



Singing Poetry in Renaissance Florence: The Cantasi Come Tradition (1375-1550) with CD-ROM.
Italian Medieval and Renaissance Studies 9 by Blake Wilson

Review by: JO ANN CAVALLO

Italica, Vol. 86, No. 4 (Winter 2009), pp. 746-748

Published by: [American Association of Teachers of Italian](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20750662>

Accessed: 15/04/2014 15:58

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



American Association of Teachers of Italian is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Italica*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

a shepherdess who is “più che la stella – bella,” both echoing Wisdom 7:29, quoted above. Finally, there is a large body of recent North American scholarship on female aspects of the divine which, however heterodox, ought to be referenced; let me just mention Barbara Newman’s book *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: U of Penn P, 2003).

Rossini’s book culminates in an extended analysis of the pageant of revelation in *Purgatorio* 28–33 (he also inventories Dante’s allusions in these cantos to the Biblical Wisdom Books in an extremely useful “appendice ragionata” with which the book concludes). As he points out, Dante’s personification of the books of the Bible allows him to insert Beatrice at the apex of salvation history, thus asserting her Christological status. Rossini observes that Beatrice, in the procession, “è corpo ma è anche testo” (76), and that the *Vita Nova* is thus surreptitiously included among the sacred scriptures. He also argues importantly that the procession itself is based on the typical liturgical framework for a medieval mass on a holiday. The most beautiful and significant passages in the book, in my mind, occur in the final chapter, when he speaks of Dante’s text as performing the function of an icon or devotional object, fabricated by a human artist, yet intended not only to impose an ethical obligation on its audience, but also to generate an authentic visionary experience, according to the Dionysian and Gregorian concept of *invisibilia per visibilia demonstrare*. Dante’s symbolic procession, Rossini ventures, might be taken as the literary double of Byzantine icons which, according to the Russian Orthodox theologian Pavel Florensky, allow the viewer to contemplate, with the help of art—as if through a window—not an image of the Virgin Mary, but Mary herself, in person, face to face. Rossini speculates in conclusion that Dante too, in representing his own personal “incontro nella carne col Mistero,” may have hoped to facilitate a divine encounter “per Grazia” also in the minds of his readers (152).

I am left wondering, however, if many of the book’s lay readers will ever reach its beautiful conclusion. Rossini’s prose is hard-going for a number of reasons: his inclusion of extensive Latin quotations (sometimes several pages long) without translations, his use of specialized, technical vocabulary (he titles chapter 5, for instance, “L’anakefalàiosis di Beatrice a *Purg.* 28–33: Una cristologia soteriologica di taglio sapienziale”) and assumption of the reader’s familiarity with patristic sources, his own protracted paragraphs, and so forth. Even I, who have also written many long pages on Beatrice’s analogical relation to Biblical Wisdom, sometimes had difficulty following his argument. But in placing Sapientia at the center of Dante’s theology, this book performs an important function and—to *dantisti*, at least—will be well worth the slog.

OLIVIA HOLMES
Binghamton University

Blake Wilson. *Singing Poetry in Renaissance Florence: The Cantasi Come Tradition (1375–1550)* with CD-ROM. Italian Medieval and Renaissance Studies 9. Florence: Olschki, 2009.

How does one reconstruct a musical tradition from centuries earlier whose sources typically do not transmit any music? In order to systematically examine the practice of composing and singing sacred poetry in Renaissance Florence, Blake Wilson spent a decade uncovering 54 manuscripts and 39 prints in American and European libraries that contain devotional poems (*laude*) indicating the popular song tune to be used for each (*cantasi come*. . .). Combining his own findings with the work of previous scholars, principally Italian musicologists, he then created a database consisting of 1836 records, with links joining the incipits of each *lauda* and its secular source. The resulting volume, as the author succinctly states, “explores the patterns and trends revealed by the database regarding the creation, dissemination and performance of music and poetry in Florence during a nearly 200-year period” (8). Wilson’s study is structured chrono-

logically, with three chapters corresponding to distinct periods in the development of the *cantasi come* tradition. Each chapter explores the sources, musical and poetic repertory, and various performance venues, as well as the city's evolving social and political circumstances within its specific time frame.

