

Voices under trial. Inquisition, abjuration, and preachers' orality in sixteenth-century Italy

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On 30 April 1596, the Tribunal of the Inquisition in Siena issued a sentence of condemnation against Pietro da Borgo San Sepolcro. He was a forty-five-year-old Franciscan preacher in the convent of the small town of Sarteano, near Chiusi, in the Grand-Duchy of Tuscany. Fra Pietro was found guilty of uttering heretical propositions and was sentenced to ascend the pulpit of his church and assert three extremely important doctrinal truths to his audience. First: that God's mercy is infinite. Second: that the apostles did not have more holy spirit than the Virgin. Third: that God causes sin as permission and not as a command.¹ Fra Pietro had preached from the same pulpit only a few months before. Between late June and early July 1595, he had told the faithful of Sarteano that God's mercy is finite, that the apostles did have more holy spirit than the Virgin, and that God causes sin as a command and not as permission, exactly the opposite of the concepts carefully listed in the detailed abjuration text that was written for him by the Holy Office's chancellor. Fra Pietro's orality had been completely rewritten.

This story is to be found in the records of the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the former Congregation of the Holy Office) in Rome and has remained untold until now. In addition to Fra Pietro's case study, the present article considers many other cases that occurred in different parts of Italy in the years between the reinstatement of the Holy Office in 1542 and the end of the century.² This study argues that the Inquisition aimed at using

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¹ The texts of the sentence and abjuration of Pietro da Borgo San Sepolcro are in Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede (hereafter ACDF), Siena-Processi 7, fols. 519r–20v and 521r–v, respectively. The entire trial is at fols. 507r–24v.

² The situation of the Inquisition was obviously different from one Italian state to another. For an outline of the question, see Adriano Prosperi, *Tribunali della coscienza. Inquisitori, confessori, missionari* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009; first edn. 1996), 57–116. A large number of studies exist on the Roman Inquisition and its history in the

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abjurations to control collective memory by rewriting the orality of Italian preachers and substituting their 'wrong' orality with what was considered to be the 'right' one. Seen in this light, an abjuration constituted a repetition of the preacher's original performance in order to replace it with a new one, thereby erasing from the audience's mind the memory of the heretical propositions that had previously been uttered. In what follows, an abjuration can be seen as another sermon delivered by the same speaker, on the same matters, in the same venue, and (in theory) to the same audience. The words and their real author, however, are different. The aim of the following pages is to analyse the reasons, the nature, the consequences, and the implications of this process.

SEEKING ORALITY

First and foremost, to understand the inquisitors' approach to abjurations, it is important to see the attitude they adopted when investigating the oral and written heresy of the preachers under trial. As in other cases, before condemning Pietro da Borgo San Sepolcro to a public abjuration, the inquisitor in charge of the case – the general inquisitor of Siena, Zaccaria Orcioli da Ravenna – had the difficult task of ascertaining what the preacher had actually said in church. Recovering the past orality of the accused was obviously the aim of every trial for allegedly unorthodox spoken words, not just for preachers delivering a public sermon.³ The latter, however, was characterized by at least two distinctive features. First, the inquisitor could count on a much larger number of ear-witnesses than for propositions uttered in a private household or in a tavern. Secondly, he might be able to get a written copy of the sermon, a kind of testimony that would not usually exist for everyday conversations of lay people.

In spite of the existence of many ear-witnesses, the inquisitors usually seemed to consider written evidence much more reliable, anticipating Montesquieu in the conviction that 'writing is a witness very hard to corrupt'.⁴ The inquisitors' question as to the existence of a written text prepared by the preacher before the delivery was often met by vague answers. 'I preached without a text because

sixteenth century. The main general recent books are Giovanni Romeo, *L'Inquisizione nell'Italia moderna* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2002), Andrea Del Col, *L'Inquisizione in Italia dal XII al XXI secolo* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006), and Christopher Black, *The Italian Inquisition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). For the other works published in recent years, see the bibliographical review in Michaela Valente, 'Nuove ricerche e interpretazioni sul Sant'Uffizio a più di dieci anni dall'apertura dell'archivio', *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* 66 (2012), 569–92.

³ For an outline of the functioning of Holy Office trials, see John Tedeschi, *The Prosecution of Heresy. Collected Studies on the Inquisition in Early Modern Italy* (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Text and Studies, 1991), 127–203.

⁴ Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws. Complete Edition* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2011; first edn. 1748), 152. The word 'ear-witness' is more common in Law than in historical studies. I use it precisely with a juridical meaning in the context of Inquisition trials, with reference to somebody who, after hearing the sermon, reports the preacher's words before the inquisitor.

I preached in a small place,' said in 1583 a Franciscan friar under trial for an alleged heretical statement.⁵ In 1580, when asked for the written version of the sermon for which he was under trial, another Franciscan preacher firmly denied having it, asserting 'I do not have a written sermon on this issue,' even if the following day he spontaneously returned to the inquisitor carrying with him a transcription of that very sermon.⁶

Presumably, being aware of the questionable nature of their words, the accused preachers were usually reluctant to give their judges such a weapon to be used against them. Aware of the defendants' reticence, the inquisitors, for their part, were reluctant to believe the idea of a preacher mounting the pulpit with no writings at all in his hands.⁷ This is particularly evident in Pietro da Borgo San Sepolcro's trial, in which the inquisitor struggled to find a preliminary written version of the sermon, whose existence was denied by the defendant: 'I have no writings.'⁸ 'It is not plausible that he preaches without writings, so he must say freely where they are,' the suspicious inquisitor insisted.⁹ This tells us that the use of a written text in the church was a practice widespread enough to be taken for granted.

After he succeeded in finding a copy of the text written by Fra Pietro, the inquisitor had to prove the correspondence between it and the subsequent oral sermon. When called to explain some of the statements contained in his written sermons, Fra Pietro did everything he could to distance himself from that inconvenient evidence. First, he tried to persuade his interlocutors, albeit with scant success, that he did not know anything about some of the writings found among his personal items: 'It is true that this sermon was among those of mine, but it is not written in my hand, I never used it, I never read it, and I do not know whose it is.'¹⁰ Then, Fra Pietro tried to distance his writing from his orality by asserting that the text he had written did not correspond to what he had really said in church. When the written text read: 'It does not seem that it is now permitted to fast,' Fra Pietro asserted: 'This is a slip of the pen: I failed to

⁵ 'Io ho predicato senza scritti per haver predicato in luoco piccolo', Trial of Francesco di Gropoli, ACDF, Siena-Processi 5, fol. 545v. Francesco da Gropoli was accused of having said that the human soul is composed by four different elements.

