

## Pietro Bembo and the Erotic Lexicon

by Ann E. Mullaney

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

### 1. *Gli Asolani*



For simplicity's sake let us begin with Bembo's first book in Italian, *Gli Asolani*, published in 1505 when was 35 years old. It is a work in dialogues and poetry set in Asolo, a town about 75 kilometers NE of Venice at the court of Caterina Cornaro. While Caterina, the Queen of Cypress, was quite real, the three young noble women and three young noble men who join in the conversations may or may not have been based on specific people. The narrator claims that the participants asked him not to reveal their actual names, if only "per torre alle vanne et sciocche menti de volgari occasione... di pensare cosa in parte alcuna meno che convenevole alla loro honestissima et interissima vita" ("to remove an opportunity for the empty and silly minds of the common crowd... to think something in anyway less befitting their extremely honest and integral life[style]," *Asolani*, 1505, p. 8 (a paginated digital copy is found on the French library site, Gallica; the text is also available in modern print in the critical edition by Giorgio Dilemmi, 1991, pp. 82-3). The interlocutors soon decide that "Perottino" (who requested this name because it was close to his real name) will present

his views on the bitterness wrought by love, then Gismondo will defend the joys of love and lastly Lavinello will address both sides.<sup>1</sup>

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

### 1.2. “*due manifestissimi morti*”

*Maravigliosa cosa è o Donne a udire quello, che io debbo dire: il che se da me non fusse stato approvato; appena che io ardissi d'immaginarlomi, non che di contarlo. Non è, si come in tuttellaltre qualita d'huomini, ultima doglia il morire ne gli amanti: anzi loro molte volte in modo è **la morte** dinegata; che già si puo dire che in istrema miseria felicissimo sia colui, che puo **morire**. Percioche avviene bene spesso, (il che forse non udiste voi Donne giamai, ne credevate che potesse essere) che mentre che essi dal molto et lungo dolor vinti **sono alla morte vicini**, et sentono già in se a poco a poco partire dal **penoso cuore** la lor vita; **tanto d'allegrezza***

It is a wondrous thing, O Ladies, to hear what I have to say, which, if it had not been experienced by me, I would scarcely have dared to imagine for myself, let alone tell about it. To die is not, as it is in all other types of humans, the final agony in lovers, on the contrary, many times death is denied them in such a way that one can rightly say that in extreme misery the happiest man is the one who is able to die. Because often it happens that (something which you Ladies have perhaps never heard, nor did you believe it could be so) even as these [men], vanquished by a great long agony, are near death, and already feel life within them going away little by little from their

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to aligning Perottino to himself, Pietro Bembo likens Perottino to Boccaccio's Cimone, who achieved great things for love of a lady, in a passage towards the end of Book 2. Here, Gismondo says that Love encouraged Perottino to pursue literary studies; he imagines Perottino (or maybe Bembo, or a part of Bembo) saying: “Certo io sono pure a mille huomini et a mille donne caro. Essi pure mi leggono, et tengonmi sovente in mano: Et forse il nome di Perottino tra quegli de gli antichi mescolando hannomi in voce con loro,” *Asolani* 1505, Gallica, p. 139; Dilemmi, pp. 174-5. And cf. Bembo's Latin poem, *Priapus* (*Carminum libellus*, pp. 12-5) addressed below. The names of the other two male characters are odd: Gismondo might express someone going about the world (*gire + mondo*). I have seen only one reference to a villa named Lavinello Bembo is claimed to have owned (*The Book of the Courtier* by Baldassarre Castiglione, translated by Leonard Opdycke (NYC, Scribner's, 1901), note 474, p. 288); *vinello* is a name given to various kinds of light wines.

**et di gioia sentono e miseri del morire**; che questo piacere, confortando **la sconsolata anima** tanto piu, quanto essi meno sogliono haver cosa che piaccia lei, **ritorna vigore ne gl'indeboliti spiriti**, e quali a forza partivano; et dona sostentamento alla vita che mancava. Così quantunque volte **essi ritornano in sul morire**, tante in su questo piacere ritornando non possono giamai alla **morte**, a cui essi così disiosamente sempre corrono, pervenire.

painful heart, such happiness and joy the wretches feel in dying, that this pleasure, comforting the disconsolate soul all the more, the less they are used to having something that pleases it, restores vigor in the weakened spirits, which were going away unwillingly, and gives sustenance to the life that was faltering. Thus, however many times they return to the moment of death, returning to this pleasure just as many times, they can never arrive at that death toward which they are always rushing so eagerly.

*Gli Asolani*, 1505, Gallica p. 30-32; Dilemmi, 1991, pp. 98-100; emphasis mine.

