# Errors of Interpretation: Vincenzo Maggi and Sperone Speroni, Readers of Francesco Robortello

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**Abstract**: This paper considers errors of interpretation in textual criticism in Renaissance Italy. It focuses on the reading of Francesco Robortello's *In Aristotelis poeticam explicationes*, published in Florence by Lorenzo Torrentino in 1548, and the readers in question were Vincenzo Maggi and Sperone Speroni. The paper shows how errors of interpretation can relate either to a misunderstanding of the original text or of its translation. It is a significant case because it concerns the first "critical edition" with commentary of one of Aristotle's most neglected works, the *Poetica*.

**Keywords**: errors, interpretation, Aristotle, *Poetics*, Renaissance.

## 1. Reading Aristotle's *Poetics* in the Renaissance

This paper considers errors of interpretation in textual criticism in Renaissance Italy. A very specific case is featured: the reading of Francesco Robortello's *In Aristotelis poeticam explicationes*, published in Florence by Lorenzo Torrentino in 1548, and the readers in question were Vincenzo Maggi and Sperone Speroni (on Robortello see Sgarbi 2020). The paper shows how errors of interpretation can relate either to a misunderstanding of the original text or of its translation. It is a significant case because it concerns the first "critical edition" with commentary of one of Aristotle's most neglected works, the *Poetica*.

The history of the reception of Aristotle's *Poetics* is well-known (Kappl 2006). The work was transmitted through a partial translation in Averroes' *Middle Commentary* (see Minio-Paluello 1968; Butterworth 1986). In 1278, the *Poetics* was translated into Latin by William of Moerbeke, but the translation remained lost until 1895, and thus had no bearing on the subsequent Aristotelian tradition. The history of the *Poetics'* reception thus really begins in 1498 with Giorgio Valla's Latin translation. Aldo Manuzio's edition of the Greek text was published in 1508, not in the Aldine edition but in the first volume of the *Rhetores graeci*. The first great impulse in the study of the *Poetics* came with the posthumous 1536 publication of Alessandro de' Pazzi's edition and translation, which had the effect of making the Aristotelian text more intelligible than the Valla edition.

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Robortello himself narrates the story of his epic enterprise to edit, translate and comment Aristotle's work:

> The book has remained unknown until our times, and no one, among either the Latins or the Greeks, has had the strength to clarify it with interpretations. Firstly, Averroes captured some of what he [Aristotle] wrote, but I cannot praise his as a great work, nor can I criticize it, because [the texts] are badly translated into Latin and obscure passages of the original have not been clarified. Secondly, the book was translated into Latin by Giorgio Valla, an erudite man who is well-versed in all things ancient. But, as usually happens to those who walk on ice, he slipped frequently while trying to render even the simplest terms. There was great relief when Alessandro de' Pazzi retranslated the book. […] He too slipped, but he must not only be pardoned but also heaped with praise, because it is always dangerous to attempt to interpret such difficult matters […] I, too, cannot promise to have avoided making mistakes.[1]

In his edition, Robortello promises to correct the many mistakes of previous editors, especially with "the lesson on manuscript books and the utterances of the most erudite authors" (Robortello 1548). He uses four books, three of which are manuscripts. Two of these were available in the Biblioteca Medicea. One, *Laurentianus* 60.14, claims to have been described by Angelo Poliziano, whereas the other, an apograph, "multo vetustior," could be the *Laurentianus gr.* 60.21, written by Francesco Filelfo on the basis of *Parisinus gr.* 1741. Similarly difficult to identify is the third manuscript, which Robortello appears to have obtained with the help of Paolo Bevilacqua, who was summoned to teach Latin in Lucca around 1541 by Peter Martyr Vermigli. It might have been *Riccardianus gr.* 46, used once previously by Alessandro de' Pazzi. The Greek edition of the printed book, on the other hand, was most certainly by Vittore Trincavelli, and was published along with the Latin translation of Alessandro de' Pazzi. Even Robortello, therefore, represents a splendid case of the identification and correction of errors, especially those committed by de' Pazzi. Nonetheless, these errors were confined to the philological and codicological level, of the kind that the reading of a new manuscript tends to generate.

