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Gaspara Stampa's Poetry for Performance

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DURING THE MID-SIXTEENTH century in Italy, when a remarkable number of women joined in the production of poetry, one of the channels open to their pursuit of intellectual life and fame was the Venetian salon. There music and poetry mingled as poems were frequently sung or recited before an audience rather than read privately in silence. The poetry of Gaspara Stampa was produced for this milieu. Published in 1554, a year after her death, her collection of more than three hundred poems has been approached in two main ways: as the autobiographical self-expression of a passionate woman and more recently as the work of a writer well assimilated into contemporary literary circles. Scholars in the last twenty years, who take her literary skill and ambition seriously, emphasize Stampa’s use of the dominant male poetic traditions to subvert male values and to empower the female creator despite her apparent self-abasement.¹ A further enriched appreciation of her work may come from exploring its social and performative contexts, for Stampa was a performer as well as a poet, and indeed a performer of poetry.

Stampa was famous as a singer and had been trained in music by Perissone Cambio, a composer personally associated with Cipriano de Rore and Adrian Willaert, the major composers in mid-sixteenth-century Venice. She performed both in her own family’s salon and in that of Domenico Venier, a patrician who gathered a mix of gentlemen, musicians,
and men of letters that, overlapping with the Stampa circle, included the literati Sperone Speroni and Ludovico Dolce, Girolamo Parabosco (writer, composer, and organist at St. Mark's), and Girolamo Molino (aristocrat, poet, and music enthusiast). As Martha Feldman observes in her recent dissertation, it was a social community that must have fostered exchange between music and literature. Parabosco, for example, wrote his own madrigals, both text and music, and performed them for his friends. Parabosco praises Stampa for both her poetic and musical abilities in one of his Lettere amorose: "chi mai sì soavi e dolci parole ascoltò? chi mai sentì più alti concetti? che dirò io di quell'angelica voce, che qualora percuote l'aria de' suoi divini accenti, fa tale e sì dolce armonia, che . . . infonde spirto e vita nelle più fredde pietre, facendole per soverchia dolcezza lacrimare?" [Who ever heard such delightful and sweet words? Who ever heard more lofty conceits? What shall I say of that angelic voice, which, whenever it strikes the air with its divine accents, makes such sweet harmony that . . . it pours spirit and life into the coldest stones, making them weep for excessive sweetness?]. Orazio Brunetto, who repeatedly sought admission to Stampa's salon, writes of a common acquaintance who never rereads Petrarch's "Chiare, fresche et dolci acque" (no. 126) without hearing in his mind Stampa's musical rendition of it. Torquaco Tasso, Girolamo Molino, Giorgio Benzone, and others similarly emphasized her singing in their poems of praise for her. Perissone dedicated to her his Primo libro dei madrigali a quattro voci "Perché si sa bene homai, e non pure in questa felice città, ma quasi in ogni parte, niuna donna al mondo amar più la musica di quello che fate voi, né altra più raramente possederla" [Because it is well known by now, and not in this happy city alone but almost everywhere, that no woman in the world loves music more than you, nor is any other more musical].

Besides these praises from others, Stampa herself frequently describes her own poetic activities as a combination of writing and singing:

cosi vorrei aver concetti e detti
e parole a tant'opra appropriate,
sì che fosser da me scritte e cantate,
e fatte cónte a mille alti intelletti.

(no. 16)
[Thus I would wish to have conceits and phrases and words befitting such work, so that they could be by me *written and sung* and made known to a thousand lofty intellects.]

... i lumi alti e sereni
di cui conven che sempre *scriva e canti*.

(no. 17)

[... the lofty and serene lights (eyes) of which I must always *write and sing*.]

che 'n voci e 'n carte spesso accuso e lodo.

(no. 27)

[that *in voice and on paper* I often accuse and praise.]

come volete...
con questa forza stanca e così frale
*i' dica in vive voci, o scriva in carte?*

(no. 39)

[how do you want ... that with this strength so weary and frail *I speak in living voice or write on paper*?]

... la fiamma mia spietata e ria,
che per sfogar talor *descrivo e canto*.

(no. 44)

[... my pitiless and cruel flame, which to unburden I sometimes *write and sing*.]

fede d’esser *cantata* in mille *carte*.

(no. 68)

[a faith to be *sung* on a thousand *pages*.]