Pietro Bembo does an admirable job sharing his near-death experiences. Even if one is not familiar with the coded sexual innuendo that was the stock in trade of Italian writers of the early sixteenth century, the gleeful precision with which Perottino describes his plight is easily perceived as a feat of love-making: *morire* (to die), we know, is to attain orgasm (*la morte*); *penoso cuore* is not just painful heart but heartened penis, one of those *indeboliti spiriti* (weakened spirits/ phalli) whose restoration to life and vigor consoles the soul/ phallus, which is almost personified here.

A canzone (*Quand'io penso al martire*) then follows the initial prose presentation. However, an earlier poem which appears in the manuscript *Asolani* (Dilemmi, p. 33) makes the theme more obvious:

È cosa natural fuggir da morte,  
 E quanto può ciascun tenersi in vita.  
 Ahi crudo Amor, ma io cercando morte  
 Vo sempre, e pur così mi serbo in vita.  
 Che perché 'l mio dolor passa ogni morte,  
 Corro a por giù questa gravosa vita.  
 Poi, quand'io son già ben presso a la morte,  
 E sento dal mio cor partir la vita,  
 Tanto diletto prendo della morte,  
 Ch'a forza quel gioir mi torna in vita.

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

*Asolani Q*, Dilemmi, p. 33; and see Dionisotti, p. 682.

The somewhat abstract *penoso cuore* above is here a concrete, palpable image: *questa gravosa vita* (v. 6): this burden [at hand] so heavy it must be set down. The prose opening spoke of the *allegrezza* and *gioia* wretched lovers feel in the act of dying, here *quel gioire* (that *jouissance*) restores the poet himself. This first, *strambotto* version may have seemed too explicit or too simplistic: Bembo did not publish it, however immediately after his death it was published by his faithful editor, Carlo Gualteruzzi, who included it in a section of *rime rifiutate* (rejected poems) in *Delle Rime di Pietro Bembo*, 1548, p. 174-5; for comparison, find the published 1505 version in Appendix 1.

Following the initial presentation of his painful experience of being unable to die, Perottino feels the need to expand in yet more prose and poetry:

*Et che si potra dir qui; se non che per certo tanto istremamente è misera la sorte de gli amanti; che essi vivendo, percio che vivono, non possono vivere; et morendo, percio che muoiono, non possono morire? Io certamente non so che altro succhio mi sprema di così nuovo assenzo d'Amore, se non questo; il quale quanto sia amaro, siate contente giovani Donne, il cui bene sempre mi fie caro, di conoscere più tosto sentendone ragionare, che gustandolo. Ma, o potenza di questo Iddio, non so qual più o noievole, o maravigliosa: (a te volgo, Lisa, il mio parlare; la quale ti maravigliasti, perche egli sia così per Iddio tenuto): non si contenta di questa loda, ne per*

And what can one say here, if not that for certain, the lot of lovers is so extremely miserable, that they, while living, since they are lively, cannot stay alive and while dying, since they are dying, cannot die. I certainly do not know what other juice I could squeeze from such a strange absinthe of Love, if not this: be content, young Ladies – whose well-being is always dear to me – to learn how bitter it may be by listening to it being discussed, rather than by sampling it. But, O power of this God, I don't know whether more harmful or wondrous (I turn my discourse to you, Lisa, you who marveled that he was thus held as a God): Love is not content with this

