Introduction

“But sing poet, in our name...”

THE MIRROR AND THE MASK

In 1977 the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges published a short story called *El espejo y la máscara* (The Mirror and the Mask). In it the king of Ireland instructs his court bard Ollan, a singer-poet and harpist, to “sing his victory” over the Norwegians. The bard returned to the king three times at one-year intervals with a new poem. The first was a work of carefully inscribed perfection: it obeyed the rules and conventions of his art, reproduced the teachings of the ancients, and in its written form showed skill in “rhyme, alliteration, assonance, quantities, the artifices of learned rhetoric, the wise variation of meters.” The king accepted the poem, ordered thirty scribes to copy it twelve times each, and awarded the poet a silver mirror. But the king was not yet satisfied: “... nothing has happened. In our veins the blood runs no faster,” for the poem was a work of imitation, and like the mirror it reflected what was already there. A year later the poet returned with a new poem, shorter than the first, which he performed with less confidence, omitting passages “as if he did not completely understand them himself.” It broke all grammatical and poetic rules, and was a dazzling work of invention and enchantment. “It was no longer a description of the battle, it was the battle,” and it astounded its audience. For his inventiveness, the poet was rewarded with a golden mask, then sent on his way to compose something “still more lofty.” When the poet returned for a final time a year later, he carried no manuscript and looked visibly altered, “like another man.” At the king’s command, the poet reluctantly recited his poem, a single line. It had come to him unbidden in his sleep as “words I did not at first understand.” Both king and bard

1 Walt Whitman, “Hush’d be the Camps Today,” in *Leaves of Grass.*
2 First published in *Il libro de arena* (1975), and then trans. by N.T. di Giovanni in *The New Yorker* (June 6, 1977), 33–34. It is discussed at greater length in Chartier, “Orality Lost.”
were "awestricken and overcome," sensing they had transgressed by invoking a beauty "forbidden to men." The poet then took his own life with a dagger that was the king’s final gift, while the king roamed Ireland as a beggar for the rest of his life, and never repeated the poem. 

Borges’ tale invokes what seems to us an ancient and mythical world of bardic performance, but in fact its three episodes trace a spectrum of written and oral poetic traditions that were still very much alive in Renaissance Italy. In the first episode, we can perhaps recognize what comes closest to our own relatively uncritical relationship to the written word, which assumes a strong authorial presence, an authoritatively inscribed and accurately reproduced text, and a silent and solitary reader in search of meaning. The movement of the tale, however, is clearly away from the “text” as a fixed monument, and toward a more fluid performative event, one capable of sublime effects upon listeners. Along the movement from mirror, to mask, to dagger, the author’s identity and ownership of his material is diminished, and finally annihilated. He becomes less the creator and owner of finished and original texts, and more a kind of messenger or medium of a poetic utterance that is not exclusively his own.

The story, in fact, brings us to the threshold of this study. By inverting the usual evolutionary progression in which “primitive” oral traditions are perceived to yield to the artistic superiority of written language, Borges prepares us for a very different view of poetic practice in Renaissance Italy where the oral practices of sung poetry thrived as a dominant cultural practice well into the sixteenth century.

We can also discern in this story a conception of poetry as an exalted and powerful cultural force, especially in its oral and vocalized form where it acquires a nearly Orpheus-like magical force. Boccaccio, too, made far-reaching claims for poetry that were supported by ancient precedent and carried forward by humanist scholars and artists:

It can arm kings, marshal them for war, launch whole fleets from their docks, even counterfeit sky, land, and sea, adorn young women with flowery garlands, portray human character in its various phases, awake the idle, stimulate the dull, restrain the rash, subdue the criminal, and distinguish excellent men with their proper share of praise: these, and many other such, are the effects of poetry.3

Renaissance society also held a broad conception of the range of poetry’s functions and social appeal, as Lauro Martines suggests in his study of Strong Words:

3 Boccaccio, Genealogia deorum gentilium, XIV, 7; Boccaccio on Poetry, trans. C. G. Osgood, 39–40.
In our neglect of poetry, we forget that before it became a modern exercise in the esoteric probing of private experience, poetry was a public mode, frequently sung or recited to a group and nearly always, at any rate, expressed in language that was immediately comprehensible.4