⁶ 'Io non ho predica distesa sopra questo fatto', Trial of Benigno da Monticchiello, ACDF, Siena-Processi 15, fol. 768v. Benigno da Monticchiello was accused of having said that Christ's passion had been imperfect. The passage taken from the following day's deposition is at fol. 769r.

⁷ On the tactics displayed by both accusers and accused in the inquisitorial trials, see Prosperi, *Tribunali della coscienza*, 194–210, and Jane Wickersham, *Rituals of Prosecution. The Roman Inquisition and the Prosecution of Philo-Protestants in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2012), 155–92. The question of the reliability of trial documents as historical sources in relation to the defendants' strategies of dissimulation is discussed in Nicholas S. Davidson, 'The Inquisition in Venice and its Documents: Some Problems of Method and Analysis', in Andrea Del Col and Giovanna Paolin (eds.), *L'Inquisizione romana in Italia nell'età moderna. Archivi, problemi di metodo e nuove ricerche* (Rome: Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali. Ufficio Centrale per i Beni Archivistici, 1991), 117–31.

⁸ 'Io non ho scritti', ACDF, Siena-Processi 7, fol. 510v.

⁹ 'Non è verisimile ch'egli predichi senza scritti, però dicca liberamente dove sonno i suoi scritti', *ibid.*

¹⁰ 'Questa predica è vero ch'era tra le mie, ma non è mia mano, né io me ne son mai servito, né manco l'ho letta, né so di chi si sia', *ibid.*, fol. 517r.

write the *not.*¹¹ Similarly, when he had to justify an unequivocally heretical assertion ('The Divine essence is *finita*'), he replied: 'This was a slip of the pen: I meant *infinita*.'¹² Finally, the accused claimed that some passages of the written version had been omitted when speaking from the pulpit: 'I have never preached this part of the sermon. You can see that I wrote this note in the margin in order to leave out these things.'¹³ Be that as it may, Fra Pietro admitted he had uttered at least some of the suspicious sentences, but, as a last resort, he denied his actual wish to utter them. 'I said this proposition because of the vehemence of my tongue,' Fra Pietro reluctantly confessed, attempting at least to distance what he had said from what he had consciously wanted to say.¹⁴

By contrast with today's historians, for whom written evidence is the only resort, the inquisitors could count also on many ear-witnesses who had heard the preachers' words. The presence of a sermon's ear-witnesses was so crucial that the Dominican inquisitor Eliseo Masini used public preaching as an example of a heresy case particularly easy to prove because the fact was evident to a large number of people.¹⁵ Practice, however, can be different from theory, and if witnesses are uncooperative or contradictory, the inquisitor's task becomes much more difficult than one might think. After all, no member of the audience was interested in admitting that he had heard a heretical statement: he himself would then run the risk of being prosecuted for not denouncing the crime.¹⁶ Obviously, not all hearers were able to recognize a heretical sentence when they heard one, especially in the case of subtle doctrinal matters that could be very difficult to grasp for a non-literate lay audience.

The relationship between orality and writing raises a crucial question: When the written heresy had been sufficiently demonstrated, why struggle to prove the oral one as well? After all, written heresy was a much more serious crime than an oral one.¹⁷ Pietro da Borgo San Sepolcro's trial, among others,¹⁸ shows that proving that the written words were heretical was not enough for the

¹¹ 'Non parrebbe ch' hora fusse lecito il degiunare', 'Questo è un errore di penna: ho mancato di porgli il non', *ibid.*, fol. 516v.

¹² 'è la Divina essentia finita', 'Ma questo è stato errore di penna: vuol dire *infinita*', *ibid.*, fol. 518r.

¹³ 'io questa predica in questa parte non l'ho mai predicata, e veda V.P. che nell'immagine io gli ho fatto questa nota per tralassare queste cose', *ibid.*, fol. 517v.

¹⁴ 'per la vehemenza della lingua io [...] dissi quella propositione', *ibid.*, fol. 516r.

¹⁵ Eliseo Masini, *Sacro arsenale ovvero pratica dell'ufficio della S. Inquisitione* (Rome: Heirs Corbellotti, 1639), 274.

¹⁶ On the position of those who attend one or more heretical sermons, see Prospero Farinacci, *Tractatus de haeresi* (Antwerp: Johann Keebergius, 1616), 96; Cesare Carena, *Tractatus de officio Sanctissimae Inquisitionis et modo procedendi in causa fidei* (Cremona: Belpiero, 1641), 461.

¹⁷ Eliseo Masini explained that much more wilful determination is needed to write heretical words than to pronounce them: Masini, *Sacro arsenale*, 338. On the search for the defendants' writings, see 123–4.

¹⁸ Another example is given by the trial of Sisto da Siena held in Naples in 1552: ACDF, Stanza Storica R 4-f, fols. 307r–34v. On Sisto da Siena see Fausto Parente, 'Sisto da Siena', in Adriano Prosperi, Vincenzo Lavenia and John Tedeschi (eds.), *Dizionario Storico dell'Inquisizione*, 4 vols. (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2010; hereafter *DSI*), Vol. 3, 1440–41. On his trial in Naples see Ulderico Parente, 'Sul preteso giudaismo di fra Sisto da Siena davanti all'Inquisizione Romana (1551–1553)', in *Le Inquisizioni cristiane e gli ebrei. Tavola rotonda nell'ambito della conferenza annuale della ricerca* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2003), 375–405 (at 391–402).

inquisitors. They also aimed at demonstrating that the preachers had uttered the same words in church before their audiences, and this was not easy. As the seventeenth-century inquisitorial jurist Cesare Carena noted, heresy proved by a private writing that contains it is unquestioned, but the writing alone cannot prove a crime separate from it.¹⁹ In other words, Fra Pietro was certainly punishable for what he had written, but this, by itself, was not evidence that he had pronounced the same words from the pulpit.

I argue that from the Inquisition's perspective, public oral heresy, although less serious a crime on paper than the private written one, was in fact more dangerous: public speech had the very detrimental effect of propagating a wrong proposition very differently than a private writing that was not meant to be read by anyone other than its author. The words spoken by a preacher from the pulpit were even more dangerous than those spoken in a private household or around a tavern table. First, because public sermons could reach much larger audiences that were sometimes composed of many hundreds of people. Second, because the authority of the preacher, certainly greater than that of a common person, made his words much more believable and increased enormously the possibility of their circulation. In 1594, an inquisitor wrote in the verdict of a preacher condemned to a public abjuration that the defendant's main fault had been 'to induce his people to believe the above-mentioned heresies and errors.'²⁰

From the very first, preachers were one of the main channels propagating Protestant thought in Italy and, as such, were one of the main targets of the Roman Inquisition.²¹ The inquisitors soon realized the danger represented by the members of the clergy who spread unorthodox ideas and did their best to repair that damage.²² Masini clearly stated that a 'master of heresies' (*maestro dell'heresie*) deserves a harsher punishment than a simple heretic because the damage he causes extends to other people.²³ And this can help to explain the need to prove the uttering of a sentence even if its writing has already been ascertained. Every inquisitor needed to know if the unorthodox sentences of his accused preacher had remained locked in his room or had been heard

¹⁹ Carena, *Tractatus*, 343–4. See also Farinacci, *Tractatus de haeresi*, 195–6.

