Renaissance Studies Vol. 33 No. 1 DOI: 10.1111/rest.12529

Urban voices: The hybrid figure of the street singer in Renaissance Italy

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STREET SINGER: THE ONE OR THE MANY?

Walking through the streets or piazzas of an Italian Renaissance city, you might have happened to hear recounted the adventures of Charlemagne's knights or the lives of the saints in verse. You could have listened to an astrological prophecy about the events of the coming year or a rhymed compendium of the opinions of the ancient philosophers on the nature of the Soul. Your attention may have been captured by the familiar chorus of a famous ballad – you might even have been enticed to dance or sing along – or by the advertisement for a miraculous oil for treating ringworm. You could have been enraptured by the notes of a melody played on a *lira da braccio* or shocked by the cries which announced some dramatic breaking news about the sack of a neighbouring city or the fall of a Christian outpost to the Turks. The dominant voices in this vibrant urban soundscape belonged to the protean and elusive figures, variously known as *cantimbanchi*, *cantastorie*, or *canterini*, but also as *buffoni*, *ciurmatori*, *ciarlatani*, *giullari*, *saltimbanchi*, who occupied the epicentre of Italian Renaissance urban culture and society (Fig. 1).

All these different names appear to designate distinct arts and professions, but what was the relationship between the medical charlatan and the ballad singer? Between the street performer and the itinerant bookseller? Or between the *poeta laureato* and the actor? In recent decades, there have been excellent studies on particular specializations of Italian piazza performers, including their medical activity, their musical skills, their function in the news market and information system, their role in the dissemination of print, their theatrical and performative abilities, and their literary and poetical production.[1] As has been argued elsewhere, 'rather than distinct categories, there

For their many references and suggestions, we wish to thanks Brian Richardson and Rosa Salzberg.

[1] For bibliographical references, see Luca Degl'Innocenti and Massimo Rospocher, 'Street Singers: an Interdisciplinary Perspective', *Italian Studies*, 71/2 (2016), 149–53. For more references on the European context see the general introduction to this special issue.

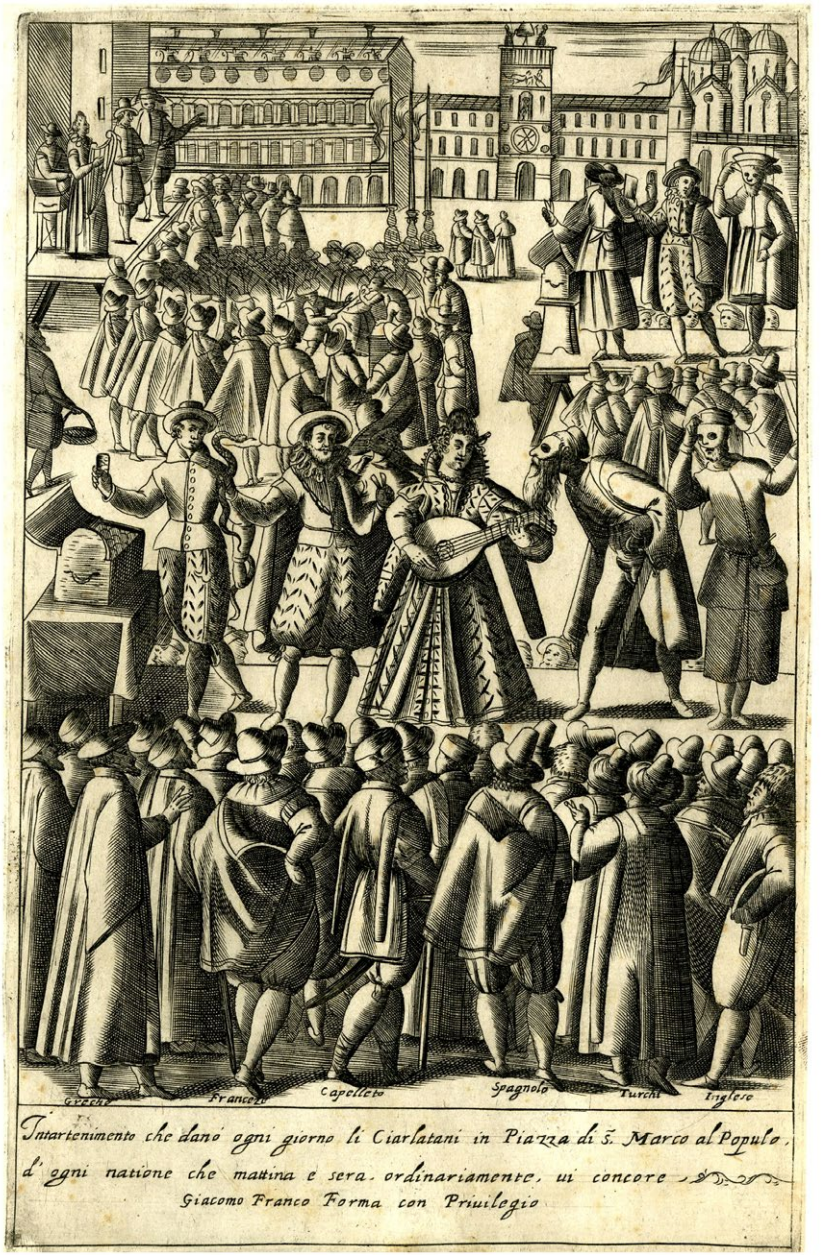

Fig. 1 Giacomo Franco, *Charlatans in Piazza San Marco, Venice*, 1610, engraving, 16 × 25 cm (in Idem, *Habiti d'uomini e donne Venetiane*, 1610). [artwork in the public domain, photograph courtesy www.metmuseum.org]

was a spectrum of interrelated performing professions' in this period;[2] our intention here is to demonstrate how most – if not all – of these different activities carried out in the public spaces of Renaissance cities were interconnected.

This essay focuses on the fluid macro-category of the professional piazza performer in Renaissance Italy. Rather than offering a rigid taxonomy, it has two main goals: firstly, we intend to highlight their role as crucial mediators in the dynamic continuum of learned and popular cultures, orality and literacy, which characterized Renaissance urban culture. Secondly, the socially and culturally mobile category of the street singer will be used as a lens which brings into focus a different view of the Italian Renaissance itself.

Because of the combination of verbal, performative, and musical elements involved in their activity, street entertainers occupied a central position in the oral and aural palimpsest of the Italian city. They personify the pervasive function of orality and its interaction with written culture within the early modern *media ensemble* and literary system, a crucial role which is now widely recognized by current historiography.[3] Due to their importance within this communication system, for today's scholars of literature street singers represent a unique opportunity to investigate the ephemeral oral traditions of Renaissance texts.

Their performances involved every medium and encompassed all levels of society; their texts circulated in manuscript and were disseminated both in print and orally; they travelled from one city to another, from the public space of the piazza to more exclusive noble salons, moving fluidly between different cultural, geographical, and social spheres. Their constant mobility is one of the key indicators of the importance of these figures in the early modern period. Their performances represented moments during which a variety of social classes came together in and around particular urban narratives and spaces. But they were also, symbolically, a focal point where the culture of the piazza and that of the *palazzo* collided. As such, for historians, street performers offer an access point to enter into – and to understand – the social and cultural world of Renaissance Italy.

From the methodological point of view, the aim of this article is to explore the figure of the street singer, not just from the perspective of a single discipline, but rather from that of many, combining the use of archival sources such as criminal records with close philological analysis of the texts they performed and sold. Because of the extreme difficulties of obtaining documentary evidence about these ephemeral and shadowy figures, who were rarely

[2] Rosa Salzberg and Massimo Rospocher, 'Street Singers in Italian Urban Culture and Communication', *Cultural and Social History*, 9 (2012), 9–26, at 9.

[3] For a comprehensive historiographical overview see the Introductions to the volumes produced by the ERC-funded project *Italian Voices, namely*: Luca Degl'Innocenti, Brian Richardson and Chiara Sbordoni (eds.), *Interactions between Orality and Writing in Early Modern Italian Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); Stefano Dall'Aglio, Brian Richardson and Massimo Rospocher (eds.), *Voices and Texts in Early Modern Italian Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

members of official organizations or guilds, rather than offering a systematic overview of these subjects, in this essay we have chosen a prosopographical approach in order to recover the lost history of street singers. We will focus closely on individual paradigmatic characters, whose careers are at the same time exceptional but also representative of larger categories. As we shall see, their activities and individual trajectories epitomize different aspects of the same multifaceted identity.

THE STREET SINGER AS CHARLATAN

On 9 January 1545, having previously banned him for a month from singing or selling anything from his bench anywhere in the city, and 'given his great disobedience' («visa inobedientia max[ima]»), the health officers of the Venetian Republic (*Provveditori alla Sanità*) condemned the «cantimbanco» Jacopo Coppa, 'Il Modenese', to pay the sizeable fine of two ducats. On this occasion, the *Provveditori* also reiterated the general prohibition against charlatans and street singers staging spectacles in the area between the flagpoles and the two columns in Piazzetta San Marco, valid until the end of the Easter period.[4] At that time, 'Il Modenese' was at the peak of his career, acclaimed by the people in the piazzas, celebrated by humanists, and protected by nobles. He may well have felt untouchable. But this was not the first time, and it would not be the last, that this famous piazza entertainer fell under the disapproving gaze of the Venetian authorities. A few years later, on 26 September 1548, a proclamation against 'Jacopo Modonin solito cantar in banco' was issued by the anti-blasphemy magistracy (the *Esecutori contro la bestemmia*), and published on the steps of the Rialto Bridge. This accused the singer of having openly 'blasphemed the most holy name of God many times'. In this era of the Council of Trent, the officials of the Serenissima charged with preserving urban decorum and public order could not tolerate the risk that a popular, uncontrollable figure such as Coppa might influence his customers and listeners with his blasphemous opinions. In his absence, the charlatan/street singer was condemned to a fine of 400 *lire de piccoli* and banished from Venice for five years.[5] Despite his elite protectors, he was compelled to leave Venice and begin travelling throughout the peninsula to find other places to set up his temporary stage.

