Prologue

> I believe that books, once they are written, have no need of their authors.[1]
> Elena Ferrante, letter to Sandra, 21 September 1991

So wrote the woman known as Elena Ferrante after negotiating the publication of her first novel, *L'amore molesto*. More than three decades later, Ferrante still has not disclosed her real name or identity, and her refusal to give interviews, receive awards, or budge from her insistence that she's 'already done enough for this long story' remains absolute. Yet as apparently commonsensical if today extremely rare her claim might be, one word stands out: *need*. Ferrante contests a general assumption that a book can't exist without its author, that it's a fragile being, at risk if left alone – a sentiment that goes back at least to Plato.[2] Is it a coincidence that a more recent work by Ferrante has the word 'abandoned' in its title, or that her fourth and final Neapolitan novel is about a lost child?

Is Ferrante right? Can books survive without their parent? The following pages will attempt to document the hold of such a question on the early modern imagination through a handful of examples ranging from ancient Rome to late seventeenth-century Mexico. The seemingly harsh words of a brash sixteen-year-old who would become one of the Renaissance's most rigorous humanists, Angelo Poliziano, constitute the first such example. In sentiment they seem no different from Ferrante's verdict. Uttered in the form of a brusque Latin epigram, Poliziano's judgement of a fellow poet goes like this:

> I recently criticized the poems that you had composed, and yet it wasn't actually your poetry that I criticized, Paul. You were the author, I admit, but once they've been published or sent out (edita), poems belong not to the author, but to the public (Auctoris non sunt carmina, sed populi).[3]

Time has effaced our knowledge of Paul, but not of Poliziano himself, as though to prove him right: the apparently bad poems of a fellow writer now belong to others. Or more accurately, they once did; and now we know of their existence only from Poliziano. Chances are they weren't published in the sense that we think of that word today.[4] When Poliziano was writing these lines in the early 1470s, the business of publishing was, at least in Italy, still in its infancy. Paul's

[1] Ferrante 2016, p. 3.
[2] In the *Phaedrus*, a written text is liable to being misunderstood: 'when it is ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself'; Plato 2005, *Phaedrus* 275e, p. 567. For Plato's metaphor of the author as parent, see McDonald 1993, p. 309.
[3] Poliziano 2019, pp. 30–1.
[4] 'Publication' was a term long before print, as Riddy 2004 reminds us: '*Pubblishen* in middle English means "announce," "proclaim," "divulge," "spread abroad," quite different from one of the OED definitions of "to publish": "to issue or cause to be issued for sale to the public"' (p. 41).

poems were evidently circulated if not published, or more precisely, they were given out; the infinitive form of the verb, *edere*, has its origins in ex + dare. As a result, the poems are no longer his.[5]

But if Poliziano sounds cavalier in his chiding response to Paul, he comes across as even more ruthless with respect to his own work. In a letter that would eventually be used as a preface to the first publication (in the modern sense) of his play *Fabula di Orfeo*, Poliziano addresses one Carlo Canale, a courtier from Mantua, with this grim account:

> History tells us, my dear sir Carlo, that the Lacedaemonians held the following custom: whenever any child of theirs was born with a malformed limb or wanting in strength, it was promptly exposed: it could not be kept alive, for such stock was deemed unworthy of Lacedaemon. Likewise, I wanted my Orpheus play – which was composed at the behest of our most reverend Cardinal of Mantua, in two days' time, in the midst of continuous upheaval, and in the vulgar language [Italian] such that it would be better understood by its spectators – I wanted it promptly, and not unlike Orpheus himself, torn apart: for I knew that my daughter would more readily bring her father shame before honor, and melancholy before pleasure.[6]

Spartan children born unhealthy or with disabilities are abandoned on mountaintops to be torn apart by beasts and birds – analogous to the fate Orpheus suffers at the hands of the Bacchanti at the end of Poliziano's play.[7] Commissioned by the Gonzaga family around 1480, the *Orfeo* was composed in the *volgare* or vernacular tongue, possibly one reason for Poliziano's disdain (another might be that he wrote it in a mere two days – no doubt an exaggeration). But Canale evidently persuaded Poliziano to let him indulge in some degree of fatherly affection. Yielding to Canale's misplaced compassion, which Poliziano judges to be little more than 'cruelty', Poliziano consents to his daughter's handoff to others: 'So let her live, since you find her so pleasing' ('Viva adunque, poi che a voi così piace').[8] Yet he also asks that this *figliuola* not be linked to her progenitor, urging Canale to defend him from anyone who 'wanted to attribute the imperfections of such a daughter to her father'.