It would be wrong, however, to believe that Robortello was the first Renaissance scholar to seriously engage with Aristotle's text. Indeed, between 1535 and 1536 Vincenzo Maggi and Bartolomeo Lombardo began their own exegetical work, criticizing Gian Giorgio Trissino's *Poetica* (1529), perhaps using a manuscript version of de' Pazzi's translation before its publication, as Guglielmo de' Pazzi seems to testify.[2] In 1541, at Alessandro Piccolomini's invitation,

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[1]   Robortello 1548, letter to readers. I quote from Speroni's own copy of Robortello's *Explicationes*, which was the very first edition.

[2]   The testimony does not make clear in any definitive way whether Maggi was teaching Aristotle's *Poetics* at the university before 1536 or using Pazzi's manuscript translation. See Morsolin 1882-1883, 244–6.

Bartolomeo Lombardo—with some reluctance on account of bad health—gave the first public lecture on the *Poetics* at the Accademia degli Infiammati. Vincenzo Maggi was scheduled to teach the text at the Accademia too, but the death of his nephew obliged him to leave Padua (Vianello 1988, 52). Lombardo and Maggi's project to translate and comment on Aristotle's *Poetics* as a joint venture was realized only in 1550 with the *In Aristotelis librum De Poetica communes explanationes*, and so following the publication of Robortello's masterpiece. In the Accademia degli Infiammati, therefore, a new interest in Aristotle's *Poetics* arose, but Robortello was the first to publish a new edition of the text, causing resentment in Maggi, who in the meantime, after Lombardo's death, was continuing the hard work of the commentary on his own. Not by chance were both the authors considered in this paper—Maggi and Speroni—notable members of the Accademia degli Infiammati, and Speroni probably its last *principe*.

The errors of interpretation that this essay considers were those made by Robortello in reading Aristotle's words and flagged up by Maggi and Speroni. Of course, the "errors" in questions are mistakes dependent on their own interpretations of Aristotle's text and expose their disagreement with Robortello's reading. Scholarship has paid scarce attention to Maggi and Speroni's annotations to Robortello's edition. Indeed, Enrico Bisanti published an Italian translation of Maggi's *Obiectiones quaedam adversus Robortelli explicationem in primum Aristotelis contextum*, but with no further investigation. Déborah Blocker, in contrast, has the merit of having discovered Speroni's personal edition of Robortello's text containing his marginal notes, and outlines his general attitude as a reader (see Bisanti 1991; Blocker 2020). Among these notes, on the first two pages of this personal copy, Speroni lists a detailed series of errors committed by Robortello.

## 2. Vincenzo Maggi's *Obiectiones*

The *Obiectiones quaedam adversus Robortelli explicationem in primum Aristotelis contextum* was published in 1550 as a para-textual element of Maggi's *Explanationes*.[3] It documented the fact that Maggi had carefully read Robortello's work and had intended to compose a much larger confutation of Robortello's every last word. However, he had abandoned this extensive task because so many mistakes needed correcting, and limited himself to reviewing Robortello's commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* 1447 a 8-11:

περὶ ποιητικῆς αὐτῆς τε καὶ τῶν εἰδῶν αὐτῆς, ἥν τινα δύναμιν ἕκαστον ἔχει, καὶ πῶς δεῖ συνίστασθαι τοὺς μύθους [10] εἰ μέλλει καλῶς ἕξειν ἡ ποίησις, ἔτι δὲ ἐκ πόσων καὶ ποίων ἐστὶ μορίων, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσα τῆς αὐτῆς ἐστι μεθόδου, λέγωμεν.

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[3] The *Obiectiones* are published along with Lombardo's lecture at the Accademia degli Infiammati, with an announcement to experts of poetic art, and also three letters from Maggi to Madrucci, from Gugliemo de' Pazzi to Francesco Campano, and from Alessandro de' Pazzi to Nicolò Leonico.

In the standard English translation, the passage is rendered as follows:

Let us here deal with poetry, its essence and its several species, with the characteristic function of each species and the way in which plots must be constructed if the poem is to be a success; and also with the number and character of the constituent parts of a poem, and similarly with all other matters proper to this same inquiry.