It was not simply Coppa's verbal exuberance that caught the attention of the authorities, nor just his challenges to morality and transgression of norms governing the use of urban spaces, associated with his public visibility as a performer. His flamboyant activity as an itinerant healer in various Italian

[4] Archivio di Stato, Venice (hereafter ASV), *Provveditori alla Sanità*, Notatorio, b. 729, 9 January 1544 (*more veneto*), fol. 65v. Similar prohibitions had been issued in the past, with performers confined to particular areas of the piazza and to times that did not infringe on religious solemnities; ASV, *Provveditori alla Sanità*, Notatorio, b. 729, 4 January 1542 (*more veneto*), fol. 21r; 2 May 1543, fol. 26r.

[5] ASV, *Esecutori contro la bestemmia*, b. 61, Raspe, fol. 4v.

cities also incited the hostility of local physicians and led to numerous confrontations with representatives of official medical culture.[6] These encounters were not always conflictual, as demonstrated by Coppa's occasional collaborations with institutions of public health, at least in times of emergency. For example, Coppa cooperated with the Paduan authorities during the plague of 1555–6, at which time he dedicated himself to the care of a great number of patients in the *lazaretto* and the city. An investigation instituted by the local authorities to certify Coppa's medical activity, which also contains interviews with patients, includes the charlatan's declaration that he had practised in Padua from at least 1541, and that he had previously obtained privileges from medical colleges in Mantua, Vicenza, Padua, Ferrara, Bologna, Naples, and Venice. This investigation, above all, vindicates his positive role on the occasion of the 1555–6 epidemic, when he used his *secretum* to cure the disease.[7] And this honourable activity was recognized also in 1561 when Coppa petitioned for the right to practise in hospitals and other locations in Venice.[8] In many Italian cities, such as Venice or Siena, local authorities appointed charlatans as overseers for their fellow performers, as in the case of Leone Tartaglini, 'L'Herbolario', in Venice. In other cases, actors and singers were made responsible for controlling piazza performers, as when Filippo Angeloni, 'Lo Zoppo', was appointed to oversee the activities of 'comici mercenarj, zaratani et cant' in banchi' in Mantua.[9]

As in the performative and musical arts, professional categories in medicine were fluid. The same was true of the sphere of humanistic or literary culture, which sometimes could collide with the world of the piazza and of performance.[10] In fact, the biography of the itinerant performer Jacopo Coppa also traverses the peaks of Renaissance literary culture. One of his cultural encounters is documented by a letter addressed to Coppa and written in October 1545 by Pietro Aretino. The famous man of letters had been told by two friends – Francesco degli Albizi and the painter Titian – that the illustrious charlatan ('un de i primi ceretani del mondo') was reciting some of Aretino's poems on a bench in the main square of Ferrara ('in su la piazza di Ferrara,

[6] On the dispute between Coppa and the Venetian medical authorities, see David Gentilcore, *Medical Charlatanism in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 129–30.

[7] 'Processo per rilevare le operationi del S. Giacomo Copa medico di Modena per la peste nel 1555 e 1556 nel luogo del lazaretto'; Archivio di Stato, Padua, *Sanità*, b. 353, cited in Jane L. Stevens Crawshaw, *Plague Hospitals: Public Health for the City in Early Modern Venice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 176–7.

[8] ASV, *Provveditoria alla Sanità, Leggi sanitarie deliberate in Pregadi*, reg. 13, ff. 45r–46r.

[9] Gentilcore, *Medical Charlatanism*, 106–7; Alessandro D'Ancona, *Origini del teatro italiano: con due appendici sulla rappresentazione drammatica del contado toscano e sul teatro mantovano nel sec. XVI* (Turin: Loescher, 1891), 474.

[10] Luca Degl'Innocenti, 'Machiavelli canterino?', in Luca Degl'Innocenti, *«Al suon di questa cetra». Ricerche sulla poesia orale del Rinascimento* (Florence: Società editrice fiorentina, 2016), 101–51.

cantando in banca').[11] At the end of his performance, Coppa also sold a work by Aretino that the charlatan himself had had printed and associated also to the humanist Francesco Sansovino.[12] Aretino, who had also been a performer and improviser,[13] celebrated Coppa's incantatory art and declared himself delighted that his work was orally disseminated 'in the mouths of charlatans'.[14] This self-proclaimed 'anti-Petrarch' praised the narrative and oratorical abilities of piazza performers and referred to the astonishing success of Coppa and his fellow entertainers, remarking on the envy they aroused from itinerant preachers – their main competitors for the attention of the popular audiences in the piazza – because of their performative skills: 'And what do you think some desperate preacher would pay to succeed in the pulpit as you succeed on your bench?'[15] The performativity of Coppa's activity is also portrayed in a 1609 *novella* written by Celio Malespini, which shows the intertwining of performance and peddling. According to Malespini's literary account, which likely had some basis in fact, the charlatan presented himself on the public stage within a carefully choreographed *mise-en-scene*. Dressed in a long robe with a black velvet cap, he appeared to the sound of drums and trumpets, astride a stage decorated with images, medical privileges obtained from various authorities and a standard which depicted the emblem of a nude woman with a severed tongue.[16]

The theatrical style and mesmerizing power of his performances were not the only reasons for Coppa's success. In the weeks following his condemnation by the Venetian *Provveditori* and his public performance in Ferrara, we find Coppa engaged in yet another successful activity: as editor and publisher. Possibly precisely in the same period when piazza performances were banned in Venice, he kept himself busy with the publication of a collection of poems

[11] Pietro Aretino, *Lettere*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli, 6 vols. (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1997–2002), Vol. III, 325–7; David Gentilcore, '"Biscantato da un dei primi ceretani del mondo". Jacopo Coppa e il linguaggio dei ciarlatani durante il Cinquecento e il Seicento', in Maria Teresa Ricci (ed.), *Otium. Antisociété et anticulture* [online] (Banca Dati 'Nuovo Rinascimento', 2009), 68–82: www.nuovorinascimento.org/n-rinasc/atti/pdf/otium.pdf (accessed September 2018).

[12] As suggested by Neil Harris, this edition might be identified with the *Capitoli del signor Pietro Aretino, di messer Lodovico Dolce, di m. Francesco Sansovino* that were printed several times in the 1540s; see Luca Degl'Innocenti, 'I cantari in ottava rima tra Medio Evo e primo Rinascimento: i cantimpanca e la piazza', in Maurizio Agamennone (ed.), *Cantar ottave. Per una storia dell'intonazione cantata in ottava rima* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2017), 3–24, at 12.

[13] Degl'Innocenti, 'Al suon di questa cetra', 32–4.

[14] Rosa Salzberg, 'In the mouths of charlatans: Street performers and the dissemination of pamphlets in Renaissance Italy', *Renaissance Studies*, 24 (2010), 638–53.

[15] 'E che si pensa che pagasse questo e quel predicator disgraziato, per riuscire in pergamo come voi riuscite in banco?'; Aretino, *Lettere*, III, 326. On the antagonism between street singers and preachers, see Massimo Rospocher, 'The Battle for the Piazza: Creative Antagonism between Itinerant Preachers and Street Singers in Late Medieval and Early Modern Italy', in *Voices and Texts in Early Modern Italian Society*, 212–28.

[16] Celio Malespini, 'Prodezze medicinali di Iacopo Coppa fatte nella città di Fiorenza', in his *Ducento Novelle…* (Venice: al Segno d'Italia, 1609), Vol. 2, fols. 299r–301v.

by various authors, including a piece written by himself. The collection was dedicated to the Venetian noblewoman Caterina Barbaro.[17] Soon after, he managed to lay his hands on some unpublished works of Ludovico Ariosto: an edition of the lyric poems of Ariosto that Coppa edited and published, in which Caterina Barbaro appears as the author of a dedication to Lodovico Morosini, can be dated to Venice, February 1547.[18] A couple of years earlier, Coppa had published Ariosto's *Herbolato*, printed in Venice by the Nicolini da Sabbio in 1545 and dedicated once again to his patron Caterina Barbaro.[19] This theatrical monologue stages the performance of the charlatan Antonio Faentino and offers many details regarding the oral dimension or the materiality of the activity of these performer-healers. 'Il Modenese' also used print intensively as an instrument to promote his medical career, publishing ephemeral copies of his remedies, recipes and electuaries until the end of his professional life.[20] All the editions published by Coppa epitomize the hybrid intellectual professional profile of the Modenese performer, but the *Herbolato* in particular unites on paper the publisher and the charlatan, in a publishing success that reproduces perfectly the oratorical modes of the latter profession.

Coppa represents a cultural model; a figure operating in that mobile space of the piazza. And indeed, mobility is another prominent characteristic of such figures. Just as the charlatan protagonist of Ariosto's *Herbolato* claims to have operated in Rome, Venice, Ferrara, Mantua, Milan, and all over Lombardy, in the kingdom of Naples as well as in France, England, and Scotland,[21] so too real characters like Coppa were in constant motion – not only physically and geographically, but also professionally, culturally, and socially – such as to render them difficult to define and locate in (pre-) established categories.

