

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-66622-0 - The Cambridge History of Italian Literature, Revised Edition

Edited by Peter Brand and Lino Pertile

Excerpt

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Origins and Duecento

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Cambridge University Press

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I

The earliest evidence

Looking back from the beginning of the Trecento, Dante surveyed the relative literary achievements of French, Provençal and Italian vernaculars up to his day:

French boasts that, because of its greater ease and pleasantness of use, anything set down or composed in vernacular prose belongs to it: for instance the biblical compilation with the deeds of the Trojans and Romans, and the exquisite adventures of King Arthur, and many other stories and learning. Provençal claims that vernacular writers wrote poetry in it first, as in a more perfect and sweeter language: think of Peire d'Alvernhe and other learned men of older times. The third language, of the Italians, has two claims to preeminence: the first is that those who have more sweetly and subtly written vernacular poetry were from its household; Cino da Pistoia and his friend are examples: and the second is that it is seen to rely more on Latin, which is universal.

(*De vulgari eloquentia* [henceforth *DVE*] I, 10 (?1304))

What is striking about this summary is that both French and Provençal have well-defined traditions behind them: the examples Dante cites go back generations (Peire d'Alvernhe wrote between 1150 and 1180; Chrétien de Troyes and Thomas, authors of the most important French romances, were writing around 1170). Significantly, Dante extends the references to French and Provençal writers by mentioning unspecified 'plures' and 'alii' (numerous others). For Italian, however, the examples could hardly be more solitary or recent: Cino da Pistoia was in his early thirties and his friend – Dante is referring to himself – was nearing forty: no other 'vulgares eloquentes' are mentioned. Indeed, much of the *DVE* is a fruitless search for writing in Italian vernaculars which rises above the municipal or the uncouth. A similar picture of the relative juniority of Italian is painted, protestingly, in *Vita Nuova* (henceforth *VN*) xxv, and in *Convivio* I, 10. Nevertheless, Dante believed the new poetry just emerging from Italy at the end of the Duecento could hold its own with the best. Where did this new-found, superior sweetness and subtlety suddenly come from?

The political fragmentation of early medieval Italy, its poor communications hampered by difficult geography, and the localisation resulting from the economic implosion of the Dark Ages left their mark on the culture and language of the peninsula. Local dialects, still a marked feature of Italy today,

restricted expression to a cramped territorial radius. Everywhere Latin remained the language of administration, learning and thought, not just for reasons of cultural prestige but because there was no other *lingua franca*. When the new literary language of Italy finally developed, it was to do so in those limited cultural spaces where Latin offered no predominant tradition, and where nevertheless cohesive patterns of expression could be established. In short, Italy would have to wait for other vernacular cultures to come of age. 'Italian', from the origins to at least the end of the *Duecento*, is a construction *post-factum* because of an unbroken cultural rather than a linguistic tradition.

Such was the monopoly of Latin as a written medium in the early Middle Ages that the first evidence of Italian *volgare* is fragmentary, amounting to a few scattered lines, and very late (early ninth century) in comparison with French or English. The fragments are not literary, and the Latinity of the scribes has made evaluation problematic. The so-called *Indovinello veronese* (early ninth century) is a riddle about writing, which can be read either as Latin influenced by the emerging vernacular, or as the new language deformed by scribal familiarity with Latin.

Similar doubts pertain to a series of *placiti*, or sworn statements, preserved in the archives of Montecassino. The documents, referring to land disputes around Capua, Teano and Sessa between 960 and 963, are set out in Latin, but the oral testimony is recorded in the vernacular. The presence of Latinisms and of dialectally unexpected verb forms suggests that the testimonies are really 'legalese' and not a reliable record of tenth-century Campanian dialect.

More extensive, though still non-literary, evidence has to wait till the late eleventh century. To eliminate blank spaces in a deed of covenant of 1087 (blank spaces facilitated surreptitious codicils), a notary by the name of Rainerio from Monte Amiata near Siena scribbled a ribald tercet about a client Caputcoctu (Capocotto, or 'Hothead'). The earthy colloquialisms can still be half heard through the scribe's latinate spelling.