Robortello's commentary on Aristotle's words can be summarized as follows:
1. Aristotle's *Poetics* has no proem;
2. The absence of the proem is evidence of the authenticity of the text;
3. The presence of long proems in other works like the *Rhetoric to Alexander* makes the authorship uncertain;
4. Instead of a proem, in the *Poetics* Aristotle immediately explains the subject;
5. Aristotle indicates his method beginning with "what comes first," just as he does in the exordium of the *Physics*;
6. The *Poetics* can be divided into three parts: a. definition and parts of poetics; b. tragedy; c. epic;
7. To the specific elements of poetics Aristotle adds plot (*fabula*), considered to be the soul of every poetic work;
8. Aristotle deals with plots both quantitatively and qualitatively.

According to Maggi, Robortello commits several kinds of errors, ranging from mistakes of interpretation to crucial omissions. First of all, Maggi disagrees with the idea that Aristotle's *Poetics* has no proem or introduction on the spurious basis that his authentic works lacked these (Maggi-Lombardi 1550, 17). Indeed, many important commentators such as Alexander of Aphrodisias, Simplicius, Philoponus, and Averroes believed in the existence of proems in Aristotle's writings like the *Physics* or *On the Soul*. Maggi points out that Aristotle himself explains the scope and importance of proems, which is to make clear the goal of the composition. Since Aristotle at the beginning of the *Poetics* explains the scope of his writing, it is an error, therefore, to maintain that there is no proem. Furthermore, if one compares the beginning of the *Poetics* with that of the *Physics*, which is clearly a proem, there are many similarities. Finally, Robortello would seem to be contradicting himself in stating that at the beginning of the *Poetics* Aristotle deals with the essence of poetics, its parts, etc., because these are exactly the sort of elements that constitute a proem. Maggi and Robortello evidently have two different conceptions of proem. Robortello had in mind the long initial letter written to Alexander in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Rhetorics*, in which the author of the work—perhaps Anaximenes of Lampsacus—does not immediately deal with rhetorical topics. Maggi's essential criticism is that Robortello is applying non-Aristotelian expectations to Aristotle.

Another mistake made by Robortello in Maggi's view concerns the division of the work, leading to many sub-errors and mis-interpretations (Maggi-Lombardi 1550, 18–9). Maggi contests Robortello's view that after providing a definition of poetics that is useful for determining the various distinctions that constitute

the parts of a work, Aristotle deals directly with one of its forms, tragedy. Indeed, after the definition of poetics Aristotle would have considered its origin, which according to Robortello is part of the investigation of the definition itself and not a separate section. Maggi also criticizes Robortello's idea that the definition of poetics is discovered by division, namely through examining genus and specific differences. This is not the case according to Maggi, because Aristotle provides different criteria for classification of the various types of poetical works—epic, tragedy, comedy, etc.—and these categorizations refer to the medium, the subject, and the manner or mode of imitation. These aspects are not specific differences, and therefore Robortello's interpretation does not stand up. Yet Robortello never claims that definition is discovered by division. He simply states that Aristotle "seeks and provides the definition of poetics after having found the genus and after having distinguished it through differences to that extent that the definition may be applied to every part of poetics" (Robortello 1548, 5). Every definition is composed of a genus and a specific difference, but this does not mean that the definition is discovered through division.

Maggi criticizes Robortello's statement that "Aristotle deals with tragedy and with its parts and then with plot" as if plot were a subdivision of poetics like tragedy, comedy, and epic, etc. Indeed, it is quite clear that plot is one of the key elements in assessing individual poetic works, and thus it cannot in itself be a specific type. However, Robortello does not say that plot is a kind of poetic work, but rather that Aristotle deals with plot after the definition of tragedy (Maggi-Lombardi 1550, 19).

Maggi then objects to Robortello's claim that for Aristotle, after presenting the subject of investigation, it is necessary to examine "the constitution of the plot and of its parts, etc." (Maggi-Lombardi 1550, 20). Maggi sees "of its parts" in Robortello's text as clearly referring to plot, whereas his own view is that Aristotle's intention was to deal with the constitution of the plot and the parts of poetics. This leads Robortello to err in maintaining that the characters, the language, the thought, the spectacle, and the music are parts of the plot, yet for Maggi they were parts of every poetic work and among these parts plot should be included too. In Latin, Robortello's sentence reads: "sibi esse dicendum etiam de fabulae constitutione, & eius partibus." (Robortello 1548, 5). Maggi's interpretation is correct, but Robortello's explanation is that the plot is the essential element—the soul—of every poetic composition, and therefore all the other parts refer to it. This error led Robortello to consider the prologue, episode, exodus, and chorus as inherent in every plot, while Aristotle attributed them only to tragedy. Indeed, these parts are not characteristic of epic, according to Maggi. Philologically speaking, Maggi's observation is correct, and Robortello is providing a very personal interpretation of Aristotle, which is not close to the text.