<p><i>somma la vuole de suoi miracoli Amore: il quale, perche si poteva argomentare, che non senza cagione alcuna di vita si vive in questa maniera, che io dissi, da gli amanti altresì, come non senza alcuna di morte si muore; che si come la morte puo in loro cagionar la noia del vivere, cosi puo bastare a cagionarvi la vita la gioia, che essi sentono del morire; vuole tale volta in alcuno non solamente che esso non possa morire senza cagione havere alcuna di vita; ma fa in modo; che egli di <b>due manifestissime morti</b> da esse fierissimamente assalito, si come di due vite, si vive. A me medesimo tuttavia pare oltre ogni maniera nuovo o Donne cotesto istesso, che io dico: et pure è vero: certo cosi non fusse egli stato: che io sarei hora fuori d'infinita altre pene; dov'io drento vi sono. Hora come quest'opera si stia; (poi che cosi volete et piacevi) in queste rime vi fie chiaro.</i></p>	<p>praise, nor does he wish it to be the pinnacle of his miracles, because one could argue, that not without any reason for life does one live in this manner, as I said; with lovers likewise one does not die without any [reason] for death, because just as the tedium of living may cause death, even so the joy that they feel in dying, may be enough to cause life; sometimes it happens in someone that not only is he unable to die without having any cause for life, but he makes it so that, assailed very fiercely by <b>two very conspicuous deaths</b>, he lives from these [deaths], as though from two lives. Still even to myself, O Ladies, this very thing which I am saying seems beyond all manner strange, and yet it is true; certainly, if it had not been so, then I would now be beyond infinite other pains whereas I am inside them. Now, how this operation takes place (since you wish thus and it pleases you) should be clear to you in these rhymes:</p>
<p><i>Voi mi poneste in foco, Per farmi anzi 'l mio di Donna perire: Et perche questo mal vi pareva poco, Col pianto raddoppiaste il mio languire. Hor io vi vo ben dire. Levate lun martire; Che di due morti; non posso morire. Pero che da l'ardore L'umor, che ven de gli occhi, mi difende: Et chel gran pianto non ditempre il core; Face la fiamma, che l'asciuga e'ncende. Cosi, quanto si prende Lun mal, laltro mi rende; Et quel stesso mi giova, che m'offende. Che se tanto a voi piace</i></p>	<p>You placed me in fire, to make me perish before my time, Lady, and because this affliction seemed slight to you, with tears you redoubled my languishing. Now I wish to tell you: take away one of the torments, because I cannot die from two deaths.</p> <p>Given that the humor that comes from the eyes protects me from the burning, and in order that the great weeping not dissolve my heart, the flame makes it so that it dries and burns it. Thus, as often as the one takes away my pain, the other gives it back to me; and the same thing that helps me makes me worse.</p> <p>Because if it pleases you so to see this hardy flesh in ashes, [flesh] that</p>



poems in *Gli Asolani*, especially sections 1.13-17 (section numbers were established by Carlo Dionisotti for his monumental 1960 UTET publication, *Prose e rime di Pietro Bembo*). The life-after-death theme is also taken up in poems which Bembo published later, some of which will be discussed below.

### 1.3. “per lunga pruova della mia calda fede”

Additional treasures of the erotic lexicon are showcased in *Gli Asolani*. Here I will present three gems, the first of which is distinguished by an extremely long build-up of warnings and cautions, by the fact that the whole passage of about 1500 words was eliminated for the 1530 edition, and by the use of the code word *fede* (faith/ phallus). The selection is framed by Gismondo’s insistence on another peculiarity of lovers: they are gladdened by the tears of their beloved. Within this framework are three segments: 1) the initial move by Gismondo to introduce his topic, entangled with 2) the countermotion verbalized but not taken by his female listeners, and 3) Gismondo’s description of an enjoyable encounter with his lady which however, ends in her copious tears after he has asked her to think about how she would feel if he were dead.

After extolling the delights of love and exclaiming how extremely difficult the holy forces of Love are to investigate even with [just] his thought, Gismondo addresses the ladies:

*Ma io vi priego per quella virtù, la quale ne’ morbidi petti di ciascuna di voi abbergando tiene più lieti e vostri dolci et pietosi cuori, che, come che io non creda potere isprimere con parole la dolcezza del mio, già dallui per lo passato sentita in così fatto caso, pure siate contente che io ne ragioni quello poco che io potrò, comunque egli n’avenisse. Nel quale ragionamento tuttavia se alcuno passolino vi paresse che io pure facessi più innanzi di quello che voi donne solete mostrare a gli huomini d’esser vaghe che altrui faccia nel favellare, lassate queste apparenze ad altre stagioni; et quando sarete nelle sale con la Reina, ripigliate la vostra severa honestà, l[a] quale nel fare de’ fatti più è richiesta tale, che nel dire delle parole o nell’udire. Senza che et il luoco invitevole di questa verdura et il tempo delle nozze licentioso et la proposta materia vezzosa m’inducono a dare più briglia alla vaga lingua, che in altra conditione non farei. Dunque ascoltatevi, che io ve ne priego. — Se io credessi — alle sue compagne rivolta*

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

(But I pray you, by that virtue which – while lodging in the soft breasts of each of you – keeps your sweet and sympathetic hearts most cheerful, that, since I don't believe I can express with words the sweetness of my [heart], felt by it already in the past in such a case, nonetheless, be content that I discourse about it what little I will be able to, however it may have happened. Still, if it might appear to you in this discourse that I might take even a tiny step beyond what you ladies usually demonstrate to men that you are desirous that someone take when speaking, leave these appearances to other occasions, and when you are in the chambers with the Queen, resume your severe honesty, which is required to be [severe] more in the doing of deeds, than in the speaking or hearing of words. Furthermore, the inviting setting of this greenery and the licentious occasion of the wedding and the proposed charming subject matter induce me to give more rein to my wandering tongue, than I would do in other conditions. Therefore, listen to me, because I beg you to.