This incessant mobility brought charlatans into contact with opposite poles of Renaissance culture and society, from the piazza to the *palazzo*. Born in Modena, probably around the middle of the second decade of the sixteenth

[17] Jacopo Coppa, *Rime di molti eccellentissimi autori con alcune stanze amorose, et altre fatte in persona della Virtù che si lamenta delle ingiurie della fortuna* (Venice: a istanza di Jacopo Modonese, 1545).

[18] Ludovico Ariosto, *Le Rime di m. Lodouico Ariosto non piu uiste, & nuouamente stampate a instantia di Iacopo Modanese, cio e sonetti. Madrigali. Canzoni. Stanze. Capitoli* (Stampate in Vinegia: ad instantia de Iacopo Modanese, February 1546 [*more veneto*]), the dedication is at fol. A2r–v.

[19] Ludovico Ariosto, *Herbolato di M. Lodovico Ariosto, nel quale figura Mastro Antonio Faentino, che parla della nobiltà dell'huomo, et dell'arte della medicina cosa non meno utile che dilettevole, con alquante stanze del medesimo novamente stampate* (Venice: Giovanni Antonio and Pietro Nicolini da Sabio, 1545).

[20] A Florentine handbill advertising one of Coppa's recipes, and printed in October 1573, has been recently discovered: see Eugenio Refini, 'Self-Promoting Charlatans in Early Modern Italy: The Case of Iacopo Coppa', in Luca Degl'Innocenti, Massimo Rospocher and Rosa Salzberg (eds.), *The* Cantastorie *in Renaissance Italy. Streets Singers between Oral and Literate Cultures*, special issue of *Italian Studies*, 71 (2016), 197–211.

[21] '[...] la santissima città di Roma, la potentissima Vinegia, il popoloso Milano con molte altre città di Lombardia, tutto il regno di Napoli con l'isola di Sicilia, e più di tutte l'altre l'antichissima Mantova, la nobilissima Ferrara [...] De l'opre mie sono testimonii molti luoghi di Francia e d'Inghilterra e di Scozia [...]'; Ariosto, *Herbolato*, fol. Biiir.

century and active at least until 1574, Coppa found success in cities as diverse as Naples (where he won the favour of the Viceroy Don Pedro of Toledo), Ferrara (where his public performances were attended by patricians and famous artists and where he maintained a friendly relationship with Duke Alfonso II D'Este),[22] Bologna (where, according to Malespini, he had a wife to support), Venice (where he found the protection of the patrician Caterina Barbaro and obtained medical privileges), Rome (where he obtained privileges from the Pope), and Florence (where he gained the favour of Cosimo de' Medici due to his ability to heal the Duke's favourite dog and to a whitening toothpaste which endowed the Duchess Eleonora with the brightest of smiles).[23]

But Coppa's long career was certainly not characterized by success alone. This is evident from the protracted conflict (1545–61) which saw him opposed by the Venetian College of Physicians and which is reflected also in his poetic works. In particular, his *Lamento della Virtù contra la Fortuna et la Invidia*, a performative and Lucianesque poem in which Coppa demonstrates his humanistic pretentions, constitutes a complaint against the author's professional enemies in Venice. In the poem, Coppa argues that envy had been the root of all his troubles.[24] In Florence in October 1573, he confronted a similar situation, when we find him penning a petition to Duke Cosimo I in which he asks for permission to exercise the medical profession. The obstacle to this aim was the local guild of doctors and apothecaries (*Arte dei medici e speziali*), 'li quali uniti contro ogn'honestà insieme, sono adirati di tal modo che non si uederanno mai satij di stratiarmi'.[25] In 1574, he was guilty of envy himself: he fled Florence condemned for having anonymously (and falsely) accused a competing charlatan of selling false remedies on the public square.[26] Professional jealously and rivalry were common characteristics in the biographies of such characters.[27]

Such recent archival discoveries, aside from extending the biography of Coppa by over a decade more than was previously known, allow us to add numerous details to his portrait as a Renaissance man, who not only traversed various social strata but also linked many important cultural and religious

[22] Pietro Camporesi, *Camminare il mondo. Vita e avventure di Leonardo Fioravanti medico del Cinquecento* (Milan: Garzanti, 1997), 206–7.

[23] A few biographical details in Giorgio Busetto, *Iacopo Coppa, detto Iacopo Modenese*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (hereafter DBI), 28 (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1983).

[24] For the text of the *Lamento*, see *Rime di molti eccellentissimi autori*, ff. 9v–12r. The *Lamento* draws on Lucian's *Dialogues*, in particular on the one in which Virtue complains with Mercury against Fortune, see Refini, *Self-Promoting Charlatans*.

[25] We owe this reference to Rosa Salzberg: Archivio di Stato, Florence (hereafter ASF), *Ospedale di S. Maria Nuova*, b. 195, fol. 532r.

[26] ASF, *Ospedale di S. Maria Nuova*, b. 195, fols. 576r–v.

[27] Such was the case, for instance, of the itinerant charlatan Leonardo Fioravanti (see William Eamon, *The Professor of Secrets. Mistery, Medicine, and Alchemy in Renaissance Italy* (Washington DC: National Geographic, 2010), 256–7), or the Florentine canterino Cristoforo l'Altissimo (see *infra*).

nodes. In fact, the documents also show him repeatedly to have been part of a network of suspected heretics denounced to the Venetian Inquisition around the end of the 1560s.[28] This unexplored role in the circulation of heterodox religious ideas led him from the Venetian lagoon high into the Alps, to Chiavenna. This refuge of many Italian evangelicals was also a destination of another itinerant singer accused of heresy and active in Venice in the same years: the Anabaptist dyer and wandering performer Zuan Battista Sambeni from Brescia ('il quale sona de lira, et monta in banco alle volte'; 'Zuan Battista bressano tentor o sonador di lira'), condemned to death by the Inquisition in Venice in 1569.[29] As we shall see, hints of heresy are also evident in the biographies of other highly mobile piazza performers who were active in the world of print.[30] Returning to Coppa, in 1569 a denunciation to the Venetian Inquisition by the supervisor of charlatans, Leone Tartaglini 'L'Herbolario' – possibly another one jealous of the success of his rival – tells us of Coppa's presence in Milan, where he seems to have publicly burnt an image of the Madonna. Tartaglini's denunciation also accused Coppa of having read prohibited books, of not practising confession for ten years and refusing the Eucharist, as well as hosting a heretical friar in his lodgings in Venice.[31] Possibly in order to flee such accusations, Coppa left Venice after several decades during which that city seems to have been his base and relocated to Florence. But the history of the heretical charlatan is one that still remains to be told, and is one that may greatly enrich our understanding of the many suggestive links between the universe of the piazza and the world of heterodoxy.[32]

Prince of charlatans, seller of soaps, toothpaste and perfumes, successful publisher and popular entertainer, humanist and religious dissident, friend of the powerful and enemy of official medical culture, Latin and vernacular poet, healer and itinerant doctor: there perhaps exists no figure more paradigmatic than Jacopo Coppa to illustrate the dynamic and polyhedric category of piazza performer in the social and cultural panorama of the Renaissance. But he was obviously not alone. Many other street entertainers also were well-known public healers, teeth-pullers, and sellers of recipes, remedies, panaceas, perfumes, secrets and soap. Already in 1462, for instance, a certain 'Branga da Fiorenza, maestro da denti' [Branga from Florence, master dentist] was recorded in the accounting books of the Este court for having

[28] ASV, *Sant'Uffizio, Processi*, b. 21, fol. 5v: mention of a 'Modenin pur canta in banchj' in the trial of Massimo de' Massimi. ASV, *Sant'Uffizio, Processi*, b. 25, unnumbered denunciation of 'Jacomo ditto il modanino'.

[29] ASV, *Sant'Uffizio*, b. 22, fasc. 2, fols. 18v, 26r, 29v, 44v. See also John Martin, *Venice's Hidden Enemies: Italian Heretics in a Renaissance City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 145–6.

[30] For the connection between mobile social categories (among them beggars, charlatans, blind people, street singers, musicians, preachers, pedlars, print sellers) and heresy, see Pietro Camporesi, *La miniera del mondo. Artieri, inventori, impostori* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1990), 282–3.

[31] The accusation suggests a progression in his career, from street singer to healer: 'Jacomo ditto il Modanino già canta in banco, che hora fa professione di medico'; ASV, *Sant'Uffizio, Processi*, b. 25.

