

# Writers and Self-consciousness: Book Publishing in Early Sixteenth Century Italy

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*Dialogo contra i poeti*, printed in Rome in 1526 and the first published work of the Tuscan-born writer Francesco Berni, is difficult to account for. It could be suggested that reasons for its apparent neglect lie within it, that it is a slight work, of little consequence, by an author who has been at times dismissed as shallow and of insignificant stature. It is, however, a work which has survived for almost half a millenium. Like its author, the *Dialogo* has been over time the object of intermittent controversy. Cultural artifacts which inspire such reactions beyond their own epoch are likely to have had significant impact in their own time. For these reasons my primary motivation in working on a new edition of *Dialogo contra i poeti* was to piece together surviving evidence from the contemporary and near-contemporary period, not the least of which was the evidence represented by the first edition of the work. That was my point of departure and these are the first of my findings. The physical evidence of the first edition provides fundamental leads to those who seek to begin the journey of interpretation and analysis. Perhaps the most conspicuous of these leads is the very fine woodcut illustration which accompanies the text in the first edition, which can be identified as the author's *impresa*.<sup>1</sup>

To understand *imprese* as they were used in publishing in the first half of the sixteenth century in Italy is to comprehend something fundamental about the rendering public of *Dialogo contra i poeti* and about the author's intentions in writing and publishing the work. For the first time *imprese* were used by authors to sign their works. Not all authors, it must be underlined, signed their works in this manner. However, at least two authors of some significance did, namely Ludovico Ariosto and Francesco Berni, in *Orlando furioso* and in *Dialogo contra i poeti*, respectively. Both works are reflections on and of a particular court society, the Estense court in the case of *Orlando furioso* and the Vatican court under Clement VII in the case of *Dialogo contra i poeti*. Both works are profoundly ironical. Both writers were scholar-intellectuals who performed duties of difficulty and complexity within the court and on behalf of those who held power in it, and both wrote works which directly and indirectly reflected their perceptions of the court society in which they lived and of their roles within it, not only as functionaries but as writers. In both these



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capacities their acts of communication and their actions were largely conditioned by their training as humanists and by the prevailing ethos of court society. It was, in my view, because they were humanists and because they lived and wrote in court society that they chose to sign their published works with *imprese*. They did so with intent and by design.

Girolamo Ruscelli and Paolo Giovio provide illumination on *imprese* as they were used and understood in the sixteenth century. From Ruscelli's presentation of the chivalric origins of *imprese* it is clear that the *impresa* was a natural expression of sixteenth-century Italian court society. In the sixteenth century the *impresa* was exploited at its highest level of excellence by the intellectual leaders (read humanists) of that society. Ruscelli credits God and the *sacri scrittori* of the Bible with the invention of the principle of 'rappresentare i pensieri per mezzo delle figure' (representing thoughts by way of figures).<sup>2</sup> According to Ruscelli, the first condition of such a *figura* is that it be *breve* (concise) and able to be seen and remembered in a single glance.<sup>3</sup> A second condition is that there should not be such obscurity of thought that meaning can be grasped only with the assistance of an interpreter or such transparency of thought that meaning is immediately grasped universally.<sup>4</sup> In creating *figure*, those with supreme skill seek not only to demonstrate their acumen as inventors but to bring beauty and delight to the beholder. As Ruscelli notes, this dual purpose is evinced in the best *imprese*, which are *figure* representing thoughts, and

le quali porgano subito come una chiave da aprire il pensiero di chi l'ha fatto; ma che lascin poi luogo à chi l'ha da intendere, di dilettersi nel conoscersi di saper da se stesso ritrovar la porta, ove detta chiave serva, & il modo d'aprir con essa.<sup>5</sup>

which immediately offer something like a key to unlocking the thought (processes) of the person who devised them, but also leave some scope for the person who has to understand them to delight in coming to realise that he can by himself work out how to find the door which the said key fits and the way of opening [the door] with it.