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

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

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

*Gli Asolani*, 1505, 2.24, Dilemmi, pp. 158-9; cf. Gallica, pp. 115-117.

Gismondo toys mercilessly with these ladies. They want to stop him, or say that they do, yet they are resigned to hearing him out. And he pleads that his are mere words, not actions, and furthermore they are attending a wedding celebration at which greater license is granted, plus, they are in nature. The buildup goes on for so long that readers are on high alert. Then, without further ado, Gismondo tells it like it was:

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

“It was the time of mid-summer and the day – which was showing itself to be very clear across the whole sky, already having passed through half its allotments – when in my lady’s rooms, with her having already been made less fierce toward me through long proof of my warm faith, she and I were sitting and talking in a charming and solitary spot, in which rooms, a gentle little breeze was entering through the windows opened to the east and to the west, striking us so sweetly with its last wafts, that we did not feel the heat of the season.”

*Gli Asolani*, 1505, Gallica, pp. 115-7; Dilemmi, 2.24, pp. 158-9.

This is the target at which the censoring arrows are directed. It seems innocent enough if one does not grasp that *fede* here is code for phallus. If the phrase “già fattami per lunga pruova della mia calda fede meno selvaggia che ella da prima non m'era,” (“having been made less fierce toward me through long proof of my warm faith than she had been earlier”) is innocent and does not mean something sexual why would the female characters have triggered alarm bells? What really makes Gismondo’s sketch of midday delight stand out is indeed the elaborate, even giddy, 400-word prelude. Constituting the longest cut, the whole passage is eliminated after the 1525 edition. Eliminated but not forgotten: a passage may gain fame by being seen as risky, and at any rate it remained available in the first nine printings of *Gli Asolani*.

### **Elucidation of fede**

When glossing portions of Bembo’s literary production, it is advisable to consult carnival songs and burlesque poetry of the era as well as other contemporary sources together with the over 2,000 code words carefully annotated by Jean Toscan in *Le carnaval du langage: le lexique érotique des poètes de l'équivoque de Burchiello à Marino (XVe-XVIIe siècles)*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See *fede* in Toscan, pp. 563, 610, 993, 1029, 1161, 1176-7.

One could gather a number of examples: a fine instance of *fede* signifying phallus is found in Ludovico Ariosto's sonnet, *Madonna, sète bella e bella tanto*, in which he lists his lady's various physical attributes, summing up and countering in the final tercet:

tutto è mirabil certo; nondimeno  
non starò ch'io non dica arditamente  
che più mirabil molto è la mia fede.

(sure, it's all admirable, still, I won't keep from saying boldly that what is a lot more admirable is my faith)<sup>3</sup>

Another way to explore terminology is through etymology: for *fede* both Jean Toscan, and Boggione-Casalegno in their *Dizionario storico del lessico erotico italiano*, cite a 19<sup>th</sup> century editor of the *Commento del Grappa* who traces *fede* to *pestello* (pestle, an obviously phallic image) through the Greek word for faith (*pistos*), (Alderighi, p. 111). This derivation seems not so much implausible as unnecessary: humans have drawn on a never-ending supply of words to designate certain body parts: one finds scores and scores of these in the two texts mentioned just above and in J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, pp. 9-79. Perhaps the best way to perceive the significance of these words is to read works of the era with coding in mind.

#### 1.4. "le nostre feste" ("our festivities")

The next section under examination forms part of a very rich hymn to Love which

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<sup>3</sup> For this and other examples by Ariosto see my "Ariosto's Pathway to Posterity," p. 109; Bembo uses a similar display meme: Donne,.../ Mirate quanto è grave el mio dolore" (*Asolani Q*, Dilemmi, p. 14). Bembo also appears to have extended the meaning of *fede* from male sex organ to female: in Book 2, Gismondo shows the ladies and gentlemen assembled in Asolo the ring of pure gold he wears as a witness of the "faith" of his lady, a ring he will wear as long as his *vita* (life/ phallus) is prolonged: "*questo memorevole testimonio della lei fede; che io porto meco sempre, et porterò, quanto si distenderà la mia vita.*" Gismondo specifies that his lady placed it on his ring finger, his *dito del cuore*, literally heart finger; *cuore* frequently stood for phallus. His lady gave the ring the same place on him she had always given **it** on herself: "*Il quale la sua donna ne l'ultima partita, che egli dallei fece, a se trahendolo pose di sua mano, dov'egli era, quello medesimo luoco appo Gismondo dandogli, che sempre dato appo se stessa gli havea*" (*Asolani* 1505, Gallica, p. 133; Dilemmi, p. 170-1). The pronoun *gli* (it) here could perhaps mean not it, the ring, but him, Gismondo. The block of text (sections 2.27-29) in which this passage is found is devoted to Gismondo's *pensiero* (thought/ phallus).