[32] Massimo Rospocher and Rosa Salzberg, *Jacopo Coppa: A Renaissance Man* (in preparation).

played and sung epic poems ('a sonare e cantare in giesta') in front of the Marquis Borso.[33] Over a century later, the ill-fated distiller and charlatan-performer Costantino Saccardino, once a jester at the grand-ducal court of Florence and an actor who played the Commedia dell'Arte role of Gratiano in Bologna, authored a poetical work in praise of the deceased Grand Duke of Tuscany Ferdinand I.[34] The association between medical activity and entertainment was very common. In 1543 Venetian authorities prohibited anyone from singing from their benches, selling soaps, broadsheets or histories, or pulling teeth in the San Marco area until the end of the *Corpus Christi* (60 days after Easter). For the rest of the year they were required to stay away from the Piazzetta and instead remain near the Clocktower.[35]

Similarly, other street singers of the sixteenth century were particularly famous for their medical and cosmetic recipes, for their persuasive advertisement of them during their public performances, for their activity in streets and markets all over Italy, but also for their publishing activities. Protean figures such as the itinerant performer-publisher Ippolito Ferrarese[36] have many features in common with characters like Jacopo Coppa. They shared the same constant social, cultural, and geographical mobility: according to his supposed deathbed lament, Ferrarese performed, accompanied by his *lira da braccio*, for different publics – 'nobles and artisans' – in towns all over Italy (from his native Ferrara to Venice, Pesaro, Brescia, Milan, Bologna, Parma, and Perugia, before dying in Lucca shortly after 1545).[37] Ippolito Ferrarese sold soap, perfumes, and cosmetic remedies as well as news pamphlets, almanacs, and chivalric poems, but he also published – like Coppa, a few years later – the poems of Ariosto in 1537.[38] Ariosto's heirs had asserted their rights to these minor works with a privilege granted by the Venetian Senate, meaning that Ippolito must have published them without permission. To have them printed, he turned to a Ferrarese compatriot also then living in Venice, an itinerant performer who by that time had become also one of the major

[33] Degl'Innocenti, *I cantari in ottava rima*, 8.

[34] *Sonetto in morte del Serenissimo Ferdinando Medici Gr. Duca di Toscana dedicato al suo Serenissimo Figliuolo Cosimo Medici Gran.Duca di Toscana dall'umilissimo servo di S. A. Costantino Saccardini detto il dottore* (Florence, 1609). For Saccardino, see Carlo Ginzburg and Marco Ferrari, *The Dovecote has Opened Its Eyes*, in Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (eds.), *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 11–19.

[35] 'De comandamento de Magnifici signori proveditori alla sanità fa saper che alcuno che salta in bancho per l'avenir non debbi più montar in bancho per cantar o altro alla piera del bando verso le colone in loco alcuno ma debano star da lì verso li relogio'; ASV, *Provveditori alla Sanità*, Notatorio 729, fol. 21r, 4 January 1542 (*more veneto*). '[...] che non sia persona alcuna sia chi esser se voglia che ardisca montar sopra banco alcuno per cantar, dar via balote, historie o qualchunque altra cosa, ne cava denti [...] fino passato el zorno del corpus domini [...]'; ASV, *ibid.*, fol. 26r, 2 May 1543.

[36] Giancarlo Petrella, '"Ad instantia d'Hippolito Ferrarese". Un cantimbanco editore nell'Italia del Cinquecento', *Paratesto*, 8 (2011), 23–79.

[37] *Il pianto e gran lamento fatto per il Ferrarese, in Luca, un giorno avanti la sua morte* (1540s?), fols 2v–3r.

[38] Ludovico Ariosto, *Forze d'amore opera nuoua nella quale si contiene sei capitoli di messer Ludouico Ariosto* (Venice: Niccolò Zoppino, 1537). For this attribution to Zoppino, see Petrella, '"Ad instantia d'Hippolito Ferrarese"'.

printer-publishers of Italian vernacular works: Niccolo d'Aristotele, known as 'lo Zoppino'.

THE STREET SINGER AS PUBLISHER

Niccolò Zoppino represents the most striking example of the highly fluid boundaries between orality and print in early modern Italy. Notwithstanding the long-standing scepticism of historians and scholars of literature about his identification, he was certainly both one of the most important vernacular publishers and a well-known *cantimbanco* of the early Cinquecento.[39]

In the first decades of the sixteenth century, in fact, an itinerant performer that went under the name of 'Zoppino' appeared in several satirical works by Pietro Aretino, Teofilo Folengo, Francisco Deligado and others, active in various capacities, as a street singer, charlatan or pimp. Zoppino's most important literary biographer was – once again – Pietro Aretino, who continually insisted upon the irresistible attraction of his street performances. In Aretino's *Dialogue* of Nanna and Pippa, Zoppino represents a paradigm of the charlatans' mastery in enthralling audiences and playing with the dynamics of pleasure-postponement. At a certain point, Nanna searches for a comparison to make clear to Pippa how a courtesan should string her lovers along. She must allow them a foretaste of the joys of love just up to the point at which business gets serious, and then suddenly refuse them, so that they will be at her mercy thereafter, willing to resume intercourse at any price. This is exactly the same trick, Nanna explains, employed by the *cantimpanca* Zoppino:

> NANNA. Don't you recall, Pippa, when Zoppino was selling on the bench the story of *Campriano*?
> PIPPA. I remember that Zoppino to whom everyone runs to hear when he sings.
> NANNA. That's the fellow. Do you recollect how you laughed when we were visiting my good old friend Piero, and you listened to him together with Luchina and Lucietta?
> PIPPA. Yes, my lady.
> NANNA. You know that Zoppino sang the tale up to the midway point; and when he had gathered a mob about him, he would turn his cape inside out and before getting set to finish the tale, he wanted to peddle a thousand other trifles. […] Well, saying 'I don't want to' and 'I can't' just at the sweet climax, are

[39] For his identification, see works cited below, notes 52 and 53.

in fact like the recipes that Zoppino gets down to sell, when he leaves the delighted crowd high and dry by cutting short his story of *Campriano*.[40]

The comparison with a prostitute may not have been most flattering – and one could well imagine Aretino's amusement in setting it up – but it was undoubtedly apt. Not by chance, the characteristic technique that Ariosto (and Boiardo before him) derived from the *cantimpanca*, of choosing a suspenseful moment for abandoning a narrative strand and either switching to another one or simply closing the canto, has been wittily dubbed 'cantus interruptus'.[41] The acclaimed street entertainer Zoppino (whose socially heterogeneous audiences, we learn, included also a noteworthy female component), first grips his listeners by telling an amusing tale, thus making sure that no one would leave before the end, and then suspends the story in the thick of it, initiating an endless sequence of advertisements, peddling all sorts of products, and in particular – precisely like many medical charlatans – his recipes and printed stories (any resemblance with modern-day TV channels is by no means coincidental, and of course the principles of serialization, suspension and postponement have existed since the time of Scheherazade). Once again, we have a charlatan who is also both a story-teller and a book-seller. In this case, the book is *Campriano contadino*, a popular *novella* in *ottava rima* about a cunning peasant who outsmarts some rich town merchants in a series of funny pranks. On other occasions, though, the story sung and sold by Zoppino was a chivalric one: as in Aretino's *Dialogo del giuoco* when, having 'promised to the mob to kill Rinaldo', the well-loved knight, in the following day's show, the singer encounters a listener who begs him: 'Here, take these five coins, but please don't kill him!'.[42] This is clearly a revamp of Poggio Bracciolini's *facetia* 83 (in which a spectator loses his shirt in order to put off the death of Hector, from one show to the next),[43] but it suggests that Zoppino's activities included also reciting series of chivalric *cantari* over many days.

[40] 'Nanna. Non ti ricordi tu, Pippa, quando il Zoppino vendette in banca la leggenda di Campriano? Pippa. Mi ricordo di quel Zoppino che quando canta in banca tutto il mondo corre a udirlo. Nanna. Quello è desso. Hai tu in mente il ridere che tu facesti sendo noi dal mio compar Piero, mentre con la Luchina e con la Lucietta sue lo ascoltavate? Pippa. Madonna sì. Nanna. Tu sai che 'l Zoppino cantò [...] la storia fino a la metà: e come ebbe adescata la turba ben bene, voltò mantello; e inanzi che si desse a finirla, volse spacciar mille altre bagattelle. [...] Il dire «non voglio» e «non posso» in sul bel del fare, sono le recette che vende il Zoppino, nel lasciare in secco la brigata che smascellava, stroncando la novella di Campriano', Pietro Aretino, *Dialogo nel quale la Nanna insegna a la Pippa* (1536), in Idem, *Sei giornate*, ed. Giovanni Aquilecchia (Bari: Laterza, 1969), 161–2; translation (amended) from Raymond Rosenthal, trans., *Aretino's dialogues* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), 178.

[41] Daniel Javitch, '*Cantus interruptus* in the *Orlando furioso*', *MLN*, 95.1 (1980), 66–80; and Luca Degl'Innocenti, 'Sul bel del fare', in *Il Professore Innamorato. Studi Offerti dagli Allievi a Riccardo Bruscagli* (Pisa: ETS, 2016), 83–98.

[42] Pietro Aretino, *Operette politiche e satiriche*, Vol. I, ed. Giuseppe Crimi (Rome: Salerno, 2014), 327.

[43] Poggio Bracciolini, *Facezie*, ed. Stefano Pittaluga (Milan: Garzanti, 1995), 88–91.