²⁰ 'indurre il suo popolo a credere e a tenere le sopradette heresie et errori', Trial of Stefano Rossi da Roccalbegna, ACDF, Siena-Processi 20, fol. 288r. Among the heresies for which Rossi had been tried were the non-existence of hell and the mortality of the soul.

²¹ See Silvana Seidel Menchi, 'Origine e origini del Santo Uffizio dell'Inquisizione romana (1542–1559)', in Agostino Borromeo (ed.), *L'Inquisizione* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2003), 291–321 (at 295–302); Giorgio Caravale, *Predicazione e Inquisizione nell'Italia del Cinquecento. Ippolito Chizzola tra eresia e contro-eresia antiprottestante* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012), 13–30.

²² On the inquisitorial and tridentine attitude towards preachers in the sixteenth century, see Giovanni Romeo, 'Predicazione e Inquisizione in Italia dal Concilio di Trento alla prima metà del Seicento', in Giacomo Martina S.J. and Ugo Dovero (eds.), *La predicazione in Italia dopo il Concilio di Trento tra Cinquecento e Settecento* (Rome: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1996), 207–42 (at 207–25), and Massimo Firpo, *La presa di potere dell'Inquisizione romana 1550–1553* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2014), 74–6, 205. On the rhetorical strategies displayed by heterodox preachers from the pulpit, see Giorgio Caravale, 'Le ambiguità della parola: Eresia e ortodossia tra oralità e scrittura nella predicazione italiana del Cinquecento', *The Italianist* 34 (2014), 478–92.

²³ Masini, *Sacro arsenale*, 384.

(and perhaps believed) by his faithful. Writing a heretical sentence required a greater determination than uttering it, but spreading it (even if through a slip of the tongue) was far more dangerous in social terms. Presumably for the inquisitors, the faithful's auralty was even more important than the preachers' orality: their main concern was not what was produced by the preachers' mouths, but what was perceived by the listeners' ears. This is the key to understanding the approach that inquisitors used to take when sentencing guilty preachers.

REWRITING ORALITY

After ascertaining what Fra Pietro had really said in church, the inquisitor had to find the best way to sentence the guilty defendant, and to limit as much as possible the deleterious effects of his heretical preaching. Both concerns were evident in the verdict issued on 30 April 1596 and signed by Zaccaria Orcioli.²⁴ As for the first aspect, the penalty was very mild, since the judges wanted to believe that the accused had erred unintentionally and not with malice. The heretical propositions pronounced with a slip of the tongue (*lubrico linguae*) were not really punishable.²⁵ Fra Pietro's words (or at least some of them) had been proved, but not the full will to pronounce them, which was a necessary condition for punishment required in inquisitorial trials.²⁶ Fra Pietro was only condemned to fast on bread and water for a few days and to recite some psalms. The question as to the effects of Fra Pietro's message, however, was much more worrying. It was one thing to jot down an unorthodox proposition on a personal sheet of paper that nobody else would read; it was quite another to spread it to a number of the faithful. Fra Pietro's spoken words had to be rewritten.

Nowadays many scholars agree that the Inquisition's main aim was not to punish but correct, and, whenever possible, reconcile with the Church those who had erred. Inquisitors were usually interested in obtaining the death of the wrong idea, not that of the man; the soul and mind of the heretic, not his head. From their perspective, an abjuration was better than a death penalty, and their efforts were usually directed towards obtaining the former and avoiding the latter. Fra Pietro was no exception: he was condemned to an abjuration in which he must express the opposite concepts to those he had uttered in the past. The verdict stated very clearly that Fra Pietro's retraction should be held in the same place where the original sermons had been preached:

²⁴ The text of the verdict is in ACDF, Siena-Processi 7, fols. 519r–20v.

²⁵ Carena, *Tractatus*, 387; Nicolaus Eymerich and Francisco Peña, *Directorium Inquisitorum* (Venice: Simeone Vasalini, 1595), 420; Farinacci, *Tractatus de haeresi*, 37–8; Francesco Bordoni, *Sacrum tribunal iudicum in causis sanctae fidei contra haereticos et de haeresi suspectos* (Rome: Heirs Corbelletti, 1648), 592.

²⁶ See Bordoni, *Sacrum tribunal*, 592.

You must retract and declare the above-mentioned propositions in the way that we will give you in writing, both before our congregation and in the same church of Sarteano where you had preached the above-mentioned propositions, reciting publicly and before the people on a feast day the words that we will give you in writing.²⁷

The venue had been specifically prescribed by the powerful Cardinal Inquisitor Giulio Antonio Santori in a letter he had written to Orcioli the previous month.²⁸ The verdict stressed, repeating it twice, that the text was to be written by the representatives of the Inquisition and that the defendant could do nothing but read it aloud word for word. The preacher's new orality was to be created and put into writing by somebody else. The collateral punishments moved in the direction of depriving Fra Pietro of his own past and future voice, both written and spoken. On the one hand, his writings containing the same heretical propositions were to be burned; on the other, Fra Pietro was temporarily forbidden from preaching: 'We ban you from preaching, so that for five years you should not dare to preach in any way, and we want all your writings to be burned.'²⁹ Apart from that created by the Inquisition, no other voices of the defendant were to survive or be produced in the near future, neither written nor spoken.

What I argue here is that, in the case of preachers' abjurations, the public display aimed at erasing the previous oral message delivered by the preacher from the pulpit. In this perspective, both the venue and the public should if possible be the same as that of the original event. Sometimes the venue was a larger place in the same town in order to convene not only the previous audience but also other people. So in what was effectively the same place and with the same voice, the preacher had to tackle the same questions, but express the opposite concepts.

Only a limited typology of abjurations is considered here: public abjurations of preachers for assertions pronounced during their sermons, which took place in the same venue where the sermons had previously been delivered. Not all the abjurations were made in public, but only those *de formali* and *de vehementi*. The former occurred in the most serious cases, for confessed or 'convicted' heretics (that is, when heresy had been proved). The latter, the abjuration *de vehementi*, was issued when the accused was seriously suspected of heresy. The

²⁷ 'Tu devi revocare et dichiarare le sopradette propositioni in quel modo et in quella forma che da noi ti sarà dato in scrittis recitando, et in questa nostra congregazione et anco in quella chiesa di Sarteano nella quale tu hai predicato le sopradette prepositioni, pubblicamente alla presenza del popolo in giorno festivo le parole formali che ti saranno date in scriptis', ACDF, Siena-Processi 7, fol. 519v.