would benefit from careful analysis, but for our purposes here, we need only broaden the concept of *feste* (celebrations) to include orgasm :

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

(Every day, pleasures grow, every night, occasions abound, nor for those that arise, do those underlying die off or diminish, on the contrary, like beautiful snows supplanted by beautiful snows, they keep themselves fresher and livelier in that way, just so with amorous pleasures: under the sweet coverings of the last, the first preserve themselves as sweeter. Nor do the new diminish the old, nor are those of today [diminished] by those of yesterday, nor do they ever lose their force, on the contrary, as one number adds itself to another it makes a much greater sum than they can make alone and by themselves, so too our celebrations, laid out and joined the ones to the others, offer more sweetness, each one beyond measure than they would have made by themselves. Alone, they are sufficient, accompanied they grow. One [celebration] makes a thousand, and of this thousand in a short while, a thousand are generated for each. Expected, they are extremely joyful, unexpected they are fortunate. Effortless, they are dear, but not effortless, they are even dearer in so far as victories acquired with some effort

make the triumph greater. Bestowed, stolen, earned, rewarded, reasoned, longed for, cried for, broken off, restored, first, second, false, real, long, brief – all are delightful, all are lovely.)

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

It may be an over-simplification to perceive Gismondo's grand litany of "feste" as pertaining to orgasms, but it is a travesty to ignore Bembo's brilliant use of erotic innuendo throughout his literary production. Thus, it seems advisable to clear off the varnish of the intervening centuries so that we can see the underlying sexual meanings. A phrase near the end of the selection, "in quanto le vittorie con alcuna fatica **e con sudore** [added later] acquistate fanno il trionfo maggiore," ("in so much as victories acquired with some effort **and with sweat** make the triumph greater"), is annotated by the vigilant but discreet Dionisotti with an apt *strambotto* from 1501, *Città con più sudor posta e cresciuta* ("A city set up and expanded with more sweat"). The meaning of *festa* cannot be anything other than the orgasmic arrival of the ship into port:

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

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

Dionisotti, *Rime rifiutate*, 12.3-6, p. 684

### 1.5. The "Solingo Augello" (*Solitary Bird*) and *I Motti*

The final of the three gems from *Gli Asolani* to be presented here is the *canzone* "Solingo Augello" (*Solitary Bird*) which comes at the end of what is now labeled section 1.27; in the 1505 edition the A in *Augello* is uppercase, as are two equivalent epithets *soletario Tortorin* and *Sventurato* used in the *canzone*. Telling the ladies and men assembled that he had just composed the poem the day before, Perottino narrates three 12-line stanzas about the lonely Bird with whom he shares the sorrows and pains of love, then he closes with what seems to be an abrupt rebuke to himself, or to a part of himself:

*Che parli o Sventurato?*

*A cui ragioni? a che così ti sfaci?*

*Et perché non più tosto piagni, et taci?*

(What are you saying, O Unfortunate one? To whom are you speaking? For what are you so undoing yourself? And why don't you weep instead and keep still?)

*Gli Asolani*, 1505, Gallica, pp. 50-1; cf. Dilemmi p. 112-3.

A nearly identical rebuke appears in one of Bembo's *Motti*: "*Misero, tristo, a che così ti sfaci, et perché non più tosto vivi et taci?*" ("Wretch, rascal, why are you coming so undone, hadn't you better stay alive and keep mum?," *Motti*, 25-6, Cian edition; slight textual corrections also in Raboni). In the context of the 312 rhyming riddling couplets of the *Motti*, first published by Vittorio Cian from manuscripts in 1888, the addressee here is generally thought to be a phallus. A number of other couplets support this reading, for example: "*Come la neve al sol sparisce et fugge,/ così per voi quel tristo si distrugge*" ("As snow from the sun recedes and runs, so for you that poor thing comes undone," 9-10); "*Che cosa è quel che sempre vive in fasce,/ et se non getta il pasto non si pasce?*" ("What is that which always lives in sheathing, and if it doesn't throw out its meal, doesn't eat," 301-2); "*Et quel che tanto calca et si dimena,/ et spande il sangue et non taglia la vena?*" ("And that which kicks so and thrashes about and sheds blood/sperm and does not cut a vein," 303-4); "*Et quel Signor, ch'ha duoi cagniuoli appresso et mai non entran nel giardin con esso?*" ("And [who is] that Gentleman/ phallus who has two little dogs by his side and they never enter the garden with him?," 305-6). Thus, it seems likely that Perottino meant to personify his own desolate "bird."