Significantly, chivalric titles also abound in the annals of the publisher known as 'lo Zoppino', that is Niccolò d'Aristotele de' Rossi from Ferrara, who cherished this genre so much that he promoted many promising young authors of such works, restored the text of Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato* by getting back to its first complete edition, and was the first to produce a complete series of woodcut illustrations for Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* even before its final edition of 1532, thus paving the way for many publishers to come.[44] In actual fact, Zoppino's relationship with his fellow citizen Ariosto may have been much more direct than this, considering that Zoppino's first reprint of the *Furioso*, published in 1524, appears to have been authorized (and perhaps even promoted) by the author himself, contrary to the dozens of pirated editions that would be printed in the following years.[45]

In general, Zoppino mostly published cheap yet well-crafted popular books: collections of verse, entertaining stories, and bestsellers past and present, almost exclusively in the vernacular, as well as manuals on various subjects (including embroidery designs) as well as books of recipes. But his performative repertoire, as we shall see, also included many ephemeral political ballads and songs. Although he based his business in Venice, where he operated initially as a publisher – with his *bottega* in campo San Fantino – and then as a printer as well,[46] he was highly mobile throughout the Italian peninsula: Bologna, Ferrara, Foligno, Milan, Pesaro, Ravenna, Ancona, Perugia, and Rome were among the stops on his itinerary, dictated by the commercial timetable of fairs and religious holidays. His mobile activity, for fifteen years (1509–24) in partnership with the performer Vincenzo di Polo from Faenza, spread all over the peninsula, through an extensive network of local bookshops and through editions that he commissioned from local printers on the eve of important fairs and markets. Some of the authors who composed lyrical or narrative works at his request, such as Niccolò degli Agostini, were poet-improvisers and performers themselves.[47] Moreover, in 1512 Zoppino was the first publisher of the young Aretino himself, who also was a poet performer,[48] and he kept on reprinting Aretino's works in later years.[49]

[44] See Neil Harris, *Bibliografia dell'Orlando innamorato'*, Vol. II (Modena: Panini, 1991), 87–92 and Idem, 'L'avventura editoriale dell'*Orlando innamorato*', in *I libri di «Orlando innamorato»*, ed. Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti (Modena: Panini, 1987), 88–159, at 88–94; Federica Caneparo, 'Il *Furioso* in bianco e nero. L'edizione illustrata pubblicata da Nicolò Zoppino nel 1530', *Schifanoia*, 34–5 (2008), 165–72.

[45] See Luca Degl'Innocenti, '"Cantar di gesta in rima". Ariosto, i cantimpanca e la diffusione a Ferrara della materia di Francia', *Schifanoia, 56–7 (2018), forthcoming.*

[46] Harris, *Bibliografia*, II, 87–8.

[47] Luca Degl'Innocenti, 'The Singing Voice and the Printing Press: Itineraries of the Altissimo's Performed Texts in Renaissance Italy', *The Italianist*, 34 (2014), 318–35; Salzberg, *Ephemeral City*.

[48] *Opera nova del fecundissimo giovene Pietro pictore Arretino, zoe strambotti, sonetti, capitoli, barzellette et una disperata* (Venice: Niccolò Zoppino, 1512).

[49] Together with those explicitly signed by Zoppino, also some of the numerous unsigned editions of works by Aretino published in the 1530s might also have been a product of Zoppino's printing shop; see Neil Harris, review of Lorenzo Baldacchini, *Alle origini dell'editoria volgare*, *The Library*, 7th ser., 14 (2013), 213–7, at 217.

Such a cultural and social profile is strikingly similar to the likes of Coppa, sharing some key common features: mobility, performativity, and printing. It is hardly surprising, then, that scholars have long wondered whether the two Zoppinos, the charlatan-performer and the publisher, could have been one and the same person.[50] Until very recently, though, the most common response has been a cautious disbelief, and two different Zoppinos have long lived side by side in the historical account. Zoppino the publisher, after all, was one of the most enterprising and productive of the sixteenth century, a respectable businessman whose activity lasted for more than forty years (1503–44) and whose impressive annals, recently published even if not comprehensive, fill a volume of 355 pages.[51] Therefore, the idea of identifying him with a crafty peddler has appeared awkward to many, and would probably still be deemed so, if it were not for a couple of recent archival findings, which have unequivocally identified the one and only Zoppino as a publisher *and* a street singer at the same time.

The first archival evidence is a series of entries from the 1520s in the account books of the ducal court of the Este family in Ferrara, in which the publisher Zoppino (certainly him, since not only does he deal with books – of music, for the sons of the Duke Alfonso – but he also has a son named Sebastiano) is familiarly called 'lo Zupin che canta in banco'.[52] This is yet another case of street singer and bookseller who was able to enter the graces of powerful rulers.

Zoppino's special relationship with his native town and its ruling family is highlighted also by the second and most conclusive document about his hybrid profile, which is a Venetian criminal record related to his conviction for having sung publicly on a bench and then sold ('cantaverint in bancho publice et vendiderint') in Ferrara, in 1509, a poem against Venice.[53] The two cities were at war and, even if the publisher already had based his activity in Venice, his loyalty to Ferrara and his role of public voice and singer of current affairs, supporting the Este side and encouraging the Ferrarese populace, put him in a tight spot with the Venetian authorities. In March 1510, Zoppino and his partner were arrested and tried by the courts of the Serenissima.

After all, as we have seen with Coppa, running into troubles with political and religious authorities was a common problem for Italian *cantimpanca*. Zoppino himself often operated on dangerous and heterodox religious

[50] Luca Degl'Innocenti, 'Testo e immagini nei continuatori dell'Ariosto: il caso uno e trino della *Marfisa* di Pietro Aretino illustrata coi legni del *Furioso* Zoppino', *Schifanoia*, 34–5 (2008), 193–203, at 196–7.

[51] Lorenzo Baldacchini, *Alle origini dell'editoria in volgare: Niccolò Zoppino da Ferrara a Venezia. Annali (1503–1544)* (Manziana: Vecchiarelli, 2011). For new additions to Zoppino's annals recently discovered at the Beinecke Library, see Giancarlo Petrella, *'À la chasse au bonheur'. I libri ritrovati di Renzo Bonfiglioli e altri episodi di storia del collezionismo italiano del Novecento* (Florence: Olschki, 2016).

[52] Camilla Cavicchi, 'Musici, cantori e "cantimbanchi" a corte al tempo dell'*Orlando furioso*', in *L'uno e l'altro Ariosto: in corte e nelle Delizie*, ed. Gianni Venturi (Florence: Olschki, 2011), 263–89, at 282.

[53] ASV, Avogaria di Comune, Raspe 3661, fol. 21r. Massimo Rospocher, '"In vituperium Status Veneti": the case of Niccolò Zoppino', *The Italianist*, 34 (2014), 349–61.

ground. In 1525 he anonymously published the first Italian edition of an anthology of Lutheran writings[54]; then, in the late 1530s, he printed cheap editions of the sermons of the Capuchin reformist preacher Bernardino Ochino from Siena.[55] In 1542, just before Ochino fled across the Alps for Geneva, in order to escape the Inquisition, Zoppino published another edition of the friar's sermons.[56] This was Zoppino's last publishing venture.

Once ascertained that the Zoppino-*cantimpanca* portrayed by Aretino was the same as the Zoppino-publisher, one must be careful not to assume that all the features of the former were shared by the latter. Even if Aretino's characters are grounded in real life, one should always make allowances for the literary nature and the ridiculous register of his portraits. Nevertheless, no matter how fictional some details may well be, what is factual beyond doubt is the symbiosis that linked book publishing and street performances in early modern Italy at all levels of the two professions.

Such links between itinerant performers and print, and between written and oral culture, sometimes can be substantiated through material objects, and in particular through printed books. In the case of the 'frotulam' sung in Ferrara in 1509, the text in question was a very rare *Barzoleta*, an ephemeral booklet of four pages (just half a sheet of paper folded in two) surviving in two copies only, in London and Turin. In the ballad's last strophe the poet encourages the bystanders to buy a copy of the text at the end of the performance, by simply 'putting their hands in their pockets, digging out [the modest sum of] two *quattrini*, and handing them to Zoppino'.[57] Such encouragement is particularly striking because we know for certain that this specific cheap print really had been publicly sung and sold, but it is rather common for similar references to appear in the final lines of popular pamphlets in verse. Allusions to performance remain evident in the printed text, which might contain ritual expressions which hint at the commercial, gestural or performative dynamics of this profession. Teodoro Barbieri closed his verse account of the Battle of Marignano (1515) with a reference to the sale of the printed text aimed at a socially diverse audience: 'So to the poor man as to the *cittadino* / you have the story and I'll keep the *quattrino*'.[58] Likewise the Ferrarese street singer

[54] *Vno libretto volgare, con la dechiaratione de li dieci comandamenti, del credo, del Pater noster, con una breue annotatione del uiuere christiano, cose certamente vtili, & necessarie a cischeduno fidele christiano. Nouamente stampato* (Venice: Nicolò di Aristotile detto Zoppino, 1525). In the 1526 edition Luther's writing were attributed by Zoppino to Erasmus: *La declaratione delli Dieci Commandamenti, del Credo, del Pater Nostro, con vna breue annotatione del viuere christiano per Erasmo Rotherodamo vtile & necessaria a ciascuno fidele christiano. Historiata* (Venice: Nicolò di Aristotile detto Zoppino, 1526).

[55] Luigi Severi, *Sitibondo nel stampar de' libri: Niccolò Zoppino tra libro volgare, letteratura cortigiana e questione della lingua* (Manziana: Vecchiarelli, 2009), 79–81.

[56] Bernardino Ochino, *Dialogi sette del reverendo padre frate Bernardino Occhino senese generale di frati Capuzzini* (Venice, Niccolò Zoppino, 1542).

[57] 'Chi vorà sta frotelina [...] / metta mane ala scarsella: / dui quatrin tragam di quella, / al Zopin li ponga in mani', *Barzoleta nouamente composta de la mossa facta per Venetiani contra a lo illustrissimo signore Alphonso duca terzo de Ferrara* [1509], fol. Aii*v*.

[58] 'Ma se fallato hauesse nel mio dire / nobilissimi miei saui e discreto / cussi al pouero come al cittadino / voi hauete la storia e mi tiro il q[uat]rino', Teodoro Barbieri, *El fatto darme del christianissimo re di Franza contra Sguizari. Fatto a Meregnano appresso a Milano del MDXV adi XIII de septembre* (Venice, *c.* 1515).

