro cagionar la noia del vivere, cosi puo bastare a cagionarvi la vita la gioia, che essi sentono del morire; vuole tale volta in alcuno non solamente che esso non possa morire senza cagione havere alcuna di vita; ma fa in modo; che egli di due manifestissime morti da esse fierissimamente assalito, si come di due vite, si vive. A me medesimo tuttavia pare oltre ogni maniera nuovo o Donne cotesto istesso, che io dico: et pure è vero: certo cosi non fusse egli stato: che io sarei hora fuori d'infinite altre pene; dov'io drento vi sono. Hora come quest'opera si stia; (poi che cosi volete et piacevi) in queste rime vi fie chiaro.

Voi mi poneste in foco,

Per farmi anzi 'l mio di Donna perire:

Et perche questo mal vi pareva poco,

Col pianto raddoppiaste il mio languire.

Hor io vi vo ben dire.

Levate lun martire;

Che di due morti; non posso morire.

Pero che da l'ardore

L'humor, che ven de gli occhi, mi difende:

Et chel gran pianto non ditempre il core;

Face la fiamma, che l'asciuga e'ncende.

Cosi, quanto si prende

Lun mal, laltro mi rende;

Et quel stesso mi giova, che m'offende.
 Che se tanto a voi piace
 Veder in polve questa carne ardità,
 Che vostro et mio mal grado è sì vivace;
 Perché darle giamai quel, che l'aita?
 Vostra voglia infinita
 Sana la sua ferita:
 Ond'io rimango in dolorosa vita.
 Et di voi non mi doglio,
 Quanto d'Amor, che questo vi comporte;
 Anzi di me, ch'ancor non mi discioglio.
 Ma che poss'io? con leggi inique et torte
 Amor regge sua corte.
 Chi vide mai tal sorte,
 Tenersi in vita un huom con doppia morte.

Parti Lisa, che a questi miracoli s'acconvenga, che il loro facitore sia chiamato Iddio? Parti, che non senza cagione que primi huomini gli habbiano imposto cotal nome?...

2. The menace of Gismondo's "warm faith," *Gli Asolani*, here in Dilemmi's ever so slightly modernized transcription, *Asolani*, 1505, 2.24, pp. 158-9 and LXXX-LXXXII; cf. Gallica, pp. 115-117.

Ma io vi priego per quella virtù, la quale ne' morbidi petti di ciascuna di voi abbergando tiene più lieti e vostri dolci et pietosi cuori, che, come che io non creda potere isprimere con parole la dolcezza del mio, già dallui per lo passato sentita in così fatto caso, pure siate contente che io ne ragioni quello poco che io potrò, comunque egli n'avenisse. Nel quale ragionamento tuttavia se alcuno passolino vi paresse che io pure facessi più innanzi di quello che voi donne solete mostrare a gli huomini d'esser vaghe che altrui faccia nel favellare, lassate queste apparenze ad altre stagioni; et quando sarete nelle sale con la Reina, ripigliate la vostra severa honestà, l[a] quale nel fare de' fatti più è

richiesta tale, che nel dire delle parole o nell'udire. Senza che et il luoco invitevole di questa verdura et il tempo delle nozze licentioso et la proposta materia vezzosa m'inducono a dare più briglia alla vaga lingua, che in altra conditione non farei. Dunque ascoltatevi, che io ve ne priego.

— Se io credessi — alle sue compagne rivolta disse allhora madonna Berenice — che Gismondo, per vietarglielo, si rimanesse da dire le cose le quai mostra che s'apparecchi di raccontarci, io direi che noi glielo vietassimo, et sarei la prima che ne 'l vieterei. Ma perciò che poi che una volta gli è nell'animo caduto di dirleci, se noi gliel concederemo, egli le si dirà et, se noi non gliel concederemo, ancho le si dirà, a me parrebbe il men male che noi togliessimo la sentenza di volontà, se pare così a voi, più tosto che perdere contendendo. — A noi pare quello che pare a voi — risposono le due giovani; — et rimanendo a Sabinetta le parole, ella sopradisse: — Ma bene ti saprei consigliare, Gismondo, che tu risguardo havessi di non dire cosa che ripresa possa essere con tuo disnore. Perciò che Lisa si vorrà riscuotere della percossa che tu le desti, et volentieri ti renderà pane per schiacciata, se tu ti lascerai cogliere, ché io la veggo di mal talento. Né ti gioverà poi il dire che noi donne usiamo di mostrare a gli huomini d'esser vaghe de gli honesti ragionamenti. — Allhotta Gismondo verso madonna Berenice ravigliandosi: — Madonna, — disse — io temo più costei che la mala ventura. Vedete voi come ella ripiglia ciò che l'huom dice? Ma tu, bella giovane, datti pace, che io disposto sono di seguire il tuo consiglio. — Et queste parole fornite, incominciò le seguenti in questa maniera:

— Era il tempo di mezza estate, et havea il giorno, il quale purissimo si mostrava per tutto il cielo, già mezzi e suoi dispendi varcati, quando nelle camere della mia donna, già fattami per lunga pruova della mia calda fede meno selvaggia che ella da prima non m'era, in vaga et sola parte ella et io sedevamo ragionando; nelle quali camere per le aperte finestre d'oriente et di tramontana entrava un soave venticello, con gli stremi suoi orezzamenti ferendoci sì dolcemente, che il caldo della stagione non si sentiva.

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