

# Poliziano's *Fabula di Orfeo*: a *Contaminatio* of Classical and Vernacular Themes

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**Resumen.** La *Fábula de Orfeo* de Poliziano es un ejemplo excepcional de las transformaciones que se dan en la tradición clásica. Es una amalgama o *contaminatio*, principalmente de Virgilio y Ovidio, Petrarca, la égloga vernácula, y otros muchos elementos. Se ha discutido ampliamente a qué género pertenece, cuestión que yo considero como sin demasiado sentido, debido a su carácter *sui generis*, una forma muy original de poesía dramática. Poliziano es un poeta diestro tanto en latín como en italiano, y en este caso él acierta en crear un extraordinario pastiche entre las dos, en una brillante ilustración de su concepción artística de la *docta varietas*. El objeto de este artículo es determinar y describir los diversos registros de la dicción y el estilo que hacen la pieza tan atractiva.

**Palabras clave:** *fábula; contaminatio; poesía dramática.*

**Summary.** Poliziano's *Fabula di Orfeo* is a unique example of the transformations of the classical tradition. It is an amalgam or *contaminatio*, principally of Virgil and Ovid, Petrarch, vernacular rustic eclogue, and numerous other elements. There has been much discussion concerning what genre it belongs to, which I consider rather pointless, for it is *sui generis*, a very original form of dramatic poetry. Poliziano is a skilled poet in both Latin and Italian, and he succeeds here in creating a marvelous pastiche of the two in a brilliant illustration of his artistic creed of *docta varietas*. The aim of the paper is to record and describe the various registers of diction and style that make the piece so engaging.

**Key words:** *fabula; contaminatio; dramatic poetry.*

Poliziano's brief *fabula* marks a unique moment in the history of Italian theatre as the first play in the vernacular to treat a profane subject. As Giosuè Carducci said in the preface to his edition of the poem: «sia dunque fra le altre

lodi d'Angelo Poliziano anche questa dell'aver fatto secolare il teatro.»<sup>1</sup> During the second half of the Quattrocento, in the Tuscan area especially, the *sacra rappresentazione* held the stage. It had developed from the early *lauda* into a literary genre in its own right, characterized by elaborate scenic effects and elevated diction, with a corresponding diminution in spontaneity and passion<sup>2</sup>. Pagan themes were relegated to pageants, scenographic presentations, and tableaux vivants that were performed in the palaces of the rich on the occasion of weddings or betrothals or to celebrate the arrival of visiting dignitaries. It was for such a festive occasion, according to the most commonly accepted opinion, that Poliziano composed his entertainment: a double *fidanzamento*, that of Clara Gonzaga, daughter of Marchese Federico Gonzaga, with Gilbert de Montpensier, and, of more political importance, the betrothal of Isabella d'Este to the first-born of the Marchese, Francesco. The play was commissioned by Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga, as we learn from a prefatory letter to the first printed edition addressed to Carlo Canale, a courtier of the Cardinal<sup>3</sup>.

Although the exact date is much disputed, it is now generally accepted that the play was written some time during or after carnival in the year 1480<sup>4</sup>. Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti, who has produced an excellent critical edition of the play<sup>5</sup>, argues for a much earlier date, but none of her arguments are entirely conclusive, and to assign this extremely polished, even virtuosic composition to the very early years of the writer seems quite implausible<sup>6</sup>. The year 1480 ac-

<sup>1</sup> *Le stanze, l'Orfeo e le rime di Messer Angelo Ambrogini Poliziano*, ed. Giosuè Carducci (Firenze: Barbèra, 1863), p. lxiii.

<sup>2</sup> On the *sacra rappresentazione* cf. LUIGI BANFI, *Sacre rappresentazioni del Quattrocento* (Torino: UTET, 1968); *Teatro e culture della rappresentazione: lo spettacolo in Italia nel Quattrocento* ed. Raimondo Guarini (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988); NERIDA NEWBEGIN ed. *Nuovo corpus di sacre rappresentazioni fiorentine* (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> The letter is contained in many of the manuscripts from Northern Italy and in the Bologna *editio princeps*. In it Poliziano says simply that the work was composed «a requisizione del nostro reverendissimo Cardinale Mantuano.» ANTONIA TISSONI BENVENUTI, *L'Orfeo del Poliziano* (Padova: Antenore, 1986), p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. GIOVANNI BATTISTA PICOTTI, «Sulla data dell'Orfeo e delle Stanze di Agnolo Poliziano,» *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei*, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filosofiche, ser. V, xxiii (1914), 319-357. Also in Picotti, *Ricerche umanistiche* (Firenze: Nuova Italia, 1955), pp. 87-105.

<sup>5</sup> ANTONIA TISSONI BENVENUTI, *L'Orfeo del Poliziano*. Her text is based on MS Riccardiana 2723, but she also gives the text of the Bologna *editio princeps* of 1494, save for the correction of obvious errors, since it is that text which has been read up to the present day.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-70, and TISSONI BENVENUTI, «Il viaggio d'Isabella d'Este a Mantova nel giugno 1480 e la datazione dell'Orfeo del Poliziano,» *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 158 (1981), 368-383. A great part of her argument hinges on the belief that a period of mourning of one year was required after the death of Margherita, wife of the Marchese Federico Gonzaga, brother of Francesco. Vittore Branca, commenting on the article mentioned above, says: «L'autrice dimostra che Isabella non era in grado per ragioni di salute di intervenire a feste nel maggio-giugno 1480: e rilevando che per il decesso della marchesa Margherita non era probabile si tenessero feste grandiose e che il cardinal Francesco risiedeva ufficialmente a Bologna, tende a negare che l'Orfeo possa essere rappresentato nel primo semestre dell'80 a Mantova. Ma né l'uno né l'altro sono argomenti validi e decisivi: i lutti a corte non erano così lunghi né escludevano rappresentazioni» VITTORE BRANCA, *Poliziano e l'umanesimo della parola* (Torino: Einaudi, 1983), p. 70, n. 17. Another prominent Poliziano scholar similarly argues against Tis-