Maggi goes on with his objections, passing from errors of interpretation to omissions. The first omission is the lack of a proper explanation of what the subject of the *Poetics* actually was—namely whether by "poetics" Aristotle meant "poetry" (*poesi*) or "poetical art" (*arte poetica*), the art of composing poetical work. Then there are several omissions in the translation. For instance, Robortello does not translate "αὐτῆς τε," which in Maggi's view should have been translated for Maggi

with "*ipsaque.*" Robortello does not explain the real meaning of "δύναμις," which he translates with "*facultate,*" that is whether it means the "nature" of poetics or something different that belongs to nature, so at a secondary level of investigation (Maggi-Lombardi 1550, 21). Maggi finds this objection particularly relevant considering that Robortello had written in the preface of his *Explanationes* that "the poet applies his true force in making meaningful and describing the characters of human beings" (Robortello 1548, 3). If this is the true faculty of the poet, then Maggi finds it to be in contradiction with the purpose of poetics that Robortello has established, that "poetics applies its force for delight" (Maggi-Lombardi 1550, 22). But here Maggi is confusing method with purpose, which for Robortello is delight and utility (though Maggi conveniently omits to mention utility). The real point for Maggi is that Robortello is contradicting what Aristotle says:

> But most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions (Maggi-Lombardi 1550, 23).

According to Aristotle's words, therefore, poetics should imitate actions and not characters, and Robortello is wrong in stating otherwise.

Other important omitted explanations are those concerning the words "πῶς" and "μύθους," which are fundamental and which according to Maggi deserve detailed examination. But the most striking omission and error concerns Aristotle's method. What Robortello writes in the introduction is not sufficient for Maggi:

> Aristotle needed to deal methodically (*ordinatim*), that is μεθοδικῶς with poetics, but he could not do so if, having given the definition, he had not explained the τὸ τί ἐστι. But the definition was not known […] First the genus must be investigated, then the difference; indeed, without them definition cannot be constituted. The genus cannot be investigated other than with an ἀναλυτικῶν method (Robortello 1548, 5).

Thus for Maggi there was no other way for Aristotle to deal with poetics if not methodically, but he never explained its τὸ τί ἐστι once the definition was given, since no hint of a real definition is found in his work. Furthermore, Maggi observes, the analytic method is inappropriate for this kind of enquiry and not even the method adopted by Aristotle's himself in his *Posterior Analytics*. Robortello's sentence is therefore meaningless (Maggi-Lombardi 1550, 23).

These then are the scattering of errors and omissions that Maggi found in Robortello's edition. By his own account, his aim in highlighting Robortello's failings was not to "calumny" his adversary, but rather to reveal truth in such a way that young scholars would not be deceived in reading Robortello's book, and not consider it gospel. Furthermore, he maintained, Robortello himself would have accepted the criticism for the sake of the advancement of knowledge.

In general, Maggi's reading of Robortello is by no means as neutral as the author says. While he correctly points out a number of omissions in the transla-

tion, he intentionally stretches aspects of interpretation, putting into Robortello's mouth and pen what the intellectual from Udine had never uttered or written.

3. Sperone Speroni's Marginal Notes

Speroni's reading of Robortello is heavily influenced by Maggi's, as frequent reference to the 1550 *In Aristotelis librum De Poetica communes explanationes* makes clear. However, Speroni is not always in agreement with Maggi, and in amending Robortello presents his personal interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetica*. Speroni's list of errors shows also that either he read Robortello's text starting at the back—that is, from the short treatises in the appendix of the 1548 edition—or that he read and commented at least twice on Robortello's edition, going back and forth with cross-references. It is impossible to ascertain when and how often Speroni read this book, but a series of marginal notes show that at least one reading of Robortello's work took place after the publication of Pier Vettori's edition of Aristotle's *Poetics* (1560).