As Ruscelli observes, *impresa* derives from *imprendere*, which 'val pigliare à far' una cosa con ferma & ostinata intentione di condurla à fine' (means to undertake the doing of something with a firm and dogged determination to carry it through to the end).<sup>6</sup> (*Impresa*, formed from the past participle of *imprendere*, is literally the end result or product of such an action as well as the undertaking of it.) *Impresa* always signifies purposeful and significant action: '... si dicono Imprese tutte le cose grandi, & notabili, che i Principi e i macstrati si tolgono a fare...' (all the great and noteworthy things that princes and educated people set about doing are called *imprese*). *Imprese* can be

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undertaken by either private or public individuals, but however they manifest themselves, whether in real actions or in acts of the imagination, *imprese* always signify something significant:

Ma in ogni modo che ò da persone publiche, ò da private si prenda à far cosa di momento et importante, si dicono Imprese, così con propria, come con traslata significatione di detta voce.... Basti dunque d'haver detto, che la parola Impresa à noi quando è voce che stia per sé sola, importa sempre cosa, ò fatto grande & di momento, che altri si tolga à condurre à fine.<sup>7</sup>

But whether it is a public or a private person undertaking to do some important and significant thing, these things are called *imprese*, sometimes literally meant and sometimes metaphorically. Suffice it to have said that we understand the word *impresa* when used absolutely as always signifying some great and significant thing or deed that someone undertakes to carry through to the end.

Ruscelli points to the chivalric origins of visual, symbolic *imprese* which were devised for heraldic purposes by *Principi, Capitani* or *Cavalieri* in order 'mostrare al mondo l'intentione loro' (demonstrate to the world their intentions) and in which they captured 'la mèta, ò lo scopo, et il berzaglio di tutto quello, che principalmente essi, ò doveano, ò desideravano, ò speravano di fare' (the aim or the purpose and the objective of all that principally they were required or desired or hoped to do), or in other words, their literal *impresa*.<sup>8</sup> In their origins such signs were not intended to be understood 'se non da persone di bello ingegno' (except by persons of fine intellect).<sup>9</sup> *Imprese* were by the sixteenth century in wider and more general use. Ruscelli confirms this in noting the development of *imprese* from chivalric-heraldic beginnings, when *imprese* were used in

occasioni particolari, quando alcuno si toglieva di condurre à fine qualche cosa segnalata & rara, sì come nelle guerre, nelle giostre, & nelle servitù amorse. Ma poi s'è disteso in farsi da ciascun bello ingegno sopra ogni suo particolare pensiero ò disegno di qualche importanza...<sup>10</sup>

distinctive occasions, when a person undertook to carry through to the end some exceptional or rare thing, such as in wars, jousts, and in chivalrous love. But then the practice was extended in *imprese* being invented by fine intellects to reflect a special thought or design of some importance...

It appears that *imprese* were by the sixteenth century automatically adopted in court society for the rendering public of any thought, however small or large. Ruscelli suggests that *imprese* were part of the visual language widely used in court society. In accordance with the sixteenth-century court cultivation of the chivalric ideal *imprese* were designed for and by 'nobili, valorosi, & gentili spiriti'.<sup>11</sup> Despite what Ruscelli identifies as an abuse of the spirit of *imprese* in the contemporary period there were "perfect" *imprese* still to be found which

conformed to the ideal courtly model:

Et massimamente, che per qual si voglia caso ò pensiero che elle [imprese] si facciano, hanno pure da prender nel nome formatione dal di sopra detto verbo Imprendere, che, come s'è detto, val pigliare con ferma et ostinata intentione à tener saldo & condurre à fine una cosa di gran momento. La qual cosa di sommo, & universalmente caro, & debito momento, è la conservatione dell'honore, & l'accrescimento della gloria, & il conseguir la cosa amata ò desiderata.<sup>12</sup>

And principally, for whatever situation or thought *imprese* are devised, they take their formative meaning from the above verb *imprendere*, which, as has been said, means to take up with a strong and determined intention to keep to one's resolve and to carry through to the end something of great moment, something of supreme, universally admired and due moment, such as the preservation of honour, the increase of glory, and the realisation of a cherished or desired thing.