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qual potrà ingegno chiaro,
'quant'io debbo e vorrei, giamaì lodarte

in vive voci o 'n carte?
Io per me farò fede,
dovunque esser potrà mia voce udita.

(no. 233)

[what bright intellect will ever be able, as much as I should and want, to praise you in living voice or on paper? For my part, I will bear witness wherever my voice can be heard.]

ciò ch'io scrissi e canti...  

(no. 266)

[what I wrote and sang...]

This incomplete set of examples shows how pervasive in her poetry is the dual nature of her work. Although poets frequently used the word sing as a metaphor for writing poetry, Stampa's combination of "sing and write" calls attention to the separate activities of each, a distinction further emphasized by the opposition between "vive voci" [living voices] and "carte" [papers].

How did Stampa perform her poetry and that of Petrarch and others? Luigi Pompilj, not generally a reliable source, imagines her singing together with her sister, Perissone, and other friends, a five-part madrigal. One poem seems to suggest its own performance by several voices:

Ninfe, che d'Adria i più riposti guadi
sacre abitate, ...

... ... ... ... ...

canti l'una di voi, l'altra risponda.

(no. 278)

[Sacred nymphs who inhabit the most sheltered fords, ... one of you sing and the other respond.]
However, imaginative scenes featuring singing with others are not unusual in poetry, and no polyphonic settings of Stampà's verse exist from her lifetime. Other scholars assume that she sang solo, accompanying herself on the lute or viol.\textsuperscript{11} For example, Feldman plausibly suggests that Stampà used the common technique, called \textit{recitarcantando}, of applying a few adaptable phrases of melody to the verses of various poems.\textsuperscript{12} Books of simple melodies for the singing of sonnets and \textit{capitoli} were available in print for general use and were quite popular.\textsuperscript{13} The simplicity and frequent repetition of the musical phrases suggest that the singer may have been expected to vary and ornament them herself. Self-accompaniment would enhance the singer’s control and thus her freedom to render the lines expressively according to the words being sung.\textsuperscript{14} The lack of existing music composed specifically for Stampà’s poetry, together with Stampà’s almost total concentration on the poetic forms of sonnet and \textit{capitolo}, for which such generalized melodies were available, supports the notion that she used this kind of pre-composed “aria.” However, since Perissone dedicated to her his book of madrigals, she could undoubtedly perform that sort of singing in parts as well.

Actually, although Perissone published some of his music together with that of Cipriano de Rore, one of the foremost polyphonic composers of the time, Perissone wrote his four-part madrigals in a more conservative, homophonic style, which aided in understanding the text. As Feldman explains, “Perissone’s settings . . . may be taken as written versions of the improvised singing to the lute practiced by Stampà and female counterparts like Franceschina Bellamano within the receptive salon of Venier.”\textsuperscript{15} Molino, another member of their circle, was enthusiastic about the older simpler, \textit{frottola} songs, which could easily be rendered by a soloist with a lute; and one of Stampà’s poems (no. 261) depicts Molino himself singing in that manner. Doni’s \textit{Dialogo della musica}, describing the conversation and music-making among a group of people that includes Perissone and Parabosco, mixes part-songs, for which both music and text are printed, and texts, recited solo with a \textit{viuola} or \textit{lira}, for which Doni does not include the music.\textsuperscript{16} So too the Stampà and Venier salons may well have offered a mix of those two kinds of music.

The sixteenth century was a time when, through the development of the madrigal, music and poetry drew especially close to each other. Petrarch was known to have sung his own poetry, possibly to melodies
of his own devising; and his texts had been set to music by composers contemporary with him, such as Jacopo da Bologna. The revival of Petrarch as the major poetic model in the sixteenth century was paralleled by the notion that such poetry should be set to music and sung. Whereas many poets’ works are now studied without any reference to music, in their own time these poets themselves were associated with musicians who set their poems to music. Stylistic norms were established with regard not only to literary models but also to developing musical tastes, and the same people, as in the case of the Venier salon, were often involved in both arts.