cords well with the events in the life of Poliziano at this time. After the Pazzi conspiracy and the continued machinations of Pope Sixtus IV against Florence, Lorenzo il Magnifico set out for Naples to form an alliance with the Aragon King Ferdinand I, who had formerly been an ally of the Pope. In the months preceding this journey, the Medici family had taken refuge in various villas, with Poliziano acting as the resident tutor of young Piero. During this period Clarice, Lorenzo's rather shrewish wife, became very hostile to Poliziano, whom she accused of giving too much emphasis to the pagan classics in the education of her son. In the face of these adverse circumstances, Poliziano travelled to the courts of the North, to Emilia, Lombardy and Venice<sup>7</sup>. Vittore Branca introduces the very reasonable thesis that in his associations with the Venetian aristocracy the Florentine exile must have assisted at the splendid mythological feasts that took place in the grandiose *palazzi* on the Grand Canal. These were the famous *momarie*, a Venetian word related to the English mummery, scenic moments from mythology enacted by mimes and masked figures, often accompanied by music<sup>8</sup>. The very names *fabula* and *festa*, as the play is referred to in the first *didascalia*, or stage direction, are related to the *momarie*, as are the choreographic and musical accompaniments.

Besides the problems of chronology there is also much controversy concerning the classification of this singular composition. It has been regarded as a profane version of the *sacra rappresentazione*, retaining many elements of its supposed model<sup>9</sup>; in the manuscripts it is often described as a pastoral or a comedy, and in a later *rifacimento*, in which more attention is paid to classical canons of the theatre, it is given the Latin title, *Orphaei tragedia*. The author of the critical edition, Tissoni Benvenuti, would like to consider the play as a unique example of the old satyr drama that often accompanied the performance of Greek tragedies<sup>10</sup>. It is true, as she points out, that Poliziano makes reference

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soni's dating in his review of her edition: «[l'argomento] di maggior peso, che cioè il periodo in cui il Poliziano fu a Mantova (e in cui avrebbe scritto l'*Orfeo*) rientri nell'anno di lutto per la morte di Margherita Gonzaga, non sembra decisivo, poiché la *fabula* è d'intonazione prevalentemente tragica e quindi tale da poter essere rappresentata in un anno di lutto.» EMILIO BIGI, *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 165 (1988), p. 466.

<sup>7</sup> A letter from Poliziano to Lorenzo of many years later, 19 March 1490, documents this troubled period: «*Repulsus a te etiam cum ignominia, Laurenti, dicebar: quid facerem istic a tua non solum domo sed etiam familiaritate praesidio eiectus cum tu praesertim peregre esses, neque quidquam iam esset in quo tibi meum officium praestare possem? Statui mihi ergo ab istorum oculis paulisper aliquo concedendum Aemiliamque et Cisalpinæ Galliae ac Venetiae oram animi causa peragravi Mantuaeque plurimum fui.*»

<sup>8</sup> BRANCA, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> One of the chief advocates of this thesis is Mario Martelli, who writes: «La *Fabula di Orfeo*, infatti, nonostante il parere contrario di alcuni studiosi, io non saprei vedere altrimenti che come specularmente collegata alla sacra rappresentazione e come risposta classicheggiante e profana—ma portatrice di un messaggio religioso—alla riforma teatrale perseguita, in accordo con Sant'Antonino Pierozzi, dal Belcari.» MARIO MARTELLI, *Angelo Poliziano. Storia e metastoria* (Lecce: Conte editore, 1995), pp. 93-94. The author goes so far as to compare Orpheus' descent to the underground with Christ's descent into Limbo!

<sup>10</sup> TISSONI BENVENUTI, *op. cit.*, chapter V, pp. 89-103.

to this genre in several places in his works, especially in his university course on the *Sylvae* of Statius and more systematically in chapter 28 of the *Centuria Secunda* of the *Miscellaneae*. In the latter work he clearly defines the genre as intermediate between tragedy and comedy and describes it as having rustic gods. He is indebted to Horace's description of the satyr play at *Ars poetica*, 220-50, where the Roman poet gives precepts of style for this type of spectacle. Poliziano makes explicit reference, for the first time, it seems, to Euripides *Cyclops* as the only satyr play to have come down to us. This is still not to say, however, that Poliziano decided to produce his own satyr drama. There are many aspects of the play that would militate against such a theory. It seems to me that if Poliziano wished to resurrect the ancient form he would have used satyrs and not mere shepherds. Tissoni gives Euripides' *Cyclops* as a precedent but it is simply fortuitous that in this one surviving satyr play the protagonist happens to be a shepherd, albeit a rather unusual one. In place of minor rustic deities there are the rulers of the underworld, Pluto and Proserpina, and the Furies. Another missing element is the prescribed happy ending. We surely cannot consider, as she does, that the Bacchic revel at the end celebrating the dismemberment of the hero constitutes a true *lieto fine*. The scene of the drunken Bacchantes may owe something to the scene of drunkenness in Euripides' *Cyclops*, but I don't think it cancels out the gruesome *sparagmos* that immediately preceded it. Over and above all these differences there are stylistic considerations. Horace stipulates a middle style, somewhere between low and elevated, for the satyr drama. What we have in Poliziano's play is a mixture of styles, a plurilinguism that ranges from excerpts in Latin to frequent echoes of Petrarchan language, to the style of popular poetry and the sporadic use of dialect, in a word, the *docta varietas* or learned pastiche of various styles that is his guiding artistic principle.

