

Censoring Petrarch:
responses of sixteenth-century censors and Venetian printers to the Roman Index

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Centuries after the publication of his poetry, the study of the Renaissance continues to depend on the contributions of Petrarch to the Italian literary and humanist tradition. His poetic success during the Italian Renaissance had already been established by the sixteenth century due to the efforts of humanist Pietro Bembo and the Petrarchan model was imitated by several poets, including women poets who could participate in the literary genre through Petrarch's style. In the sixteenth century alone, 148 editions of Petrarch's vernacular lyrics were published by Italian printing houses, which is not surprising considering his popularity.¹ Given his poetic success and literary influence in Italy, Petrarch seems an unlikely author to be prohibited by the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, yet Petrarch's poems were included amongst those banned works that were placed on the *Roman Index*. By analyzing numerous editions of Petrarch's vernacular lyrics, this essay will trace the responses from censors, printers, and owners to the censorship of Petrarch during the sixteenth century, culminating in the study of a particularly fascinating codex printed by Gabriele Giolito de Ferrari, which demonstrates how material culture can be shaped by human agency. The effect of censorship laws on print ultimately impacted the tastes and genres of the period, shifting literary trends and audience preferences at the end of the sixteenth century.

The invention of the printing press gradually changed the nature of printing and publishing in Europe, but as books became easier and cheaper to produce, they also became more of a concern for institutions like the Church. Information and ideas could now circulate without regulation by authorities, triggering the Catholic Church to respond by publishing an *Index of Prohibited Books* in 1559. The Protestant Reformation, whose followers produced several polemics against the Church, prompted tighter restrictions on what could and could not

¹ Rhiannon Daniels, "Printing Petrarch in the Mid-Cinquecento: Giolito, Vellutello, and Collaborative Authorship." *Italian Studies* 75, no. 1 (2020): 21.

be published. Petrarch's works, along with other vernacular authors such as Boccaccio and Ariosto, had been under scrutiny early on for their genre of poetry and prose, but two features suggest that the prohibition of Petrarch's sonnets was determined by Counter-Reformation politics: first, the year of the ban; and second, the subject matter of the poems.

Consulting the *Index* in order to determine which works were prohibited is only one method of finding evidence of censorship and often does not provide enough information. This fact becomes apparent when examining the censorship of Petrarch's Babylonian sonnets, a group of three (RVF 136-138), and then four (RVF 114), poems that harshly criticized the Avignon Papacy. Petrarch was unforgiving in his attacks against the papacy, which had moved from Rome to Avignon at the beginning of the fourteenth century. His poems and letters expressed his condemnation, calling the Avignon papacy "greedy Babylon", "false and wicked Babylon", "nest of treachery", "fountain of sorrow", and so on.² The poems were banned as early as 1559, but not because they were placed on the *Index*. Protestant Pier Paolo Vergerio's book, *Alcuni importanti luochi*³, is a polemic against the Church that particularly mentions and underlines three sonnets from Petrarch, now known as his Babylonian sonnets. His second edition was placed on the *Index* in 1559, coinciding with the censorship of Petrarch's sonnets and indicating that Petrarch's association with Vergerio's book is what resulted in the prohibition of his poems.⁴ As Maria Luisa Cerrón Puga writes, the rules on prohibited books initially impacted Vergerio's work, but it

² Francesco Petrarca. "Fiamma dal ciel.", "L'avara Babilonia.", "Fontana di dolore." *Petrarch's Songbook: Rerum Vulgarum Fragmenta*, translated by James Wyatt Cook, (New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies: 1996), 198-201.