Stampa’s poetry addressed itself to the same audience that her singing did. The lines from no. 16, previously quoted, make clear reference to the importance of an audience, defined there as intellectuals. Other of her poems describe this audience, that is, the salon society, as “quell’illustre e nobil compagnia” [no. 30; that illustrious and noble company], “cavalier onorati” [no. 242; honored knights], “schiera gentil” [no. 268; a well-born crowd]. Salon life made musical and literary talents a means to social interaction with the upper class. Sixteenth-century Venice saw the progressive separation of the commercial class from the nobility. Nobles turned away from mercantile involvements toward land investments, while the merchants, who had previously mingled freely with the nobles, felt themselves increasingly scorned by them and found themselves losing social ground. Merchants tried to enhance their prestige by investing in art: not only in fancy homes and portraits of themselves and their families, but also in the musical skills that might permit them to maintain their ties with the nobility. Stampa’s family encouraged her musical education; and her talented celebration of the aristocratic object of her devotion (Count Collalto) gave her, the daughter of a merchant, the continued access she desired to noble society.

Stampa is quite open in many of her poems, starting with the very first, about her desire to use both poetry and song to raise her social status. Parodying Petrarch’s Rime no. 1, Stampa writes in her own no. 1,

> gloria, non che perdon, de’ miei lamenti spero trovar fra le ben nate genti.

[Glory, not only pardon, for my laments I hope to find among the well-born.]
and indulges in the fantasy that some well-born woman, envious of her lofty love-object, passion, and poetic ability, will say,

Deh, perché tant'amor, tanta fortuna
per sì nobil signor a me non venne,
ch'anch'io n'andrei con tanta donna a paro?

[Oh, why did such love, such fortune, for so noble a lord not come to me, that I too might go as equal with such a lady?] 19

No. 157 complains of unrequited love while simultaneously acknowledging the social aims of her poetry:

a che scrivendo procacciarmi onore . . . ?

[what for by writing to pursue honor for myself . . . ?]

With similar candor, Stampa follows her epistolary poems to the King and Queen of France with one to the established poet Alamanni, saying:

Tu, che traesti dal natio paese
le nostre muse tutte ed Elicona
là dove regge il Rodano e la Sona
il maggior re che viva e 'l più cortese,
ed or con voi son tutte ad una intese
insieme col gran figlio di Latona
a celebrar quella real corona,
e le sue tante e gloriose imprese,
chiaro Alamanni, io vorrei ben anch'io
venir in parte di cotanto onore,
e lodar lui con voi e poi voi anco.

(no. 248)

[You, who drew all our muses and Helicon from your native land to where the greatest
and most courteous king reigns the Rhone and the Saone, and now they (muses) are all as one intent with you, together with the great son of Latona, to celebrate that royal crown and its many and glorious enterprises; famous Alamanni, I very much wish that I too could come to a place of such honor, both to praise him with you and then to praise you too.)

This expresses the wish to share with Alamanni an audience that is not only noble but royal, and to do so not just through the sending of poems as letters but through her actual presence to the audience. So, too, no. 269 prays for the welfare of the more local cultured leisure society and for her own inclusion in it:

Amica, dolce ed onorata schiera,
schiera di cortesia e d'onestade,
soggiorno di valore e di beltade,
di diperti e di grazie madre vera,
   io prego Amor e 'l ciel ch'unita, intera
ti conservi in felice e lunga etade,
e questi giochi e questa libertade
veggan tardi, o non mai, l'ultima sera.

       A me si dia per grazia di gioire
con lei molt'anni e con la fiamma mia,
che sovra ii ciel mi fa superba gire.

[Friendly, sweet and honored crowd, crowd of courtesy and honesty, sojourn of valor and beauty, true mother of entertainments and of graces, I pray Love and heaven that they may preserve you united, whole, in happy and long age, and that these games and this liberty may see late or never its last evening. . . . To me may it be granted by grace to rejoice with you for many years, and with my flame which makes me go proudly above the heavens.]
The emphasis on social courtesy and entertainments—lines 7 and 8 suggest an endless series of evening gatherings—overshadows the brief mention of “valore.” Her count’s role in the wars often kept him away from her and excluded any participation on her part; only the pastimes of the leisured afforded her entry. Their “libertade” is also hers. Her “fiamma” raises her to their proud heights, which are likened to the heavens (“sovra il ciel”), as if she were being admitted to the circle of the blessed. Thus the prayer form becomes especially appropriate; continued social success is her salvation.