In the end it is useless to attempt to assign this work to any one established category. A more genial and apposite approach, in my opinion, is to regard the poem as an original amalgam of poetry and music, «alternanza di declamazione puramente verbale e canto», which is the view of Nino Pirrotta, a noted Sicilian musicologist, who taught for some time at Harvard<sup>11</sup>. He agrees with the assessment of Romain Rolland, novelist, playwright and music critic, who described the *Orfeo* as «l'opéra avant l'opéra.»<sup>12</sup> It is no coincidence that the first writers of Italian opera, Jacopo Peri, Giulio Caccini, and Claudio Monteverdi, also chose Orpheus as their theme. There are many similarities to be found between the *recitar cantando* of these early operas and the many lyric monologues of Poliziano's play. In the *didascalie* given in the manuscripts and in the first published edition, there is frequent mention of singing and musical accompaniment both for Aristaeus, the first shepherd to appear on the scene, and for Orpheus.

<sup>11</sup> NINO PIRROTTA, *Li due Orfei* (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> ROMAIN ROLLAND, *Musiciens d'autrefois* (Paris: Hachette, 1927), p. 21.

The heterogeneous character of Poliziano's *fabula* is also reflected in its very free structure, which resembles not so much a dramatic presentation as the panels of a frieze, as in those very lacunaria, or sunken panel ceiling, of the famous Camera degli Sposi in Mantova designed by Mantegna in 1474, in which the myth of Orpheus is also depicted<sup>13</sup>. One scene blends into another with no continuity. There is hardly any action, but brusque changes of poetic meter serve to effect sudden changes of register, as the scene shifts from an opening pastoral scene, to a woodland, to the precincts of the classical underworld.

The play opens with a prologue spoken by the god Mercury. Such a presentation by a deity has good classical precedent. There is no need to trace it to the angelic prologue of the *sacra rappresentazione* except that it may be meant as parody. The god rehearses the plot in a very terse summary, but not without some implicit commentary on the action. The theme of excessive love, which will be Orpheus' downfall, is prefigured in the story of another demi-god, Aristaeus, son of Apollo and the nymph, Cyrene. In Virgil's telling of the tale, and nowhere else in ancient literature, it is he who causes Eurydice's death. This is an integral part of the story in Virgil's version. Both male figures are cultural heroes, Aristaeus in the sphere of agriculture, especially bee-keeping, while Orpheus symbolizes the civilizing force of poetry and music<sup>14</sup>. Poliziano shows his fidelity to the master, as it were, by retaining this incident and portraying Aristaeus as a simple shepherd, not as a deity. Mercury's words describing Eurydice fleeing from Aristaeus along the water's edge, «fuggendo lei vicino all' acque» (7)<sup>15</sup> closely reproduces a line from Virgil; «Illa quidem dum te fugeret per flumina praeceps.» (*Georg.* IV, 457). To express the sentiments of love and passion Poliziano draws on the vernacular tradition. Aristaeus' love is characterized as *sfrenato ardore*, a direct reminiscence of Petrarch's *sfrenato ardore* (*Canzoniere* XXIII, 143), with the substitution of a noun for a verb for the sake of the rhyme with *amore*, but retaining the original rhythmic position of the phrase, a convention observed in such poetic borrowings. There is also a deliberate echo of Ovid's «effreno captus amore» (*Met* IV, 465) in this blend of classical and vernacular sources. To describe Orpheus' cruel destiny the poet resorts to a Petrarchan phrase, «suo caso acerbo e reo» (*Canzoniere* CLXXII, 9). Recounting Orpheus' fatal turning around Poliziano uses the humble adjective *poverel* of his protagonist instead of Virgil's grave *miserabilis* in accordance with the lower style he has elected. In conclusion, Mercury informs the audience of Orpheus' resolve to shun the company of women and his subsequent vengeful murder by women, an element of both Virgil's and Ovid's narration, but there is no specific mention in the prologue of Orpheus as the initiator of homosexual love, as at the end of the play.

From this rather solemn prologue spoken by a god, Poliziano suddenly sur-

<sup>13</sup> PIRROTTA, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. GIAN BIAGIO CONTE, *The Rhetoric of Imitation*, trans. Charles Segal (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), ch. 4, «Aristaeus, Orpheus and the *Georgies*,» pp. 130-140.

<sup>15</sup> The text of *Orfeo* is cited according to the edition of Tissoni Benvenuti.

prises his audience with the advent of a cruel shepherd speaking a comic dialect, which would certainly have delighted the listeners. The *didascalia* calls the interloper a *pastore schiavone*, that is, an immigrant from Dalmatia, (whence the name Riva degli Schiavoni in Venice). Imitation of foreign accents and linguistic distortions, or *storpature*, have always been a rich source of stage humor. The foreign shepherd announces to the audience:

State tenta, bragata! Bono argurio,  
ché di cievol in terra vien Marcurio. (15-16)

*Tenta* for *attenta*, *bragata* for *brigata*, *argurio* for *augurio*, *Marcurio* for *Mercurio* and the strange *cievol* for *cielo* provide a vivid dialectal coloring.

For his dramatization of the Orpheus tale Poliziano invents a pastoral ambience peopled by shepherds engaged in the conventional rustic conversations and competitive singing that characterize the poems of Theocritus and Virgil. This was particularly suited to the Mantova setting, where the spirit of Virgil was ever present. It was also a genre with which Poliziano was familiar from his fellow poets in Florence. Bernardo Pulci had translated Virgil's *Eclogues* into Italian *terza rima* and Girolamo Benivieni had experimented in this genre, not to speak of the numerous eclogues of several Sienese poets later collected in the *Bucoliche elegantissimamente composte di vari autori* (Florence: Miscomini, 1482). He signals the change to a pastoral setting by passing from the initial *ottave* to the *terzine* typical of the vernacular eclogues. In this bucolic cadre Poliziano chooses to imitate the Third Eclogue of the rather obscure poet, Calpurnius, a slavish imitator of Virgil who lived at the time of Nero. One wonders why Poliziano should have done this. For several reasons, I believe: to display his erudition and indulge his interest in minor writers, to create a rather lowly style from this episode in contrast to what would follow, and perhaps to avoid direct emulation of Virgil in this genre. The simple dialogue between an older shepherd, Mopsus, and the younger Aristaeus centers around a lost calf. A third shepherd, Thyrsis, servant of Aristaeus, is sent off to retrieve the calf, exactly as in Calpurnius. Aristaeus then tells his fellow shepherd of the beautiful nymph he saw, «più bella che Diana,» together with her young lover. In his account Aristaeus makes no mention of pursuing her, but merely tells of his forlorn state, his tears and sleepless nights. Mopsus responds that he should extinguish the flames of love quickly before it is too late: «rimedia tosto or ch'1 rimedio giova» (40) The source of these words of wisdom is Ovid's famous precept in the *Remedia amoris*: «Principiis obsta» (91), as Mopsus' *figura etymologica* plainly shows. The whole scene is filled with various topoi of the bucolic genre, done in a very simple, unaffected style in loose imitation of Calpurnius and filled with proverbial expressions of popular wisdom.