³ The full title of the work is "*Alcuni importanti luochi tradotti fuor delle epistole latine di M. Francesco Petrarca, che fu canonico di Padova, archidiacono di Parma, e laureato in Campidoglio. Con tre sonetti e con XVIII Stanze del Berna che fu secretario di papa Clemente VII. Ove vedessi che opinione hebber ambidue della Romana chiesa*"

⁴ Jennifer Helm, *Poetry and Censorship in Counter-Reformation Italy*, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 13.

had consequences for the distribution and publishing of Petrarch as well.⁵ Therefore, the decision to ban the three poems was political, responding to the threat of the appropriation of Petrarch in Protestant works. Furthermore, Jennifer Helm emphasizes another work's role in the censorship of Petrarch and other vernacular authors. The treatise *Pro Lingua Latina*, written by the priest Gabriele Barrio, argues for the superiority of the Latin language over the vernacular language which had, at that point, permeated literary circles and linguistic debates about the *questione della lingua* on the peninsula. Barrio also suggests reforming the humanist education system, including a strict censorship of vernacular poetry that would prohibit those popular vernacular authors of the day, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Ariosto, among others.⁶ As Helm suggests, it is likely that Barrio's work and his connections to the papal courts brought an awareness towards the dangerous content of vernacular poetry that intersected with the adoption of an Italian literary figure in a movement that jeopardized the authority of an Italian institution.⁷ The Roman Catholic Church could not afford to admit that an Italian author's works contradicted, questioned, or criticized the teachings of the Church. As a result of Vergerio's book, Petrarch was banned for thirty years until 1590 when his three sonnets, joined by a fourth, were explicitly listed on the *Index*. However, this prohibition did not last long, as he was removed in 1596, indicating the difficulties the Curia had in navigating the censorship of a literary figure like Petrarch.

The Index of Prohibited Books was more than a list of books and texts forbidden to Roman Catholics. In 1563, the rules and procedures finalized at the Council of Trent were

⁵ María Luisa Cerrón Puga, "Nel labirinto di Babilonia. Vergerio artefice della censura di Petrarca." *Annali della Scuola normale superiore di Pisa, Classe di lettere e filosofia* 1, no. 2 (2009): 389.

⁶ Helm, *Poetry and Censorship*, 11.

⁷ Helm, *Poetry and Censorship*, 14.

codified into the laws surrounding censorship. In my discussion of Petrarch and vernacular poetry, it is important to note Rule VII, which states:

“Books which professedly deal with, narrate or teach things *lascivious* or *obscene* are absolutely prohibited, since not only the matter of faith but also that of morals, which are usually easily corrupted through the reading of such books, must be taken into consideration, and those who possess them are to be severely punished by the bishops.”⁸ (emphasis mine)

The vague wording of Rule VII left more than one censor questioning the ambiguity of the law; in fact, the Duke of Savoy even questioned the meaning itself and the problems it posed.⁹ Helm suggests that this vagueness was intentional and could be used by the Church “to intimidate authors, readers, editors, printers, and book sellers [...] to make them more cautious in their production”.¹⁰ I would argue, however, that this rule could have the opposite effect, leading to negligent interpretations that defined profane works as acceptable for print or for reading. Petrarch’s poems could certainly be interpreted as lascivious or obscene as he writes about earthly love towards his lady, Laura. It is clear when comparing two forms of censorship in the same book that the censor of one particular codex, published in 1542 by Francesco Bindoni and Maffeo Pasini, felt this way. His censorship of the Babylonian sonnets is

extremely careless, demonstrated by a large X across the pages of prohibited poems that does nothing by way of legibility (fig. 1). On the other hand, four lines of Canto 23 are crossed out

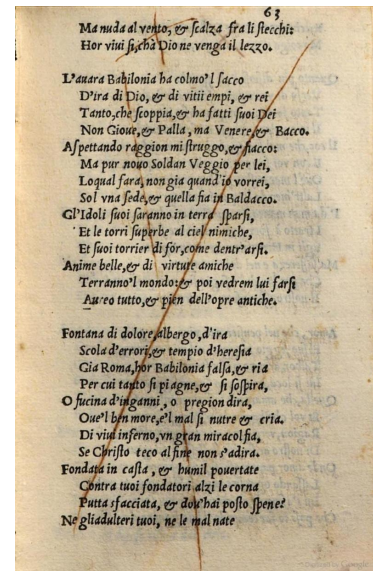


Figure 1. 1542 Bindoni and Pasini codex.