Because her aim is social self-enhancement, it is important to her to have an audience; she writes not just as a form of private self-expression but as a public performance that will bring her attention and praise. We have seen this already in no. 16 (“e fatte cònte a mille alti intelletti”). So, too, other poems declare:

Io per me sola a dimostrar ne vengo
quanto l’amo ad ognun, quanto lo còlo.
(no. 15)

[I by myself alone come to demonstrate how much I love him to everyone, how much I adore him.]20

e piango ch’atta a pinger non mi sento
al mondo il mio bel sol quanto devria.
(no. 58)

[and I weep that I do not feel myself adequate to paint to the world my fair sun as well as I should.]

... io la divolgo, e non la celo,
e non mi pento, anzi glorio e gioisco.
(no. 155)

[I reveal it, and I don’t conceal it, and I do not repent of it, but rather glory and rejoice in it.]
Her prefatory letter to her beloved Count Collalto, whose very name ("high hill") is used in her poems to link the poetic and social heights to which she aspires, offers her poems to him not as a lover's complaint or demand but as entertainment and praise that can do her good even if her love is never requited:

Né pensi V. S. ch’io abbia ciò fatto per farla conoscette della sua crudeltà, perché crudeltà non si può dire, dove non è obbligo, né per contristarnela; ma per farla più tosto conoscette della sua grandezza ed allegrarla. . . . Poi che tormentando ancora giovi e fai frutto

[And do not think, your lordship, that I have done this to make you recognize your cruelty, for it cannot be called cruelty where there is no obligation, nor to make you sad about it; but rather to make you aware of your greatness and to gladden you . . . since even by tormenting me you still help me and do me good.]

In fact, since the count was absent much of the time, her audience is less her lover than the social circle that is allowed to "overhear" her confessions and complaints. It is with this audience that her suffering for the heartless count brings her pleasures and advantages. Although the cruel and absent beloved is an obvious borrowing from the fashionable model of Petrarch's verse, Petrarch's flight from company into solitude is reversed in her seeking out a large and noble audience for her complaint.

Stampa's intent to be a successful entertainer who can enjoy the pleasures of upper-class society helps to explain the combination of two qualities in her verse that might, at first glance, seem contrary: one is the tragic tone and theme of many of her poems, the other is her wit. Scholars who see Stampa as a tragic poet of unrequited passion completely ignore the element of wit. Both characteristics actually contribute to her intent, for reasons that also link her efforts with those of contemporary composers.

Poetry and music were undergoing a similar development at this time: a separation of stylistic levels aimed at raising the general status of
the art. Pietro Bembo and his disciples, such as Lodovico Dolce in the Venier salon, emphasized the clean separation of stylistic levels and found reinforcement in the current enthusiasm for Aristotle’s Poetics. A tragic tone and subject indicated the “high” style associated with upper-class characters, while comedy suggested a more plebeian ambience. Along with this separation of themes and moods came a linguistic distinction. Bembo’s advocacy of a noble Italian language to replace the various Italian dialects gave rise to a consciousness of choice between writing seriously and idealistically in the sweet elegant style or more comically or realistically in dialect. Similarly in music the frottola was giving way on one hand to the villanesca or villanella, in a simpler, popularizing style and with texts usually in dialect, and on the other hand to the madrigal, with its texts in the purer Italian recommended by Bembo and drawn most frequently from the same authors revered by the literati: Petrarch and Ariosto. According to Alfred Einstein, “The transition to a more ‘literary’ form [of the madrigal] begins between 1530 and 1540 and continues at a steadily accelerating pace.”

Here again mood shares in the distinction of social levels, and composers after 1540 increasingly took as their texts the more pathetic and spiritualized poems of Petrarch on Laura’s death rather than the amatory poems on her life, which had previously been more popular. From Ariosto, it was the dramatic laments of abandoned or jealous lovers that were most frequently set to music. In the 1540s and 1550s Venetian composers were for the first time setting to music Petrarch’s canzone to the Virgin Mary and his spiritual sonnets of repentance: “Padre del ciel, dopo i perduti giorni” (no. 62) and “I’ vo piangendo i miei passati tempi” (no. 365), sonnets that provided a model for some of Stampà’s own poems. Rore’s setting of the canzone to the Virgin as a cycle of eight madrigals emphasizes the poet’s anguished sorrow. Feldman cites a poetic suggestion by Dolce that terms of grief and joy be combined in Petrarchan oxymoron so as to moderate emotional extremes by finding a common “sweetness” in both. Thus Dolce emphasized the aesthetic pleasure of a sweetened pathos. But interest in the aesthetic sweetness of tragic emotions had begun even earlier. Albercht Dürer, attending a concert in Venice, noted that the players themselves were moved to tears. “This Venetian madrigal,” writes
James Haar, referring especially to the circle around Willaert and Rore, "is characterized by seriousness of musical language corresponding to the texts, which include some of Petrarch's most melancholy and contemplative sonnets." The association of tragedy with high literariness made the musicians' search for affective pieces and for respected literary texts converge.