This exchange ushers in a solo *canzona* of Aristaeus, in ballad form, with a two line *ritornello*, or refrain, which Poliziano also uses in his *Rime*. The models are Theocritus and Virgil principally, the love song of Polyphemus to Ga-

latea (Idyll XI) in the Hellenistic poet and that of Corydon to Alexis (Eclogue II) in Virgil. It is an apostrophe addressed to nature, to the *care selve*, to which lovers often address their complaints, as in other pastoral poems of the period, such as Leon Battista Alberti's *Mirtia* or Pietro de Jennaro's *Egloghe*, and later in the arias of baroque opera:

Udite, selve, mie dolce parole  
poichè la nympha mia udir non vuole. (54-55)

The theme of this lovely composition is the fleetingness of beauty and youth, as found in the late Latin poem *De rosis nascentibus* (for which Poliziano wrote a commentary), much admired in the Renaissance, source also of Lorenzo de Medici's famous ballad, «Quant' è bella giovinezza.»

Mopsus counters with a polite *gratulatio* on Aristaeus' performance, again a topos of the pastoral, comparing his fellow shepherd's singing to the pleasant murmur of a rushing stream leaping down from the rocks: «delle fresche acque che d'un sasso piombano.» (89). The source is a memorable passage from Virgil's Fifth Eclogue: «quale per aestum / dulcis aquae saliente sitim restinguere rivo.» (*Ecl.* V, 46). In the same verse Poliziano pays homage to his fellow poet from the Medici *brigata*, Girolamo Benivieni, who had written an almost identical line: «dell' acque, che dagli alti sassi piombano.» (*Ecloga* II, 154-155). The rime scheme, *rima sdrucchiola*, with accent on the third-last syllable, is characteristic of the Tuscan vernacular eclogue tradition and has a certain comic flavor. Some of the vocabulary of this *ottava* of Mopsus is definitely of a lower rustic style, more appropriate to prose than to verse. *Sollazzevole* is a word commonly found in Boccaccio's *Decameron*; *cucciola* («puppy») is definitely not poetic currency, nor is the comic verb *sdrucchiolare* to describe the shepherd Thyrsis tumbling down the hill without the lost calf.

The first part of Thyrsis' answer is framed in an even lower register, reflecting usages of Tuscan dialect, as in the Sienese collection. Poliziano purposely uses crude rhymes from some rather gross episodes in the *Inferno*: *epa* (an unusual word for «belly») and *crepa* (*Inf.* XXX, 119-121), found also with the same rime in Brunetto Latini's *Tesoretto*, V. 2838. From Dante also are the rimes *mozzo* and *cozzo* (*Inf.* IX, 95-9). Typical of Tuscan rustic speech are the shortened participles, *mozzo* for *mozzato*, *pieno* for *pienato* or *riempito* and the preponderant use of pleonastic personal pronouns. On the other hand, when Thyrsis turns to the description of Eurydice, the language becomes almost a cento of Poliziano's own lines in his famous *Stanze per la giostra* delineating the beauty of Simonetta (I, 43-52):

Ma io ho vista una gentil donzella  
che va cogliendo fiori intorno al monte.  
I' non credo che Vener sia più bella,  
più dolce in acto o più superba in fronte. (104-7)

The poet is careful, however, in this borrowing, not to transcend the more humble style that he has reserved for the pastoral episode.

The dialogue continues in a few more amoebian exchanges, which lead into a wholly new scene. The audience is suddenly transported to another woodland scene, in which Aristaeus is in hot pursuit of the fair maiden Eurydice. The archetype for this *ninfa fuggente* theme is the opening story of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, that of Daphne and Apollo. The god invokes her with these words: «Nympha, precor, Penei, mane, non insequor hostis.» (*Met.* I, 504). Aristaeus sings in like vein, but in a more simple style:

Non mi fuggir, donzella,  
ch'i' ti son tanto amico  
e che più t'amo che la vita e `l core. (128-30)

In some manuscripts of the play that circulated in the North of Italy and in the *editio princeps* of Bologna there is an insert here of a fifty-two-line Sapphic ode in Latin<sup>16</sup>. Tissoni Benvenuti considers it an addition meant for a later performance, in homage to the Cardinal, whom it eulogizes. It seems indubitably to be from the hand of Poliziano although it may have been written earlier and shows some indebtedness to a Sapphic ode composed on a similar occasion by Martino Filetico, a Roman humanist, for Cardinal Riario<sup>17</sup>. Whatever the case, this mixing of Latin and vernacular is certainly not foreign to Poliziano's usual practice, and perhaps the singing of a Latin ode to the accompaniment of a lyre at this part of the dramatic action, just before the entrance of Orpheus, might suggest the superiority of Latin verse to the more humble *frottola* that Aristaeus just sang to the sound of his pipe. In actual performance it seems that the recitation of the ode was reduced to only the first two stanzas, which I shall quote in order to give an example of Poliziano's facile technique in the composition of Latin verse:

O meos longum modulata lusus  
quos amor primam docuit iuventam,  
flecte nunc mecum numeros novumque  
dic, lyra, carmen:  
  
non quod hirsutos agat huc leones;  
sed quod et frontem domini serenet,  
et levet curas, penitusque doctas  
mulceat aures.

