

LEARNED CULTURE AND POPULAR CULTURE  
IN RENAISSANCE ITALY<sup>1</sup>

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RESUMO: Ainda que estudos sobre o Renascimento italiano se multipliquem, sempre haverá surpresas quanto a abordagem a cultura imputar: da presente estudo pretende explorar as formas de captação dos princípios populares transparecidos na literatura da época.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Renascimento, Itália, Modernidade, Cultura Popular, Humanismo.

The study of the Italian Renaissance continues to flourish. The history of popular culture continues to expand. Some recent studies of popular culture have argued, reasonably enough, that it is more fruitful to study interactions between learned and popular culture than to attempt to define what separates them<sup>2</sup>. All the arguedsame, studies of the Italian Renaissance have little to say about popular culture, and studies of Italian popular culture even less to say about the Renaissance<sup>3</sup>. To consider whether the gap should be filled and how it might be filled is the purpose of this essay.

It is clear that we have to study a two-way process. On one side, we must chart the spread of the forms and ideas of the Renaissance from the elites to the people, their social as well as their geographical diffusion. For convenience - despite the crude spatial metaphor - we may call this a

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S. Kaplan, ed. *Understanding Popular Culture* (Berlin, 1984); R. Chartier, *lectures et lectures dans la France de l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1987).

Briell accounts (too brief, as it now seems to me) in P. Burke, *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy* (London, 1972), pp 29ff and P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), pp.27ff. Cf. P. Camporesi, 'Cultura popolare e cultura d'élite fra medioevo ed età moderna', *Storia d'Italia, Annali 4* (Torino, 1981), 81-157, and S.K. Cohn, *Death and Property in Siena* (Baltimore, 1988) who uses wills to show a rise in individualistic, secular attitudes as the level of the petty bourgeoisie.

movement 'downward'. On the other, side, we must consider movement 'upward', in other words the extent to which and the ways in which Italian artists and writers drew on the heritage of popular culture. Thus essay will therefore be divided into two parts-All the same, it has a common theme. On both sides of the interaction, we must look not only for appropriation but also for reception and assimilation (as Carlo Ginzburg did in his famous study of Menocchio)<sup>4</sup>. Alien elements were transformed as they were assimilated, but in the process they too transformed the 'host' culture.

A relatively clear-cut example of movement downwards is that of the popularisation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. The poem was, of course, written by a noble for nobles, and in its published form it was (quite expensive. However, the 'laments' of Bradamante, Isabella, Rodomonte, Ruggiero and so on, as well as other verse paraphrases, supplements and summaries, were available in chap-book form in the sixteenth century. Some of these texts were anonymous, but some - including an attempt to compress the 'beauties' of the poem into 16 pages, were the work of the Bolognese poet Giulio Cesare Croce, a well-known mediator between learned and popular culture<sup>5</sup>.

Montaigne offers us further evidence of Ariosto's penetration of popular culture. At a spa near Lucca, he met a poor peasant woman named Divizia, who could not read or write but had often heard Ariosto read aloud in her father's house, thanks to which she had become a poet herself. Near Florence, and elsewhere in Italy, Montaigne tells us that he was surprised to meet peasants and shepherdesses who knew Ariosto by heart<sup>6</sup>. His testimony is confirmed by the poet Bernardo Tasso<sup>7</sup>. The poems of Bernardo's son Tor-

4 C. GINZBURG, *Il formaggio e i vermi* (Torino, 1976).

5 Lamento de Isabella, con il lamento di Rodomont, no place, no date; Lamento di Isabella nella morte di Zerbino, no date, no place (BL,1071.c65); Lamento di Ruggiero con Bradamante (Venice, 1584); Barzelletta de 'falliti con alcune stanze dove s'imita a traduce J'Ariosto, no date, no place (BL 1071.C.113, 32); Alcune ottave composte in dichiarazione di tutto l'Ariosto (Melina, no date: BL 1071.c.63, 50); G.C Croce, *Ricerca gentilissima delle bellezze de l' Furioso* (Bologna, 1617); Guerrini, Croce (1879) A 149, Lamento di Bradamante, A 225, On Croce, P. Camporesi, *la maschera di Bertoldo* (Torino, 1976).