A brief first chapter (41–54) covering the late Trecento period (1375–1430) examines a small number of manuscripts with the oldest surviving *laude* indicating *cantasi come* rubrics. Wilson finds that although these *laude*, apparently for private devotional use, are not consistently linked to a *cantasi come* setting, they do show some recycling of popular polyphonic music. Moreover, his comparison of lyrics demonstrates that sacred *laude* were often closely modeled on the texts of their secular counterparts: “the overall poetic forms, involving madrigals and *ballata* variants, were strictly maintained, and most involved the retention and manipulation of end-rhymes, key words, entire phrases, or even rhetorical elements by means of which the sacred text might be understood to interact directly with, and re-interpret semantic elements of its secular model” (49). The texts he cites provide striking examples of the transformation of courtly and pastoral themes into a religious message, redefining concepts such as love, faith, suffering, wisdom, and happiness. In one particularly illustrative example, the opening of a madrigal is changed from “Apress’un fiume chiaro / donne e donzelle ballavan d’intorno / ad un perlato di bei fiore adorno” to “Appresso al volto chiaro / de questa Maestà, ch’è sempre adorno, / vergini belle gli stavan d’intorno” (50–51).

An extensive second chapter (55–143), entitled “The Belcari Era” for the importance of Feo Belcari’s poetry, comprises the years 1430–1510. Wilson has found the greatest number of extant manuscripts dating from this period, with increasingly varied poetic forms as well as a broad array of foreign *cantasi come* models. The resulting picture, according to the author, has implications for our view of Florentine cultural practices under the Medici since it “stands very much at odds with the prevailing historical view of a Medicean Florentine culture growing more privatized and preemptive, and suggests an ongoing vitality of the traditional, pluralistic devotional culture where Savonarola would later find a base of support” (55). In the course of the chapter Wilson discusses the importance of the Venetian poet Leonardo Giustinian as well as Florence’s interaction with other musical cultures, from Franco-Flemish to Neapolitan and northern Italian. In the pages devoted to literary considerations, the author shows how *lauda* poets continued to adopt the rhyme-words, language, themes, and structure used in the secular songs originally set to the same melody, thus making the subversion of meaning all the more evident. The section on carnival and May songs in the context of Florentine festivals (120–7) addresses the ongoing appeal of Poliziano’s *Ben venga Maggio* as a *cantasi come* model.

A final chapter (145–87) on sung poetry in the early sixteenth century (1510–1550) covers the influence of Savonarola on its practice, its concentration in Dominican convents, and its eventual decline. Wilson finds that during this period Florentine *lauda* singing distances itself from both the lay venues and the more cosmopolitan repertoire that had characterized it in the previous century. This chapter also devotes attention to polyphony from northern Italy, the early sixteenth-century carnival song, and the madrigal.

Four appendices provide 1) a reconstruction of *Laude facte e composte da più persone spirituali* (1485/1486), 2) Leonardo Giustinian and *giustiniane* in the *cantasi come* sources, 3) Feo Belcari *laude* and their *cantasi come* models, and 4) the d’Albizo *laudario*. The volume also contains alphabetical indices of *lauda* and *cantasi come* incipits in the database. The CD-ROM version of the database, which runs in File Maker Pro for Mac or PC, offers the possibility of searching in nine fields: *cantasi come* title/poetic form, poet, language, composer, music sources, *lauda* title/poetic form, *lauda* poet, *cantasi come* sources, and notes providing relevant bibliography.

Wilson’s study will be most relevant to musicologists specializing in early modern Europe since the vibrant *cantasi come* tradition in Florence is part of a broader practice of

setting sacred songs to popular melodies documented elsewhere in Italy as well as in France, Spain, and Germany. The sections of most interest for Italian literary studies would be his presentation and comparison of the original secular lyrics and their sacred counterparts. In addition, his findings offer valuable data about social and cultural practices, since the shifts in musico-poetic trends correspond to changes in Florence's political framework and reveal instances of exchanges and borrowing across borders, both within the Italian peninsula and beyond the Alps.