⁸ “Rules on Prohibited Books (1563)” in Denis Janz, *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 366.

⁹ Helm, *Poetry and Censorship*, 43.

¹⁰ Helm, *Poetry and Censorship*, 43-44.

with ink to the point of illegibility (fig. 2). There was a serious effort to remove these lines of poetry due to the censor’s disapproving interpretation of the four lines: “Io, perché d’altra vista

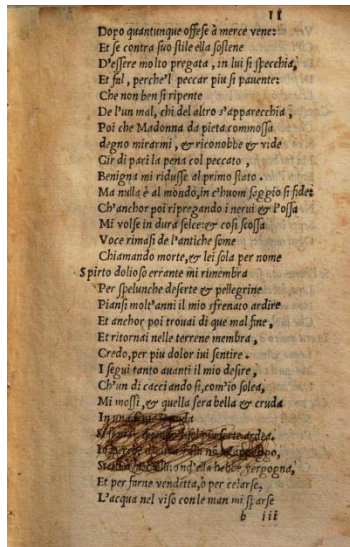


Figure 2. Bindoni-Pasini codex.

and the text differently, leaving no traces of the poem. The censorship of one codex, a 1550 edition from Giolito, has crossed out the verses in ink completely (fig. 3); the censorship



Figure 4. 1574 Vidalì codex.

of another codex, a 1574 edition of Giacomo Vidalì, has actually cut out the pages with the poems (fig. 4). The former method, inking out the poems, was more common than cutting pages because it removed *only* the offending passages. As is the case in one codex which will be discussed later, the censor decided to cut the pages from the quire, resulting in the removal of two non-offending poems, *Sennuccio*, *i’vo che sappi*, and *Qui, dove mezzo son* (RVF 112-13). Expurgation was meant to

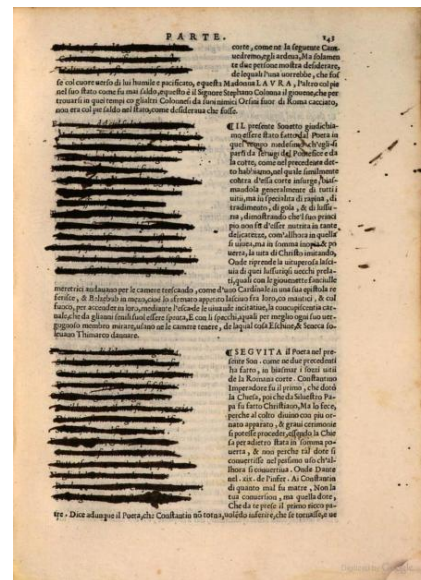


Figure 3. 1550 Giolito codex.

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11 English translation: “I, because no other site so pleases me, stood and gazed: she covered in her shame”

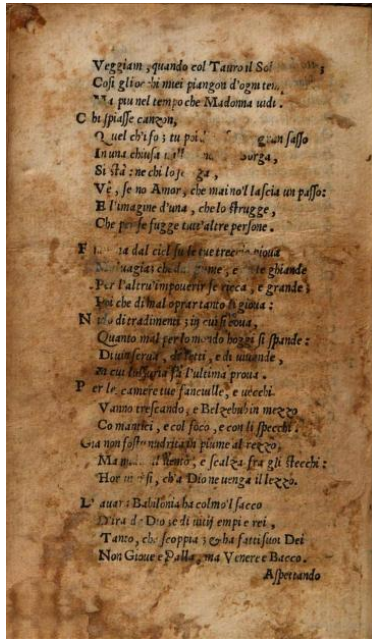


Figure 5. 1550 Giolito codex.

only delete those prohibited texts within a work in order to purify and save the entire work from the *Index*. Other methods included using glue and paper to cover over the prohibited sonnets (fig. 5).