6 M. de Montaigne, *Journal de Voyage en Italie*, ed. M. Rat (Paris, 1955), 175, 193.  
B. Tasso quoted in G. Bronzini, *Tradizione di stile aedico dai cantaria al Furioso* (Firenze, 1966), 127.

quato also seem to have entered popular culture. His *Gerusalemme liberata* was translated into a number of dialects - Bolognese in 1628, Bergamask in 1670, Venetian in 1693, and so on. When the English writer Joseph Addison visited Venice in 1701, he remarked on the custom of the common people of this country, of singing stanzas out of Tasso<sup>8</sup>.

One would of course like to know much more about these incidents - how exactly the peasants remembered Ariosto, and, still more important, what the epic - assuming that 'Ariosto' refers to the *Orlando Furioso* rather than the *Satires* - meant to them. My own hypothesis would be that ordinary people read the poem as an example of the late medieval romances of chivalry or 'books of battles' (*libri di battaglie*) which were widely available in chap-book form in sixteenth-century Italy and were sometimes used in elementary schools to encourage boys to learn to read<sup>9</sup>.

In the case of the visual arts, the relation between learned and popular is considerably more complicated because the 'high' art the Italian Renaissance was generally produced by men with the training and status of craftsmen. They made religious paintings without the opportunity to study theology, and scenes from classical mythology without being able to read Latin, let alone Greek. It follows that works like Botticelli's *Primavera*, or Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*, which appear to refer to neoplatonic ideas, must have been the outcome of a complex process of mediation between learned and popular culture, in which the participants include humanists, such as Ficino, popularisers, such as the Venetian professional writers or poligrafi, and patrons (members of an elite who knew neoplatonism only in 'popularised' form) as well as the artists themselves<sup>10</sup>.

Paintings of this kind, secular in subject-matter, were not widely seen during the Renaissance. They belonged to the 'private' rather than the 'public' circuit<sup>11</sup>. It was, however, possible to see graphic versions of some of them, notably the engravings after Raphael by Marcantonio Raimondi. The work of art had already entered the age of mechanical reproduction. Like printing, engraving was a great populariser at least in the sense that it

8 J. Addison, *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* (London, 1705), 104.

9 P. Grendler, 'What Zunne read in School', *Sixteenth-Century Journal* 13 (1982)41-53.

10 E. Panofsky, *The Neoplatonic Movement in Florence and Northern Italy*, *Studies in Iconology* (New York, 1939), 129-69; on Titian and the *potigrafi*, Ginzburg, 'Tiziano e Ovidio' (1978) repr in his *Spie* (Torino, 1986), 133-57.

11 C. Ginzburg (1986)p. 136, adapting Burke (1972). pp. 144,158.

allowed many more people to see images, and probably more kinds of people as well.

Ceramics offered another means of diffusing images more widely, since the raw material was cheap. The majolica plates and jugs produced in Faenza, Urbino, Deruta and elsewhere were frequently decorated with scenes from classical mythology and ancient history. Some of them were made for wealthy patrons, but others were simple drugpots for the shops of apothecaries<sup>12</sup>. The painted terracotta images produced by the Delia Robbia family workshop in Florence might be regarded as the poor man's sculptures. The workshop produced some large expensive altarpieces for churches, but also small images for wayside shrines or private individuals. It would be an exaggeration to speak of 'mass-production' but signs of hasty work can be found and it is not uncommon for a particular image (an Adoration, say, or a Madonna and child) to survive in eight, nine, ten, or even twenty almost identical copies<sup>13</sup>.

In certain cities, such as Florence and Venice, major sculptures could be seen in the main streets and squares, while churches all over Italy displayed religious paintings in the new style. The problem is of course to discover how people who were not members of a cultural elite perceived these objects, and especially whether or not they were interested in the styles. In the case of Florence, at least, there is evidence of a sophisticated popular visual culture. Some ordinary people, craftsmen and shopkeepers, were not only familiar with the names of the leading artists of their city, past and present, but were not afraid to offer opinions—often critical opinions—about the value of particular works.