The poem was eliminated for the 1530 edition of *Gli Asolani*, but it popped up in our poet's other publications. Dionisotti traces the many reworkings, concluding that in the sonnet *Solingo augello* Bembo's imitation of Petrarch's verses takes on the consistency of a *centone* (Dionisotti, pp. 545-6, 554-5, 686-7). To me the tercets of the sonnet sound as though they are written in code:

*Privo in tutto son io d'ogni mio bene,  
e nudo e grave e solo e peregrino  
vo misurando i campi e le mie pene.*

*Gli occhi bagnati porto e 'l viso chino  
e 'l cor in doglia e l'alma for di spene,  
Né d'haver cerco men fero destino.*

(I am wholly deprived of my every good, and naked and weighted and alone and strange, I go measuring the fields and my pains. I bear my eyes bathed and my face bowed, and my heart in agony and soul empty of hope, nor do I seek to have a fate less fierce.)

Dionisotti, 48.12-14, pp. 545-6; Dilemmi, p. 54.

Perhaps I am misled by the idea of the poet measuring his *pene* and lamenting his *alma for di spene* – his soul empty of hope making no effort to avoid its dramatic downfall. But I might be forgiven since Bembo writes so very much about the soul, the *alma* which "d'ogni speme priva/ brama che 'l nodo suo tosto s'allenti" ("deprived of all hope, wishes that its knot would soon loosen," 31.4-5, Dionisotti p. 532). He describes it as a *spalmata nave* (a slathered vessel) facing all kinds of weather, which is first attended at by *speme onesta e pure*, but then due to his lady's furor is disdained and this *alma* cries and sighs and goes to its death before its time (32.1-14, p 532-3). What is needed is a group of calm scholars conversant with the erotic lexicon who can elucidate these and other passages by Bembo and those by other writers of his era.

### **1.6. *Gli Asolani*: conclusion and suggestion**

Throughout every one of the editions of *Gli Asolani* which Bembo saw published – Dilemmi lists 15 publications of the text during Bembo's lifetime – he refers over and over to the women and men in his dialogues as aware, savvy, discerning. A quick sampling from the ubiquitous 1553 edition yields "aveduti e intendenti giovani" (1.1), "ben sappiamo quanto tra gli intendenti giovani sieno le tue rime lodate" ("well we know how much your poems are praised among the knowing young people," 1.14), "sagge... donne" (2.2), "intendenti donne" (2.7), "avedute giovani" (2.13). His readers then and now need to be equally astute. So, while I do not disagree with Kidwell's statement that "Bembo clearly intended *Gli Asolani* to be a serious philosophic contribution to the understanding of one of the most important forces in human life" (p. 109), I think Bembo also intended his book to be a contribution to the art of writing in crafty

linguistic ways. Going forward, commentaries and translations of this work need to encompass Pietro Bembo's virtuosity in Italian and Latin. While there has been a tendency in the scholarship to describe Bembo's poems primarily as Petrarchan, to see his compositions as calques, as mosaics of "tessere petrarchesche" (Dionisotti, p. 507, 509), or worse, of "detriti petrarcheschi" (p. 599, 601), today better diagnostic tools diagnostic tools can help us become the savvy readers Bembo pursued.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. *I Motti (Sayings) continued*

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

Other *Motti* also seem to allude to homosexual encounters, like the following, "Servi, non ti lagnar, ma soffri et taci,/ ch'ancor potrai salir se bene hor giaci" ("Submit, don't complain, but suffer and keep still, because you will still be able to rise up if now you lie there," 135-6, see also 111-2 and 167-8). Of particular interest to me is a couplet that features the word *maccheron* connotating butt [macaroni in the early sixteenth century were like tortelloni or little dumplings]: "O Maccheron mio dolce, tondo et sodo,/ qual'è la cosa contraria del chiodo?" ("O my pleasing Macaron, round and firm, what is the thing opposite the nail?," 51-2). I have found allusions to this connotation for macaroni

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<sup>4</sup> One sharp early reader may have been Teofilo Folengo who praised *Gli Asolani* as one of the modern works which might rival those of ancient masters, "*Materies Asolana gravis veniet quoque Bembi*," (Toscolana *Baldus*, 1521, Book 25 p. 250v), where "grave... matter," with a nod to Bembo's frequent use of the adjective *grave* perhaps suggests something playful.

in works by Teofilo Folengo (best known for his macaronic epic poem *Baldus*) and Agnolo Firenzuola, but none as clear as Bembo's definition: for more information, please see my note at *Motti*, 51-2.