Speroni's list of errors is meticulously annotated at the beginning of the book with an exact note of the page number.[4] The errors he identifies in Robortello are mainly in connection with the interpretation of Aristotle's text, and more generally about the task of poetics. They are strongly influenced by Speroni's very personal conception of tragedy, and by the debate provoked by the publication of the *Canace.*

Speroni finds the first error at the very beginning of Robortello's proem, where poetics is categorized among the various language arts according to their relation or closeness to the truth. Herewith Robortello constitutes the hierarchy of the language arts:

1. *apodictic logic*, that is demonstration, which deals with what is true;
2. *dialectics*, which deals with the probable;
3. *rhetoric*, which deals with the persuasive;
4. *sophistry*, which focuses on the verisimilar;
5. *poetics*, which is concerned with the false or the fabulous (Robortello 1548, 1).

Speroni contests Robortello's idea that "as far as the more the oration departs from the truth, the nearer it gets to the point that it is false" (Robortello 1548, 1). He emphasizes how Robortello is wrong in this classification because there is no medium point between what is true and what is false. Therefore, the difference between the various language arts should be unrelated to truth and pertain to the function of language. In the *Dialogo della istoria* Speroni writes

> Poetry does not narrate the fact; it is an imitation and semblance of the fact, like the mirror for the one reflected; rhetoric is no ambassador for senators or judges, but it persuades of the truth. The truth is tested in a higher way by dialectics; and this is proved by the sciences, which treat the general, where the feelings go not (Speroni 1740, vol. 2, 314).

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[4]    In this paper I will consider only the major errors identified by Speroni.

It falls to dialectics and demonstration to show the truth by abstracting it from all those particular feelings which are aroused by poetry and rhetoric. In other words, one can say that poetics invents facts, while rhetoric persuades that something is true, even though it may be false. Their goal, therefore, is not the truth, but respectively delight and persuasion. About truth, Speroni says that "poetry paints it, rhetoric uses examples and enthymeme to substantiate it; syllogism and induction giving general proofs yield uncertain knowledge, but demonstration makes it certain" (Speroni 1740, vol. 2, 314).

Speroni contests the idea of a direct relationship with the truth and finds qualitative differences between the various kinds of oration. Hence, even if Speroni shares with Robortello this classification of language arts—coming traditionally from Averroes—the principle according to which they are grouped is different. For Speroni, it is not their relationship with the truth that distinguishes them, but rather the instruments that they employ. In reading Robortello, Speroni likely had in mind his fierce opponent Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio, who made of truth and verisimilitude the cornerstone of tragedy and who in his *Giudizio* charged the *Canace* with inverisimilitude.

Speroni then attacks one of the cardinal ideas of Robortello's interpretation of Aristotle's poetics, namely catharsis. Indeed, according to Speroni, Robortello supported the conception that tragedy purges the audience of pity and fear by means of pity and fear. The criticism against Robortello is based on a simple reading of the following Latin passage: "Quod si quis roget, qualis sit Aristotelis sententia de tragoedia. Respondeo, existimare illum; eius recitatione, & inspectione purgari perturbationes has duas, commiserationem, & metum" (Robortello 1548, 53).

Robortello is clearly referring to the famous passage "δι᾽ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν," which is translated in the standard English edition as "arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions" (Aristotle, Poetica, 1449 b 27-28). In identifying this error, Speroni explicitly endorses Maggi's criticism of Robortello. Maggi writes:

> A spectator at a tragedy undergoes feelings of pity and of fear: of pity, due to his recognition that the evil events that have happened to the individuals in the tragedy have come about because of some ignorance or misjudgment on their part, not because of their malevolence; of fear, due to his recognition that the same sort of thing could happen to himself, no matter how good his intentions. The goal of this experience is the purification of emotions; the aim is not that of liberating the spectator's soul from pity and fear. If the spectators witness tragic actions on stage (which are in fact crimes that originate in ignorance), they will find themselves moved by compassion and fear, the fear that the same could happen to them. […] If tragedy were to free this dictator from fear, the fear of themselves committing the same kind of crime, then tragedy would make human beings all too ready to commit heinous crimes. And this is clearly absurd (Robortello 1548, 97).