Some of the evidence for this statement comes from Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1550), which from time to time discusses popular reactions to particular works of art or artists (particularly interesting in this respect is his discussion of Florentine responses to Perugino). Vasari's testimony may be supplemented by that of Antonfrancesco Grazzini, a man of the shopkeeper class (probably an apothecary), whose poems, or more exactly songs (*madrigalesse*), sometimes mention works of art. Two of these songs comment critically on Vasari's decision to paint the cupola of the cathedral, declaring

12 B. R. ACKHAM. *Italian Maiolica*, (1952, second ed. London 1963).

13 A. MARQUAND, *Andrea della Robbia and his Atelier* (2 vols., Princeton 1922), nos 122-42, 157-67, 302-9, 112-20. On signs of haste, *ibid.*, 2.64.

'the fault was George's' (*Giorgin fece il peccato*) and that it showed 'little sense and less judgement' (*poco senno e men giudizio*)<sup>14</sup>.

## II

It is time to turn from the popularisation of the Renaissance to the importance of 'low' elements in 'high' culture. The presiding genius over this section is of course the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, whose *World of Rabelais* (written in the 1930s, but not published until 1965) argued that the autor of *Gargantua and Pantagrue* drew heavily on the 'culture of folk humour', in particular the grotesque and the carnivalesque<sup>15</sup>. This work, which is a *tour de force* of the historical imagination, has been taken as a model for recent studies of Brueghel, Shakespeare, and other artists and writers of the Renaissance<sup>16</sup>.

*The World of Rabelais* has also been criticised by Renaissance specialists. On the assumption that Bakhtin claims that *Gargantua and Pantagrue* belong wholly to popular culture, critics have pointed out that Rabelais was a learned man and that his work would not have been fully comprehensible to ordinary people<sup>17</sup>. Unfortunately, Bakhtin's account of the relation between 'high' and 'low' culture was neither precise nor explicit. At times the contrast or opposition with which he is concerned seems to be that between the culture of two social groups, the elite and the people. At other times the two opposed cultures are defined in functional terms as the 'official' and the 'unofficial'. These distinctions may overlap but they do not coincide. The students of Montpellier, for example, whose festivities Bakhtin describes, belonged to a social elite, but participated in unofficial culture.

Another important distinction which remains blurred in Bakhtin's work is that between appropriating (and transforming) elements from popular culture (which Rabelais certainly does) and participating fully in that culture. I have argued elsewhere that sixteenth-century European elites were 'bicultural'. They had a learned culture from which ordinary people were excluded,

14 A. F. Grazzini, *Scritti scelti*, ed R. Fornaciari (Florence, 1957), 243-4.

15 M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (1905: English trans., Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

16 L. Silver, "The State of Research in Northern European Art of the Renaissance Era", *Art, Bulletin* 68 (1986) 518-35; M. D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre* (New York, 1985).

17 M.M.Screech, *Rabelais* (London, 1979).

but they also participated in what we now call 'popular' culture<sup>18</sup>. If this was the case, however, would these elites participate in the same way as people for whom popular culture was all the culture they had? Or did they associate popular culture with times and places of relaxation? The concept of 'participation' is itself somewhat elusive.

Despite these ambiguities and the need to draw more careful distinctions, I believe that Bakhtin's study both could and should inspire future research on the cultures of Renaissance Italy, encouraging us to ask exactly what artists and writers took from popular traditions, as well as what they did with what they appropriated.

So far, there have been relatively few studies of this kind. Before Bakhtin, Domenico Guerri studied what he called 'the popular current in the Renaissance', but he virtually limited himself to the subject of jokes and comic verses in Florence<sup>19</sup>. Eugenio Battisti has published a wide-ranging study of what he called the 'Anti-Renaissance', a fascinating collection of essays on medieval, mannerist, grotesque, occult and other themes in art and literature. The main weakness of this study is conceptual. Battisti tries to pack too much into his category of 'anti-renaissance'. His chapters range from self-conscious rejections of classicism to medieval survivals which I would prefer to describe as 'non-Renaissance'<sup>20</sup>.