²⁸ Giulio Antonio Santori to the inquisitor of Siena, Rome, 23 March 1596, in Oscar Di Simplicio (ed.), *Le lettere della congregazione del Sant'Ufficio all'inquisitore di Siena 1581-1721* (Trieste: Università di Trieste: 2009), 15. On Santori, see Saverio Ricci, *Il sommo inquisitore. Giulio Antonio Santori tra autobiografia e storia (1532-1602)* (Rome: Salerno, 2002).

²⁹ 'Ti priviamo dall'atto della predicatione, ché per spatio di cinque anni non ardischi predichare in modo veruno, et vogliamo che tutti i tuoi scritti siano abbrusciati', ACDF, Siena-Processi 7, fol. 519v.

majority of the abjurations were made in private in the presence of the inquisitor or the bishop: the abjuration *de levi* (when only a slight suspicion of heresy existed) and the private abjuration (made before the trial).³⁰ In general, the inquisitors tended to opt for a lighter punishment and a private abjuration when the defendant presented himself spontaneously to the Holy Office (*sponte comparens*). On the contrary, they were more inclined to opt for a public abjuration when the heresy of the accused was publicly known.³¹ Understandably, the insult to the Church had to be wiped out before those who had knowledge of it, but it was always better not to publicize it if it had remained secret.³²

A public abjuration responded to different kinds of needs on the part of the Inquisition. First, it affirmed the power of the authority over the dissenter who had dared to challenge it. It was also a public humiliation aimed at annihilating the dissident's dignity and in so doing deterring possible imitators.³³ Moreover, the issue at stake was not only the condemnation of the man, but also the condemnation of one or more of his ideas. In this perspective, the public abjuration was a reaffirmation before the public of what was right and wrong in terms of doctrine. In this light, it is not strange that the abjuration could not only contain a generic repudiation of heresy: it had to mention each single doctrinal issue in which the abjurer had previously erred.³⁴ At the same time, inquisitors had to be very careful about what they wrote in the text for the abjurer: an early seventeenth-century instruction to the inquisitor of Bologna shows great concern that a public abjuration could have the undesired effect of instructing those present on the wrong practice, rather than teaching them to refuse it.³⁵

A public abjuration was characterized by a complex ritual governed by its own rules. It was also a public performance and, as such, needed an audience which had to be as numerous as possible. It is not surprising that inquisitorial manuals used to stress that public abjurations should take place on Sundays or feast days in order to have the largest possible audience.³⁶ All the other planned sermons in town had to be cancelled to facilitate attendance.³⁷ Since words were the protagonists of the show, in this case the religious authority really did want the people to understand what the accused said. This should not be taken

³⁰ See Elena Brambilla, 'Abiura', in *DSI*, Vol. 1, 5–6. On the definition of the different levels of suspicion in inquisitorial manuals, see Wickersham, *Rituals of Prosecution*, 239–43.

³¹ On this last point, see Farinacci, *Tractatus de haeresi*, 324.

³² See Eymerich and Peña, *Directorium Inquisitorium*, 492, and Wickersham, *Rituals of Prosecution*, 239–40.

³³ On the importance of 'public humiliation' in abjurations, see Prosperi, *Tribunali della coscienza*, 170–71. See also Wickersham, *Rituals of Prosecution*, 232, and Irene Fosi, *Papal Justice: Subjects and Courts in the Papal State, 1500–1750*, translated by Thomas V. Cohen (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 57.

³⁴ Farinacci, *Tractatus de haeresi*, 324; Masini, *Sacro arsenale*, 318; Carena, *Tractatus*, 427; Bordoni, *Sacrum tribunal*, 227.

³⁵ See Tedeschi, *The Prosecution of Heresy*, 229–30, 244.

³⁶ Farinacci, *Tractatus de haeresi*, 323. It should be kept in mind that the manuals were written after the trials mentioned here, and that they are not always uniform, since they reflect the mentality of their authors and the chronological and geographical contexts in which they were produced. See Tedeschi, *The Prosecution of Heresy*, 51–7.

³⁷ Eymerich and Peña, *Directorium Inquisitorium*, 494, 500, 503.

for granted, since this was an age in which the entire Catholic liturgy was recited in Latin, and even the Bible in the vernacular was prohibited.³⁸ However, the great majority of the faithful were illiterate and completely unable to comprehend Latin. In this context, one might think that the Inquisition would be satisfied by the visual effect caused by the public humiliation of a man dressed in the penitential garment (*abitello*), but this is not the case.³⁹ Unlike the pillory, which was traditionally silent, the abjuration ceremony was based on the offender's words, and the audience had to both hear and understand them. Every inquisitorial manual tirelessly repeats that the abjuration had to be pronounced in the vernacular so that everybody could understand it.⁴⁰ The great attention to orality is further demonstrated by other prescriptions: the language should be well known to the audience,⁴¹ and the voice should be loud enough to facilitate comprehension.⁴² As previously said, the inquisitors' main concern was what the listeners' actually understood. The aim was to achieve the greatest possible impact on the public, and this is even more evident for the retractions of preachers, whose popularity was built on public speeches.

Needless to say, the defendants themselves were perfectly aware of meaning and significance of the public abjuration ceremony. It was not difficult for them to understand that they were being called upon to be the main characters in a show that centred on their humiliation and on the recantation of their deepest beliefs. The crisis of conscience related to the abjuration is clearly exemplified by the story of the Protestant lawyer Francesco Spiera, who publicly abjured twice, in Venice and Cittadella (near Padua), in 1548 and died shortly after. According to a well-established historiographical tradition, Spiera's illness and death were caused by the remorse for his recantation, and already at the time his case became a symbol of the internal conflict between coherence with one's ideas and the surrender to repression.⁴³ Obviously, substituting one's previous orality for somebody else's words was difficult to accept. This is especially

³⁸ On the prohibition of the Bible and prayers in the vernacular in sixteenth-century Italy, see Gigliola Fragnito, *La Bibbia al rogo. La censura ecclesiastica e i volgarizzamenti della Scrittura (1471–1605)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997); *ead.*, *Proibito capire. La Chiesa e il volgare nella prima età moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005).

³⁹ Not all public abjurers wore the *abitello*, but only those condemned to the abjuration *de formalis*. The abjuration *de vehementis* did not include the penitential garment. See Masini, *Sacro arsenale*, 308.