Cast off as an orphan, the *Fabula di Orfeo* was left exposed to die until she was rescued thanks to another's *pietà*. The preface tellingly contrasts with the ensuing play, about the refusal to let a loved one go. Unable to accept his wife's death, Orpheus descends to hell to charm a tyrant with his song, winning Eurydice back.

[5] Van Groningen 1963 for various meanings of the Greek ἔχδοσις.
[6] Poliziano, *The Fable of Orpheus*, trans. J. Perna, unpublished translation (2009), p. 1.
[7] The language used to describe the sickly or malformed in early modernity is discussed in Bearden 2019.
[8] Poliziano, *The Fable of Orpheus*, trans. J. Perna, p. 1; Poliziano 2000, p. 136.

But he must respect one seemingly simple rule: don't turn around to look at her until you're back on earth. Orpheus disobeys, and the heretofore silent Eurydice announces her definitive return to Pluto's realm with a line that resonates in light of both Poliziano's sober announcement to Paul and his letter to Canale: 'né sono hormai piú tua':[9] I am no longer yours. Or as Virgil put it in his fourth *Georgic*, one of Poliziano's sources: 'non tua.'[10] We cannot be too attached to what we love – our child, our partner, our work – and must be willing to let go for them to have any kind of life (or death) of their own. And yet perhaps there's another tale here as well, one that Poliziano will return to in a later, Latin text, *Nutricia*. Here he blames not Orfeo for his backward turn (if he could even be said to blame him in the *Fabula*) but Pluto. The 'excessive severity of [his] harsh law' does nothing less than condemn humanity itself.[11] If texts need protection in a hostile world, the poet needs protection too – a poet who can be torn apart as easily as the orphaned work.[12]

These dynamics are all the more interesting insofar as Poliziano himself was an orphan. Following the assassination of his father, a leading political figure in Montepulciano – 'Politian' or 'Poliziano' alludes to his native seat – the ten-year-old boy was sent soon thereafter to a cousin's family in Florence, of lesser economic means than his own. Poliziano's earliest epigrams – aside from his retort to Paul – allude to his poverty; he directs himself at one point to Lorenzo de' Medici asking him to stop praising his poetry and send him some clothes instead![13] The slightly older Lorenzo took him in and facilitated his studies of Greek in the Florentine Studio, where eventually Poliziano would teach. Despite these early successes, as Davide Puccini has mused, 'It's unimaginable that the tragic murder of his father had not left a trace on the soul of the adolescent'. Puccini goes on to suggest that although Poliziano remained silent throughout his life about the event, it's not hard to see in his perennial insecurity the trauma of early loss.[14] Was Poliziano's seemingly calloused attitude about his relationship to his works – and others' relationships to theirs – a way of warding off the memory of his own displacement?

Still, Poliziano was lucky. Many children without other family resources were left at orphanages, where despite the many caring figures who worked within their walls, the rate of illness and death within the first year of an orphan's arrival was at times as high as 50 per cent. Just as Poliziano uses the word 'exposed' to

[9] Poliziano 2000, line 248; p. 159. [10] Virgil 2006, *Georgics* 4.498, I, pp. 254–5.
[11] Poliziano 2004, pp. 130–1: 'heu durae nimia inclementia legis!' (line 297).
[12] Tissoni-Benvenuti stresses the 'autonomous life' of the theatrical text in the fifteenth century, 'no longer connected to its author, and subject to successive adaptations every time it was newly performed'; Poliziano 2000, pp. 10–11.
[13] Poliziano 2019, p. 22, 'Ad Laurentium medicem'. A letter from 1480 movingly identifies Lorenzo as someone who has offered Poliziano 'not only the protection of a patron, but even the affection of a father'; McGowan 2005, p. 43.
[14] Poliziano 2012, p. viii; Butler 2018, p. 16; Greene 1982, p. 169.