In the case of art, one might begin the study of the interaction between high and low with certain grotesque or comic sculptures (I would not care to assume that whatever is comic is necessarily popular, but it is worth remembering that Aristotle - as interpreted by Italian humanists - argued that comedy was concerned with 'low' people). Take, for example, the figure of a dwarf by the sculptor Valerio Cioli; a squat, paunchy figure sitting astride a turtle with his penis hanging down on to the shell. The statue represents a favourite dwarf of the Grand Duke Cosimo de Medici, nicknamed 'Morgante' after the character in Pulci's poem of that name. It was placed in the Boboli gardens, a place of relaxation which has been described as a kind of sixteenth-century 'fun house'<sup>21</sup>. Similarly, one might describe the famous gardens of Bomarzo, created for the Roman aristocrat Vicino Orsini, as a kind of sixteenth-century Disneyland, The huge stone monsters, the leaning

18 Burke (1978), 24-9.

19 D. Guerri, *La corrente popolare nel Rinascimento* (Florence, 1931).

20 E. Battisti, *L'antirinascimento* (Milan, 1962).

21 P. Barolsky, *Infinite Jest* (Columbia, 1978), 153f; D. Heikamp, 'Les merveilles de Pratolino', *L'Oeil* 171 (1969) 16-27.

tower, and the hell mouth (inside which there is a marble picnic table) all play on a popular taste for the grotesque, whatever layers of learned meaning have been superimposed. A grotto was after all the appropriate setting for the grotesque<sup>22</sup>.

The *commedia dell'arte* certainly deserves study from the point of view of this essay, with special reference to the fascinating and perplexing problem of the relation between the characters or masks of this apparently popular art-form - the boastful soldier, the foolish old man, the cunning servant - and those of ancient Greek and Roman drama. Did the extemporisers owe their knowledge of these masks to the humanists? Or did the classical masks survive 'underground' in popular culture, to emerge in the sixteenth century, and inspire 'high' Renaissance drama?

In the paragraphs which follow, however, I shall concentrate on literature, and especially on four writers: Boccaccio, Folengo, Ariosto and Aretino (at the expense of Burchiello, Berni, Pulci, Ruzante, Calmo and other obvious examples of mediators between the two cultures). These four writers will be discussed in chronological order, which also happens to be a logical order, an order of increasing complexity in the relation between learned and popular culture. The increase in complexity over time is probably no accident, but the result of a process which I have described elsewhere as the 'withdrawal'<sup>7</sup> of elites from participation in popular culture .

The obvious place to start is of course Boccaccio's *Decamerone*. As in the case of Rabelais, Boccaccio is remembered today for his 'vulgarity', so that it needs to be emphasised that he too was a learned man, a university teacher who wrote treatises in Latin and lectured on Dante. His Tuscan was 'canonised' in the sixteenth century (along with Dante's and Petrarch's) as a model of pure Italian. All the same, it is clear that many of the stories in the *Decamerone* were taken from popular oral tradition, from what nineteenth-century scholars would call 'folktales', and also that they illustrate some of Bakhtin's favourite themes.

The place of the carnivalesque in Boccaccio's work is obvious enough, above all in the story of frate Alberto which ends with a ritualised hunt of the 'wild man' on piazza San Marco in Venice<sup>24</sup>. A number of the stories include

22 Battisti, (1962), 125f; H. Bredekamp, *Vicino Orsini und der heilige Wald von Bomarzo* (2 vols, Worms 1985).

23 Burke (1978), 270-81.

24 *Decamerone*, 4.2, For a general view, G. Mazzotti, *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decamerone* (Princeton, 1986).

episodes of what Bakhtin calls 'grotesque realism' or 'degradation'. This would, for example, be a plausible way of reading the story of the wicked notary who managed to trick posterity into venerating him as a saint<sup>25</sup>

Tricks recur in Boccaccio's *novelle*, as they do in those of other storytellers of the Renaissance (such as Sacchetti, Masuccio Salernitano, Bandello, and Grazzini), who draw on a folktale tradition. A recurrent theme is that of the *beffa*, essentially a type of practical joke in the form of a deception which humiliates the victim, as in the case of the four stories about the painter Calandrino, who is portrayed as a simpleton, and his colleagues Bruno and Buffalmaco. For example, the two of them persuade Calandrino to look for a magic stone which is supposed to make whoever carries it invisible, or they steal his pig and then 'prove' to him that he stole it himself<sup>26</sup>. The *beffa* is not only a literary device - however well adapted to the conventions of the *novella* - but rather the literary elaboration of a social custom which can be documented from other sources<sup>27</sup>.