The first lengthy document is a confessional formula from Norcia in Umbria, again from the late eleventh century. The vernacular character (Umbrian dialect) is unmistakable, even though the doctrinal context ensures that Latin is predominant, in both lexis and sentence structure.

Despite the increasing length of such documents, consciously artistic and linguistically autonomous use of the vernacular would have to wait till the second half of the twelfth century, when an unknown *giullare* (minstrel) composed, in eastern Tuscany, the *Ritmo laurenziano*, a poem praising a bishop and brazenly begging for a horse. The octosyllabic metre, along with the obsequious content, displays affinities with models north of the Alps. Other poems displaying the same *giullaresco* characteristics are the *Ritmo cassinese* and the *Ritmo di S. Alessio* (both late twelfth or early thirteenth century), the latter a substantial but incomplete hagiography in 27 irregular stanzas.

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Poetry

Francis of Assisi

None of the documents mentioned so far indicates conscious cultural accumulation or progressive literary development, and this unsophisticated localised production was to carry on for centuries in its geographical and linguistic isolation, long after literary standards had been established. Piety and humour were to be its staples, and genre and metrical forms were to remain closely linked to the oral humus from which it spontaneously germinated. This hidden dimension (hidden, that is, from the history of 'high' literature) could occasionally throw surprises, such as the impressive religious outpourings of Umbria, starting with St Francis (1182–1226) himself. The saint, whose very name indicates how fashionable French culture was, and who sang in French when jolly, who liked to name his companions after the characters in the Round Table, and whose followers were nicknamed *ioculatores domini* (minstrels of the Lord), was able, even in the discomfort of his last illness (c. 1225), to compose a hymn of astounding freshness and innocence. The *Laudes Creaturarum*, also known as the *Cantico delle creature* ('Praise of God's Creation'), starts by singing the praises of God for creating the sun, moon and stars, then, after thanking Him for the four elements, concludes in gratitude for patience in suffering and for Death itself. Here, in the stanzas in praise of water and fire, the character of St Francis, a cross between extraordinarily heightened directness and a simplicity verging on the simple-minded, comes across in all its exaltation:

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sor'aqua,
 la quale è multo utile, et humile, et pretiosa et casta.
 Laudato si', mi' Signore, per frate focu,
 per lo quale ennallumini la nocte:
 ed ello è bello, et iocundo, et robustoso et forte.

(Be thou praised my Lord for Sister Water, which is very useful, humble, precious and chaste. Be thou praised my Lord for Brother Fire, by which you light up the night, and which is fair and jolly, strapping and strong.)

Francis's pantheistic celebration is written in assonantal prose, with what was an originally marked Umbrian timbre ennobled by biblical turns of phrase and notions of Latin rhetoric. The use of the vernacular was, of course, linked to the essentially *popular* nature of this new piety, in contrast to the Latinity of the regular Church. The spreading of religious enthusiasm, unimpeded by

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barriers of language or learning, meant that the Franciscan tradition was to produce many other *laudes*, some of the most dramatic, even terrifying, being written by Iacopone da Todi (1230–1306), who is also tentatively credited with composing the famous *Stabat Mater*, Mary's lament on the crucified Christ, later set to music by Palestrina, Haydn, Rossini and others. In *O Segnor, per cortesia, manname la malsania*, Iacopone catalogues a ghastly checklist of deformities, suppurations and illnesses, ending up with a gruesome wish: to be devoured by a wolf and defecated among briars. The sufferings, however horrible, could not compare with the poet's sin against God: 'ché me creasti en tua diletta / e io t'ho morto a villania' (for you created me in your charity / and I killed you basely). The dramatic distance between these late outpourings from Todi and the original simplicity of St Francis's welcome of 'Our Sister Bodily Death' could hardly be wider.