Bighignol wrote: 'Whoever wants the story that I sing from the bench, / … let him bring the money and he shall have it'.[59] Among many other possible examples, there is at least one other which is directly connected with documented performances of the text. At the end of the eighth and last canto of his mock-chivalric *Libero del Rado Stizuxo* ('Book of the Furious Rado'), in fact, the renowned Venetian *buffone* Zuan Polo dismisses his audience with the advertisement of a special sale price: no more than two *marcelli* for a copy, and just a *mocenigo* for his friends (the joke being that the *mocenigo* was a coin worth twice as much as a *marcello*).[60] The first and only known edition of this work was published in Venice in 1533, and the author had held the privilege to print it since January 1532.[61] It is more than likely, therefore, that this edition was published by Zuan Polo himself, who would then sell it during his performances, even if its 46 leaves qualify it as a less ephemeral product than cheap pamphlets like Zoppino's *Barzoleta*. And indeed, this selling is a documented fact, recorded by the diarist Marin Sanudo on the 10th of August of that very year 1533, when he attended a performance in Venice's Piazza San Marco of Zuan Polo, who 'recited a text in front of everyone' and then 'peddled the printed work composed by him of *Rado Stizoso*', dressed 'in the guise of a poet with a laurel on his head', precisely as he is portrayed in the woodcut on the title-page (Fig. 2).[62] Although based on Polo's real appearance, his woodcut portrait is also strikingly similar to other illustrations that depicted public performances of oral poetry in printed books of the early sixteenth century, such as the one in fig. 3, which significantly was used both to represent the Latin poet Horace and the street singers described in Luigi Pulci's *Morgante*.[63] However, the example of Zuan Polo confirms that even when they did not become publishers in a general sense, piazza performers arranged to have their own works printed and sold copies of them in the streets. Such was also the case of famous poet-singers – or *canterini* – like Cristoforo l'Altissimo, as we shall see in the next section.

[59] 'Chi vol l'istoria la qual canto in banco, / […] porta soldi chi la vol avere', Bighignol, *Li horrendi e magnanimi fatti de l'ilustrissimo Alfonso duca di Ferrara contra l'armata de venetiani in Po del mile e cinque cento e noue del mese de decembro a giorni uintidoi* (Ferrara Baldassare Selli, 1510).

[60] 'Demilo vui per vostro chortexia / dui marcelli e portelo via. / E si xe qua qualche mio amigo / non voio laltro che vn mocenigo' [Ioan Paulavichio (*alias* Giovanni Paolo Liompardi)], *Libero del Rado stizuxo* (Venice: Bernardino Vitali, 1533), fol. Mi*v*. On this figure, see recently Chriscinda Henry, '*Alter Orpheus*. Masks of Virtuosity in Renaissance Portraits of Musical Improvisers', in *The* Cantastorie *in Renaissance Italy*, 238–58.

[61] Salzberg, *Ephemeral City*, 83.

[62] Marin Sanudo, *I Diarii*, ed. Rinaldo Fulin, Federico Stefani *et al.*, 58 vols. (Venice: F. Visentini, 1879–1903), Vol. 58, col. 542: 'Da poi venuto zoso el Conseio, havendo Zuan Polo piacevole buffon preparado un soler apresso el Relogio, vestito da poeta con zoia de lauro in testa, suo fiol et uno altro travestidi, fè un sermon a tuti et dete fuora l'opera composta per lui a stampa di Rado Stizoso, qual messe a soldi … l'una'.

[63] See Degl'Innocenti, *'Al suon di questa cetra'*, 65–77.

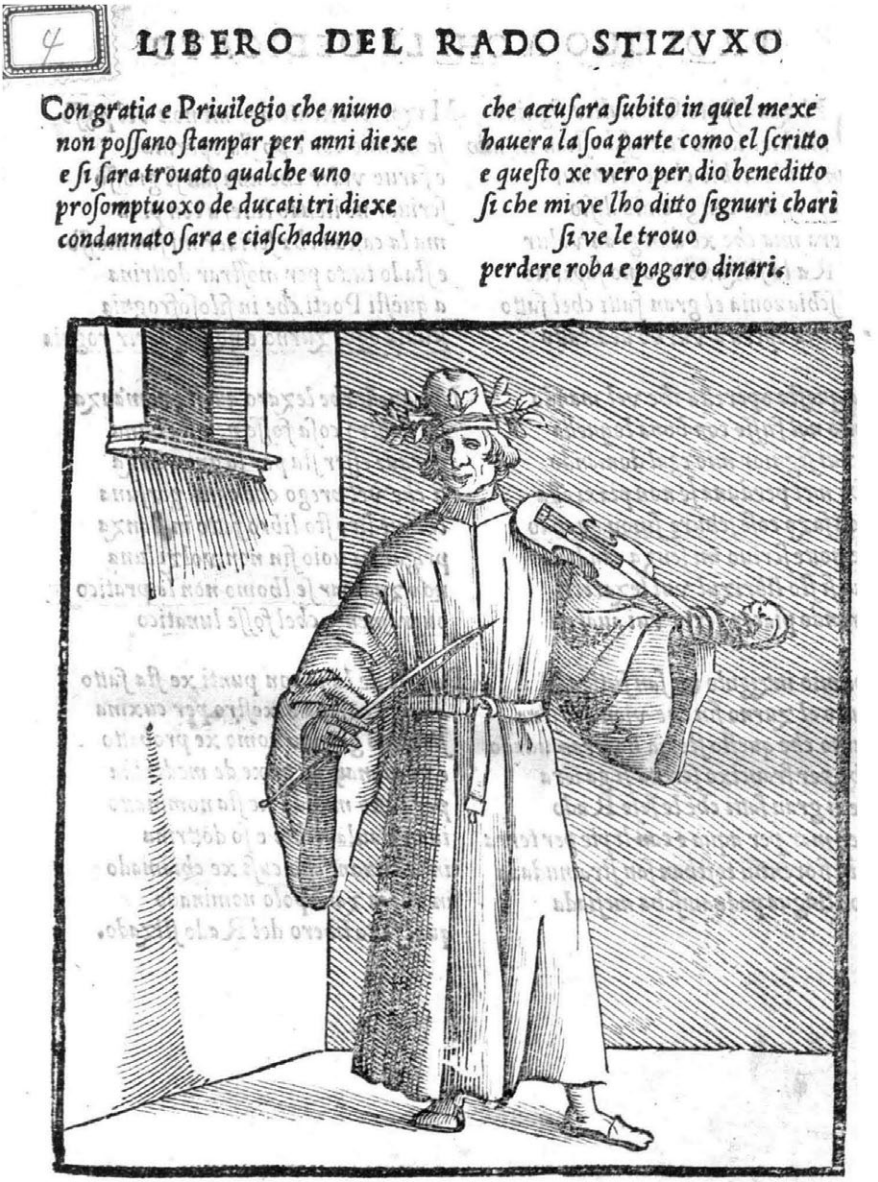

Fig. 2 *Zuan Polo*, 1533, woodcut (in Ioan Paulavichio (*alias* Giovanni Paolo Liompardi)], *Libero del Rado stizuxo* (Venice: Bernardino Vitali, 1533), frontispiece) [artwork in the public domain, photograph courtesy Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Universitätsbibliothek, 0014/W 4 Techn. 128]

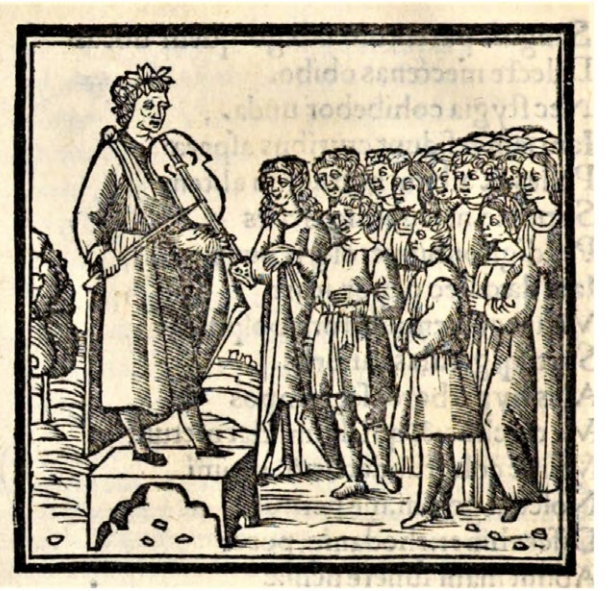

Fig. 3 *A poet-performer*, 1520, woodcut (in Horace, *Odarum libri quatuor, Epodi…* (Venice, Guglielmo da Fontaneto, 1520) [Staatliche Bibliothek Regensburg, 999/2Class.120, fol. h1*v*, urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11054222-0]

THE STREET SINGER AS POET

In 1564 Florence was decorated with ephemeral architecture to welcome Joanna of Austria, the daughter of the Emperor Ferdinand I of Habsburg, bride-to-be of the son of the Grand Duke Cosimo, Francesco de' Medici. A group of the greatest Tuscan poets was portrayed in a painting at Porta al Prato to celebrate the literary glory of Florence and its region, and along with Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio it seemed altogether natural to include Cristoforo 'l'Altissimo'.[64] Apparently, it made no difference that Altissimo had not been a refined writer but was instead a humble, albeit very famous, poeta *canterino*: a street performer. After all, his works, composed in the first quarter of the century, were still successfully published and reprinted.[65]

Already in his own lifetime Altissimo had received reverential dedications from well known publishers like Bernardo Giunta, who in 1515 called for the protection of the Florentine poet, very famous in his home town, in support of no less than the *Arcadia* by Sannazaro.[66] Today *Arcadia* is considered one of

[64] Rick Scorza, 'A New Drawing for the Florentine *Apparato* of 1565: Borghini, Butteri and the Tuscan Poets', *Burlington Magazine*, CXXVII (1985), 887–90.