In contrast to Robortello, therefore, for Maggi and Speroni, tragedy purges all other perturbations, emotions and passions of the soul by means of pity and fear. Speroni is quite explicit on this in a manuscript passage of a preliminary draft of his *Apologia* of 1554. He openly confesses that tragedy "with fear (*terrore*) and pity (*misericordia*) delighting purges the chest of the listener" (Biblioteca Capitolare, Padova, Ms. Speroniani, VIII, c. 203v). The word "delighting" plays a crucial part in Speroni's conception.

A much clearer exposition of Speroni's criticism of Robortello can be found in a letter to Alvise Mocenigo, dated 26 February 1565. Here he opposes two possible interpretations of *Poetics* 1449 b 27-28, one truly Aristotelian and the other labeled "Stoic." The passage, which in some texts reads "*ut purgemur,*" and in others "*ut liberemur,*" or "*ab hujuscemodi,*" or "*ab hujusmodi affectibus*" can be understood in two very different ways. One is completely false, taking the text to read "*ut purgemur ab hujusmodi affectibus:*" through pity and fear, tragedy purges negative affects, among which are pity and fear. The second and more correct interpretation reads the passage as "*ut liberemur ab hujuscemodi fascinoribus*"—in other words, that through pity and fear tragedy purges the passions represented on the stage.

Speroni focuses on the incorrect way of reading Aristotle, the stronger interpretation that sees tragedy as purging fear and pity through exposure to fear and pity ("*ut purgemur ab iis affectibus*"). This seemingly contradictory position is characterized as Stoic and not Aristotelian in Speroni's eyes and it is clearly the position that he and Maggi attributed to Robortello. In the context of this letter, Speroni seems particularly to criticize the ethical and political importance of catharsis for Robortello, a position endorsed also by his great archenemy Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio. He saw the position of both as being that catharsis was a means of strengthening the moral virtues of justice (*giustizia*) and fortitude (*fortezza*) and, though a positive outcome, this was not Aristotle's true and original thought. Indeed, "the poet because of his nature aims at nothing other than delight" (Speroni 1740, vol. 5, 178). There was no directly ethical objective in tragedy, whose final purpose was to deliver delight or pleasure, rather than moral edification. The latter pertained not to the poet, or to tragedy, but to political government, whose final goal was to educate its citizens.

According to Speroni, therefore, Aristotle's opinion is that catharsis does not purge pity and fear, but the passions represented on stage. Interpreting him otherwise, Speroni says, would make of "Aristotle a Stoic rather than a Peripatetic." But it is clear that "Aristotle does not want to free [the human soul] from the affects, but that we rule them, because in themselves are not free" (Speroni 1740, vol. 5, 178). According to Speroni, Robortello would have rendered the passage more aptly with "*ut eos purgemus.*" Speroni's criticism of Robortello is, however, tendentious, since Robortello himself explains that

> when people see stage productions […] they become accustomed to suffering (*dolore*), being afraid (*timere*) and feeling pity (*commiserari*), and so, should it come about that they have the same experience, they would suffer and fear less (*minus doleant, & timeant*) (Robortello 1548, 53).

For Robortello, catharsis does purge pity and fear but it limits all excessive passions of the soul. Indeed, in another passage, which was annotated and underlined by Speroni, Robortello explains that

> Aristotle did not agree with Plato, who did not wish the passions and perturbations of the soul to abound in poems; for Aristotle thought of an imitation in entirely different terms than did Plato. Such passions do not at all corrupt the characters of human beings or become more abundant in their souls, but rather purge them of all kinds of perturbations (Robortello 1548, 166, translated by Weinberg).

Pity and fear do not purge pity and fear, but rather all the other perturbations which produced excessive emotions and passions in the soul. In doing this, catharsis leads to delight (ἡδονή). Robortello clearly distinguishes ἔλεος and φόβος from παθήματα. The former are generated in the soul, the latter are put on the stage during tragedy. The generation of pity and fear in the soul limits the excesses of all passions.