characterize his abandoned play, these children too, many but by no means all infants, were often referred to as *esposti* – or, given the fact that they were found once exposed, *trovatelli* or foundlings. Poliziano was able to bypass this grim future, and the extent to which he did receive care may have made him ever more appreciative of support from friends like Canale, or Lorenzo's cousin, to whom Poliziano again refers to himself as an uncaring parent. In a letter dated 4 November 1482 to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, Poliziano prefaces the inclusion of his Latin poem *Manto* with the phrase 'You compel me' (cogis tu quidem me). And what Lorenzo has compelled him to do is to publish (*edere*) his unpolished poem, characterized as a deformed or imperfect creature, not unlike the *figliuola* left to languish in the wilds. (The Florentine publisher Antonio Miscomini evidently rushed the work immediately into print before Poliziano could change his mind, given the date on the final page of *Manto*: 6 November.)[15] A poetic rendition of the letter repeats the use of 'to compel': 'It is your chief object of care that my trifles not disappear; and though I am an unwilling parent, you compel them to bear the light of day.'[16] The word *cura* – care – is at the centre of this line, the beginning and end of which are straddled by Poliziano's 'trifles or worthless things': '*Neve meae* permeant *cura* est tua maxima *nugae*' (l. 42). What grounds those worthless words, and presumably gives them worth, is the centring project of Lorenzo's caring, which drives them from the darkness of Poliziano's study into daylight, where they can now belong to others.

Was Poliziano an anomaly? Or were his apparent habits of casting off his works with no concern for their longevity a typical response to the vagaries of the time – or expressions of false modesty? Arguably Ferrante's dismissal of her novels as well as her refusal to reveal her real name and to prolong her association with her works are uncharacteristic of our own era. But was Poliziano's stance vis-à-vis Paul, vis-à-vis himself, equally unusual in the late fifteenth century?

At times Poliziano contradicts himself, particularly when writing about works other than Paul's. He too cared for lost, abandoned, others: if not the apparently mediocre words of the now forgotten Paul, then those of writers worthy of being read. In a dedicatory verse to a compilation of Horace's *Odes* by the Florentine scholar Cristoforo Landino, Poliziano celebrates his contemporary as the one who 'restored you, Horace (te . . . reddidit) to the choruses and the lyre just as you were when you used to play the soothing lute by the waters of Tivoli'.[17] Shrouded for centuries in clouds and covered with dust, Horace is here now (*nunc*) as he used to be; and Poliziano accentuates the 'nowness' of his reappearance by repeating *nunc* three times in the final four lines. And just as Giotto speaks in words Poliziano

[15] Poliziano 2004, p. 200. [16] Poliziano 2019, pp. 128–9. [17] Poliziano 2019, pp. 310–1.

composed for the painter's cenotaph in the Florentine Duomo ('I am one through whom the extinct act of painting lived again'),[18] so does the Greek historian Herodian speak in Poliziano's translation of his prose into Latin, which allows Herodian to 'travel more broadly and come into the hands of more people'.[19] Thanks to Poliziano, who has rendered – *reddidit* – everything Herodian wrote in Latin words, Herodian can now speak Latin too. If the word Poliziano flung in Paul's face, *edita*, means to give out, *reddere* literally means to give again or to give *back*, as though translation returns something lost to its author.

This seems to be at odds with Poliziano's comments to Canale, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, and Paul. Surely if Michel Foucault is right, and the author is dead, and surely if Poliziano is right and the poem can no longer be *called* the author's, then there is no need to feel responsibility to the writer.[20] Yet Poliziano's care for others' texts, and his appreciation of those who cared for his own texts, belies the question. Is one's responsibility to the orphaned work, a text that needs future readers rather than a parent? In an oration on the Roman poet Statius, delivered to the Florentine Studio soon after his return from Mantua, Poliziano suggests that we should disregard a writer's thoughts *about* their work and concentrate on the work itself. Even though Statius opens his *Silvae* (modestly) warning that it's not worthy of being read, Poliziano argues that 'we should not pay attention to that which one thinks . . . but to what he has made' (effecerit).[21] The artefact itself – the object, the *thing*, that we hold in our hands, whether a roll, a manuscript, a printed folio – becomes the point of one's commentary. One engages with the work: complete or incomplete, rough or polished, well-raised by a caring parent or cast off by a dismissive one. As Kate van Orden notes, especially with the invention of print, 'Texts cannot escape the uneven world of the objects in which they are captured, exchanged, gifted, commodified, preserved and destroyed' – a process during which, she adds, 'authors lose their sovereignty'.[22]

