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Review of *Retorica della diffrazione: Bembo, Aretino, Giulio Romano e Tasso: Letteratura e scena cortigiana*,  
by Fabio Finotti

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Fabio Finotti. *Retorica della diffrazione: Bembo, Aretino, Giulio Romano e Tasso: letteratura e scena cortigiana.*

Biblioteca di "Lettere Italiane" Studi e Testi 63. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2004. 463 pp. + 20 b/w pls. index. append. illus. bibl. €46. ISBN: 88-222-5384-1.

Finotti divides this rich, erudite study into three large parts, each dedicated to a different literary genre: Bembo's lyrics, Aretino's theater, and Tasso's bucolic tale. The volume has two valuable appendices that confirm Finotti's innovative interpretive work as well as fill a serious modern lacuna: the first publishes Bembo's poetic juvenalia in the original, and the second supplies the first Italian translation (with notes). *Ab initio* we must highlight the important translations from Latin, not only in these final pages, but also throughout the entire volume, where numerous original citations are presented in Italian in the notes. The ample bibliography includes Latin and Italian works, as well as critical works that underscore the author's interdisciplinary approach: the "retorica della diffrazione." To mark "the rhetoric of diffraction," Finotti reconstructs the tradition in theater, painting, sculpture, prints, engravings, and miniatures from which the satirical fable in poetry proceeds, confirming how satirical and licentious taste became one of the two most relevant driving forces of the Cinquecento and beyond.

In the first part, "La scena lirica: Pietro Bembo," the "rhetoric of diffraction" is clarified with an interpretation of the "hedonistic classicism" of *De Aetna* (1496) and *Asolani* (1505). It addresses the tendency at the time toward both rhetoric and a centrifugal polyphony that increased on a multilingual and multistylistic plane in *De Aetna* and a multitonal plane in *Asolani*, a polyphony that ultimately guarantees a solidified linguistic system. "Amo infatti la poesia non meno della retorica" (translation from Latin, 7), Bembo wrote to Angelo Gabriele, intending to substitute the poetry-philosophy pairing with poetry-rhetoric in response to the negative conception that Pico elaborated in his well-known letter to Ermolao Barbaro. The lack of a translation of Bembo's poems, Finotti shows, has skewed their interpretation toward Neoplatonism instead of the revival of the Dionysian theme of the Renaissance in northern Italy. One of the most important contributions of the volume is the differentiation of philosophical-literary paths among different geographical locations. Bembo in *De Aetna* abandons certain Quattrocento concepts: the rhetoric regarding *negotium* of Venetian civic humanism and the subordination of poetry to philosophy of Florentine philosophical humanism. *De Aetna* praises *otium*, elegant conversation, pleasing with rhetoric, *licet* (license), and the religion of letters.

For an accurate reconstruction of these two texts by Bembo, Finotti could have paid more attention to the place of women in Cinquecento letters, as readers, listeners, and authors of texts precisely in those cities with which Finotti is concerned: Florence, Venice, Padua, Ferrara, and Mantua. The female public contributed not only to the shift of letters as regards *delectare*, but also to that polyphony of voices, multiplicity of points of view, and theoretical eclecticism that defined, as Finotti shows well, the “diffrazione della verità” in the Cinquecento.

In the second part of the volume, entitled “Aretino e Castiglione: il Marescalco e il Cortegiano,” Finotti discusses Aretino’s theatrical writings within, and not against, the civility of the court for the “insistenti omaggi” (the paradigm of the prank, the pun) in the *Marescalco*. The presence together of “convenienza” and “disconvenienza” (not only natural but, above all, cultural), of model and anti-model, of experimental and classical, or rather “dei diversi e dei contrari” (187) places this theatrical text in the area of “the rhetoric of diffraction” so prevalent in the culture of the Cinquecento. Such dissemination of tones guides the final part of the volume, “La scena satiresca e l’Aminta del Tasso,” dedicated to the pastoral tale. Like Aretino’s comedy, the satirical *Arcadia* is introduced in the Cinquecento court not by avoiding but by reflecting the contradictions, the illusions, and the dreams of the court, according to the final chorus of the first act of *Aminta*: “S’ei piace, ei lice.” Here the “rhetoric of diffraction” is defined in the isotopy between courtly honor — then classicist reputation — and formal and thematic licentiousness — then aesthetic and hedonistic lasciviousness — provoking that centrifugal tendency with which Tasso takes account of the style of the “favola pastorale” and, I might add, of the epic. For Finotti, the drunkenness of the bacchanal becomes “internal” to the very culture of the Renaissance, thanks to the encounter between the bucolic and the urban. The bucolic tale marks the lasciviousness and joy which are indispensable elements of creativity and which sanction the birth of a new literary genre between tragedy and comedy. The substitution of satyrs with shepherds does not privilege the unrestrained lust of the former but the erotic attraction of the latter toward a particular nymph, lessening the sentimentalizing and humanizing suitable for the central thematic core of the new literary genre. The dialectic between honor and license — “la retorica della diffrazione” — assumes a new connotation in how much Aminta gathers to himself the affect of the shepherds and the instinctiveness of the satyrs. Indicative of this new “diffracted” dimension are Finotti’s reflections on the male gaze of the shepherd who looks at Silvia tied to a tree, naked: “ignuda come nacque, ed a legarla fune era il suo crine: il suo crine medesimo in mille nodi / a la pianta era avvolto” (3:1233–37). The eroticism that animates the scene is immediately mitigated by the shame of the nymph “disdegnosa e vergognosa,” who lowers her gaze and “l delicato seno, quanto potea torcendosi, celava” (3:1268–71). The description is modeled on the topos, abundant in literature, of male voyeurism and female *simplicitas* that strengthens the desire to penetrate the character viewed.

The schizophrenia between duty and license, control and instinct, story and literature, *docere* and *delectare*, perfectly condenses the “rhetoric of diffraction” that

Finotti's book discusses: the consistent theme of Cinquecento civility that erupted into different camps of learning and different literary genres, and acquired distinct connotations in specific geographical areas — from the theme of the faun in miniatures and sculpture to satirical fables in poetry, theater, painting, and sculpture in the Padua-Veneto region, to that connection between duty and license that arose from the old category of anti-Renaissance.

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