The Benedictine monk Teofilo Folengo also draws on the tradition of the *beffa* in an episode - appropriated by Rabelais for his own purposes - describing a sea voyage with the owner of a flock of sheep, in which the trickster buys the ram and throws it into the sea, inevitably followed by the rest of the flock<sup>28</sup>. However, his poem *Baldus* (published in 1517 under the pseudonym 'Merlin Cocciaio') is essentially an example of the grotesque, a mock-romance of the chivalry narrated in a mock-epic style. The poem tells the story of a young nobleman, a descendant of the paladin Rinaldo, who is raised among peasants but has his head as full of romances as Don Quixote's would be later in the century. Baldus, together with two companions, a giant called Fracassus and a trickster called Cingar, becomes involved in a series of comic adventures which draw on popular traditions<sup>29</sup>.

The subject of the poem is a hybrid, at once bucolic and chivalric, and the style, appropriately enough, is a Latin which often behaves as if it were Italian or dialect - a mixture of two or three codes or better, a product of their

25 Decamerone, 1.1.

26 Decamerone, 8.3, 86, 9.3, 9.5.

27 A. Rochon, ed. *Formes et significations de la beffa dans la littérature italienne de la Renaissance* (Paris, 1972).

28 Folengo, *Baldus*, XII.

29 E. Borona and M. Chiesa (eds) *Cultura, generaria e tradizione popolare in Teofilo Folengo* (Milan, 1979), Bakhtin himself, (1965, p. 150), drew attention to the episode in which someone is resurrected from the dead by drenching in urine.



interaction<sup>30</sup>. In a battle scene, for example, the rhetoric of the 'high' style, appropriate for epic encounters, is constantly pulled down to earth by the use of crudely latinised technical terms such as *alebardae* (halberds), *banderae* (banners); *lanzae* (lances), *partesanae* (partisans), *picchiae* (pikes), *stendar-di* (standards) and so on, or by works imitating the sound of drums and trumpets:

Stendardique volant, banderae; timpana pon pon  
continuo chioccant; sonitantque tarantara trombae.

The epic begins with an invocation not to the muses, but to plump country girls, fattened on polenta and macaroni (or gnocchi), and the style is now known as 'macaronic' Latin. Folengo was the greatest master of this language but he was not its inventor. It was a literary elaboration of the language of notaries, who wrote it for convenience, and of students, who spoke it for fun .

The first example, that of Boccaccio, shows a learned man drawing on a popular tradition in which he participated. The second, that of Folengo, is more complex, since it shows a learned man making a self-conscious synthesis of learned and popular traditions, or at least playing with the tensions between them.

The example of Ariosto is still more complicated. Like Folengo's *Baldus*, *Orlando Furioso* is a romance of Chivalry, or a mock-romance of chivalry - is it difficult to choose between these alternatives because Ariosto deliberately hovers on the edge of parody. The romance of chivalry was originally a high-status genre; stories about nobles, written for nobles, and in some cases (including that of Ariosto himself) written by nobles. However, as we have seen, this genre was also part of Italian popular culture in the sixteenth century. It took the form of printed chap-books and also of oral performances by wandering singers of tales, or *cantimbanchi*, who sang or recited the stories on the piazza, asking for money at the end of each installment, thus leaving the audience in suspense till they had made their contribution. The printed versions and the oral versions influenced each other<sup>32</sup>. Like other men of letter's, Ariosto enjoyed these oral performances and it has been suggested that his poem owes something to them. For exam-

30 Cf N. Borsellino, *Gli anticlassicistici del '500* (Roma and Bari, 1973), 89.

31 U.E. Paoli, *Il latino maccheronico* (Padova, 1959).

32 P. Burke, 'Mündliche Kultur und Druckkultur im Spätmittelalterlich Italien', *Volkskultur des Europäischen Spätmittelalters*, ed P. Dinzelbacher and H.-D. Mück (Stuttgart, 1986), 59-71.

ple, although he wrote to be read, he took over some of the popular formulas telling the audience to listen<sup>33</sup>. In that case, Ariosto exemplifies a complex process of reappropriation, that of a learned man borrowing and transforming themes which had earlier been borrowed from high culture. (When the *Furioso* was itself popularised, as we have seen it was, we have a case of double reappropriation).