How to combat this captivity, which is hardly just a result of print? And is Poliziano exhibiting remarkable cruelty or showing us the foresight of an unwithering gaze into the perilous future of any poem: the innocent *figliuola* torn apart by wild beasts. Is he (equally) concerned that he'll suffer the same fate as the less innocent Orpheus if he reveals that he is too attached to his work, and hence, to what he loves? Poliziano's invocation of the *figliuola*, however harsh, implicitly assumes that the author is a caretaker, parent, and guardian who nurtures poetry and sees it through its birth, maturation, and public entrance into the world – a personification that has found numerous forms of expression over at least two millennia, albeit often paired with sentiments of *angst* regarding

[18] Poliziano 2019, p. 171. [19] Poliziano 2019, p. 169. [20] Foucault 1979, pp. 141–60.
[21] Poliziano 1952, p. 874. [22] Van Orden 2013, p. 17.

a work's reception and return. The frequent references to the orphan highlight the necessarily uncertain result of the author's disappearance – and create a space for those who emerge in the author's absence such as scribes, editors, publishers, and translators as a way of acknowledging their own essential work of caring.[23] At the same time, were early modern authors viewed as 'sovereign' in the first place? And to what extent is the eventual creation of that 'sovereignty' dependent on the obfuscation of others' labours – such as those caring readers who, like Canale, bring someone else's work into the world?

Interest in material culture and the history of print over the last several decades has produced a body of scholarship that considers the dynamics of licensing, permissions, and patronage. To an extent we might characterize this scholarship as an ongoing history of the estrangement of an original work from its author, as historians of the book analyse the making of the author's words into what van Orden calls an object – an objectification that tests the reader's liberties as well.[24] Yet we must also question the extent to which the 'author' was already a fixed entity in the early modern world. The interest in paratexts, portraits, and formulas for textual closure has also led to important reflections on attempts to negotiate ownership and interpretation within the shifting contexts of both manuscript and print culture.[25] Additionally, translation studies has enabled exciting new work on the possibilities opened up through the renaissance of both classical and early Christian texts – texts necessarily orphaned throughout the medieval period because of the unavailability of speakers of Greek and scholars of classical Latin.[26]

This is the necessary backdrop for my own interest in ways that early modern readers saw texts as living things that defied objectification – even as they did not automatically regard print as a way of objectifying texts. On the one hand, publishers allowed authors to return to their work during the printing stage as well as afterwards, as they frequently published new, expanded editions and instalments, Tasso, Montaigne, and Milton among them. On the other hand, the non-existence of extended copyright privileges before the eighteenth century meant that authors were far from being perceived as the ultimate 'authorities' over their texts. Just as

[23] Other works attending to textual metaphors of orphanhood include Navarrete 1994 and Auerbach 1975, for whom the orphan comes to be 'thought of as a metaphor for the novel itself' as well as for 'the dispossessed, detached self'; p. 395. Sections 2 and 3 will address editors and translators in the production of early modern texts; for the role of the scribe, see Blair 2019.

[24] Chartier 2014, pp. 8–9. On print history: Chartier 1994; Hoffman 1998, Murphy 2000, and Pettegree 2010.

[25] Genette's comment on prefaces is typical of his approach to thinking about the 'objectives' of paratexts: the preface's chief function is '*to ensure that the text is read properly*' (emphasis in the original); p. 197; Sherman 2011 for a reading of what he calls 'terminal paratexts'; on authors' portraits, Bolzoni 2019; on closure, Fowler 1989.

[26] Richardson 2018, Rizzi 2017, Newman and Tylus 2015, Burke 2002, Coldiron 1993.

importantly, with the shift from the fixed Latin language to the vagaries of Europe's fledgling vernaculars, the new kids in town, the early modern period ushers in a new attitude about language itself: fleeting, in motion. Or as Dante says of the dialects spoken in Italy's cities, over a mere fifty-year period one can see 'how many words have been exhausted, and born, and altered' (in qua molti vocabuli essere spenti e nati e variati).[27] This is a process of *trasmutare* or transformation that must be tended to by all who translate and write, conscious of the differences between their tongue and that of their predecessors – and future readers.