<sup>16</sup> The ode was sung by Bacio Ugolino, a friend of Poliziano and a servant of Gonzaga, who had played the part of Orfeo in the banquet sponsored by Cardinal Riario for Eleanor d'Aragona in 1473 on her way to Ferrara. Cf. *Storia della civiltà letteraria italiana*, vol. II. *Umanesimo e rinascimento*, ed. Rinaldo Rinaldi (Torino: UTET, 1990), p. 555.

<sup>17</sup> The ode of Filetico is contained in codex Corsinianus 582, in which there are also some youthful poems of Poliziano, all in the hand of Tommaso Baldinotti, a good friend of Poliziano. There are also some similarities to another eulogistic poem in Phalcean hendecasyllables written by the young Poliziano to Cardinal Nicolò Piacentini, extant only in ms. Vat. Lat. 2836 and edited by ISIDORO DEL LUNGO, *Florentia. Uomini e cose del Quattrocento* (Firenze: Barbèra, 1897), p. 342.



As the ode continues, elaborate praise is bestowed upon the noble line of the Gonzaga family and the city of Mantova.

A shepherd now bursts upon the scene to announce the death of Eurydice by the bite of a serpent as she fled the amorous quest of Aristaeus. Then Orpheus appears, and in what one might almost call an aria, he bids his disconsolate lyre to join in his lament: «Dunque piangiamo, o sconsolata lira» (149). Virgil described Orpheus' grief in a beautiful simile about the nightingale (*philomela*), which, deprived of its young by a heartless ploughman, fills the air with its plaintive cries (*Georg.* IV, 511-513). Poliziano again does not attempt to emulate the Roman poet, but merely alludes to the Virgilian passage, «e Philomela ceda al nostro pianto.» (152) He borrows, instead, part of an apostrophe from Terence's *Adelphi*. In this case we are certain of the source, for Poliziano wrote the verse from Terence in his own incunabulum of Virgil's work<sup>18</sup>, following an early commentator of Virgil, Macrobius, who cited these very verses at this point. «O cielo, o terra, o mare!» (153) is a direct translation of Terence (*Adelphi* 790), but Poliziano deftly adds, to complete the line, «o sorte dira,» with a fine Latinism. The last line of this stanza, «sanza te non convien ch' in vita stia,» (156) will become famous in the beautiful aria in Gluck's opera, «Che farò senza Euridice.»

Orpheus resolves to go down to the *tartaree porte* to attempt to obtain mercy from the infernal spirits in his pathetic plea:

Pietà! Pietà! del misero amatore  
pietà vi prenda, o spiriti infernali. (165-166)

The figure of anaphora is used with great effect. Pluto wonders who it is that has caused a suspension of the perpetual torments of the classical transgressors: Ixion's wheel is still, Sisyphus is seated upon his rock, the Danaids stand with empty jugs, the waters no longer recede from the lips of Tantalus, Cerberus is mesmerized by the visitor's song and the Furies are placated. Poliziano's description is a combination of bits and pieces not only from Virgil and Ovid but Claudian and perhaps even Boethius' *Carmen* in Book III of the *Consolatio philosophiae*, a superb example of his synthesizing technique. While Virgil had emphasized the terror and inexorability of the underworld, Ovid, in his usual manner, is more fanciful and inventive. Poliziano adheres more closely to the Virgilian model, but he gives even more emphasis to the transfixed state of Hades effected by Orpheus' song.

The next five octaves might well be regarded as the center piece of the play. The model is the speech that Ovid devises for Orpheus before the ruler of Hades. (*Met.* X, 17-39) Virgil includes no such speech in his dramatization of the scene. It would have been contrary to his sense of *religio*, which dictates that Orpheus in his love-induced *furor* is trespassing against inviolable laws. Ovid,

<sup>18</sup> This is the *Opera omnia* printed in Rome by Sweynheym and Pannartz in 1471, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, Inc. Rés. gr. Yc. 236.

the rhetorical poet par excellence, relishes the opportunity to construct a classical peroration, which Poliziano imitates but with an emphasis and rhetoric all his own. He echoes Ovid's opening invocation, «O positi sub terra numina mundi / in quem recidimus, quidquid mortale creamur» (*Met.* X, 17-18). Poliziano writes: «O regnator di tutte quelle genti / che han perduto la superna luce» (189-190). There is a clear reminiscence here too of Dante's famous line «le genti dolorose c'hanno perduto il ben de l'intelletto» (*Inf.* III, 17-18), Orpheus pleads that he has made this journey not to chain Cerberus (as did Hercules in one of his labors), but solely for the sake of his spouse:

non per Cerber legar fei questa via,  
ma solamente per la donna mia. (194-5)

Ovid's lines are much more rhetorical:

Non huc ut opaca viderem  
Tartara descendi, nec uti villosa colubris  
terna medusaei vincirem guttura monstri,  
causa viae coniunx (*Met.* X, 20-23)

Orpheus then cleverly appeals to the infernal deities with an allusion to their own ill-fated love, of Pluto's abduction of Proserpina as she was gathering flowers in the meadow. In Ovid's version the reference is made rather obliquely: «Famaque si veteris non est mentita rapinae / vos quoque iunxit Amor» (*Met.* X 28-9). Poliziano's Orpheus is more direct:

se la vecchia rapina a mente havete,  
Euridice mie bella mi rendete. (203-204)

The next passage is an instructive example of Poliziano's marvelous ability to turn Latin verse into vernacular poetry. In this case his lines are an *amplificatio* of Ovid's. I shall quote both in turn:

Omnia debentur vobis paulumque morati  
serius aut citius sedem properamus ad unam.  
Tendimus huc omnes, haec est domus ultima vosque  
humani generis longissima regna tenetis. (*Met.* X, 32-5)

Ogni cosa nel fine a voi ritorna,  
ogni cosa mortale a voi ricade:  
quanto cerchia la luna con suo corna  
convien ch'arrivi alle vostre contrade.  
Chi più chi men tra'superi soggiorna,  
ognun convien ch'arrivi a queste strade;  
quest'è de'nostri passi extremo segno,  
poi tenete di noi più longo regno. (205-12)

*Superi* is a rare Latinism and the last line is a fine *calco* of Ovid's concluding verse.