One distinctive aspect of the assimilation and adaptation which *imprese* underwent in Italian court society, whose intellectual ideals were largely humanist, that is a complex amalgam of ancient and Christian wisdom, and whose social ideals were largely expressed through the cultivation of an idealised chivalric archetype, was that *imprese* were for the first time used by authors in publishing their books. Ruscelli presents Ariosto's use of an *impresa* in the published text of *Orlando furioso* implicitly as a new custom and explicitly as an extension of the publishers' signing of books with distinctive marks (actually *insegne*):

Ne i libri ancor hanno leggiadramente usato i librari à metterle, & vi si ne veggono alcune bellissime... I litterati poi di raro giudicio sogliono far mettere l'Imprese loro ne i lor libri; non nella prima parte, che è del segno del libraro ò dello stampatore, ma ò nella seconda facciata... ò nel fine del libro, come fece l'Ariosto la sua [italics mine].<sup>13</sup>

In books as well publishers<sup>14</sup> have used the decorative custom of marks, and there are some very beautiful ones to be seen. Moreover writers of rare judgement [now] have the custom of putting [actually, causing to be put]<sup>15</sup> *imprese* in their books; not in the first part where the publisher or the printer puts his mark, but either on the second title-page... or at the end of the book, as Ariosto put his.

*Imprese* cannot be transferred from one person to another<sup>16</sup> so an *impresa*, strictly used, marked only one author and one book.<sup>17</sup>

What prompted authors such as Ariosto and Berni to use authorial *imprese*? What constituents of the meaning and purpose of *imprese* as they were then

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understood made of an *impresa* a natural text-accompaniment? When one considers Ruscelli's presentation of the origins, the development, and the contemporary practice of *impresa*, it is clear that a visual *impresa* used in this manner outwardly marked the text-object to which it was attached as an expression of a court society and designated the published work as something of importance—at least in the author's view—and something undertaken with purpose and intent, reflecting 'l'intensità dell'impegno culturale'.<sup>18</sup> On another level a visual *impresa* was designed by its author-inventor to be a symbolic key to the author's motivations and intentions in the carrying through of the undertaking. Ruscelli demonstrates that *impresa* were designed to activate the viewer's intellectual capacities to an understanding of the thought processes of the inventor. Was the process intended to be a closed circuit in which individuals engaged in a form of mutual admiration? Or was the *impresa* intended and understood as a code which implied meaning outside of itself, in the discovery of which the viewer had to exercise his intellectual capacities on a level similar to that on which the inventor of the *impresa* had worked? Ruscelli implies that both outcomes were possible and desirable. *Imprese* could have, as Ruscelli observes, a function in time and place as well as an intellectual function. They could point to things both inside and outside of themselves: '... l'Imprese debbian sempre importare, ò desiderio, ò speranza, ò ammaestramento, ò informazione, le quai cose tutte ò comprendono le cose future & non le passate... ò mostrano le presenti...' <sup>19</sup> (*impresa* should always imply either desire, or hope, or instruction, or information—all things which involve either future and not past things...or point to present things...).

The best *impresa* was intended by both inventor and viewer in the Italian court society which cultivated *impresa* as a challenge. It was, moreover, a challenge in which the viewer devised strategies according to the clues given in the hope of arriving at the inventor's 'truth'. The creator of the *impresa*, however, always kept back something which was never revealed, except perhaps to a chosen few. Literary and philosophical writings as well as biblical writing retained this essential quality of always keeping something back, as Paolo Giovio observed. Because of this ultimately impenetrable core literary, philosophical, or Biblical writing always represented a challenge to the interpreter:

Et per certo sí come i(n) un bellissimo palazzo, che si mostri tutto di parte in parte à chi vuol vederlo, sempre i padroni si riserban chiusa qualche stanza con alcune cose à sua voglia, da non publicarsi ò mostrarsi se non à chi à lui piace, ò à chi pare che si convengano, così giudico, che nelle Imprese sia cosa tanto più vaga et tanto più comoda all'Autore quanto havendo ella una ò più expositioni & sentimenti da mostrare à tutti, n'habbia ancor poi qualch'altro

mistico, & recondito, che serve à se stesso, ò à chi egli vuole. Et questa intentione si vede che hanno havuto non solamente gli scritti de' poeti, & de' filosofi, & principalmente de' Platonici,<sup>20</sup> ma ancor le sacre & divine lettere.<sup>21</sup>

And certainly just as in a very beautiful palace, which reveals itself completely only by degrees to the person who wants to see it, it's always the case that the owners will keep some rooms closed with some things deliberately held back, so as not to reveal them or to show them except to people they have chosen or people who are deemed suitable, so I think that in *imprese* it is a finer thing and more useful to the author that the *impresa* in having one or more expositions or sentiments to reveal to everyone should have some other mystical and recondite sentiment which it keeps to itself, or reveals to someone of the author's choosing. And it is evident that this has been the intention not only of poets' writings and of philosophers, principally Platonic philosophers, but also of sacred and divine writings.

Giovio here makes clear the association that has been implicit throughout this presentation of *imprese* as they were used and understood in the sixteenth century, namely that writing of a particular order of complexity and difficulty, including literary and philosophical writings, constituted an *impresa* and was so intended by its author. The visual *impresa* in a published text of such a kind was probably understood in the sixteenth century as a counterpart of the literary/literal text-*impresa*. Giovio also implies that *imprese* to the sixteenth century indicated a Platonic, or perhaps more accurately, neo-Platonic mind set. Giovio's analysis throws light on this factor which distinguishes sixteenth-century *imprese* from their chivalric counterparts.

Ruscelli's presentation of *imprese* demonstrates the continuity of aspects of sixteenth-century *imprese* with their chivalric origins. Ruscelli implies that the *impresa* as a form of expression was particularly congenial to Italian sixteenth-century court society and notes that *imprese* were widely adopted and adapted to a variety of uses within that society. Ruscelli also underscores the complex public/private nature of *imprese* and the challenge to interpretation which *imprese* implied. He implies that the works to which *imprese* were attached not only represented something of significance to their author but reflected a present reality.

It is against such a background, from near-contemporary sources on *imprese*, that works such as *Orlando furioso* and *Dialogo contra i poeti* and their authors must be assessed. What did the visual *impresa* in the first edition of *Dialogo contra i poeti* signify in contemporary terms? It probably marked the work as one of a considerable order of complexity, at least as far as the author was concerned. It also marked the author (but did not necessarily reveal his identity) and implied the court environment in which the author practised. It may have marked the text as a work intended principally for that same court society. It was also likely to have been understood as one part of a two-part

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*impresa*, in which the text-*impresa* was the second part. (The text of the *Dialogo* could be seen to function as the motto of the visual *impresa*.) This bipartite *impresa* called upon those who viewed/read it to engage in the challenge set up by the author with a view to exposing the viewer/reader not only to the pleasure of the intellectual chase but also to the notion that the *impresa*, textual and visual, pointed to something certainly of personal significance to the author if not also something outside of itself that reflected on or pointed to the present or the future. The *impresa*, be it literal/literary or metaphorical/visual, functioned paradoxically as a guide to and as a screen for the author and his truth.