The early modern insistence on vernacular languages and texts alike as growing and incomplete results in an entity that not only needed but benefited from others' help. Recourse to metaphors of a family, including the adoptive family, grants wandering works an aura of authenticity and gives them a home, preserving them from the potential depersonalization of the industry – or of any process of transmission that removes something from its source. This is a turn from old families to new ones, for ultimately the return to the author is always a fiction: *né più tua*. But in its place emerges a newfound recognition of the possibilities that distance can confer.[28] Such distance gives the reader the freedom to produce their own interpretations of a text that, as Stephen Orgel has written, is seen as 'alive', evidenced nowhere more than in the marginalia found in manuscripts and printed books alike.[29] Indeed, for Orgel, studies in material culture have enabled us to recover those practices that pre-existed a more modern emphasis on 'pristine books, unmediated by use or even by prior possession' – and hence on the author.[30]

Which is what Poliziano surely recognized. As an editor and translator himself (not unlike Anita Raja, who has been convincingly identified as the 'real' Elena Ferrante), Poliziano was well aware that, without the care of others, many authors' works would be forever forgotten or lost – including his. Indeed, without Canale or Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, he would have rarely sent anything out. This isn't because he was too lazy to edit his writing or (much more likely) too busy – as he claims to his friend Girolamo Donà, no doubt exaggerating, he has no time for himself, so hassled is he by others' requests for things they want written instead: a motto for the hilt of a sword, 'a line of verse for a bed'.[31] Written in 1490 and thus at the height of his fame, the letter continues: 'as long as I am compelled to belong to everybody, I can never really belong to myself – or to anyone'.[32] *Nec meus esse possum*: I can never be my own. There is only what he has made, and that is for others to take stock of.

[27] Dante 1993, Convivio 1.5,9, p. 56. [28] Stock 1990, pp. 107–9.
[29] Hoffman 1998, p. 101 notes the wide margins of the 1588 edition of Montaigne's popular *Essais*, which 'invited readers to take copious notes' – even as the most 'prolific annotator of his edition' was Montaigne himself (102); see Section 2.
[30] Orgel 2023, p. 25. [31] Poliziano 2006, p. 127. [32] Poliziano 2006, p. 128.

These others, in turn, would emerge after his death at barely forty. Had it been up to Poliziano, we wouldn't be reading his epigram to Paul today. During the summer of 1494, Poliziano had been preparing an edition of his Latin poetry for publication (possibly one that included that epigram). He died in September, leaving it unfinished and thus 'unable to send it out' (scito non esse haec edita ab ipso). This is what Aldus Manutius notes in his preface to *Omnia opera Angeli Politiani*, published in 1498.[33] But these are not, despite the title, all of Poliziano's works. Many of Poliziano's papers were lost or dispersed after his death, including that edition of Latin poems, and it was only thanks to his friends ('sed ab amicis') that Aldus has something at all to print. Other pages no doubt lurked in the homes of various Florentines who sought to publish them as their own (ut edant pro suis). Aldus acknowledges that some works in the volume 'lacked finish and refinement', and that Poliziano 'would have made corrections if the opportunity had been granted him' as he continued working to 'shed great light on all the liberal arts' and 'free philosophy from the grasp of the barbarians'.[34] Given Poliziano's concern about the *Orfeo*'s lack of polish, Aldus's claim that the 1498 edition is not what Poliziano would have wished is especially poignant. *Si licuisset*: had Poliziano only been given licence to live and complete the task himself.

The phrase is Ovid's, from his *Tristia*, written after Augustus banished him from Rome in 4 CE. In poem 1.7 he asks a friend to add six lines to the opening of the *Metamorphoses*, the 'work broken off by the unfortunate exile of its master' (infelix domini quod fuga rupit opus).[35] In the next lines, Ovid identifies himself not as *dominus* or lord but as parent. 'All you who touch these rolls bereft of their father, to them at least let a place be granted in your city [i.e., Rome]! … Whatever defect this rough poem may have he would have corrected, had it been permitted him': 'emendaturus, si licuisset, erat', the final words in the poem, and the line cited by Aldus.

'Had it been permitted': how much licence do authors really have when it comes to how their works circulate in the world? The following pages will chart the drama that emerges as the personified text is released, a drama involving authors themselves as well as those who look after their works in their absence – sometimes having been explicitly entrusted with those words, sometimes not. Moving via the aforementioned Ovid, Horace, and Dante to early modern figures from Erasmus to

[33] Manutius 2017, pp. 184–5.
[34] Manutius 2017, p. 187. The *Orfeo* was published a month before Poliziano's death, in Bologna; Canale may have circulated it to printers. It appeared with Poliziano's other major work in Italian, *Stanze per la Giostra*, in honour of Giuliano de' Medici – left unfinished out of grief following Giuliano's assassination.
[35] Ovid 1996, *Tristia* 1.7.35–40, pp. 38–9.