Orpheus argues that Eurydice will be theirs when her time comes. It is useless to pluck the fruit before it matures. In this part of the speech Poliziano refashions lines from Tibullus, Virgil and Ovid. Orpheus culminates his appeal with «i'non vel cheggio in don, quest' è prestanza» (220), a direct imitation of Ovid's «pro munere poscimus usum» (*Met.* X, 37). The closing of the speech is very close in both poets. Ovid ends with a peremptory:

Quod si fata negant veniam pro coniuge, certum est  
nolle redire mihi; leto gaudete duorum. (*Met.* X, 38-9)

Poliziano's version is milder and lacks the Ovidian sarcasm:

E se pur me la neighi iniqua sorte,  
io non vo' su tornar, ma chieggio morte. (227-228)

In Virgil, as there is no appeal by Orpheus, so there is no infernal interlocutor. We are told indirectly that Proserpina was moved by Orpheus' prayer and convinced her spouse to show mercy and that Eurydice's release was granted with the stipulated condition. Poliziano achieves a more dramatic effect in having both gods speak, a device not found in the classical sources. Proserpina expresses her disbelief that pity would ever enter their realm and that death itself could be moved to pity. She begs her consort in a touching tricolon that he yield to the suppliant who has won his case through song, through love, and just entreaty:

pel canto, pell' amor, pe' iusti prieghi. (236)

Once again the dramatic segment ends in a genial couplet, spoken by Pluto:

I' son contento che a sí dolce plectro  
s'inchini la potenza del mio sceptro. (243-244)

The *didascalia* at this point indicates that Orfeo should sing some joyful verses as he issues from the underworld, which was supposedly left up to the actor. The North Italian MSS and the Bologna edition print two distichs in Latin fashioned out of Ovidian material. I tend to agree with Tisconi Benvenuti that these verses do not seem worthy of the pen of Poliziano and may have been inserted by someone charged with the later performance of the play.

The action now moves very quickly. Orpheus fatally turns around and a cry from Eurydice (perhaps off stage) announces that all is lost. In Virgil's narration of this culminating moment we have a momentary glimpse of the silent pair as they proceed to the upper air, but in Poliziano's adaptation there is no prepara-

tion for the tragic turn of events. It is a striking *coup de théâtre*. The Virgilian passage is justly famous:

‘Quis et me’ inquit, ‘miseram et te perdidit, Orpheu,  
quis tantus furor? en iterum crudelia retro  
fata vocant conditque natantia lumina somnus.  
Iamque vale: feror ingenti circumdata nocte  
invalidasque tibi tendens, heu non tua, palmas. (Georg. IV, 494-8)

Poliziano recaptures the beautiful pathos of Virgil’s lines in briefer compass:

Oimé, che ‘l troppo amore  
n’ha disfatti ambendua.  
Ecco ch’i’ ti son tolta a gran furore,  
né sono hormai più tua.  
Ben tendo a te le braccia, ma non vale,  
ché ‘ndrieto son tirata. Orpheo mie, vale!» (245-250)

Ovid shows rather more sympathy for Orpheus. Eurydice makes no reproach, but seems to give tacit forgiveness, and Ovid casually remarks, «Quid enim nisi se quereretur amatam» (*Met.* X, 60). He seems purposely to circumvent the pathetic details of the story. No words are exchanged between them. In Poliziano too, the blame is attenuated but the feeling is unmistakably Virgilian. Orpheus’ fate is represented as a condign punishment for his uncontrolled passion. Undaunted, Orpheus wishes to return once more «alla plutonia corte» (*calco* of «domus . . . Plutonia», Horace *Carm.* I, 4, 17) but a Fury blocks his path (in Ovid it is the ferryman Charon, as in later operas).

At this pivotal point of the story Poliziano renounces the Virgilian model, presumably since it would not lend itself very well to staging. Virgil moves here into the eerie realms of primitive myth, recounting how Eurydice’s cold corpse glided over the Styx and how Orpheus wept for seven months in the wilderness of Thrace. So great was his grief that no thought of love could touch his heart, no bridal song: («Nulla Venus, non ulli animum flexere hymenaei» *Georg.* IV, 516). For this the Thracian women, thinking themselves scorned by this devotion to the dead, rend him limb from limb in ritual punishment. Virgil then adds a gruesome, almost surrealistic ending: the singer’s head, severed from his marbled neck, floated down the Hebrus river, still calling upon the name of Eurydice, and the river banks echoed across the flood «Eurydice.» Poliziano does not aspire to such lofty strains but assigns a rather verbose monologue of thirty-two verses to Orpheus, a lengthy amplification of only seven verses of Ovid. Ovid further specifies Virgil’s *nulla Venus* «(omnemque refugerat Orpheus / femineam Venerem» *Met.* X, 79-80), and gives a more rationalistic approach to the myth, relating that many women desired Orpheus and were aggrieved at their repulse. Thus it was that the Thracian bard first introduced the love of young boys among men:

Ille etiam Thracum populis fuit auctor amorem  
 in teneros transferre mares, citraque iuventam  
 aetatis breve ver et primos carpere flores (*Met.* X. 83-5)

Poliziano takes up this theme and has Orpheus sing in language that explicitly recalls Ovid:

Da qui innanzi vo' cor e' fior novelli,  
 la primavera del sexo migliore (269-270)