And finally, the singer-poets of Renaissance Italy shared with the Irish bard of Borges’ tale another fundamental quality: the tendency of their poetic “texts” to resist assuming a definitive version in writing by virtue of a quality aptly named by Paul Zumthor as mouvance.5 The instability of oral texts was abhorrent to the humanist advocates of textual criticism, but the variability and mobility, the mouvance, of orally transmitted texts also derive their creative force and meaning from their fluid state as “multiforms and modifications” of a larger narrative network. An oral text (including its music) could not stand alone, for the performance of such a work “finds the fullness of its meaning in the rapport that connects it to those that have gone before it and those that will follow it,” and likewise “the melody of oral tradition exists only through its variants.”6 That mobility proceeded directly from the protean circumstances of performance, in which the “text” (both verbal and musical) was reborn each time, and under unique circumstances governed by the “totalizing function” of oral poetry that inseparably fused the elements of performer (as poet, composer, actor, and performer), venue, and audience.7

A WORD ABOUT TERMS

Though the origins of oral poetic practice are ancient and global, the earliest modern traces of our singer-poets appear in the twelfth-century records of the early Italian communes, and thereafter mouvance characterized not only their oral poetic practices, but their itinerant lifestyles and the unstable terminology by which they, their instruments, and their activities were called. In a seminal study of the topic, James Haar suggested that the variety of names by which they were known warn us that we are not dealing with a single type or professional calling, but a “range of careers.”8 It is perhaps more useful to think of an activity – the oral practice of singing poetry to the accompaniment of a string instrument (usually bowed) –

4 Martines, Strong Words, 234. 5 Zumthor, Oral Poetry, 203–208 6 Ibid., 203, 206. 7 Ibid., 117–119. 8 Haar, “Improvisatori and Their Relationship to Sixteenth-Century Music,” in Italian Music and Poetry, 78.
practiced across a range of professional levels. At one end were poets recognized for their own verse, performing abilities, and song style (or *aria*), who found patronage at courts, in the homes of the wealthy, and in service to communal governments. At the other end were itinerant street singers who entertained crowds with verse typically not of their own making, and often in combination with other forms of entertainment (acting, jugglimg, dancing), or the sale of goods (quack remedies, trinkets, pamphlets) or services (teeth pulling). Ranged between were an array of performers who sang (sometimes, but not always, *all’improvviso*) their own works as well as those of others, whose activities slipped between court and street.  

In large part because these figures typically were not members of official organizations or institutions (there was no guild of *improvvisatori*, for example), the terminology for them was never well developed or consistently applied, and it is not easy to align terms with the rough categories outlined above. Prior to the fourteenth century *iuculator, giullare*, and *histrio* (and later *buffone*) appear to have been applied indiscriminately to all ranks of singer-poets and entertainers. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the terms *cerretani, ciurmadori*, and *ciarlatani* attach primarily to the lower ranks of street performers, and retain the hybrid resonance of the earlier terms as street performers and entertainers of all kinds.

On the other hand, the terms *cantimpanca* (or *cantimbanca*), *cantastorie*, and *canterino* (and the more generic *cantore* or *cantatore*) usually apply specifically to singers of vernacular poetry who more often than not appear to have made their living as performing poets, the more successful of whom supported families, acquired property, and enjoyed a certain level of fame. The first of these designates the specific activity of singing on
A raised platform or bench (panca or banca) of some kind, typically in a piazza where benches were also set up for audiences (see Fig. E1.2). These figures ranged across the social scale from famous singers like the Florentines Antonio di Guido and Cristoforo Fiorentino l’Altissimo, who were star performers in the relatively prestigious and organized setting of Piazza San Martino (discussed in Excursus 1), to cerretani and ciurmadori like the Johannes Baptista who in 1539 “sang on the bench and sold saints’ lives, balls of soap . . . and other things” throughout Florence. The term cantastorie is both rare and vague in pre-sixteenth-century sources. For example, in the diary of the Florentine San Ripoli printing press, one Bernardino is variously called cantastorie, cermatore, and Bernardino che canta in panca. But the term now specifies singers of cantari, long epic poems in ottava rima on subjects drawn from ancient and medieval history and legend. These figures might range from fully professional performers like Antonio and Cristoforo (though they did not exclusively perform cantari) to the cantore described by Lovato de’ Lovati in a piazza in Treviso in 1304, “spontaneously spinning songs” and “roaring about Carolingian battle order and Gallic deeds.” Though used occasionally with reference to our singer-poets, the terms cantore/cantatore are less useful since they become associated with singers of polyphony in churches and courtly chapels. The term that best encompasses the upper tiers of vernacular singer-poets in early modern Italy is canterino, for it includes those who sang a variety of lyric and epic verse types (and not only the ottava rima of the cantastorie), and those who sang in palazzi and not only (like cantimpanche) in piazzas, while distinguishing them from the lower tier of hybrid entertainers who were generally not engaged in creating and performing their own poetry. Canterino also has the advantage of being reasonably widespread in contemporary usage; it appears, for example, in the court