Besides the text itself, there were two more factors that the censor considered: the intention of the author and the role of the reader.¹² The former refers to the purpose of the text: *what* is the function of the work and *how* does the author present this function to his reader? Understanding the intent of the author was crucial in understanding how a text would be received by the reader. In the author's preface, Boccaccio outlines that he writes

out of compassion, especially for those women plagued by the

pains of love.¹³ Simply put, the stories of the *Decameron* are a distraction, lacking any intention to morally instruct the reader. Therefore, Boccaccio was not useful in the studies of a devout Catholic or to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Besides its depictions of corrupt clergymen and explicitly sexual tales, this factor was also considered when banning Boccaccio in 1559. The education and intelligence of the reader was also questioned in the judgement of a text. The quality of the person determined their interpretation of the text; therefore, a work of vernacular poetry could be potentially harmful in the hands of a simple or uneducated reader. Vincenzo Bonardo, secretary to the Congregation of the Index, believed that those vernacular and spiritual works “full of errors and heresies” were read by “persone Idiote et Semplici”.¹⁴

¹² For a discussion on the concept and role of the “imagined reader” in Counter-Reformation censorship, see Helm, *Poetry and Censorship*, 34-40

¹³ Giovanni Boccaccio, Peter Bondanella, and Mark Musa, *The Decameron: a New Translation: 21 Novelle, Contemporary Reactions, Modern Criticism*, (New York: Norton, 1977), 1-3.

¹⁴ Helm, *Poetry and Censorship*, 35.

Bonardo links the ownership of heretical books with unlearned people, making a suggestion about the nature of those vernacular readers, who were generally lower to middle class laypeople.

Through *expurgatio*, censors were able to purify the text and remove the offensive passages, thus saving an entire body of work from censorship. After discussing the role of the censor in rectifying texts, the next place to look is inside the printing house. Printers were involved in censorship of a different kind, as they reformed the text *prior* to its publication

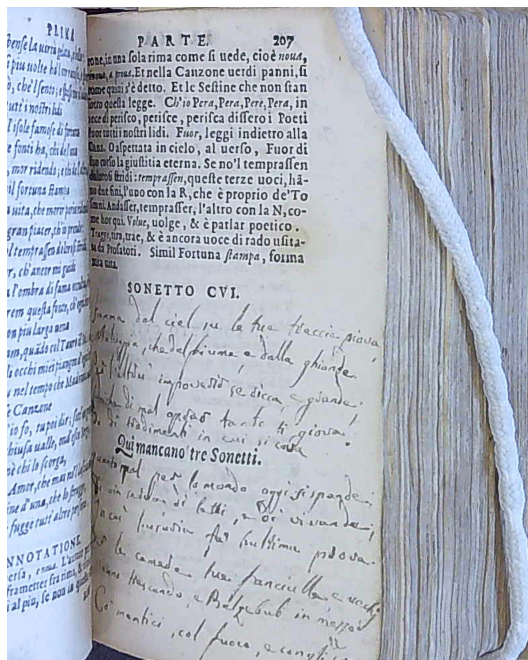


Figure 6. Angelieri's 1586 edition.

whereas censors sought out extant works. The Italian printer Giorgio Angelieri did not include the Babylonian sonnets in his 1586 edition of *Il Petrarca*, but in their place, he left empty pages with the poem's respective numbering (fig. 6) and the note, 'qui mancano tre sonetti' (three sonnets are missing here). Angelieri boldly supplied the reader with both the knowledge that something was missing as well as the space to write in the missing poems. Indeed, the

owner of the book made the decision to rewrite the poems on the blank pages. Besides standing up to censorship laws, this could suggest an economic motive as well: by leaving space and knowledge about the poems, Angelieri was leaving it up to the reader to decide whether they wanted to include the poems. Petrarch's largest markets in Europe were Venice, Lyon, and Basel.¹⁵ Venice experienced harsher censorship within the book world for obvious reasons; in contrast, Lyon was a city that experienced a fair amount