Popular and didactic poetry

Important as St Francis is (and many take the composition of the *Cantico delle creature* as the starting-point of Italian literature), the religious poetry of Umbria was, like its counterparts in the north of the peninsula, a cultural blind alley, incapable of fomenting a lay artistic tradition. Amongst the northern writers, most of whom stuck to edifying or devotional subjects, Girard Pateg (fl. 1228) from Cremona rendered parts of Ecclesiastes into a *Splanamento* or dialect explanation in alexandrines. Pietro da Bescapè's *Sermoni* (1274) crudely paraphrased in a variety of metres large chunks of the Gospels and other parts of the Old and New Testaments. The least grey of these northern moralists was Bonvesin da la Riva (d. ?1315), a schoolteacher whose *De quinquaginta curialitatibus ad mensam* ('Concerning Fifty Courtesies at Table'), despite its Latin title, furnishes copious and doubtless much-needed vernacular advice. More importantly, Bonvesin's substantial *Libro delle tre scritture* ('Book of the Three Scriptures') catalogues Hell, Christ's passion, and the joys of Heaven in a Milanese dialect already beginning to show tentative ambitions to refinement.

Whilst popular poetry (both humorous and didactic) was also to appear in Tuscany, its later appearance meant that it was created in a more sophisticated context, reacting to, as well as adopting, values and forms (e.g. the sonnet) from the 'high' literature which was beginning to assert itself. Rustico di Filippo (b. ?1235) is typical, in that his extant production of nearly sixty sonnets divides almost exactly into two halves: one uninspiringly in the new literary style and the other more enjoyably in a mordant, 'street-wise' popular idiom. Cecco Angiolieri (?1260–1312) embraced a costermongerish delight in ribald vituperation which belied his well-bred upbringing in Siena. Forese Donati (d. 1296) would exploit this burlesque vein in his *tenzone* (poetic exchange) possibly with Dante, whose replies were no less caustic.

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Tuscan didactic poetry also distanced itself from its more pedestrian forebears elsewhere in the peninsula. Brunetto Latini (?1220–1294) composed his major work, *Li livres dou Trésor* (mid 1260s), in French, claiming that the language was ‘plus delitable e plus commune’ (pleasanter and more widely known). The *Trésor* is part of a wider medieval phenomenon of encyclopaedic works, the most famous being Vincent of Beauvais’s *Speculum Maius*, but it is the first scientific text in any of the vernacular languages. Though Brunetto consciously chose French as the vehicle for his most ambitious work, he nevertheless produced in his *Rettorica* a vernacular translation and commentary for the first seventeen chapters of Cicero’s *De inventione*, and also began to compose an allegorical poem in Tuscan in rhyming heptasyllables, the *Tesoretto*, in which the protagonist loses himself in a dark wood (Roncesvals of the *Chanson de Roland!*), only to be conducted on an educational tour of Virtue and Knowledge. The problem with the *Tesoretto* lies in the heptasyllables which impose a breathless rhythm on a naturally august subject matter. The intention is serious, but the effect is doggerel. The author himself was aware of the limitations of this format, complaining that the dictates of rhyme ‘hide the precept and change the meaning’ (*Tesoretto* 411ff.). When Dante came to the *Commedia*, though he drew inspiration from the *Tesoretto*, he took good care to write his own poem in more spacious hendecasyllables.

The allegorical-dramatic approach à la *Roman de la rose*,¹ clearly the result of Brunetto’s long stay in France, is also much in evidence in anonymous poems from the end of the Duecento. The *Fiore* is a remarkable paraphrase in 232 sonnets of the more ‘novellistic’ parts of the French poem, more Jean de Meung than Guillaume de Lorris, enthusiastically concentrating on the erotic or voyeuristic message. The lively but cynical tone is faithfully conveyed by these lines from sonnet LX, advocating ‘firm’ action:

E quando tu ssarai co llei soletto,
Prendila tra lle braccia e fa ’l sicuro,
Mostrando allor se ttu sse’ forte e duro,
E ’mantenente le metti il gambetto.