12 Canta in panca et vendi leggende e palle di sapone . . . et altro; Bertoli, “Librai cartolai, e ambulanti,” 160. Prior to the sixteenth century, one rarely sees cantimbanca/cantimpanca as a noun referring to a category of performer, but rather a verb (Antonio che canta in panca) in reference to an activity. In other words, it was an acknowledged professional activity that did not yet, however, necessarily denote a self-standing class of professional practitioners.


14 See Chapter 1. Perhaps there were proper cantastorie who sang only cantari, but the civic singer-poets we know about, such as Antonio Pucci, Antonio di Guido, Niccolò cieco d’Arezzo, and Cristoforo Fiorentino, tended to create and perform both lyric and epic poetry, though their lyric poetry was more conditioned by a mixed orality and was likely to reach a fixed and written state.
and civic records of cities like Florence, Siena, Perugia, Ferrara, and Milan beginning in the fifteenth century.  

Singer-poets of all ranks were probably improvvisatori to some degree (especially in their musical accompaniments), but for several reasons the term is inappropriate for use in a general sense. The contemporary terminology related to improvisation is almost never used to denote a person (an improvvisatore), but rather an activity (cantare all’improvviso, cantare de improviso), which perhaps reflects the tendency of their mercantile societies to value skill in executing a trade rather than individual virtù. Improvisation was also unevenly practiced across the field of Renaissance oral poetry. The skill was de rigueur for singers of epic verse (cantari), the cantastorie, but less so in the case of lyric forms like the sonnet or strambotto that often assumed a relatively fixed form much less affected by textual mouvance. Serafino Aquilano, for example, specialized in these forms, and there is no evidence that he was an improvvisatore. Bernardo Accolti, on the other hand, was known for his improvisatory skills in lyric verse, and it was assumed that performers of neo-Latin lyric poetry like the Brandolini brothers could improvise on short notice on a given topic and in any of several lyric forms. Thus, it is critical to distinguish improvisation from orality; especially in an oral poetic environment like that of Renaissance Italy that was conditioned by writing (“mixed” orality), not all oral practice necessarily involved improvisation, though an apt and well-trained memory was universally required.

While part I is concerned with the scope and nature of traditional canterino culture, part II focuses on the new breed of singer-poets who emerged during the second half of the fifteenth century. Unlike the canterni, whose backgrounds and educations were largely mercantile, these were typically well-educated humanists who pursued their singing in courtly venues, either as dedicated professionals like Serafino Aquilano and Bernardo Accolti, or, like Baccio Ugolini, Benedetto Gareth (Il Cariteo), and the Brandolini brothers, as diplomats, orators, advisers, scholars, and teachers who pursued their performing as an integral part of their professional humanist activities. The solo singing of poetry was also practiced as a recreational activity at all levels of educated society, from schoolboys to

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15 In Siena, and particularly in Perugia, cantarino (or the Latin cantarinus) referred to occupants of the civic position; the term appears less often in the court records of Milan and Ferrara. In Florence, the older term buffone was retained in reference to the civic herald position, though at his hiring in 1456, the long-serving Francesco Filarete was called canterinus cum violamore; Corso, “Araldi e canterini nella reppublica senese,” 140–160; Rossi, “Memorie di musica civile in Perugia,” 129–152; McGee, The Ceremonial Musicians, 102.
popes. To judge from the biographies in Vasari’s *Vite*, many artists (and most conspicuously Leonardo da Vinci) became quite accomplished singer-poets in their youth, only to relegate the activity to an avocation as they became fully engaged professional artists. As the familiar and traditional activity of instrumentally accompanied solo singing was aligned with the ancient poetic practice of *rhapsodes* and *citharoedes*, a classicizing vocabulary was applied to the humanist practice: *cantare ad lyram/cantare in sulla lira*, as it was most often called, invokes the classical lyre that was used in ancient Greece to accompany recitation and singing. But the Renaissance *lira* was completely different from the plucked, U-shaped ancient instrument, and the term referred either specifically to the bowed, seven-string *lira da braccio*, which during the late fifteenth century largely displaced the late medieval viola (*viuola*, or *vielle*) as the instrument of choice for humanist singer-poets, or generically to any of the string instruments they used: the viola, *lira da braccio*, or, with increasing frequency in the sixteenth century, the lute (*liuto, leuto*). Used interchangeably with *lira* (or *lyra*) to refer to any of the string instruments for accompanying singing *ad lyram* were *cetra/cetera/citera/quitarra*, all derived from the word for the ancient relative of the *lira*, the *kithara/cithara* (or *citharode* to denote the ancient singer-poets who accompanied themselves on the *cithara*).16