¹⁵ Peter Stallybrass, "Petrarch and Babylon: Censoring and Uncensoring the Rime, 1559–1651." In *For the Sake of Learning* 2016, 18:586.

of autonomy, and Basel was a Protestant town. So, perhaps Angelieri did not have only Italian readers in mind, but his broader markets where the prohibition would be less strict and the desire to read these poems was higher. Alessandro Griffio, an Italian printer in Venice, approached the censorship of Petrarch carefully: he completely removed any trace of the poems from his 1582 edition, both in the index and in the collection. His compliance suggests that his markets were more local or that he had more reason to fear the arrival of censors in his shop. Otherwise, it may have been a question of morals: as a devout Catholic, perhaps he saw the removal of the poems as the morally responsible response.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize a codex published in 1557 by Gabriele Giolito de Ferrari, a highly prominent publisher of vernacular texts in the sixteenth century. Giolito, head of his family's printing press in Venice, advanced the print trade in early modern Italy by publishing vernacular works. From 1542 to 1560, he published 24 editions of *Il Petrarca*. The 1557 edition was one of his final editions before he decided to stop printing Petrarch's works, a decision motivated by the rules surrounding censorship. The small pocketbook of poetry is a duodecimo, a less expensive book size that was commonly produced by Giolito to attract the emerging market of the lower and middle class. In particular, this codex highlights the intersection of varying responses to the censorship of Petrarch: first, from the institution, from the censor, and finally, from the reader. Because the edition was published in 1557, Giolito, as the printer, had no way of responding to the prohibition through this edition. Therefore, there are no revisions that attempt to reform the text. We do know, however, that Giolito was quick to comply with the changing moral climate in the second half of the sixteenth century: he stopped printing Boccaccio in 1552, and Ariosto and Petrarch in 1560. This reaction is quite surprising

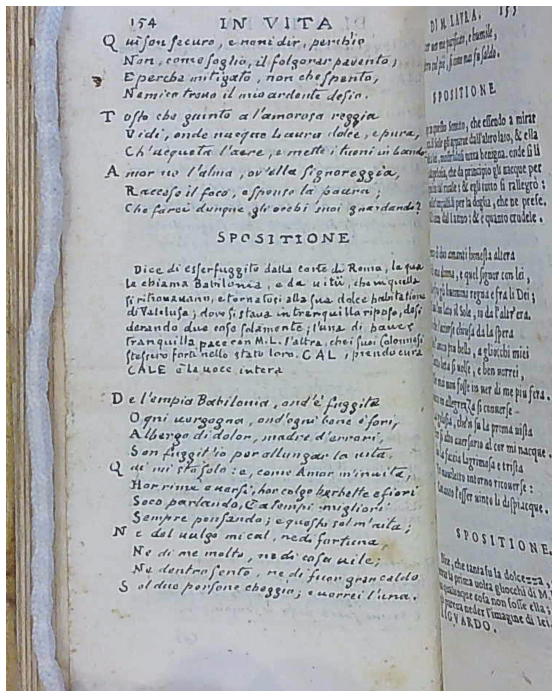


Figure 8. Rewritten page from 1557 codex, showing Sonnet 114.

