PAMPHLETS AND PROPAGANDA IN THE ITALIAN WARS, 1494-1512

by

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We know much about the printing of books in the period termed the High Renaissance. A printing sideline, however, is generally forgotten, and this concerned the printing of pamphlets, information bulletins, manifestoes, and akin material. All these were of ephemeral interest, and, being unbound sheets, easily damaged and often soon totally destroyed.¹ One may wonder if printing this class of material did not enable some printers to subsidize the publication of more substantial and erudite volumes. May not the Renaissance colporteur and his popular leaflets be a parallel to the modern supermarket and its paperbacks? Certainly a study of the ephemeral printed material of the Renaissance is needed. The place of origin and date of printing of individual items is not indicated usually, but often can be deduced. The scientific investigation of the paper used, of the type and of the blocks, should produce supplementary information, and ought to result in the identification of some of the printers. We know that in the first decade of the sixteenth century, Alessandro Lippo of Bologna printed books as well as pamphlets, as, apparently, did Nicolò Brenta of Venice, and it would be interesting to know how typical these two were.²

The extent of official propaganda that existed during the High Renaissance was considerable in quantity and range, and was closely related to the growth of printing. Indeed, it was probably during the Italian wars that the importance of printing as a means of propaganda was first recognized. One striking example: in the summer of 1509 the Emperor Maximilian besieged Padua, and in an attempt to demoralize the besieged, letters were printed that stressed the certainty of Imperial victory, and these, attached to arrows, were shot into the beleaguered city.³ In the following year, and again in 1511, when dissension between the 'Old' and the 'New' nobility of Venice was common knowledge, the Emperor had distributed printed letters addressed to the 'Old' nobility, promising them his support.⁴

¹ Cf. F.J. Norton, Italian Printers, 1501-1520 (Cambridge, 1958), makes no mention of this kind of material in his otherwise admirable introduction.

² A. Serra-Zanetti, L'Arte della stampa in Bologna... (Bologna, 1959), index references to Alessandro Lippo; Short-title Catalogue of Books printed in Italy... in the British Museum (London, 1958), p. 796.

³ Cf. L. von Ranke, History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations (1494-1515), trans., G.R. Dennis (London, 1909), p. 300.

⁴ Bonardi, cited in the list, no. 15.

The state that first seems to have appreciated the value of printed leaflets in psychological warfare has not been studied in terms of the Italian wars.⁵ Evidence suggests, though, that it was France that first exploited printing to this end, for from 1494 we have Bulletins d'Information. These were printed, seemingly, to keep the French informed of the success of the campaign in Italy, to boost morale, and to ensure that the payment of contributions for the war continued.⁶ We need to know who instigated the publication of these bulletins, and how publication was arranged. By 1509, at least, there were official printers with exclusive rights of printing. Interestingly enough some of the original dispatches that were used as the basis for the printed Bulletins exist, so that here we can estimate the extent of editing and deduce the motives behind it; the very fact that official dispatches were used strongly implies official backing for the printing.⁷ It is a short step from the Bulletins to directing leaflets against an enemy. These latter even contained crude propaganda cartoons: the San Marco of Venice, for instance, is depicted in anti-Venetian pamphlets of the 1509 period, after the defeat at Geradadda, with its paws cut away.

Many leaflets were not official propaganda on the part of a state. Private individuals, as today, wanted their work in print and were willing to pay for this. Perhaps some of the published orations are of this category.⁸ Other leaflets were of popular appeal, and the author-printer relationship in these cases remains a mystery. A writer like Francesco Maria Sacchini of Modigliana appears to have earned sufficient reputation for his name to appear as the author, though most pamphlets of popular appeal were anonymous. The bulk of this class was a rendering, usually in verse, of contemporary events, and they are related to those which in England are still handed down as nursery rhymes. Sacchini is in the tradition of journalism, and the popular printed leaflets, like those Sacchini wrote, can be seen as early newspaper, anticipating the well known news-letters. Presumably the writer travelled around, chanting his tale to an audience he gathered about him in the local market, and selling printed copies. Certainly the printed leaflets reflect the sentiments of the class of society, and the locality, for which they were written. For example, we have some idea of the popularity of Cesare Borgia in the Romagna from the pamphlets of

⁵ No mention of this propaganda is made by the following: F.L. Taylor, The Art of War in Italy, 1494-1525 (Cambridge, 1921); P. Pieri, Il Rinascimento e la crisi militare italiana (Turin, 2nd ed., 1952); P. Pieri, Scritti Vari (Turin, 1966).