**PLAN**

A central premise of this study, and one that has determined its relatively large scope, is that while the *canterino* and humanist practices are distinguished by the social and educational backgrounds of their practitioners, they are manifestations of a single, broad cultural practice: a pervasive Italian tradition of instrumentally accompanied solo singing characterized by a strong degree of orality. An example of their inseparability is the poetic career of Lorenzo de’ Medici, *il Magnifico*: he engaged actively with the practice throughout his life; in his early years as a *canterino* who sang and played the viola, and favored the company of traditional performers like Antonio di Guido. Later, as his education under the tutelage of humanists like Poliziano and Ficino took hold and he matured as a classicizing poet, he became what can only be characterized as a *cantor ad lyram*. However, it

16 For a more detailed discussion, with citations of relevant secondary literature, see Wilson, “The *Cantastorie/Canterino/Cantimbanco* as Musician,” 11–15.
is too simplistic to suggest that the practice of *cantare ad lyram* emerged squarely from the older *canterino* tradition (there was, for example, no recent precedent for a humanist oral tradition of performing neo-Latin poetry), but neither could it have thrived as it did without a pervasive oral tradition of poetic performance already in place. As Charles Dempsey has suggested for much of humanist culture, its practices were not direct recreations of ancient models, but often arose through appropriation and transformation of aspects of vernacular culture viewed anew through the lens of ancient precedents.17

Few of the lines drawn in determining the scope of this study were done with ease or clarity. The core components are clear: the period ca. 1350–1500 is the high tide of *canterino* practice, while the shorter, meteoric arc of the humanist tradition falls during ca. 1470–1530. Chapter 1 reckons with the scant archival evidence to tease out the earliest outlines of *canterino* practice prior to the mid-fourteenth century, and the epilogue suggests some of the challenges awaiting a study of the complex developments in solo song during the sixteenth century that is more inclusive of oral traditions. Between these bookends, the remaining chapters range widely geographically, more so than previous studies of this topic, but only as wide as the evidence permits. Most of what we know of *canterino* activity in the north Italian courts of the fourteenth century comes less from the records of the cities and feudal courts they traversed, such as Milan, Venice, Padua, Verona, Bologna, Ravenna, Forlì, and Rimini, and more from surviving *canterino* poetry, and this is explored in the first part of Chapter 2. The remainder of this chapter, and most of Chapter 3 focus on what was clearly the heartland of *canterino* culture during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. A number of factors lifted Florence to cultural preeminence at this time, but their numerous, wide-ranging, and well-trained *canterini* were bolstered by the prestige of Tuscan language and its great representatives, the *tre corone* of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, who each had interesting and complex relationships with the world of sung poetry that surrounded them. After a short *excursus* on Piazza San Martino in Florence as the most well-documented venue for poetic singing in Italy, Chapter 3 explores *canterino* culture at its zenith in the fifteenth century. Here the abundance of primary source material permits a nuanced picture of urban *canterino* culture in Florence, including a study of surviving vernacular memory treatises (the *arte della memoria*) that can be linked directly to Florentine *canterino* culture, and implicitly applied to oral song practice

17 Dempsey, *The Early Renaissance and Vernacular Culture*. 

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throughout the study. As will become clear in the following chapters, a well-trained memory was essential to the success of oral singer-poets, especially when they engaged in improvisation. Chapter 3 concludes with a view of canterino culture in two smaller centers; the city archives of Siena and Perugia provide detailed accounts of the canterini who served those cities’ priors in a contractual and salaried role.