(When you find yourself alone with her take her in your arms, confidently, showing then how strong and hard you are, then shove the peg in.)

The *Fiore* has received a lot of attention because some have identified its author as the young Dante (the name *Durante* crops up, but this may be just another phallic pun). A further work based on the *Roman de la rose* is the *Detto d’amore* (it too now attributed to Dante), a pedestrian paraphrase, but notable for its transfer of attention from the Lover (male) to the Beloved (female), a refocusing occasioned by new emphasis on the Lady in the Tuscan love lyric.

¹ A long French poem by Guillaume de Lorris, c. 1230, completed by Jean de Meung c. 1275, in which Eros stands as the desire for knowledge.

Provençal influence

The development of an Italian literary tradition, whether in poetry or in prose, would take place, as the more travelled Tuscans like Brunetto Latini sensed, through the mediation of Provençal, French and Latin models. Provençal acted as a catalyst to the development of the lyric, French offered models of prose and of epic or allegorical verse, and Latin provided a constant challenge to both the syntactic and the rhetorical ambitions of the language.

Provençal verse, with its technical sophistication, its lyrical approach to the poetry of passions, and its conversion of chivalry from warfare to wooing, was well known in Italy, particularly in the north where linguistic similarity meant few problems of comprehension. Whilst Provençal poets found work easily in Italy (too easily, judging by Aimeric de Peguilhan's complaint about unfair competition in *Li fol e.il put e.il filol*, 'Fools and sodomites'), their views on the poetic backwardness of the Italians were implicitly harsh: Raimbautz de Vaqueiras (fl. 1180–1207) wrote, in addition to a large number of poems in his own language, two pieces making use of Italian dialect for comic effect. In the *Descort* (Discord) he uses five languages (Provençal, Italian dialect, French, Gascon and Galician) to symbolise the strife and confusion of love's ferment. Paradoxically, Raimbautz's Italianising is far more refined and 'Italian' than any native production of his time. In the *Contrasto bilingue* a suave Provençal's elegant courtship, complete with request for 'merces' (favour) meets with indelicate refusal from a Genoese-speaking woman, who calls her wooer 'sozo, mozo, escalvao' (filthy, stupid and cropped like a thief). The *Contrasto* humorously exploits the dramatic and linguistic possibilities suggested by the seduction dialogues in Andreas Capellanus' Latin treatise *De amore*, where lovers of different classes are pitted against one another.

The traffic between Provence and Italy was not one way: some Italians were so enamoured of the expressive possibilities of Provençal that they composed exclusively in it. The Bolognese Lambertino Buvaelli (d. 1221) probably learned to write in Provençal from reading anthologies of Occitanic (written in *langue d'oc*) poetry circulating in northern Italy, rather than from direct contact. But the next generation, which included Lanfranco Cigala from Genoa (d. 1278) and Sordello da Goito (d. 1260), was sufficiently respected as to compete on its own terms with Provençal poets. Sordello was famous in his day for a lament on the death of Ser Blacatz, in which the cream of European chivalry is invited to partake of the dead hero's heart as a cure for cowardice: 'Premiers manje del cor, per so que grans ops l'es, / l'empeiraire de Roma ...' (May the first to eat of the heart be the Emperor of Rome, whose need of it is very great ...). Our image of the poet is now coloured by Dante's emotion-charged portrayal in *Purgatorio* VI–VII, and Robert Browning's philosophising *Sordello* (1840).

Interesting as they are, these early importers and exporters were few and lacked influence. For real change, there needed to be a context where imported

values, conceits and techniques could be acclimatised in such a way as to provoke not only imitation but also emulation.

The poets of Provence had flourished in a fragile environment of small courts and an impecunious nobility. Feudal hierarchy and etiquette, which governed the approach to patrons, became a metaphor in their verse for amorous frustrations, for the search for recognition, and for a sense of exclusion. The resultant poetry of *fin'amors* (true love as opposed to *fol amors*, mere sensual instinct) is one where passion meets hindrance, longing meets indifference, and feelings of inferiority are sublimated into conceptual sophistication (*trobar clus*) or verbal ostentation (*trobar ric*); it proved internationally attractive because of its romantic courtly milieu and its artistic panache.