⁴⁰ Eymerich and Peña, *Directorium*, 487, 493, 496, 502; Farinacci, *Tractatus de haeresi*, 325; Bordoni, *Sacrum tribunal*, 233–4; Masini, *Sacro arsenale*, 318; Carena, *Tractatus*, 427; Umberto Locati, *Opus quod iudiciale inquisitionum dicitur* (Rome: Heirs of Antonio Blado, 1570), 497.

⁴¹ Bordoni, *Sacrum tribunal*, 233.

⁴² Eymerich and Peña, *Directorium*, 504. The attention to orality, however, does not mean that the writing dimension was neglected: a written version of the abjuration should be produced, signed (if not written) by the abjurer and kept. See Ignazio Lupo, *Nova lux in edictum S. Inquisitionis* (Bergamo: Rubei, 1648), 47; Farinacci, *Tractatus de haeresi*, 325. On the theory and practice of abjuration in the Roman Inquisition, see also Wickersham, *Rituals of Prosecution*, 230–57, and Thomas F. Mayer, *The Roman Inquisition. A Papal Bureaucracy and its Laws in the Age of Galileo* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 202–03.

⁴³ The traditional interpretation of Spiera's story has been convincingly refuted in Anne Overell, 'The Exploitation of Francesco Spiera', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 26 (1995), 619–37. The article also deals with the connection between Italian Protestants' abjurations and the debate on the legitimacy of Nicodemism, too complex to be discussed here. On this matter, see also Wickersham, *Rituals of Prosecution*, 256–7. On Spiera, more recently, see Adriano Prosperi in *DSI*, Vol. 3, 1470–71, and Silvano Cavazza, 'Un vicenda europea:

true for preachers used to delivering their sermons before a public of the faithful who depended on them to discern truth and lies, right and wrong.

It is not surprising, therefore, that preachers were not always willing to recant their own ideas before their own audiences, not even to spare their lives. Leaving aside the many preachers who refused to abjure and were sentenced to death, such as Baldo Lupetino (1556) and Bartolomeo Fonzio (1562), the story of the Benedictine monk Giorgio Siculo signifies the hesitation and affliction that presumably characterized these individual trajectories particularly well. In 1551 he agreed to abjure publicly in the church of San Domenico in Ferrara, where he had been preaching when he was arrested. A large crowd gathered in church to attend the ceremony, including Duke Ercole II d'Este. Apparently Giorgio Siculo changed his mind after his sentence was read aloud with the list of all his doctrinal errors. For whatever reasons, he did not want to abjure anymore. He was strangled in prison soon after.⁴⁴

From the perspective of the preacher's abdication of his own orality, the case of the Franciscan preacher Giovanni Buzio is different from those just mentioned. Lupetino, Fonzio, Giorgio Siculo and many others were not willing to ascend a pulpit and talk with words written by somebody else, but they also lost forever the opportunity to say in public what they really thought. On the contrary, before being hanged and burned in Campo de' Fiori in Rome in 1553 for not believing in indulgences and Purgatory, Fra Giovanni took the opportunity of the huge crowd gathered in the square to harangue it with a speech in which he defended his opinions and attacked the inquisitors. In contrast to the abjurers, Buzio's orality was not rewritten by the judges of the Holy Office. Not only did he ignore the ban on preaching that he had previously received, but his final speech in Campo de' Fiori was put into print and circulated in two different languages.⁴⁵ The survival of his ideas rather than his body was presumably exactly the opposite of what the Holy Office wished to obtain. It is not surprising that in the following years the practice spread of gagging the condemned person before he mounted the scaffold. The most famous case occurred in 1600 in the same place, namely, that of the Dominican Giordano Bruno, who was executed only after the inquisitors had done everything they could for six months to exchange his life for a public abjuration.

Nevertheless, silencing the offender was impossible when he climbed the stairs of the pulpit to abjure and not those of the scaffold to be executed. In that case, talking was precisely what the condemned person was expected to do before the public, and this exposed the authorities to a great risk if he chose to

Vergerio e il caso Spiera, 1548–49', in Guido Dall'Olio, Adelisa Malena, and Pierroberto Scaramella (eds.), *La fede degli italiani. Per Adriano Prosperi* (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2011), Vol. 1, 41–51.

⁴⁴ On Giorgio Siculo, see Adriano Prosperi, *L'eresia del Libro Grande. Storia di Giorgio Siculo e della sua setta* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2011; first edn.: 2000). The story of the non-abjuration is narrated at 229–33. On the anomaly of Giorgio Siculo's death see Firpo, *La presa di potere*, 188–9.

⁴⁵ On Giovanni Buzio, see John Tedeschi, 'Giovanni Buzio', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Treccani, 1960–; hereafter *DBI*), Vol. 15 (1972), 632–4; Matteo Al Kalak, 'Giovanni Buzio', in *DSI*, Vol. 1, 237–8.

speak with his own words. The most dramatic example comes not from a preacher, but from a cobbler who was expected to abjure in the cathedral of Udine in 1544. When he was standing in front of the largest audience of his life, he started to read a different text from that written for him by the inquisitors, confirming rather than recanting his heretical ideas.⁴⁶ In a different context, that of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions, Francisco Bethencourt has shown that an *auto da fé* could sometimes shift from the celebration of the Church to that of the offender.⁴⁷ It is understandable that in another case the inquisitor of Milan was told not to proceed with the public abjuration of the condemned preacher to avoid the risk that he might repeat his erroneous propositions.⁴⁸

A different strategy was that of the Franciscan Bartolomeo Golfi (also known as Bartolomeo della Pergola) who preached in the cathedral of Modena in 1544. When the suspicion began to spread that his sermons contained hidden heretical propositions (including the denial of the existence of purgatory, the negation of the justification by works, and the refusal of the validity of indulgences and the cult of the saints), he tried to anticipate and avert a possible trial. At the request of the Bishop of Modena, Giovanni Morone, Golfi agreed to read aloud in the same cathedral a retraction that he himself had written (the so-called *Retrattatione*). On the appointed day – 15 June 1544 – the whole town thronged to witness the event, including the governor, the *podestà*, the *massaio* (a public officer with administrative duties), the college of doctors, and the members of the local academy.⁴⁹ The text was much milder and more ambiguous than the traditional abjurations written and imposed by inquisitors. As a consequence, it was not sufficient for Golfi to avoid a trial and sentence, including a proper abjuration and a temporary ban from preaching.⁵⁰

Whether the *Retrattatione* attained its goal or not, its delivery before Modena's people is an extraordinary example of the interplay between oral and spoken preaching, and the interweaving of different voices behind a preacher's orality. Who had really written Golfi's *Retrattatione*? And was it delivered with exactly the same words as were written on the paper? For the first question, we know that the text was originally written by Golfi, but it was later sent to the Bishop of Modena to be checked and approved. In addition, Bishop Morone sent the writing to the inquisitor of Bologna who certainly corrected it and added some passages. Therefore, it is possible to say that the text that Golfi was supposed to

⁴⁶ Andrea Del Col, 'L'abiura trasformata in propaganda ereticale nel duomo di Udine (15 aprile 1544)', *Metodi e Ricerche* 2 (1981), 57–72. Del Col also mentions the case of another abjurer, who had prepared an amended version of his abjuration, in which the words 'I abjure' was substituted by 'I confirm' (1567). The text was checked and confiscated before its public reading.