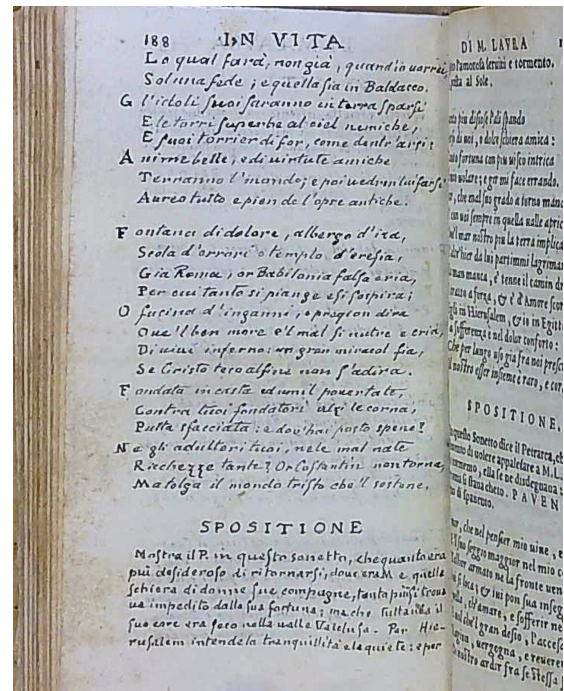


Figure 9. Rewritten page from 1557 codex, showing Sonnet 138.

considering the success he had publishing these works and the fact that only three of Petrarch's sonnets were prohibited in 1559. Inside the codex we can find four pages of rewritten poetry (fig. 8 and 9), suggesting the removal of the original pages. Indeed, the pages were not left intentionally blank, as we saw in Angelieri's edition. A further inspection of the pages reveals a slant that is inconsistent, suggesting these pages were glued *onto* the quire. Furthermore, if Giolito had left the pages blank, there would have been no reason to delete Sonnets 112 and 113, which were removed because the page was cut out. The response from the censor, then, was quite extreme and uncommon in practices of *expurgatio*.¹⁶ Most censors avoided cutting pages from books because it would remove other non-offending poems. The year of removal may have come at a time when the Church cracked down on censorship of banned books and texts. It is likely that the removal of the pages occurred around 1590, when Sonnet 114 was also placed on

¹⁶ Peter Stallybrass, "Petrarch and Babylon: Censoring and Uncensoring the Rime, 1559–1651." In *For the Sake of Learning* 2016, 18:588.

the *Index*. It is also clear that the owner wanted these poems in his or her *Il Petrarca*, and somehow had access to these removed pages, either through another copy of the same edition or circulating pages of the poems. The unique censorship of this codex highlights the nature of the print book in early modern Europe. The existence of a dynamic relationship between various parties— the Church, the printer, the censor, and the owner— culminates in the intersection of these varying responses to censorship. Print created a culture wherein the interactions of humans impacted the technology itself, suggesting the role of human agency in shaping sixteenth century print culture.

Before 1560, Giolito's sales were overwhelmingly associated with vernacular works, especially Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, and Petrarch's *Il Petrarca*.¹⁷ In the very early years of the ban, Giolito seems to have found little reason for the censorship to disturb his success. But after 1560, there was a shift in the production of his printing house from vernacular to religious texts that aligned with the shift in the religious attitudes of the late sixteenth century. Giolito belonged to that group of Venetian printers who avoided secular vernacular literature altogether, no longer printing the works that gave him his reputation and instead turning to devotional texts. The shift in Giolito's printing strategies from the earlier decades of his career to after 1560 demonstrates the impact of the *Index* on print book culture throughout Italy as one can assume that Giolito was not the only printer to comply with the rules, as highlighted above in the example of Griffio. Scholars often highlight the inconsistency and inefficiency of the censorship laws, but here is an example of a printer whose business decisions were directly impacted by the prohibition. Giolito's response differs from Angelieri's and Griffio's since his production of problematic texts ceased completely, suggesting his desire to

¹⁷ Angela Nuovo and Chris Coppens, *I Giolito e la stampa: nell'Italia del XVI secolo*, (Genève: Droz, 2005) 457.

avoid any troubling encounters with the Curia. As Venetian printers began to avoid secular works, the demands around book culture began to shift from vernacular to devotional works, indicating the direct effect of censorship of the literary trends at the end of the period. By the early seventeenth century, authors began using Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* as a model of the epic over Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, highlighting a moral revision in the world of literature. The 1557 codex is an incredible source in the study of sixteenth-century print and the prohibition of Petrarch's vernacular lyrics. *Il Petrarca* survived the censorship of its content, even after the removal of its pages, but Giolito's press did not: his sons took over after his death, but the printing house closed in 1606.

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