The twentieth-century interpreter of a sixteenth-century text such as *Dialogo contra i poeti* and a would-be biographer of Berni is impelled to look at and through the *impresa*, both visual and literary, in the first edition of Berni's first published work, to balance and assess their separate and interdependent meanings, and on that basis to begin to account for meaning and intention. Berni provided readers of the first edition of his *Dialogo* with both verbal and visual clues to unravelling meaning. The clues in both *impresa* have been in large part ignored. Once it is understood, i) that the text of the *Dialogo* and the illustration are an integrated expression of a conscious design on the author's part, ii) that as *impresa* the work and the illustration are a manifestation of a courtly and humanist culture possibly imbued with (Neo)Platonism, and iii) that as *impresa* the work and the illustration were intended not only as a challenge to the viewer/reader but as a challenge in the face of present times, then the twentieth-century interpreter of a sixteenth-century text such as this can begin to account for meaning in terms which have validity. The visual *impresa* in *Dialogo contra i poeti* represents a scene from the myth of Apollo and Marsyas: Marsyas, the quintessentially human figure, was challenger of the divine Apollo. In this myth and in its interpretation from ancient times to the sixteenth century lies a key to both the text and its author.

The scene depicted within the triple border of a cameo-shaped *impresa* contains the figures of Marsyas, Apollo, and Olympos, at the point of greatest tension in the myth, the point of transition between the contest in which Apollo has defeated Marsyas and the punishment by flaying of Marsyas, the satyr who dared challenge the mythic god of poetry. Olympos intercedes with Apollo on Marsyas' behalf. The aspect of the myth represented in the *impresa* highlights not the competition between the god and the satyr nor the judgement of their respective merits nor the punishment inflicted on the vanquished satyr but an intermediate and relatively undefined phase. If the myth is taken to its literal conclusion then a negative outcome for the vanquished satyr is certain. However, the *impresa* privileges one phase only of the myth. Other aspects of the myth may or may not be relevant or the whole myth may be implied by

reference to this one phase. Moreover, to which of the many versions of the myth potentially known in the sixteenth century and to which other similar representations might this representation refer? The *impresa* in its framed and static form is, after all, an illustration to a text. Its resonances are therefore likely to be both verbal and visual. The tension and open-endedness implied in this representation from the myth of Apollo and Marsyas are indeed a fitting analogue to the ironic discursiveness of the *Dialogo*. The appositeness of this myth to Berni and to *Dialogo* is presented in a forthcoming article.<sup>22</sup> This provides speculative evidence of which aspects of the myth and of its interpretation over time Berni intended to privilege in publishing in Rome in 1526 a work focused on the papal court of Clement VII in that momentous period which led to the sack of the city and to much more besides.

## Notes

- 1 The term *impresa* has a technical meaning, best translated as *emprise*. *Impresa* is sometimes translated imprecisely into English as *emblem*. Daly notes that there are 'no defining differences between emblem and *impresa* in terms of content and form... The basic difference is one of purpose'. The *impresa* represents 'a principle of individuation' (Daly, quoting Sulzer), and is used by one person only "as the expression of a personal aim' (Daly, quoting Schöne), whereas the emblem is addressed 'to a larger audience, its message is general, and it fulfils a didactic, decorative, or entertaining function, or any combination of these'—P. M. Daly, *Literature in the Light of the Emblem*, Toronto, 1979, p. 23. Praz suggested that the *impresa* is a closed form and the emblem is an open form (Daly, p. 23).  
*Impresa* as it was understood by contemporaries of Berni, and in the specific instance of the use of *impresa* in publishing in the sixteenth century, is set forward in Girolamo Ruscelli's account of *impresa* (see below). The heraldic antecedents of *impresa* are presented by D'A.J.D. Boulton, 'Insignia of Power: The Use of Heraldic and Paraheraldic Devices by Italian Princes, c. 1350-c. 1500', in *Art and Politics in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Italy: 1250-1500*, ed. Charles M. Rosenberg, Notre Dame/London, 1990, pp. 103-27.
- 2 Girolamo Ruscelli, *Discorso intorno all' Inventioni dell' Imprese, dell' Insegne, de' Motti, & delle Livree*, in Paolo Gioiio, *Ragionamento... sopra i motti, & disegni d'arme, & d'amore, che comunemente chiamano imprese...* Venezia, 1556, p. 123.
- 3 Ruscelli, p. 125.
- 4 Ruscelli, p. 126.
- 5 Ruscelli, p. 128.
- 6 Ruscelli, p. 178.
- 7 Ruscelli, pp. 179-80.
- 8 Ruscelli, p. 180. An *impresa* can exist without a motto, as Ruscelli later notes: '...l'Imprese si fanno solamente di due sorti, ò generi. L'uno, di figure sole senza alcun motto. L'altro, di figure, & di motto insieme' (p. 203).
- 9 Ruscelli, p. 180. As Daly notes: 'Obscurity is a relative matter: what one twentieth-century reader finds cryptic may have been clear to Gioiio's contemporaries... as