⁴⁷ Francisco Bethencourt, 'The *Auto da Fé*: Ritual and Imagery', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 55 (1992), 155–68.

⁴⁸ See Romeo, 'Predicazione e Inquisizione', 220 note 25.

⁴⁹ Lancillotti, *Cronaca*, quoted in Cesare Bianco, 'Bartolomeo della Pergola e la sua predicazione eterodossa a Modena', *Bollettino della Società di Studi Valdesi* 151 (1982), 3–49 (at 26).

⁵⁰ On the delivery of the *Retrattatione*, *ibid.*, 23–7. On the veritable abjuration, 43.

deliver from the pulpit of Modena's cathedral on 15 June 1544 certainly contained somebody else's words, and was aimed at altering his own orality.

Did it really happen? Did Golfi read the text faithfully as it existed in the written version? We do not know. It is unlikely that Golfi could ignore all the corrections made to his writing by the inquisitor and the bishop. However, Morone himself was the first to doubt Golfi's compliance, as he asked his vicar to be present in church during the delivery and check the correspondence between the written text and that actually recited by Golfi.⁵¹ Unlike a traditional abjuration, Golfi's *Retrattatione* was certainly a mixture of his and others' words. The fact that he did not completely abdicate control of his own orality was the reason why he later had to make a real abjuration, confining himself to reading aloud words written by others. This was not the only case. In 1552 the Augustinian Ambrogio Bolognesi got into trouble for a sermon delivered in Palermo in which he denied human free will. His own spontaneous public retraction recited two weeks later was not enough to close the case, and in the following year, after a formal inquisitorial trial, he was obliged to make a proper public abjuration.⁵²

Things went differently before the reinstatement of the Roman Inquisition, not only because of the different judicial system, but also because of the different religious climate, since a reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants still seemed to be possible. In 1537, the Augustinian Agostino Museo da Treviso was arrested under an accusation of heresy for the interpretation of free will and justification by faith alone that he had given when preaching in the cathedral of Siena. He was tried by diocesan and papal representatives, who in 1538 allowed him to preach again on the basis of a list of eight propositions that Fra Agostino had written and they had approved. The outcome of the trial was certainly affected by the heated debate that developed in 'Spiritual' circles at a time when the Catholic doctrinal position on justification was much more fluid and variegated than it was later. However, even if Fra Agostino's orality was not rewritten by his judges, it did not pass through the trial unchanged. We have reason to believe that his religious stance after 1538 was much more orthodox (from the Roman Catholic perspective) than that of the previous years. This must also have been the conviction of the religious authorities in charge of the case because, immediately after the end of the trial, they sent Fra Agostino to both Siena and Vicenza – the two towns in which he had delivered sermons before – to preach following the eight propositions he had presented.⁵³ They clearly wanted him to rectify the message he had previously spread before the

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 25 note 114. Moreover, one notary was present to transcribe the text delivered, 26.

⁵² See Salvatore Caponetto, 'Dell'agostiniano Ambrogio Bolognesi e del suo processo di eresia a Palermo (1552-3)', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 20 (1958), 310-43.

⁵³ On Agostino Museo da Treviso and his trial, see Mario Rosa, 'Agostino da Treviso', in *DBI*, Vol. 1 (1960), 489-91; Valerio Marchetti, *Gruppi ereticali senesi del Cinquecento* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1975), 18-24. Some documents, including the verdict and the list of eight propositions, are in Bartolomeo Fontana, 'Documenti vaticani contro l'eresia luterana in Italia', *Archivio della R. Società Romana di Storia Patria* 15 (1892), 71-159, 364-470 (at 365-70).

same public.⁵⁴ The idea of repeating the sermons in the same venues substituting the 'wrong' words with the 'right' ones was certainly not born with the Roman Inquisition.

No inquisitorial manual actually recommended that the abjuration should be held in the same place where the heretical sentences had originally been uttered. Perhaps it was so common a practice – demonstrated by innumerable examples and noted by many modern scholars⁵⁵ – that there was no need to remind inquisitors of it. Presumably, reaching the same audience was not the only reason for the inquisitors' insistence on the same venue, especially when a long time had passed between the first and the second performance. In a gesture pregnant with symbolic meaning, the ritual of repetition could serve also to purify the preacher himself and the place in which the heresy had been pronounced, and not only the ears of those who had listened to it. Many kilometres were covered by the preachers travelling from the town of their trial to that of their public retraction, especially when the case was not handled by a local tribunal, but had been transferred to Rome. Sometimes there was more than one destination, such as for the Augustinian Lorenzo Romano who, after a trial in Rome, had to return in 1552 to both Caserta and Naples where he had previously preached. So important was the question of the location that in 1592 the preacher Anton Angelo Carcassona travelled back across the sea from Rome to Alghero (Sardinia) to abjure in the same church where he had pronounced the sentences for which he had been tried.⁵⁶ In that case the inquisitorial ritual not only went well beyond the political borders, but also the limits of jurisdiction, as Sardinia fell under the competence of the Spanish Inquisition, not the Roman one.

THE NEW ORALITY

The new orality written by the inquisitor and performed by the preacher was not necessarily destined to die in the space of few hours. Sometimes it was even repeated *ad infinitum*. This is the case with those heterodox preachers who, after the abjuration, did not stop preaching, but started a new life with sermons in harmony with the Roman Catholic orthodoxy imposed during their trials. Take, for instance, the Lateran canon Ippolito Chizzola, who was arrested and sentenced for the unorthodox propositions contained in his sermons. After his trial in Rome, in 1552 he went back to Venice – where he had previously preached – to abjure publicly with three sermons delivered on three different days. Contemporary observers immediately realized the reasons behind the choice of venue. One of them stressed that Venice was the very place where

⁵⁴ The verdict defined the new preaching as an appropriate remedy (*oportunum remedium*) for the old one; Fontana, 'Documenti vaticani', 368.

⁵⁵ Among others, see Tedeschi, *The Prosecution of Heresy*, 49; Romeo, 'Predicazione e Inquisizione', 220; Wickersham, *Rituals of Prosecution*, 248, 253.