⁶ See J.-P. Séguin, "L'Information en France à la fin du XV^e siècle", in Arts et Traditions populaires (1956), IV, pp. 309-330; (1957), V, pp. 46-74; cf. H. Hauser, Les sources de l'histoire de France: I, Les premières guerres d'Italie... (Paris, 1906), pp. 13, 33-34.

⁷ J.-P. Séguin, L'Information en France de Louis XII à Henri II (Geneva, 1961), pp. 49-51. For the original used as a source see Commynes, ed. Dupont, in the list, no. 1, p. 390 n. 2.

⁸ D. Weinstein, Ambassador from Venice: Pietro Pasqualigo in Lisbon, 1501 (Minneapolis, 1960), reprints an oration of 1501 from the original pamphlet.

Sacchini. We know, too, how a Venetian printing, intended for a Venetian audience, modified one of Sacchini's versions so as to make Cesare a villain.⁹

The High Renaissance was the era of the 'Pasquinate', when anonymous and violent satires were printed and displayed publicly.¹⁰ What such posters said was frequently untrue for the most part, but they coloured contemporary opinion. The Borgia, especially, were victims of hostile anonymous printed propaganda, and one of the most effective leaflets was the Letter to Silvio Savelli.¹¹

Information deriving from printed leaflets is not uncommon in contemporary chronicles, and exists in official dispatches. Usually these sources do not indicate the origin of the information, and this can cause serious distortion and incorrect evaluation. Francesco Guicciardini's History of Italy states that after the defeat at Geradadda the Venetian Government sent Antonio Giustinian as envoy to the Emperor. Guicciardini gives a translation of Giustinian's oration in which the cities awarded to the Emperor by the League of Cambray were surrendered to him. The original source for all this is a propaganda leaflet, which is quite false. Giustinian not only did not make the oration, but he had not been granted a safe-conduct to the Imperial Court.¹² It is likely that Buonaccorsi's Diario drew on a leaflet of Sacchini's Spavento d'Italia, for details concerning the Battle of Geradadda and casualties.¹³

Scholars of the Renaissance should be aware of such important sources, even though today the originals are very rare. It would be exceptional for a library to have an opportunity to purchase a collection of them, or even a single copy. In libraries where the originals already exist they are elusive, sometimes listed by subject, sometimes by title, when, as is common, the author is unknown.¹⁴ An admirable undertaking would be a comprehensive bibliography for the

⁹ R. Garnett, "Contemporary poems on Caesar Borgia", in The English Historical Review, I (1886), pp. 138-41. For this popular material see A. Medin, La Storia della Repubblica di Venezia nella poesia (Milan, 1904).

¹⁰ G.A. Cesareo, "Pasquino e Pasquinate nella Roma di Leone X", Miscellanea della R. Deputazione Romana di Storia Patria, XI (Rome, 1938).

¹¹ L. Pastor, The History of the Popes, trans. (London, 5th ed., 1950), VI, pp. 113-14; see also Burchard cited in the list, no. 3, p. 303.

¹² F. Lampertico, "Ricordi storici del palazzo Loredan", Nuovo Archivio Veneto, V (1893), pp. 224-85; O. Tommasini, La vita e gli scritti di N. Machiavelli (Rome, 2 vols., 1883-1911), II, pp. 1346-47, under 1509, VI. 53.

¹³ Tommasini, I, p. 463 n. 4.