This variant of the Orpheus myth is found previously only in a fragment of the third century B.C. Greek poet, Phanocles, from a work called Ἐρωτες ἢ καλοί. It is contained in a collection of excerpts from Greek literature made by Stobaeus<sup>19</sup>, a copy of which existed in the Medici Library. Significantly, Poliziano quotes this unique fragment in the margin of his copy of Ovid next to this passage<sup>20</sup>. The next *ottava*, of explicit misogynist content, is taken word for word from the beginning of the *Stanze per la giostra* (I, 14), where the young Julio, who represents Giuliano de' Medici, expresses his contempt for the lures of Venus. It might almost seem to be an interpolation if it were not fully corroborated by the textual tradition. The new context of these lines accords more with the Ovidian model in its linking the themes of homosexuality and misogyny. Poliziano perhaps thought that his Mantuan audience would not be familiar with his earlier composition and, as was his wont, did not hesitate to transpose his own poetic lines into a new context. The Ovidian influence continues in the next stanza with an allusion to two examples of ephobic love, that of Zeus and Ganymede, and Apollo and Hyacinth, which Ovid has Orpheus himself narrate in his despondency together with many other tales before the Maenads come upon him (*Met.* X, 155-219).

As Orpheus sings his last verse: «e ciascun fugga el feminil consorzio» (292), a wild Bacchante appears and points him out to her companions: «Ecco quel che l'amor nostro disprezza.» (293) The source once again is Ovid, «en hic est nostri contemptor,» (*Met.* XI, 7). In the mad scene that follows, the ritual *sparagmos* or dismemberment, Poliziano borrows details from Euripides' *Bacchae*, including the cry *euoè*, which occurs here for the first time in Italian. As in Euripides, one of the Bacchantes returns, carrying aloft Orpheus' head and describes their heinous deed. At this point the tragic tone suddenly modulates into the riotous cries of a *canto carnascialesco*, sung by a chorus of Bacchantes. The rhythm is a fast-moving line of eight syllables, with frequent *rima tronca* of seven. The frenetic quality of the rhythm gains in momentum by the alternation of various voices. It begins boisterously.

<sup>19</sup> The Phanocles fragment may also be read in J. U. POWELL, *Collectanea Alexandrina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), pp. 106-7.

<sup>20</sup> His incunabulum of Ovid's work was the *Opera omnia* printed by Stefano Corallo (Parma, 1477), now in Oxford, Bodleian Auct. P.ii.2. Descriptions of both this and the Rome incunabulum are given by ALESSANDRO PEROSA, *Mostra del Poliziano nella Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana. Manoscritti, librari, autografi e documenti. Catalogo*. (Firenze: Sansoni, 1955), pp. 29-30.

Ognun segua, Bacco, te!  
Bacco, Bacco, euoè! (309-10)

The language becomes very *popolare*, as in Poliziano's own *rispetti*, the carnival songs of Lorenzo de' Medici or the rustic rhythms of Luca Pulci. The stanzas are sprinkled with numerous lewd double entendres playing on the sexual connotations of words connected with drinking, such as *pevere* meaning a funnel in the North Italian dialect (but here with an anatomical signification), riming with the Tuscan dialectal form *bevere*, and *fare fiacco* in the sense of *fare baccano*, appositely echoing the name of Bacco. The structure is asyndetic without connectives or grammatical subordination. The *sdrucchiolo* rhythm, *pevere-bevere* alternates with truncated rhythms, as in «'l cervello a spasso va. Ognun corra 'Za e lá.» (322-33) «Za e in lá.» is pure Venetian dialect and there are many Northern forms of the personal pronouns, *mi* (a subject) and *ti*, for *io* and *te*, which surely would have delighted his Northern audience.

Thus the play ends in general merriment, suitable for the carnival season. Although the published version did not appear until 1494, since Poliziano never authorized the publication of his vernacular works, the *Orfeo* circulated in manuscript and, as is in the case with dramatical texts, underwent various modifications in performance. Among these is a version that bears a Latin title, *Orphei tragoedia*, divided into the canonical five acts, also with Latin titles<sup>21</sup>. The second act is entirely new with the addition of a chorus of Dryads and preparations for the funeral of Eurydice, which could have provided the occasion for dance or pantomime. The chorus was probably inspired by a scene from the Virgilian setting: «At chorus aequalis Dryadum clamore supremos / implerunt montes» (*Georg.* IV, 460-1). Latin is used in the various *didascalie* and the last farewell of Eurydice is also in Latin: «Orpheu mi, vale.» (*Georg.* IV, 106) Another interesting insertion is a series of verses taken from the *Praefatio* to the second book of Claudian's *De raptu Proserpinae* that are spoken by Orpheus. The tone and the language are more in the tragic register and all the comic elements are suppressed. It is not the work of Poliziano but a *rifacimento* with more tragic intent, which may well have appealed to the courts of the North especially Ferrara, where classical plays formed part of lavish spectacles with *intermezzi* between the acts. It was discovered in 1776 by the Reverend Father Ireneo Affò in the convent of Santo Spirito in Reggio Emilia, who did not doubt for a moment that it was the authentic version of the play, and so it was considered until comparatively recent times<sup>22</sup>. Carducci was the first to question

<sup>21</sup> The critical text was established by MARIA PIA MUSSINI SACCHI in *Teatro del Quattrocento. Le corti padane* a cura di M.P. Mussini Sacchi e Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti (Torino: UTET, 1983), pp. 179-198. This is reprinted in Tissino's edition of the *Orfeo*, pp. 187-209.