Part II has four chapters and an excursus, and is focused on certain urban centers where the forces of humanist learning, Renaissance court culture, and evidence of poetic performance align. Four cities – Florence, Ferrara, Naples, and Rome – figure prominently. The first three were traditional strongholds of oral singer-poets, where the rise of cantare ad lyram occurred in a manner distinguished by each center’s brand of humanism. Rome was not, as far as we know, a center of canterino practice prior to the late fifteenth century, but it was transformed by various political, religious, and cultural forces into the peninsula’s leading center of cantare ad lyram in the half century prior to the Sack of Rome in 1527. Chapter 4 sets forth what we know about solo singing to the lyre in the precocious humanist environments of fifteenth-century Florence, and argues for its integral role in both the Neoplatonic philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, and the vernacular poetics of Lorenzo de’ Medici and his circle of performing poets, principally Angelo Poliziano and Baccio Ugolini. It is in the socially fluid environment of Florence that the interface and overlap between the cultures of the traditional canterino and humanist cantor ad lyram is most apparent. The occasional difficulty of drawing this distinction is explored in the following excursus on a portrait by Filippino Lippi of the early 1480s (Fig. E2.1), where the sitter – a singer-poet – is shown tuning a lira da braccio in a composition that renders his status difficult to determine. Besides Florence, the other formative contexts for the humanist cultivation of singing to the lyre were the educational environments in which the studia humanitatis was implemented. Chapter 5 is based on a careful re-reading of the humanist educational treatises written during the first half of the fifteenth century, and their prescriptive contents are balanced by the relatively unknown correspondence of Michele Verino, a student with a predilection for cantare ad lyram who was immersed in the new humanist curriculum at the University of Florence during the 1480s. The fundamentally oral aspect of humanist culture proceeds from its pedagogical and practical emphasis on rhetorical eloquence, and the view of cantare ad lyram as an integral aspect of rhetoric guaranteed for it a wide dissemination in the rapidly growing apparatus of humanist schools and universities.
The remaining two chapters deal with the elite courtly environments of Italy, where poetic singing would find its fullest integration into humanist culture. As the newly invigorated and performative disciplines of poetry and rhetoric took hold in court cultural life, so too did the inseparable activities of poetic recitation and performance. Chapter 6 focuses on three centers, Ferrara, Urbino, and Naples, where poetic singing (like humanism in general) thrived in a manner particular to each court’s distinctive character: residual feudalism and a strong university in Ferrara; the Spanish heritage of the Aragonese kings in the Kingdom of Naples, with the many satellite courts of its rural barons; and the Urbino court of the humanist-educated warrior-prince Guidobaldo da Montefeltro as seen through the idealizing lens of Castiglione’s Il cortegiano. Chapter 7 is devoted to Rome, where cantare ad lyram reached the summit of its popularity ca. 1490–1530. Like the humanist-trained scholars, artists, and clerics who came to Rome from elsewhere, the practice of cantare ad lyram was compelled to adapt to the unique patronage environment of the city, distinguished by its emphasis on Latin language, a clerical environment quite unlike the secular world of the courts, and a robust and varied patronage structure. The chapter is divided into two principal parts, the first devoted to Latin Rome, and focused on the brothers Raffaele and Aurelio Brandolini (including Raffaele’s De musica et poetica, a humanist defense of cantare ad lyram), and on the remarkable Roman banqueting scene that was the city’s primary venue for elite poetic performances. The second section on vernacular Rome focuses on the figure of Serafino Aquilano, perhaps the era’s greatest exponent of oral poetic performance. Here the intent is to place him in the context of the language debates associated with Paolo Cortesi’s Roman Academy, in part through fresh readings of Vincenzo Calmeta’s biography of Serafino and Angelo Colocci’s Apologia in defense of Serafino’s poetry. The chapter closes with a short study of Raphael’s Parnassus with a view to understanding its relationship to contemporary Roman performance practice of cantare ad lyram.

A strategy pursued in most of the chapters has been to discuss certain primary topics with respect to the center with which they can be most strongly associated. Memory technique, as mentioned above, applies throughout the study but has been discussed mostly in Chapter 3 in the context of Florence. In like manner, theatrical performance, courtly behavior, and banquets were pervasive dimensions of Renaissance court life, but these are treated, respectively, in relation to their exceptional vitality in Naples (Chapter 6), Urbino (Chapter 6), and Rome (Chapter 7). And