JO ANN CAVALLO
Columbia University

Paolo Cherchi, Micaela Rinaldi e Mariangela Tempera, eds. *Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinzio gentiluomo ferrarese*. Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2008.

Il volume raccoglie nove saggi che traggono spunto da un convegno su Giraldi Cinzio tenutosi nel dicembre 2005 a Ferrara, città dove Giraldi Cinzio nacque, insegnò per un lungo periodo, e tornò malato alla fine della vita.

Il primo saggio, di Luigi Pepe, apre utilmente il volume coprendo in dettaglio il percorso di Giraldi Cinzio professore a Ferrara, Mondovì, Torino e Pavia. Il quadro, stringato ma ricco di dati, mette in luce una rete di contatti che Giraldi Cinzio poteva avere formato attraverso le varie cattedre ricoperte, e tocca diverse dinamiche economiche, culturali e politiche che hanno segnato in vario modo il destino dell'autore. Si affaccia qui sulla scena la figura di Renata di Valois (poi rievocata anche in altri saggi), duchessa di Ferrara la cui tolleranza verso la Riforma innescherà una serie di reazioni cattoliche che avranno grande peso sulla vita culturale della città, e dunque anche sulle scelte e posizioni di Giraldi Cinzio, «strenu[o] difensor[e] dell'ortodossia» sebbene in «opposizione ai metodi di repressione violenta, con la quale la Chiesa reagiva alla riforma protestante» (9).

Segue un saggio di Angela Maria Andrisano incentrato sulla *Lettera overo discorso sovra il comporre le satire atte alla scena*, dove la studiosa sottolinea l'approccio aperto con cui Giraldi Cinzio sapeva bilanciare tradizione classica e pratica del presente, e «attento ad una corretta esegesi del testo aristotelico, egli non esitò ad allontanarsi, da uomo di teatro, da quelle prescrizioni che giudicava inadatte ai tempi» (19). Da qui nasce un'interessante considerazione sul valore "strategico" del testo teorico giraldiano, che approntato in relazione alla stesura della tragicommedia *Egle* serviva a Giraldi Cinzio per giustificare «a posteriori la sua singolare operazione di recupero di un genere dimenticato, ma potenzialmente vitale» (19), in un'operazione non dissimile da quella compiuta nel *Discorso dei romanzi*, che, come mostra il commento dell'edizione Benedetti-Monorchio-Musacchio, era da comprendersi anche quale legittimazione teorica del proprio *Ercole*.

Di argomento almeno in parte teatrale è anche il saggio successivo, forse l'ultima fatica di Walter Moretti, deceduto durante la preparazione del volume. Viene qui discussa la trattazione della vita di corte e dei suoi meccanismi di potere nella tragedia *Orbecche* e nel *Discorso intorno al servire un gran Principe*, entrambe testimonianze di una visione fondamentalmente pessimistica in cui i precedenti di Della Casa e Castiglione sembrano corretti in senso più cinicamente concreto da reminiscenze del *Principe* machiavelliano; una visione in cui però «l'«onesto» è il limite invalicabile per il gentiluomo [. . .], al quale è assegnato un compito difensivo, in una realtà intricata, al di fuori di ogni grande disegno utopistico» (33).

Si allontana parzialmente dal soggetto principale del libro il saggio di Giovanni Ricci sull'erudito Lilio Gregorio Giraldi, parente di grado imprecisato di Giraldi Cinzio. Tra le opere dell' "altro Giraldi" Ricci evidenzia in maniera particolare il *De sepulchris*, uno studio sulle consuetudini funebri di vari popoli antichi e moderni, che potrebbe avere offerto qualche spunto per gli aspetti macabri della produzione tragica giraldiana, e che