<sup>22</sup> It was published as *L'Orfeo / tragedia de Messer / Angelo Poliziano / tratta per la prima volta da due vetusti codici ed alla / sua integrità e perfezione ridotta ed illustrata / dal Reverendo Padre Ireneo Affò / di Busseto / Minor Osservante / Professore di Filosofia nelle Regie Scuole di Guastalla / e dato in luce / dal P. Luigi Antonia di Ravenna M.O. // In Venezia, MDCCLXXVI.*

its authenticity. In the light of recent research it seems clear that this play was written for courtly entertainments in Northern Italy. At one time it was thought to be the work of Antonio Tebaldeo, but it is now attributed to Matteo Maria Boiardo, author of the epic poem, *Orlando innamorato*. At any rate, this more manneristic version of the tale is the work of a poet of no mean ability. Another longer and more tedious version (1456 verses in *terza rima*), *La favola di Orfeo e Aristeo*, is more similar to the numerous pastoral - mythological plays that proliferated during the last decade of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a genre that owes much to Poliziano's experiment<sup>23</sup>. A century later the *Euridice* of Jacopo Peri, with libretto by Ottavio Rinuccini, performed in the Boboli gardens in Florence, and Claudio Monteverdi's great masterpiece *Orfeo*<sup>24</sup>, dedicated to another Francesco Gonzaga at the same court of Mantova, owe their inspiration to their Tuscan predecessor.

Even from such a cursory reading of this engaging little play it is evident that it cannot be read in the void but rather in the presence of the whole literary tradition in which it stands, classical, medieval and humanistic. It is a genial synthesis of classical and vernacular elements joined together by an adroit *arte combinatoria*, of which Poliziano was the unchallenged master. It does not suffice merely to identify the sources but to see how the poet-philologist makes new poetic currency of them<sup>25</sup>, fusing them in new combinations, *callidae iuncturae*, to use Horace's dictum, with inventive spontaneity, in what one writer has ventured to call a sort of «intertextual delirium.»<sup>26</sup> In the more poignant scenes of the drama Poliziano captures some of the pathos of Virgil while in other episodes he gives his own imitation of Ovidian rhetoric, but without the cynical playfulness that characterizes Ovid's treatment of the myth. Poliziano engages the ancient writers in a spirit of competition, filling in motifs that were only suggested or left entirely inexpressed in his models. The language is a rich hybridization of Latinisms, dialect, borrowings from Petrarch, Boccaccio's *Ninfale fiesolano*, Alberti's pastoral poems, especially the *Mirtia*, and even excerpts from his own *Stanze per la giostra*.

There is one school of critics emanating from Florence that favors reading this play in the rarefied light of Neo-Platonism, with rather forced allegorical interpretation, such as might be found in Cristoforo Landino's commentary on Virgil.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. ANTONIA TISSONI BENVENUTI, *La fortuna teatrale dell'Orfeo del Poliziano e il teatro settentrionale del Quattrocento* in *Culture regionali e letteratura nazionale* (Bari: Adriatica, 1974), pp. 397-416.

<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note that in the libretto by Alessandro Striggio for Monteverdi's opera the usual tragic ending is preserved, but in the staged version Orpheus is wafted up to heaven by Apollo to join his beloved Eurydice. Since Peri's opera was performed for the wedding of Maria de' Medici with Henry IV of Navarre, a happy ending was also devised for his *Euridice*.

<sup>25</sup> No one has expressed or illustrated this poetic technique with more acumen and linguistic sensitivity than Alessandro Perosa, who writes: «il quale [Poliziano] si serviva delle fonti classiche come di materiale grezzo, cui attribuire mediante suggestivi accostamenti una nuova vita e una nuova funzionalità poetica.» *Angeli Politiani Sylva in scabiem* a cura di Alessandro Perosa (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1954), p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> POLIZIANO, *Sylvae* a cura di Francesco Bausi (Firenze: Olschki editore, 1996), p. xvii.

In reality, Poliziano resisted the mystical-ascetic ambience of the Ficino circle even from his youth and devoted himself to the rigorous humanistic study of language in all its diversity<sup>27</sup>. It is true that at the end of his life, as is often mentioned, he paid homage to his master, Ficino, in the *coronis* of the *Prima Centuriata Miscellaneorum* with an allegorical reference to the Orpheus myth: «cuius longe felicior quam Thracensis Orphei cithara veram (ni fallor) Eurydicen, hoc est amplissimi iudicii Platoniam sapientiam revocavit ab inferis»<sup>28</sup>, but there is nothing of this sublimity in the *Fabula di Orfeo*. This is not Orpheus the seer, the demiurge, the civilizer of mankind, but Orpheus the poet of love and of love's sufferings. Though colored by the flamboyance of his lecture style the words of the Neapolitan critic, Francesco de Sanctis, heralding the triumph of secularism in the Renaissance, are nearer to the truth: «Dopo il lungo obbligo della notte della seconda barbarie, Orpheo rinasce tra le feste della nuova civiltà, inaugurando il regno dell' umanità, o per dir meglio, dell'umanesimo»<sup>29</sup>. In this unique courtly entertainment Poliziano retells a beautiful classical myth in a world of pure imagination and illusion, which in his own words in the letter to Canale, was «piuttosto apta a dar melancholia che allegrezza»<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> The great doyen of Italian Renaissance studies, Eugenio Garin, insisted on Poliziano's detachment from the Ficino school, as in this critical judgement: «impiantare così la considerazione della «poesia» e della «filologia,» significava per Poliziano staccarsi singolarmente anche da tutto quel clima platonico entro cui nascevano le ricostruzioni delle «teologie poetiche» di cui s'interessavano i famosi commenti del suo maestro e poi collega, Cristoforo Landino.» EUGENIO GARIN, «L'ambiente del Poliziano» in *Poliziano e il suo tempo* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1957), p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> *Opera omnia* a cura di IDA MAÏER (Torino: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1970), vol. I, p. 696.

<sup>29</sup> FRANCESCO DE SANCTIS, *Storia della letteratura italiana* a cura di Niccolò Gallo (Torino: Einaudi, 1966), vol. I, p. 407.

<sup>30</sup> TISSONI, *Orfeo*, p. 136.