Sicilian school

Social organisation in most of Italy was different from that in Provence. Whereas in parts of the north there were small courts (and Provençal models were able to penetrate directly), in central Italy the political, cultural and economic centres of gravity were the towns, already acquiring independence and evolving post-feudal forms of government. The closest approximation to Occitan conditions existed in the south, where the Hohenstaufen Emperors had inherited a state shaped by Norman occupation. The Emperor Frederick II, who reigned from 1220 to 1250, epitomised this strange amalgam of northern and southern European cultures: his father was German and his mother Norman, but his interests were decidedly Mediterranean. His relations with Arab and Greek subjects were often better than those with western counterparts. Frederick's court, the *Magna curia* or Great Court, was filled with officials and supplicants from all over Europe, and its taste in culture was catholic. Though the court was in many ways more bureaucratic than chivalrous, the lure of the love poetry of Provence was strong, but only as one amongst many competing forms of expression. The narrow concentration on love in the vernacular production of the *Magna curia* compared with its Provençal source is explained by the fact that the Frederician court was also hyperactive in Latin, and many of the themes (political invective, reference to historical events) missing from the Sicilian poets can be found transposed into this other language. Guido delle Colonne, for instance, an important lyric poet in the *volgare*, produced an elegant and very influential translation into Latin, not Sicilian, of the French poet Benoît de Ste Maure's *Roman de Troie* (Romance of Troy).

From reading the verse of the *Magna curia*, the impression one gets – an impression reinforced by the high percentage of lawyers and imperial functionaries to whom the surviving examples of Sicilian poetry can be ascribed – is of a civil-service mentality with an educated élite indulging in an esoteric amateur pastime, a *nomenklatura* concerned with mutual recognition amongst fellow

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hobbyists, rather than full-time troubadours playing to the public as in Provence. One unwitting consequence of this private, non-professional context was that the link between poetry and music (which still survives in the terminology of forms, *sonetto*, *canzone*, *ballata* etc.) was undermined. Much Provençal poetry was written down together with its musical notation, and the *Vidas* (accompanying biographies) state whether the poets were gifted with a good singing voice or instrumental technique. The poetry of the Magna curia bears no melodic indications, and some of the phrasing, indeed, would be unrewarding to set to music. Poetry amongst equal amateurs could now be *read*, privately and silently, and not *sung* for patronage, and was therefore freed from aedic disciplines. The poet's task would now be deemed to be *dittare* (to set in writing) not *cantare* (to sing).

The golden age of the Frederician court was shortlived, and the collapse of the Swabian house in the years after Frederick's death in 1250 meant that the structures which had permitted a compact and intercommunicative 'school' of poets to thrive were quickly dismembered. Effectively the first generation of Sicilian poets started writing around 1230, and the second generation were contemporaries with the more vigorous poets of Tuscany. Indeed, nearly all the evidence we now possess of the Sicilians comes from anthologies and imitations made in Tuscany, whose political and economic ascent paralleled the decline in Swabian fortunes.