Willaert, popular in the salons as a writer of madrigals and the central figure in Venetian music of Stampa's time, was influential in breaking from the homophonic or chordal harmonies of earlier composition to a more polyphonic use of voices that shared with Petrarchan poetry the fracturing of the singing persona into contrasting parts. This fractured self both expressed and required a tragic stance. Even more than Willaert, Feldman says, "Rore drew from among the darkest and most tumultuous" of Petrarch's poems, and Rore's music exploited the dramatic potential of the texts he selected, with dissonances, jagged rhythms, and widely ranging voices, paving the way for operatic developments. The aesthetic pleasure in contrasts encouraged the construction of a self torn by unresolvable conflicts of feeling. A happy lover simply did not offer suitable material to demonstrate the poet's wit or the composer's skill, and merry material was more likely to be set as a villanella. Stampa's verses, full of dramatic emotion, are mentioned by Einstein as an example of the "mannerist" poetry that attracted composers "for the clash of the conflicting feelings." She wrote to suit the converging currents both of poetic fashion and of contemporary musical taste.

Some of Stampa's poems—especially the more pastoral ones—even present themselves as performances. No. 278 ("Ninfe . . .") mentioned above is one example; another is no. 201, of which the octave is a speech for which the sestet provides the setting:

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È questa quella viva e salda fede,  
che promettevi a la tua pastorella,  
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  
Così l'afflitta e misera Anassilla  
lungo i bei lidi d'Adria iva chiamando  
il suo pastor, da cui 'l ciel dipartilla;  
e l'acque e l'aure, dolce risonando.
---
STAMPA’S POETRY FOR PERFORMANCE

[Is this that lively and solid faith which you promised to your shepherdess . . .
So the afflicted and wretched Anassilla along the fair shores of the Adriatic was calling her shepherd, from whom heaven had parted her; and the waters and breezes were sweetly resounding.]

A similar self-staging occurs in other poems: no. 173, “Cantate meco, Progne e Filomena” [Sing with me, Procne and Filomena]; and the capitolo, no. 244, in which the first nine lines set the scene of a “donna, avendo lontano il suo signore” [lady with her lord far away] releasing her burning desires by addressing the Adriatic shores along which she paces, while the following lines present her words.34 In no. 59, verbal echoes of the Vergilian Dido imply that Stampa is taking on another recognizable role that simultaneously suits her own case and remains an enacted other. The witty turn at the end of sonnet no. 82 (“Ciò si comporta, Amor, ne la tua scola?” [Is this tolerated, Love, in your school?])—along with the explicit staging at the beginning when Anassilla is lamenting by the shore (“Qui, dove avien che ’l nostro mar ristagne,”)—clearly marks a separation of poet from character, whom she even refers to in the third person while directly addressing the count (“E si l’assenzia e ’l poco amor v’invola / la memoria di lei, la vostra fede, / che pur non le scrivete una parola” [And absence and slightness of love so steal from you the memory of her and of your promise, that you do not even write her one word]). Thus, the speaker becomes an interceder between Anassilla and her beloved.35

The role-acting could not be more self-conscious here; but I would argue that it is similarly self-conscious even in the many poems whose theatricality is less obvious. More than half the poems in the Rime d’Amore section are directly addressed (the Rime varie, frequently epistolary, are almost all to specific persons): the greatest number to the count, whether present or absent; the second greatest number often to Amore; the third greatest number to a generalized audience (“voi chi . . .,” “donne,” etc.); and many others to the landscape or other objects such as eyes, tears, the night, a dream, and her soul. These direct addresses often present small dramatic scenes, implying at
times a larger context of action and reaction, of which we are glimpsing only a part:

S'io 'l dissi mai, signor, che mi sia tolto l'arder per voi, com'ardo in fiamma viva.

[no. 128; If I ever said it, lord, let my burning for you, as I burn in living flame, be taken from me.]