[65] On the editions of the *Opere* and of the *Rotta di Ravenna* from the 1540s to the end of the century (and beyond), see Luca Degl'Innocenti, *I 'Reali' dell'Altissimo. Un ciclo di cantari fra oralità e scrittura* (Firenze: SEF, 2008), 32–42.

[66] *Ibid.*, 24–8.

the masterpieces of the Renaissance, while Altissimo is lucky to receive a fleeting mention in literary histories. However, in early sixteenth-century Florence, this perception could be inverted because the Florentine artist's enormous popularity in his city was actively fuelled, day after day, by his fêted performances in Piazza San Martino. His shows were inimitable, with his prodigious talent as a poetic improviser winning him the 'unique affection' of his entire audience – all those who, in the words of Giunta, 'possono in presentia el vostro improviso udire' ['can hear your improvisation in person'].[67]

Effectively, Altissimo was a street singer just like Coppa and Zoppino, one particularly talented at improvisation, like many before and after him. The greatest *canterino* of late fifteenth-century Florence, Antonio di Guido, for instance, was greatly admired for his ability to sing extemporaneous verse on various subjects, including learned praises of foreign rulers, guests of the Medici family.[68] Even if his contemporaries and the generations immediately after treated Altissimo on a par with the most cultured poets and included him among the ranks of the greatest authors, at the end of the day he was no different from the common street singers of Renaissance Italy. There is nothing in the little we know of his biography that induces us to distinguish him from the norm. Indeed, the fact itself that we know so little about him (starting from his family name, which remains obscured by his stage name superlative) is a typical trait of this category. Most of the time, all we have is a first name and that of a singer's city of origin, perhaps together with some other qualification, such as 'Orbo' or 'Cieco' – that is, 'blind' – like Niccolò Cieco da Arezzo, an extremely successful *canterino* of the early fifteenth century, equally acclaimed in Venice, Rome, Perugia, Siena, and Florence,[69] and Francesco Cieco da Firenze, who in the 1470s 'sang improvised chivalric tales in verse' ('canta de jesta in rima' 'alo improviso') at the court of the Este in Ferrara and who later published a long chivalric poem called *Persiano* (1493, reprinted at least six times in the sixteenth century).[70]

In the mid-1510s, Cristoforo l'Altissimo appears to have been the supreme example among Florentine street singers, to the extent of having access at his pleasure to the main public performance stage in the city, Piazza San Martino, for more than a year from the summer of 1514 to that of 1515 (and probably

[67] *Ibid.*, 26.

[68] For this and other examples, see Marco Villoresi, 'Panoramica sui poeti performativi d'età laurenziana', *Rassegna Europea di Letteratura Italiana*, 34 (2009), 11–33.

[69] See Irene Tani, 'Niccolò Cieco', in *DBI*, 78 (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 2013) and Laura Carnelos, 'Street Voices. The Role of Blind Performers in Early Modern Italy', in *The* Cantastorie *in Renaissance Italy*, 184–96.

[70] See Giulio Bertoni, 'Il Cieco da Ferrara e altri improvvisatori alla Corte d'Este', *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana*, XCIV (1929), 271–8; Reginald Foster French, 'The Identity of Francesco Cieco da Ferrara', *PMLA*, 52 (1937), 992–1004; Jane Everson, 'The Identity of Francesco Cieco da Ferrara', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, XLV (1983), 487–502; and Annalisa Perrotta, 'Serialità e reinterpretazione: il caso dell'*Altobello* e del *Persiano*', in Andrea Canova and Paola Vecchi Galli (eds.), *Boiardo, Ariosto e i libri di battaglia* (Novara, Interlinea, 2007), 107–26.

longer). It is also true that in May 1518 he managed to attract the attention, praise, and money of Marin Sanudo along with a myriad of other spectators, both locals and foreigners, who watched his performances in Piazza San Marco in Venice (where he appeared again in September 1519, and where he possibly remained). However, it is equally true that for the years before 1514 we only know that Cristoforo, before becoming l'Altissimo, worked as a sculptor, since in the extremely rare first edition of one of his *capitoli* in tercets he signed himself as 'Christophano sculptore'.[71] During the years from 1519 to 1526 (when he probably died), we can affirm only that in the early 1520s, when he published the first editions of his rhymes, an unspecified 'malignancy' ['pravità'] had forced him to stop exhibiting himself in public. Of this 'malignancy', the origin is unknown (envy of rivals; repression by the authorities – problems also experienced by Coppa and Zoppino; changes in fortune, or health problems?), nor whether it affected him in Florence or Venice. We know that his admirers included members of noble families, like Gualtieri Panciatichi from Pistoia,[72] but it is also on record that one of Altissimo's main sources of income was donations from spectators collected after his performances (solicited by him during the finale of some of his *cantari*, and confirmed by Sanudo for the Venetian performance, after which a 'confetiera' ['sweet bowl'] was circulated with considerable success). The references to his poverty that Cristoforo, like many of his colleagues, scattered throughout his works thus had a solid foundation in truth.[73]

Nevertheless, there is at least one thing about Altissimo that makes him unique. The *cantari* in *ottava rima* recited by him 'in improvisation' in Florence in 1514–15 were actually handed down in a printed edition, whose ample text corresponds closely to what the street singer effectively recited in the streets.[74] Printed posthumously in Venice in 1534, the *Primo libro de' Reali* presents, upon close inspection, a series of oddities and anomalies that can be explained only by admitting that these *cantari*, as the printing editor warns, were transcribed live by a number of the poet's fans during his shows.[75] This explains, among other things, why there are references to the performer's gestures without which some of his verbal descriptions cannot be understood, intentional contradictions, embarrassing 'bloopers', and even some details of the dates of forthcoming events, making it possible to reconstruct much of the

[71] Degl'Innocenti, 'The Singing Voice', 326.

[72] Degl'Innocenti, *I 'Reali' dell'Altissimo*, 57–8, note 87.

[73] On this topic see Rosa Salzberg, '"Poverty Makes Me Invisible": Street Singers and Hard Times in Italian Renaissance Cities', in *The* Cantastorie *in Renaissance Italy*, 212–24.

[74] Probably the most popular form of oral poetry in Italy from the mid-fourteenth century onward, the *cantari* were narrative texts in *ottava rima*, typically about forty stanzas long, performed in public – as well as written down and then printed – on the most various topics, including chivalric tales, ancient and recent battles, current affairs, legends, religious stories, moral topics, *novelle* and fairy tales and much more.

[75] See Degl'Innocenti, *I 'Reali' dell'Altissimo*, 97–114 and 202–9, and Degl'Innocenti, *'Al suon di questa cetra'*, 57–63.

calendar of his shows: a series of ninety-four events, distributed over a period of almost fourteen months.

In the *cantari* of the *Primo libro,* Altissimo draws heavily on his abundant thematic and stylistic repertoire, which, like that of many of his colleagues, ranges from chivalrous battles to storms at sea, from political orations to amorous laments, from moral precepts and dilemmas to techniques for the use of explosives, and includes aspects of astrology, medicine, theology, ancient and contemporary history, moral philosophy, nautical skills, politics, etc. In order to entertain and instruct his variegated audience, the street singer displayed an equal mastery of countless subjects, exhibiting a versatile and omnivorous culture that respected no boundaries between the refined and popular. It was a proudly vernacular culture, ignorant of Greek and Latin, but nevertheless very interested in classical traditions accessed through Medieval and humanist vulgarization. Some of Altissimo's sources might have been oral, but it is also certain that the majority of his octaves, when examined closely, are found to match written texts. The underlying plot is provided by the popular prose romance on the *Reali di Francia* written about a century earlier by Andrea da Barberino, upon which the street singer embroidered extensively with additions and digressions modelled on street performance traditions, on Dante, as well as on the leading authors of the previous Florentine generation: poets like Angelo Poliziano and Luigi Pulci, and even the humanist Marsilio Ficino.

The faithfulness with which the printed text of the *Primo libro* corresponds to the street recitations also makes it possible to see in action, almost live, the performing and compositional art of the street singer, and to uncover a few tricks of the trade. Each of Altissimo's *cantare* compositions is a variable mixture of writings and oral performance, including sequences (verses or strophes) deriving from written prose or verse models, which were probably rehearsed, as well as sequences that appear improvised. These ranged freely over recurrent subjects like battles and duels, or managed theatrical turning points like preambles and envoys, by making use of impromptu compositional techniques typical of the tradition of oral poetry, like formulas and themes. In the almost 29,000 verses of the *Primo libro* there are countless repetitions of hemistichs, verses, and other brief textual segments either identical or derived from a matching formulaic scheme in which alternative words are combined, permutated, and adapted.[76] There are also entire almost identical octaves and octave sequences that the street singer re-uses on different occasions, in the *Primo libro* or other works, to describe a storm at sea, the different stages of a battle, or to recount a moral monologue, an amorous theme, or a dissertation on the human soul. These are set pieces that the poet had to carefully elaborate and memorize so that they were ready to be recycled when opportune. They are what experts in oral composition call 'themes' and which the early modern critics already acknowledged as among the secrets of the art of

[76] For an example of formulaic patterns, see Degl'Innocenti, *I 'Reali' dell'Altissimo*, 101.

improvisation.[77] Adopting the notion of semi-improvisation is thus a legitimate suggestion.[78] The street singer follows the storyline of a written plot, but he is also capable of instantly composing dozens of verses on any given subject. To do this he needs a wide poetic repertoire, versatile and ready to use, and he must be able to manage it with a well trained memory, a natural sense of metre and rhythm, and an agile skill in invention. He has to be able to remember and combine, invent and sing at the same time.