Catharsis was not alone in being at the center of Speroni's criticism of Robortello's interpretation of Aristotle, but also the goal of tragedy. Indeed, on page 58, Robortello wrote that "the primary goal of tragedy is the imitation of the habits of the soul and the characters of human beings" (Robortello 1548, 58). In contrast, Speroni correctly emphasizes how for Aristotle the goal of tragedy was first and foremost the imitation of human actions. Speroni is perhaps too severe with Robortello, who, on many occasions, says precisely this. However, not all human actions must be imitated according to Robortello, but only those pertinent to a moral education, and for this reason the imitation of habit and character is so crucial for him.

On page 65 Speroni identifies an error of precision made by Robortello in characterizing the faculty of *dianoia*. Indeed, according to Robortello *dianoia* or the faculty of thinking "composes, divides, ratiocinates, contemplates, simply apprehends, affirms, denies, argues, demonstrates" (Robortello 1548, 65). Among these actions, for Robortello, simple apprehension pertains to the intellect and not to *dianoia*, which is a discursive faculty. In this respect Robortello is therefore in error.

Page 87 is particularly dense in marginal annotations. Indeed, after noticing that it is false that "all that is possible is probable" because what is possible may appear very seldomly and therefore not be at all likely, Speroni criticizes Robortello's idea that the poet cannot invent because imitation must relate to true action. Robortello's thesis seems to be in contradiction with poetical tradition, but Speroni counters this by saying that there are two modes of invention, one beyond nature (*praeter naturam*) and the other according to nature (*secundum naturam*). In the first instance we are faced with a lie, which for Robortello must be expunged from poetics. In the second, poetics follows what is either probable or necessary, which in other words is something in relation to what is true, and which can convey an ethical message. Since Speroni does not conceive of poetics in relation to truth, then in imitating the poet is free to invent whatever

is able to evoke pity and fear, even unbelievable and preternatural things (Robortello 1548, 87).

The problem of the relationship between invention and truth in poetics returns on page 93 where Robortello comments as to why according to Aristotle one should retain true names in tragedy. According to Speroni, who does not accept Robortello's idea that poetics has a strict relationship with the truth, in the commentary no real explanation or reason is given for why tragedians do not and cannot invent names, while comedians create names at will. Robortello here emphasizes once again that tragedy must imitate the truth in order to move an audience to pity and fear, and for this reason its capacity to evoke these two emotions is more effective if the names used are real or verisimilar.

Speroni, then, shows how Robortello overinterprets Aristotle in saying that in tragedy it is better to imitate the actions of famous or important persons because their characters, deeds and mistakes are so extraordinary that they arouse the various passions with greater intensity. Furthermore, only illustrious and noble men can achieve the highest happiness as well as the deepest sorrow. Imitation of plebeians, according to Robortello's interpretation of Aristotle, should be avoided in tragedy. For Speroni, however, all kinds of actions befit imitation, not only those of noble and illustrious men, because—following what Aristotle says in his *Ethics*—every human being, according to their own nature, can be happy. Once again, Speroni tends to go beyond Robortello's thesis or make it stronger. And indeed in this case too, Robortello simply states that the imitation of such men and women arouses the various passions more forcefully, but he does not exclude the representation of common people's actions. Nonetheless, Speroni believes that Robortello's conception is methodologically flawed, and this is particularly clear in the *Lettioni in difesa della Canace del medesimo*. Here, Speroni maintains that tragedy should imitate common people, because the spectators at the theatre were plebeians, and in imitating them their feeling of pity and fear would be much stronger.

Finally, in commenting on *Poetics* 60 a 19-26, Robortello explains Aristotle's statement that Homer is a master of paralogism by making the point that this kind of argumentation is employed by rhetoricians. Thus Robortello is arguing for an affinity between poetics and rhetoric, both of which would use the same type of inference. Speroni, who differentiates the language arts according to the mode of inference they employ, cannot accept this kind of connection or affinity, and he adds, considering in this instance the two disciplines in relation to truth, that in any case rhetoric cannot be considered akin to poetics because the former deals with the verisimilar, and the latter with the false. In this respect, Robortello was right and Speroni wrong, since Aristotle himself establishes this connection when speaking of pity in *Rhetorics* II.8 and fear in *Rhetorics* II.5.