The last of my four examples is that of Pietro Aretino. Aretino made his reputation in Rome as a composer of cutting pasquinades . The *pasquínala* was a genre on the frontier between learned and popular culture. The practice of attaching satiric verses to the mutilated classical statue on Piazza del Pasquino in Rome goes back to the later fifteenth century, and at that time the verses were in humanist Latin. In the early sixteenth century, it became common to write the verses in a vernacular which everyone could understand<sup>35</sup>.

Aretino went on to write, among other works, *Il Marescalco* (printed 1533), a comedy built around a *beffa*, enacting a carnivalesque mock-wedding between the keeper of the court stables at Mantua, a notorious homosexual, and the 'bride' arranged for him, who turns out to be a page-boy.

However, the best example of the mixture or interaction of learned and popular elements in Aretino's work is surely his *Ragionamenti*, dialogues in which an old prostitute instructs a young one in the skills of the profession. The dialogues offer a series of scenes from low life in early sixteenth-century Rome, apparently faithful to the colloquial language and the slang of that social milieu. At the same time, humanist readers would have been aware that the dialogues borrow from and allude to a classical text, Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans*<sup>36</sup>. In the third place, the dialogues may be read as a parody of Renaissance treatises on good manners, and especially of Castiglione's famous *Book of the Courtier*. Here as elsewhere Aretino exploits the similarities between the terms *cortegiano*, 'courtier', and *cortegiana*, 'courtesan'<sup>37</sup>.

33 Bronzini (1966), 50, 76-7, 80, 85.

34 P. Aretino, *Scritti scelti*, ed. Ferrero, 1951, 53ff. P. Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino fra Rinascimento e Manierismo* (Roma, 1980), 47f.

35 There is a considerable secondary literature on pasquinades. Recent contributions include A. Reynolds, 'Cardinal O. Caraffa and the early '500 Tradition of the Feast of Pasquino', *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 34 (1985), 178-208.

36 The best edition is that of G. Aquilecchia (reprinted Rome-Bari 1975).

37 P. Burke, 'The Renaissance Dialogue' *Renaissance Studies* 3 (1989), 1-12.

Aretino was the son of a craftsman, he grew up in the world of popular culture, and to the end of his life he appreciated street singers<sup>38</sup>. He lacked the opportunity for a conventional humanist education in Latin and Greek, (presumably a more learned friend drew Lucian to his attention). He came to high culture as an outsider and he rejected some of it as artificial and affected, notably the conventions for the Petrarchan love-sonnet and the rules for spoken Italian laid down by Castiglione's friend Pietro Bembo (rules which are mocked in the *Ragionamenti*). Like his friend the artist Giulio Romano, Aretino liked to break rules. In this sense he was a self-conscious 'mannerist' or 'anti-classicist'<sup>39</sup>. Low culture, the culture in which he grew up, was his instrument to subvert high culture, or at least those parts of it which he disliked. One might say that he draws on the non-Renaissance for the purposes of an anti-Renaissance.

Cultural historians are surely right to shift, as they have been doing, from concern with popular culture in itself to a study of the long process of interaction between learned and popular elements. If we focus on the interaction between high and low, however, we need to recognize the variety or polymorphism of this process. Four examples are not many but they are at least sufficient to suggest the variety of possible relationships between high and low, the uses of popular culture for Renaissance writers, the uses of the Renaissance for ordinary people, and finally, the importance of the 'circular tour' of images and themes, a circular tour in which what returns is never the same as what set out.

**ABSTRACT:** Although the studies about the Italian Renaissance multiply themselves, there will always be surprises in relation to the aspect of popular culture. The present study intends to explore the forms of capturing the popular principles which become apparent in the literature of the period.

**KEY-WORDS:** Renaissance, Italy, Modernity, Popular Culture, Humanism.

38 P. Aretino, *Lettere* (1545, to Modanese).

39 Larivaille (1980); Borsellino (1973), 1640