This foreclosed timespan means that, except for accidental survivals such as Stefano Protonotaro's *Pir meu cori alligrari* ('To liven my heart', late Frederician period), we are unable to read the works of the Sicilians in their original linguistic garb. Medieval copyists saw it as their job not to transmit a text passively, orthographic difficulties and linguistic incomprehensions included, but rather to interpret it, so as actively to facilitate its transmission. The anthologies of Sicilian poetry transmitted by Tuscan copyists are heavily Tuscanised: in particular, the differences in the vowel systems of the two languages were marked, and produced unintended changes in rhyme in the Tuscanised versions. Sicilian has five tonic vowels, whereas Tuscan has seven, plus two diphthongs. Sicilian rhyme was perfect, that is to say there was a complete correspondence between the vowels of both the penultimate and the final syllables of lines. In 'translating' Sicilian into Tuscan, the copyists found that originally perfect rhymes could not be respected. Key words such as *placiri* (pleasure) and *sospiri* (sighs), for instance, which rhyme in Sicilian, would give *piacere* and *sospiri* in Tuscan. Likewise, the distinction between 'open' and 'closed' *e* and *o* (separate phonemes in Tuscan) ran counter to the single forms in Sicilian. The tonic diphthongs, too, a marked feature of Tuscan, do not occur in Sicilian. The cultural impact of the poetry of the Magna curia meant that these unavoidable compromises of transmission became naturalised, even sought after, in straight Tuscan writers: 'open' and 'closed' vowels could be allowed to rhyme; non-diphthongised Sicilian variants (such as *core* for *cuore*) would be considered more 'poetic' than the common Tuscan forms

(Dante would consistently use *core* in the verse sections of *VN* and *Convivio*, and *cuore* for the prose). In certain instances, the glaring conflicts of rhyme (and their solutions) acquired legitimacy: *sospiri* and *dire* could pass muster, and *voi* could be Sicilianised to *vui* to avoid awkward problems of rhyme with *altrui* (the ‘other person’, a key word in love lyric). In addition, some grammatical forms (the future in *-aggio*, the conditional in *-ia*, *aggio/ave* for *hol/ha* and *sacciol/saccente* instead of *sol/sapiente*) provided convenient ‘doubles’ to Tuscan forms. Opportunistic as they were, the Tuscan poets do not seem to have exploited these possibilities to the hilt, and only adopted authentic Sicilianisms, never making up new ones by analogy.

The difference between the actual language of the poets of the Magna curia and the Tuscanised versions of the copyists can still be seen in the canzone *S’eo trovasse pietanza* (‘If I could find pity’) by ‘Re Enzo’ (1224–72) – Henry of Sardinia, the illegitimate son of Frederick II, who languished for most of his adult life in a Bolognese prison. By an accident of transmission, parts of the poem have come down to us in two different versions: one is still in its original Sicilian form, the other has been Tuscanised.

Such was the early diffusion of the Tuscanised copies of Sicilian poetry that Dante was firmly convinced that they were the ‘real thing’ and that verse which remained genuinely Sicilian was mere barbarism: in the *DVE* (1, 12) he quotes disapprovingly a line from Cielo d’Alcamo’s delightfully humorous *Rosa fresca aulentissima* (‘Fresh, fragrant rose’) as an example of what issues from ‘mediocre natives’, not realising that Cielo was indulging in an elaborate joke almost on a par with Raimbautz de Vaqueiras’s *Contrasto*. But Dante’s error was commonly held, and moreover productive: it was to be the modified Sicilian material rather than the original which was to serve as the model for subsequent poetry in Italy.

The importance of the Sicilian school resides in its role as a filter. There is little direct quotation of individual Provençal poets, as there was to be in Tuscany later. Whereas elsewhere Occitan poetry had been directly read or imitated in its own language, at the Magna curia the material was transposed into local speech, only the technical terms showing the debt to Provençal: *gioia*, *amanza*, *fin’amore*, *caunoscenza*, *tristanza*. This vocabulary would be transmitted to the standard language in due course, with borrowings such as ‘speranza’ all but replacing the former ‘speme’. In addition to the technical terms for rendering *fin’amors*, the Sicilians also took over many of the verse forms, the Provençal *cobla* (stanza) becoming the *cobbola*, the *canso* becoming the *canzone*, the *tenso* or poetic exchange becoming the *tenzone*. The troubadours of Provence had conducted such exchanges by means of single stanzas (*coblas esparsas*) of the *canso* form, which normally required multiple stanzas. It is probably from the high-art *cobla esparsa*, rather than from the popular Sicilian *strambotto* (eight-line stanza of alternate rhyme), that the sonnet was to develop.

The invention of the sonnet is generally attributed to Giacomo (or Iacopo)