## 4. Conclusion

Maggi and Speroni identify different kinds of errors in Robortello's commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*. While Maggi has more of a focus on the philological restitution of Aristotle's text and thought, Speroni is driven more by a

personal interest in tragedy. Their criticisms testify to the relevance and significance of Robortello's enterprise and show how personal readings of Aristotelian texts could lead to divergent interpretations and be the origin of different exegetical traditions.

Interestingly enough, coming from a totally different conception of poetics, a close family friend of Speroni—Torquato Tasso—read and commented on Robortello's text, signalling the same errors, but reaching totally different interpretative conclusions (see Bettinelli 2001). When Tasso was a student in Padua between 1561 and 1566, he had the opportunity of frequenting Speroni's house: a long-lasting friendship had created a strong bond between his father Bernardo and the Paduan Intellectual. Tasso probably had recourse to a manuscript copy of the *Lezioni sui personaggi*, itself published posthumously only in 1597, but in Speroni's possession at the Accademia degli Elevati in Padua in 1558, and which would have inspired the young scholar in composing the *Rinaldo*. Looking at Tasso's marginal annotations to Robortello's commentary—the subject of a detailed study by Andrea Bettinelli—it is evident how the same passages that caused problems for Speroni also piqued Tasso's interest.

In the pages in which Robortello explains the ethical value of imitation but at the same time emphasizes that poetics is concerned with falsehood, Tasso notes "si recitatio et imitatio virtutum fit etc.: sibi contradicit" (Bettinelli 2001, 294). In Tasso's mind either the subject is falsity or imitation generates virtue, but the two together are impossible. And it is quite clear which Tasso himself would opt for. Indeed, he writes that it is "Robortello's error that the false is the subject-matter of poetry" (Bettinelli 2001, 309). Tasso was probably convinced by Speroni's reading of Robortello that the Pisan intellectual was defending the idea that the false was central to poetics, while, as we have seen, this is a misinterpretation. But while for Speroni falsehood was part of the remit of poetics—thus detaching it from a direct relationship with truth—for Tasso poetics should constantly engage with the truth, unwittingly following the footsteps of Giraldi Cinzio and Robortello. That Tasso endorsed Speroni's misinterpretation of Robortello is evident in the *Discorsi dell'arte poetica e in particolare sopra il poema eroico* (1594), where he writes that

> Robortello is wrong in assigning the false to the poem as its subject matter. Indeed, according to Plato and Aristotle's opinion, the false is the subject matter of the sophist, who struggles around what is not. But the poet bases himself on some true action and considers it as verisimile. Therefore, his subject matter is the verisimile, which can be either true or false, but is more often true (Tasso 1594, 26).

But Tasso's conception echoes Robortello's, and the fact that he believed himself to be at odds with him suggests that he is following Speroni's view.

In relation to the false, Tasso makes a marginal note where Robortello speaks of the possibility of including subjects that are *praeter naturam* in poetics. Whereas, as we have seen, for Robortello this option is not to be considered common, according to Speroni it was a central feature of poetics. Like Speroni,

Tasso believes that this is a negative aspect of Robortello's interpretation of Aristotle. However, unlike Speroni, he corrects Robortello explaining better how even beyond nature subjects may still serve poetry in relation to the truth. Indeed, some of these subjects can be the logical consequences of a story, without which it would be understood as mere fantasy.

These are only two instances of particular passages that were commented on and annotated in different directions by Speroni and Tasso, both of them signalling errors in Robortello's reading, but many more could be cited. For instance, both criticize Robortello's interpretation of the passage in which Aristotle states that Homer taught that a poetical lie is a paralogism, and likewise the reading of Aristotle's distinction between a simple and complex plot. A further, much more detailed investigation is clearly needed.

Working on errors of interpretation rather than similarities, especially in textual criticism, can be extremely useful for reconstructing the reception of a text. By juxtaposing the annotations of Maggi, Speroni, and Tasso against Robortello's commentary, and drawing out a comparison helps us to understand better, not only how a critical text was read, but also how Aristotelian ideas were received—much more informatively, in fact, than concentrating solely on similarities and points in common. Indeed, errors are often very precise and circumscribed, and they allow for genealogical reconstructions, whereas similarities and loans, which are for the most part very vague, do not. Histories of error in textual criticism could thus lead to a new way of interpreting the incremental rise of a specific literary and philosophical tradition.

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