⁵⁶ See Mauro Perani, 'Anton Angelo Carcassona', in *DSI*, Vol. 1, 266–7.

Chizzola had sown his bad seeds, and therefore the preacher now wanted to root them out in order to sow good ones. The aim of substituting Chizzola's formerly wrong orality with a new and correct one was evident. Moreover, Chizzola did not stop preaching. After the abjurations he continued to deliver sermons in which he passionately pleaded the cause of Roman Catholic doctrine, in complete contrast to his previous positions. He soon became a prominent anti-Protestant controversialist speaking with a new voice to his old audience.⁵⁷

The gradual transformation of an abjuration into a common sermon intertwines with one of the most intriguing questions looming over the repetition of the orality carried out through the abjuration: to what extent were the faithful aware that the preacher's words had been written by somebody else? To be sure, the Inquisition did not try to hide the fact that an abjuration was an abjuration. The ceremony was different from that accompanying a normal sermon, and many features (such as the *abitello*, when it was worn) made it easy for those present to understand what they were attending. This, however, did not necessarily make them more suspicious regarding the opinions expressed by the abjurer in that context. The assumption was that he was truly repentant, and his alleged sincerity was the premise on which the whole ritual was based. Nevertheless, whatever the abjurer's inward persuasion at that specific moment might have been, the text he was reading before the audience had been written by his judge at the end of his trial and contained one or more propositions in open contrast to what he had believed when he was a free man.

The question is even more complex when the ritual features accompanying the abjuration ceremony were reduced or completely eliminated in subsequent performances. If the content of the sermon survived while the ceremonial practice associated with the abjuration disappeared, it would be almost impossible for those attending to question the authenticity of the preacher's words. In fact, it is virtually impossible to say what the hearer of an abjuration really thought. On a more general level, it is very difficult to find sources giving information on the public's reactions, which obviously did not find a place in the trial records. In Chizzola's case, we know that Catholic observers, predictably, praised his sincere conversion, and that at least one of the Protestants was amazed and puzzled. After returning home from church, he asserted that if he had known that Chizzola would preach in a Catholic manner, he would have remained at home cooking and would have sent his female servant to attend the sermon in his place.⁵⁸ It was the understandable reaction of an admirer of the pre-conversion Chizzola who had left home without a clue that he would be assisting in an abjuration and that Chizzola would be talking with somebody else's words.

⁵⁷ On Chizzola's abjuration, see Caravale, *Predicazione e Inquisizione*, 111–7. The passage on good and bad seeds is at 111.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

The larger the preacher's following, the greater the effects of his abjuration, as is demonstrated by the case of the Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola (although he did not read the text of his abjuration in person, and his case occurred before the reinstatement of the Inquisition). Savonarola's words of retraction were read in public and printed shortly after they had been uttered, with the consequence that many of his followers were shocked and lost their faith in him, regardless of the torture with which those words had been extorted.⁵⁹ After hearing Savonarola's confession, the devoted chronicler Luca Landucci desolately admitted: 'we thought he was a prophet, but the things he preached were not from God [...] my soul ached seeing such a structure crumble.'⁶⁰

The pedagogical and social function of public abjurations (rather than the expiatory one) is evident in what an inquisitor wrote in 1593 with reference to the heretical proposition uttered by a Tuscan preacher: 'there was public talk about this, therefore to silence this talk the preacher needed preaching about it and retracting it'.⁶¹ It seems that the main aim of a retraction was not the offender's repentance but the public correction of the unorthodox ideas that he had previously spread among his audience. The link between the effects of preaching and the need for abjuration was even more explicit in the letter that Cardinal Santori wrote to the inquisitor of Siena in 1599 in reference to a heretical priest who had already been condemned. According to Santori, the abjuration was needed only if the accused's affirmations had not been forgotten by the local people: 'If the scandal of the propositions he uttered still remains [...] Your Reverence should make him retract them in a sermon.'⁶² Also in this case, it was specified that the abjuration should take place in the same church where the unorthodox propositions had originally been spoken.

The new performance by the unorthodox preacher had to be addressed to the same public in order to take away the scandal caused by his previous words, and it was useless if the effect of his heretical preaching had already disappeared. Phraseology of sixteenth-century inquisitorial trial records shows that abjuration was seen as a way to wipe away a scandal widespread among the faithful. Another frequent expression was that of the offender 'making a correction' by means of the abjuration, which is perfectly coherent with the action of

⁵⁹ On Savonarola and the public reading of his retraction, see Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola. The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 281. The entire text of Savonarola's depositions is in Ida Giovanna Rao, Paolo Viti, and Raffaella Maria Zaccaria (eds.), *I processi di Girolamo Savonarola* (Florence: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2001).

⁶⁰ Stefano Dall'Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, translated by John Gagnè (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies: 2010), 66 ('noi tenevamo che fosse profeta, e non aveva da Dio le cose che predicava [...] dolore sentiva l'anima mia vedendo crollare un siffatto edificio').

⁶¹ 'n'è era di ciò publico romore, onde per quietare detto rumore bisognò che il predicatore ne predicasse et che egli se disdicesse', Trial of Stefano Rossi da Roccalbegna, ACDF, Siena-Processi 20, fol. 278v.

⁶² 'Se dura ancora il scandalo per le propositioni da lui proferite [...] vostra reverentia gli le faccia riovocare in una predica nell'istessa chiesa', Giulio Antonio Santori to the inquisitor of Siena, Rome, 9 January 1599, in Di Simplicio, *Le lettere*, 23. A similar sentence is contained in the letter that Santori wrote to the inquisitor on 30 January, *ibid.*

erasing the error and substituting for it the correct words before the audience. The prescription of choosing a larger venue for an abjurer whose heresy was known by a larger number of people⁶³ reinforces the idea that, at least in theory, all of those with knowledge of the error should attend the ceremony of its public correction.

CONCLUSION

The idea of preachers' abjurations as a substitution of the previous orality with a new one rests on some crucial elements: the danger represented by orality for the propagation of heresy, the need for correcting a wrong proposition by reaffirming doctrinal truth, and the importance of reaching the same audience to make the correction effective. This combination of factors assumes a particular significance in the case of preachers, the 'professionals of the word'.⁶⁴ In sixteenth-century Italy, noblemen, men of letters, and artisans also abjured, but preachers were the only ones whose normal activity was based on ascending a pulpit and talking to people gathered in church. Only for preachers, therefore, could the inquisitors speculate on the confusion between the normality of the Sunday sermon and the exceptionality of the abjuration one. Nobody would ever think that the cobbler called to abjure in the cathedral of Udine in 1544 was acting in the execution of his duty, but in the case of a local preacher speaking in the usual church to the usual audience about the usual matters, the distinction was much less clear. He was the shepherd returned to his flock, and we do not have any reason to believe that many of his sheep were disinclined to trust his words, no matter what ritual accompanied the sermon and what propositions he had expressed before leaving.