Certainly, Altissimo was first and foremost a poet, his case being exemplary for highlighting the literary aspect of the street singing identity. This makes it even more telling that he also exhibits many other facets of that polyhedric identity. An obvious example is the musical aspect. Unlike many of his colleagues,[79] it appears that Altissimo did not personally play an instrument – be this viola, *cetra*, or *lira da braccio* – to accompany his shows, but entrusted this role to an assistant, to whom he occasionally gave directions, and whose presence is also confirmed by Marin Sanudo. His *cantari* were, logically, always sung and accompanied by music. Singing allowed the significant possibility of slowing down and speeding up, lingering on notes and embellishments, or stealing a few syllables, all valuable devices while improvising the textual composition. In particular, as already seen for Coppa and Zoppino, it was precisely the songs and the music, the voice of the street singer and the sound of the instruments, that attracted and enchanted the public, fascinating them with the stories and interesting them in the goods for sale, regardless of real poetic or material merits. It would appear that Altissimo became particularly popular precisely for his singing skills, if he had, as a contemporary described him, 'una gran copia […] di genti intorno / che del cantare a lui sol dava il vanto' ['a great crowd of people around him, who hailed him as the best at singing'].[80]

In the *Primo libro* and other texts there are clear traces of the considerable theatrical talents of the street singer, who was not just a poet and singer but also an actor. On the one hand, the frequent references to his gestures are clear evidence that the performer mimed the actions he was describing, while on the other hand the abundance of direct discourse, both monologues and dialogues, illustrates his propensity for impersonating diverse characters and giving them a voice, to the extent that even God is impersonated in a duet

[77] See *Ibid.*, 92–5 and 241–71.

[78] See Peter Burke, 'Oral and Manuscript Cultures in Early Modern Italy', in *Interactions between Orality and Writing*, 21–30.

[79] See Blake Wilson, 'The *Cantastorie/Canterino/Cantimbanco* as Musician', in *The* Cantastorie *in Renaissance Italy*, 154–70.

[80] Filippo Oriolo, *Il Monte Parnaso*, 17.77–8; for a recent edition of this text, see Francesca Bortoletti (ed.), *L'Attore del Parnaso. Profili di attori-musici e drammaturgie d'occasione* (Milano and Udine: Mimesis, 2012), 451–8.

with the poet, in a brilliant invocation in which Altissimo typically asks for divine inspiration, and God rather unexpectedly answers and incites him.[81]

It is not known whether Altissimo was also a charlatan, exploiting his talent as an entertainer in order to sell goods. On multiple occasions he certainly demonstrates an extraordinary familiarity with the most typical science of charlatans, medicine. For example, he occasionally exploits certain hyperbolic blows dealt by knights in battle to minutely describe the anatomy of the wounded organs, listing and commenting all the parts of an eye run through by a lance, or the layers of a brain sliced by a sword. Elsewhere he plays on certain superstitious tricks to amplify the effects of a medicine, and when one of the protagonists is about to die of a broken heart, the street singer takes the opportunity to teach his public some cardiac physiology. It is fair to note, however, that this interest in anatomy could have derived from his training as an artist rather than a vocation as a charlatan.[82] However, it is certain that Altissimo hawked at least one product after his street recitations: his poetry. He sold it not only in oral form, paid by collection, but also in the form of printed books, published at his own expense and peddled to the audience.

As far as we know, Altissimo was not a genuine charlatan publisher, in the sense that he did not publish and market the works of others, but he was certainly his own publisher and he frequently had direct relations with the publishing world, both in Florence and Venice. As early as March 1515 Bernardo Giunta encouraged him to exploit printing to spread his works and his own fame far beyond the boundaries of Florence, and the following year, on 23 January 1516, the Signoria, or government of Florence, awarded Altissimo the right to print his short war poem on the *Rotta di Ravenna*, presumably published the same year. On 1 September 1519 the Venetian Senate conceded Altissimo the printing privilege for a mysterious *Historia de Anthenore* and a collection of his *Capitoli, Sonetti et Stantie*, published in the early 1520s in both Venice and Florence in editions clearly prepared by the author.[83]

Italian street singers catalyzed a very productive synergy between oral poetry and printed books. This is brilliantly epitomized at the end of the Venetian edition of Altissimo's love poems,[84] where he published a short poem entitled *Liber de se ipso loquitur* (*'The book talks about itself'*). In its three stanzas, Altissimo identifies himself and his own poetry with the book as a physical object and plays on the possible double meaning of *libro* (which, like the Latin *liber*, could

[81] Cristoforo l'Altissimo, 'Inuocatione. L'infermo rihauere la sanitate' in *Opere* (Firenze: per Bartolomeo S.[er] M[artelli]. ad istantia di Marco Peri libraio, 1555), fols. B8r–C1r. Significantly, a similar idea is exploited in a famous and hilarious performance of the early 1980s of the Tuscan comedian Roberto Benigni ('Guido, accidenti a te!'), whose art is not by chance rooted in the tradition of the impromptu poets who were still popular, until a few decades ago, in the area of Florence and Prato.

[82] For the close affinity with Leonardo da Vinci, artist, anatomist and poet-improviser, see Degl'Innocenti, 'The Singing Voice', 326–9.

[83] See Degl'Innocenti, *I 'Reali' dell'Altissimo*, 27 and 30.

[84] *Opera dello Altissimo poeta fiorentino, poeta laureato, cioè stramotti, sonetti, capitoli, epigrammi* (Venice: [Guglielmo da Fontaneto, 1520]), fol. I4r.

mean both 'book' and 'free', *libero*), and thus celebrates books as powerful agents of free thought and expression.

It is worth reading in its entirety, but the most impressive stanza is without doubt the second:

> Ognun mi pò squarciar, mordere e volvere,
> ma nissun mi può tôr l'eterno vivere.
> Ferro, ardor, vento, sol, pioggia, omin' e polvere,
> perch'io mi fo rimprimere e riscrivere,
> forza non han di potermi dissolvere.
> Quando le membre mie son rotte e livere,
> per le immense virtù ch'io porto e speculo,
> come Fenice torno al fin del seculo.
>
> *[Anyone may abuse me with rip, bite and bend,*
> *but none my eternal life can end.*
> *Man, wind, sun, rain, flame, iron and dust*
> *in my destruction all are repulsed,*
> *for I revive, reprinted and rewritten.*
> *When my limbs are slack and broken,*
> *on the strength of the high virtues I bear and inspire,*
> *like a Phoenix at time's end I arise from fire.*]

This is a sort of hymn to the immortality of books. Notwithstanding an overwhelming list of adversaries (the list rightly including the worst of all enemies of books, mankind), and in spite of all the injuries that can be inflicted, books never die because at the end of their life cycle, like the Phoenix, they are born again.

Such confidence (or perhaps, overconfidence) in the resilience of books could hardly have been inspired by manuscripts, considering that once these have been assailed and destroyed by 'Man, wind, sun, rain, flame, iron and dust', there is no way of bringing them back to life. The same, moreover, is true for any single copy of a printed edition.

What Altissimo had in mind was instead an entire print run, considered as an entity comprising hundreds of identical individuals. Any one of them could be destroyed, but a book's overall survival was much less likely to be at risk. As soon as a copy is reprinted (the poet explicitly uses 'rimprimere', 'to reprint'), hundreds of new copies will guarantee the eternal life of a book (or rather, of the content of its pages).

This triumphal and defiant celebration of the eternal life of printed books could not but stand in sharp contrast with the inherently ephemeral nature of the oral poet's performances. When publishing and selling their books, street singers were conscious and confident of the capacity of these objects to disseminate and preserve their words through space and time.

They probably also thought that books would never represent an alternative to their performances, since printed pages lacked so many of their most compelling oral, visual, and social ingredients. If this was true, then they were wrong, because printed books were ultimately destined to marginalise the oral art of the street singers. However, there is no doubt that it is precisely thanks to the early alliance between *cantimpanca* performers and printed books that today we can still read their words and try to revive an echo of their voices.

Street singers of early modern Italy always turn out to be elusive and indefinable, no matter whether we frame large groups of them within a wide shot, performing distinct and yet cognate activities shoulder to shoulder in a piazza, a marketplace, a banquet or festival, or whether we zoom in to a close-up of a particularly interesting individual, whose features appear – at first sight – more stable and easier to clarify. Coppa, Zoppino, Altissimo and their peers always affirm their multitalented, dynamic, ever-changing nature and their ability to balance opposites, revealing themselves to be both champions of memorisation and wizards of creativity, pure artists and entrepreneurial sellers, public and secret, truth-tellers and fakers, doctors and charlatans, thinkers and acrobats, protesters and eulogists, crowd-pleasers and marginals, sought-after by patrons and wanted by authorities, custodians of oral poetry and heralds of printed books; at once singers of the past, reporters of the present, and tellers of the future. Renaissance Italian culture and society found in the *cantimpanca* both its epitome and its exception.

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