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we have seen, clarity and directness were not expected of the *impresa*, the understanding of which was a matter of intellectual effort' (Daly, p. 22).

- 10 Ruscelli, p. 189.
- 11 Ruscelli, p. 182.
- 12 Ruscelli, p. 181.
- 13 Ruscelli, pp. 188-89.
- 14 Literally booksellers. However, since in the period of publishing to which Ruscelli refers the book-shop was more often than not also the print-shop, the translation *publishers* is closer to the reality of the term.
- 15 This phrasing points to the author's primary role in the devising and publication of the *impresa*.
- 16 Ruscelli, pp. 189-90.
- 17 It is apparent that Ariosto devised more than one *impresa* in the course of publishing in Ferrara the three authorised editions of *Orlando furioso*. The first of these *imprese*, representing a trunk from which a swarm of bees emerges, within a frieze bearing the motto 'Pro bono malum', appears in the first and second authorised editions of the poem, but in the end-position noted by Ruscelli only in the second authorised edition of 1521. A second *impresa*, representing a sheep suckling a wolf, appears in the end-position in a few surviving copies of the third and definitive edition of 1532, replacing *Finis* and the same motto. On the bibliographical and iconographical complexities of Ariosto's two *imprese* and on their connection with the theme of ingratitudes, see Conor Fahy, *L'Orlando furioso del 1532: Profilo di una edizione*, Milan, 1989, pp. 16, 107-18. Berni's *impresa* appears only in the first edition of *Dialogo contra i poeti*. The absence of Berni's *impresa* in the second edition of the *Dialogo*, the only other edition published during the author's lifetime, points to Berni's non-involvement in the second publication process which took place in Bologna and not in Rome as was the case with the first edition of the *Dialogo*. Ariosto's use of the *impresa* differs from Berni's in that Ariosto's first *impresa* had an accompanying motto and in that both of Ariosto's *imprese* appeared in a work to which the author put his name. Berni's *impresa* without an accompanying motto (a permissible type, according to Ruscelli, see below) is the only outwardly visible identifying mark in the first edition of *Dialogo contra i poeti* which was published with no reference to Berni's name as author.
- 18 Fahy, p. 110.
- 19 Ruscelli, p. 191.
- 20 Daly expands this obviously important aspect, underlining the growth of interest in and understanding of the Greek-Platonic view of hieroglyphic writing from Ficino and Alberti in the fifteenth century to Valeriano in the sixteenth (see Daly, pp. 15-21).
- 21 Giovio, *Ragionamento*, p. 110. Ruscelli states a similar case as follows, with specific reference to *imprese* which do not have mottos, a permitted variety of *impresa*: '... tutte queste Imprese senza motto vogliono per principal ricordo avvertimento di chi le fa, che elle habbino sempre in se stesse alcune cose, che quasi propongan subito à i begli ingegni da considerarvi sopra qualche leggiadro misterio nell'intentione dell'Autor suo....' (all these *imprese* without mottos want consideration of the person who makes them as their principal impact, since they always have within them some aspects which almost impel fine intellects to read into them some pretty mystery in the intentions of the author of the *impresa*...) Ruscelli, pp.

- 205-6.  
22 In *Renaissance Humanism in Rome: Politics and Culture at the Court of Clement VII*, ed. Raymond Waddington, New York, 1995.