### 3. *Rime and Stanze*

In the *Rime* which are full of allusive verse but contain many poems not involved with the erotic code, we find reiterations of themes already discussed. As we saw above in the sonnet *Si come quando il ciel*, the poet (as a *spalmata nave*) blurs the thematic lines of hope, death and rebirth (32.1-14, p 532-3, and see *I chiari giorni miei*, 99.9-11, p. 588-9). In another sonnet, addressed to *Speme* (Hope), the poet asks why hope is reborn in the bottom of his heart/ phallus if he has already uprooted it, (*Speme, che gli occhi nostri*, 54.5-6, p. 550). Perhaps the most vivid example of "hope" appears in the tercets of the sonnet *Viva mia neve*:

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

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

28. 9-14, p. 530.

But the times were changing: in a letter to Vittore Soranzo on July 1530 Bembo acknowledges the increasing austerity [presumably of the dawning Reformation age]. He asks that a couple of accompanying sonnets not be shown to anyone except his friend Carlo Gualteruzzi, "not only because they were composed just now, and I may change them, but also for this, that they do not contain subject matter for these years, and I think one day I'll place them among my youthful writings," (Dionisotti, speculative note for *Viva mia neve*, p. 530).

When I first read Bembo's *Rime* about forty years I was amazed that he wrote such explicit verse, and even more astounded that his literary prowess was largely overlooked. One had to read the scholarly work quite carefully to find any mention of this angle of Bembo's production. Dionisotti signals some of the blatant passages. In the *Stanze*, for example, at a moment when Bembo is speaking for Love, he tells the ladies not to close the entryway to his [i.e. Love's] pleasures, adding:

*Non basta il campo aver lieto et aprico,  
se non s'ara e sementa e miete poi:  
giardin non colto in breve divien selva,  
e fassi lustro ad ogni augello e belva.* *Stanze, 30.4-8*

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

Dionisotti notes, "Comincia qui, in contrasto coi motivi stilnovisti e petrarchisti, la predica di un amore umanistico quattrocentesco, non senza qualche tocco di franca galanteria cortigiana e popolareggiante" ("Here begins, in contrast with the stilnovistic and Petrarchan themes, the preaching of a fifteenth century humanistic love, not without a touch of frank courtly and folksy eroticism," p. 663-4); I learned that *galanteria* in these contexts does not mean gallantry.

The 50 *Stanze* which Pietro Bembo and Ottaviano Fregoso recited at the court of Urbino during carnival festivities in 1507, contain a few more such 'gallant' passages: stanza 45 begins "O quanto è dolce, perch' Amor la stringa/ talor sentirsi un'alma venir meno" ("Oh how sweet it is at times to feel a soul/ phallus come undone because Love is squeezing it"); stanza 47 turns an allusion to the tale of separated humans (told by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*) into a humorous sexual image which compares Love to a pivotal *chiodo* (nail):

*Però che voi non sete cosa integra,  
né noi, ma è ciascun del tutto il mezzo:  
Amor è quello poi, che ne rintegra,  
e lega e strigne come chiodo al mezzo;  
onde ogni parte in tanto si rallegra,*

*che suoi dilette e gioie non han mezzo:  
e s'uom durasse molto in tale state,  
compitamente diverria beato.*

(Because you [women] are not an integral thing, nor are we, but each is half of the whole: Love is that which reintegrates them then and binds and tightens like a nail in the middle, whence every part becomes so happy that its delights and joys have no measure, and if a man were to endure a long while in that state, he would become completely blissful. *Stanze*, 47.1-8)

So yes, Bembo wrote Petrarchan and Platonic prose and poetry, but with a twist. His *capitolo, Dolce mal, dolce guerra, dolce inganno* is a great example of Bembo's sly usage of language that is *strettamente petrarchesco* and a true masterpiece of the Italian Renaissance (Dionisotti p. 673-8). I will add it to my appendix in hopes that one or more of my *venticinque* readers will translate this terza rima treasure into English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic... Viva "l'estravaganza cortigiana"! (p. 677).

#### **4. *Libellus Carminum*** (also called *Carmina*, posthumous, 1553)

Lastly, it might seem to fly in the face of reason to speak of coding in a poem which has as its narrator, protagonist and title, *Priapus*, and yet one must. This 82-line composition in elegiac couplets is a triumph of innuendo. In Bembo's day the Latin language was itself seen as a sort of code to keep indelicate concepts from delicate women and children, yet even within this learned language Bembo used eroticized vocabulary. [Latin still seems to work as coding: if *Amicus ad Gallum* were instead titled *Ragazza/ Amica al Gallo (Girlfriend to Cock)*, the phallic nature of *gallus* would be more readily perceived.] The game of fashioning the phallus as a pleasing garden herb in the blatantly playful *Priapus* does not require mastery of arcane terminology (*Libellus Carminum*, pp. 12-5; with English translation in *Lyric Poetry*, Chatfield, pp. 22-9). However, there are structures and phrases appearing in this and in other manifestly erotic *carmina* which when used in a eulogy of Pope Julius II, might cause confusion. *Iulii secundi pontificatus maximus (The Great Pontificate of Julius II, Carmina*, pp. 46-7; Chatfield 94-7) shares a great deal with *Priapus*. There is something unsettling about the image of the elderly Julius, reputed to have been sexually active with males and