¹⁴ Cf. Short-title Catalogue..., cited note 2, gives no. 5 in the list under Borgia, Cesare.

whole class of material. Meanwhile we must make do with the work of Sander for the Italian printings, though this excludes all those that have no woodcut,¹⁵ and that of Séguin for the French.¹⁶

Here, of the hundred or so for the period 1494-1512, I list those that have been reprinted. These form an interesting selection and are most readily available for consultation:

1. French Bulletins relating to the war in Italy, 1494-95. Reprinted in J.-L. de la Pilorgerie, Campagne et Bulletins de la grande armée d'Italie... (Nantes-Paris, 1866); several were reprinted in P. De Commynes, Mémoires, ed. Mlle. Dupont (Paris, 1847), III, pp. 375-407.¹⁷
2. Ordonnance faite pour les funérailles célébrées à Paris le 24 avril 1498 pour l'enterrement du corps du bon roy Charles Huystième, que Dieu absoille avec son épitaphe et la piteuse complainte de dame Christienté (Paris, 1498). Reprinted L. Techner, Collection de pièces fugitives pour servir à l'histoire de France (Paris, 1874).
3. The anonymous letter to Silvio Savelli, printed late 1501. Reprinted in J. Burchard, "Liber Notarum", ed. E. Celani, Rerum Italicarum Scriptores (new ed.), XXXII, Parte i, 312-15. At University of Toronto.
4. Francesco Maria Sacchini, Lamento della morte dello illustre ed excelso Signor Duca Valentino (Bologna, 1507). Reprinted in "Lamenti storici....", ed. A. Medin and L. Frati, Scelta di Curiosità Letterarie.... (Bologna, 1890), Dispensa 236. At University of Toronto.
5. Anonymous, Questa è la historia de la morte del Duca Valentino... [Venice, 1507?]. Reprinted in Scelta..., Dispensa 236.
6. La Conquiste de Gennes, et comment les François conquestèrent la Bastille.... [1507?]. Reprinted E. Pandiani, "Il riacquisto di Genova bel 1507....", in Miscellanea di Studi Stoirici in onore di Antonio Manno (Turin, 1912), II, 436-43.
7. Lectres de la commission et summacion faite aux Venicens par Monjoye... [1509]. A portion is reprinted in Pierre Darù, Histoire de la république de Venise (Paris, 1853). At University of Toronto.
8. Le Grant Credo de Venise [1509]. Reprinted in Italian translation by A. Medin, "Il Gran Credo di Venezia....", in Mélanges offerts à M. Emile Picot (Paris, 1913), II, 43-50. At University of Toronto.

¹⁵ M. Sander, Le livre à figure italien (Milan, 6 vols., 1942).

¹⁶ Cited in notes 6 and 7.

¹⁷ See also Hauser cited in note 6.

9. L'Ordre du Camp de Louys Douziesme Roy de France en la Bataille d'Aignadel... / 1509 /. Reprinted in T. Godefroy, Histoire de Louys XII... (Paris, 1615), 344-54.
10. Questa è la bella historia de la victoria de Cividale ... / 1509 /. Reprinted L. Suttrina, Per Nozze Rubini-Morpurgo (Rome, 1925).
11. La Obsidione di Padua / 1509 /. Reprinted by A. Medin, Scelta di Curiosità Letterarie... (Bologna, 1892), Dispensa 244.
12. Manifestoes of the Emperor Maximilian addressed to the Venetian nobility -- 15 April 1510; 1 August 1511. Reprinted A. Bonardi, "Venezia Città libera dell' Impero...", in Atti e Memorie della R. Accademia di scienze, lettere ed arti di Padova, XXXI (1915), 138-42.
13. H[ans] S[chneider], Heinach volget das arnntlich und gewaltig erobern... und vesten Statt Bressa... / 1512? /. English synopsis in Letters and Papers... Henry VIII vol. I, part i (London, 2nd ed., 1920), no. 1071.
14. Lamento e rotta di Prato / 1512? /. Reprinted C. Guasti in Scelta di Curiosità Letterarie..., Dispensa 177, pp. 3-33.

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