The issue here is not that of assessing the role played by the Inquisition in disbanding the preachers who spread heterodox ideas in Italy. It is to analyse the ways the inquisitors used preachers' orality to control collective memory.⁶⁵ In Roman Inquisition studies, this is an aspect that has received little attention compared to the control exerted through writing (the production of orthodox texts and the prohibition of unorthodox ones). From Leonardo Sciascia to Adriano Prosperi, much has already been written on the role the Inquisition had in the destruction and construction of memory.⁶⁶ Much less has been written on the use of orality for this purpose, whose relevance should not be underestimated in a historical context in which literacy was the exception and not the

⁶³ Eymerich and Peña, *Directorium Inquisitorum*, 486.

⁶⁴ The expression is borrowed from the Italian title of Carlo Delcorno, 'Professionisti della parola. Predicatori, giullari, concionatori', in *id.*, *'Quasi quidam cantus'. Studi sulla predicazione medievale* (Florence: Olschki, 2009), 3–21.

⁶⁵ Paradoxically, in most cases nowadays inquisitorial records are the only way to recover the orality of the preachers who were forced to abjure. In a sense, we use inquisitorial trials against themselves, restoring, thanks to them, the voices that the Inquisition had tried to silence.

⁶⁶ Leonardo Sciascia, *Il teatro della memoria* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), 25; Adriano Prosperi, *L'Inquisizione romana. Letture e ricerche* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2003), 82, 385–411.

rule. Similarly, much has been said on the use of orality to transmit dissent that could not be put into writing, on the manipulation of the written word, and on the use the authorities made of writing to fix a fluid oral tradition with the aim of tightening their control on society. The social control carried out by orality and the manipulation of the spoken word, on the contrary, have attracted far less interest among scholars. For all these reasons, the rewriting of preachers' orality carried out by the Inquisition in the sixteenth century represents a very peculiar phenomenon that deserves the utmost attention.

To be sure, the manipulation of memory with regard to preachers' orality was not made only by Catholics but also by Protestants, although in Counter-Reformation Italy the former was the rule and the latter the exception. Take the case of the heretic Augustinian Giulio da Milano, who publicly abjured in Venice in 1542 after preaching in the same town in Lent 1541. The written version of that sermon cycle, printed in Basel, not only openly contradicted the abjuration Fra Giulio had previously made, but was not faithful to the oral sermons actually delivered, as it emphasized the preacher's Protestant position.⁶⁷ If the Catholics aimed at making Fra Giulio's words look more Catholic than they had really been, the Protestants meant to do exactly the opposite. Nobody (author included) was interested in preserving the memory of what the Augustinian preacher had actually said from the pulpit.

Sixteenth-century inquisitors seemed to treat people's memory as if it were a surface upon which sense impressions were inscribed, and could be erased and re-inscribed. This view could be explained in the light of the Platonic and Aristotelian image of the human mind as a wax tablet, which was widespread in medieval and Renaissance Italy. According to this view, memory is a writing surface on which marks can be subsequently erased and substituted with others.⁶⁸ To this aspect must be added the idea of 'forgiving by forgetting', deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, which established a strict link between oblivion and amnesty.⁶⁹ Moving from the theological to the public arena, in the early modern period forgetting became 'a ceremonial prerequisite for granting political amnesty', since it 'signifies negation', as Brandon Vivian puts it.⁷⁰ This suggests that, whenever possible, the pardon should be preceded by the effacement of

⁶⁷ See Ugo Rozzo, 'Le "Prediche" veneziane di Giulio da Milano (1541)', in *Bollettino della Società di Studi Valdesi* 152 (1983), 3–30.

⁶⁸ See Plato, *Theaetetus*, 191d–195a. (edition consulted: Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992, 67–71); Aristotle, *On Memory*, 449b4–453b11; Jonathan Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, 3 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), Vol. 1, 714–20. Relevant considerations are also in Aristotle's treatise *On the Soul* (Vol. 1, 641–92). On Plato's and Aristotle's 'wax tablet' imagery in a broader context, see Douwe Draaisma, *Metaphors of Memory. A History of Ideas about the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 24–5. The classic studies on the use of memory in the medieval and early modern periods are Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: The Bodley Head, 2014; first edn. 1966), and Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008; first edn. 1990).

⁶⁹ See Bradford Vivian, *Public Forgetting. The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 42–3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

the crime, not only to limit the effects of the wrong action but to disclaim the action itself. The inquisitors' approach seemed to reflect this conviction, in the assumption that erasing the memory of a heretical statement was tantamount to negate it and represented the prerequisite for forgiving he who had uttered it.

Nowadays, many studies exist on how a new experience can update or override the memory of a previous one, how false memories can be artificially created and true memories erased, how our brain tends to replace the previous information in the presence of a contradictory new one, and how new suggestions can lead us to remember our past in a different way.⁷¹ This is especially true in the context of a predominantly oral culture, such as that in which Pietro da Borgo San Sepolcro delivered his sermons: in this case, as Walter Ong puts it, 'you know what you can recall.'⁷² In this light, we could argue that the older words of the heterodox Italian preachers might disappear from their audience's memory after the delivery of and listening to completely new words on the same topic coming from the same mouth. We will never know what the listeners of Fra Pietro's abjuration really thought when leaving the church in the small Tuscan town of Sarteano. However, I believe that if they remembered that God's mercy is infinite – not finite as he had said in his first sermon – it could be said that the inquisitors' goal had been achieved.

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⁷¹ On updating and overriding memories: Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson, 'Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story', in Robert S. Wyer, Jr (ed.) *Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), 1–85. On the creation of false memories and the role of new suggestions: Elizabeth F. Loftus and Jaqueline E. Pickrell, 'The Formation of the False Memories', *Psychiatric Annals* 25.12 (1995), 720–25. On the erasure of emotional memories: Thomas Agren *et al.*, 'Disruption of Reconsolidation Erases a Fear Memory Trace in the Human Amygdala' *Science* 337 (2012), 1550–2. On the replacement of the previous information and the alteration of memory: William G. Cole and Elizabeth F. Loftus, 'Incorporating New Information into Memory', *The American Journal of Psychology* 92 (1979), 413–25; Elizabeth F. Loftus, 'Reactions to Blatantly Contradictory Information', *Memory & Cognition* 7 (1979), 368–74; Elizabeth F. Loftus, 'Planting Misinformation in the Human Mind: A 30-Year Investigation of the Malleability of Memory' *Learning Memory* 12 (2005), 361–6.

⁷² Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the World. 30th Anniversary Edition* (London: Routledge, 2002; first edn. 1982), 33.