females, as an oak which inserts its head among the stars where, as much as it had “nourished” men, it would now nourish the gods (final couplet). Priapus too was a fiber that “nourished” greatly (verse 56). Analyses of these poems require sensitivity: an image of the day-star raising its head above the stars appears also in a solemn epitaph for his brother Carlo who died young (Chatfield, pp. 96-7). So, when we see the della Rovere oak tree and Gallus both characterized by *recti... cupido* (zeal for the upright, *Carmina*, pp. 46, 47; Chatfield pp. 94, 96), we can’t assume there is an erotic meaning, but we also needn’t assume that the list of trees (including the *pinus*) which the good Julian oak is said to surpass, are not endowed with suggestive significance.

Bembo danced for decades on the razor’s edge between outrageous and charming. In this he was like near contemporaries Teofilo Folengo and his brother Giovanni Battista (although it is difficult for me to see how the latter’s shtick of biblical commentary has actually functioned as a cover for his relentless satire and cerebral erotica). It is our job as readers and scholars to probe these 500 year old works and do our best to elucidate them, and not obfuscate our findings. Pietro Bembo deserves a discerning audience.

March, 2020

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

## Appendix

1. *Gli Asolani*, 1505: Book 1, section 15.

*Quand’io penso al martire,  
 Amor, che tu mi dai gravoso et forte;  
 Corro per gir a morte,  
 Così sperando i miei danni finire.  
 Ma poi ch’i giungo al passo,  
 Ch’è porto in questo mar d’ogni tormento;  
 Tanto piacer ne sento,  
 Che l’alma si rinforza; ond’io nol passo.  
 Così il viver m’ancide:*

*Così la morte mi ritorna in vita.  
O miseria infinita;  
Che l'uno apporta et l'altra non recide.*

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

*Gli Asolani*, 1505, Gallica, p. 30-31; Dilemmi, pp. 98-99.

2. *Dolce mal, dolce guerra:*

*Dolce mal, dolce guerra, e dolce inganno  
Dolce rete d'Amor e dolce offesa,  
Dolce languir, e pien di dolce affanno.*

*Dolce vendetta in dolce foco accesa  
Di dolce onor, che par giammai non ave,  
Principio della mia sì dolce impresa.*

*Dolci segni, ch'io seguo, e dolce nave,  
Che porti la mia speme a dolce lido  
Per l'onda del penser dolce e soave.*

*Dolce infido sostegno, e cader fido:  
Dolce lungo dubbiar, e saper corto:  
Dolce chiaro silenzio, e roco grido.*

*Dolce bramar giustizia, e chieder torto:  
Dolce andar procacciando i danni suoi:  
Dolce del suo dolor farsi conforto.*

*E dolce stral, che 'l cor d'ambeduo noi  
Ferendo intrasti là, dove altro mai  
Non passò prima e non passerà poi.*

*Dolce del proprio ben sempre trar guai,  
E gir poi del suo mal alto cantando:*

*Dolci ire, dolci pianti, e dolci lai.*

*Dolce tacendo, amando, e desiando  
Romper un sasso, e raccender un gelo  
Pregando, sospirando, o lagrimando.*

*Dolce dinanzi agli occhi ordirsi un velo,  
Che non lasci veder, perché si miri,  
Fronda in selva, acqua in mar, o stella in cielo.*

*Dolce portar in fronte i suoi desiri,  
E dentro aver il foco, e d'ogn'intorno  
Mandar da lunge 'l suon de' suoi martiri.*

*Dolce via più temer di giorno in giorno,  
Ed ardir meno, e sol d'una figura  
A l'alma specchio far la notte e 'l giorno.*

*Dolce aver più d'altrui che di sé cura,  
E governar due voglie con un freno,  
E 'n comune recar ogni ventura.*

*Dolce non esser mai beato a pieno,  
Nè del tutto infelice, e dolce spesso  
Sentirsi innanzi tempo venir meno:*

*E per cercar altrui perder se stesso.*

Dionisotti, p. 677-8; *Delle Rime di M. Pietro Bembo*, Rome, 1548, p. 170.

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