Certo fate gran torto a la mia fede, conte, sovra ogni fé candida e pura, a dir che 'n Francia è più salda e più dura la fé di quelle donne a chi lor crede.

[no. 180; Certainly you do great wrong to my faith, count, above every faith white and pure, to say that in France the faith of those ladies is more solid and sure to one who believes them.]

Here we are aware of Stampa's responding to something said previously by the count, as if a dialogue were in progress; but only one of the actors is before us. In other cases we are made aware of a context of actions, such as the count's departure again for the wars despite a number of poetic pleas that he remain in Venice:

Deh lasciate, signor, le maggior cure d'ir procacciando in questa età fiorita con fatiche e periglio de la vita alti pregi, alti onori, alte venture;

[no. 158; Oh, leave off, lord, the greater cares of going, in this flowering age, with troubles and dangers to your life, in pursuit of lofty prizes, lofty honors, lofty fortunes.]

Signor, ite felice . . .

[no. 199; Lord, go and be happy . . .]
STAMPA'S POETRY FOR PERFORMANCE

Or we hear Stampa's challenges to her tormentor Love, and her mockery of his powers:

Straziami, Amor, se sai, dammi tormento,
[no. 154; Tear me apart, Love, if you know how, torment me].

Che bella lode, Amor, che ricche spoglie
avrai d'una infiammata giovinetta
[no. 168; What fine praise, Love, what rich spoils you will have of an inflamed young girl].

Even her addresses to herself can be dramatic, as in the pair of sonnets nos. 88–89, beginning: “Lassa, chi turba la mia lunga pace?” [Alas, who disturbs my long peace?] and “Ma che, sciocca, dich’io? perché vaneggio?” [But what, fool, am I saying? Why do I rave?]. In other words, Stampa constructs herself as someone on stage, performing drama. She addresses either fellow characters (the count, Amore) or members of the audience: “Chi porterà le mie giuste querele / al mio signor . . . ?” [no. 67; Who will bear my just complaints to my lord?] “Piangete, donne” [no. 86; Weep, ladies]. If she sang these particular poems, the music would make these speeches even more operatic and theatrical. Luigi Malagoli takes Stampa as the prime representative of a new dramatic sensibility in style approaching the baroque. We would do well, however, to remember that for Stampa, poetry, when it was not epistolary, was potentially designed for actual performance; that even her written verse was addressed to the same people who had seen her perform; and that being taken seriously as a performer contributed to the acceptance of her public voice as a poet.

Stampa employs an entertaining wit in dramatic exaggerations and cleverly stated emotional paradoxes. But there is wit, too, in the whole stance of a tragic poet’s adoring from afar her social superior while entertaining him and his friends with her complaints. Within Parabosco’s Diporti, a poem (much like some of Stampa’s poems) on how only the hope of shortly dying keeps the unhappy lover alive in the absence of his
beloved is received with admiration for its wit rather than with sympathy for the lover’s pain. Similarly in Doni’s Dialogue of the Music, Parabosco’s recitation of a sonnet to the divine eyes of his beloved elicits laughter. The following poem by Stampa (no. 142) provides an example of various types of wit: dramatic scene-playing, humorously exaggerated use of a classical motif, and the stark contrasts of theme and feeling (Ercol or Sansone/giovane e donna; giorni/anno; valor/inganno; her enemy is her only defense.)

Rimandatemi il cor, empio tiranno,
ch’a si gran torto avete ed istraziate,
e di lui e di me quel proprio fate,
che le tigre e i leoni fanno.

Son passati otto giorni, a me un anno,
ch’io non ho vostre lettere od imbasciate,
contro le fé che voi m’avete date,
o fonte di valor, conte, e d’inganno.

Credete ch’io sia Ercol o Sansone
a poter sostener tanto dolore,
giovane e donna e fuor d’ogni ragione,
massime essendo qui senza ’l mio core
e senza voi a mia difensione,
onde mi suol venir forza e vigore?

[Send back my heart, cruel tyrant, which with such great wrong you possess and tear apart, and you do with it and with me just what tigers and lions do with a deer. Eight days have passed, to me a year, that I have had no letter or message from you, against the promise which you gave me, oh fount of valor, count, and of deceit. Do you believe that I am Hercules or Samson to be able to sustain such pain, I who am young and a woman and without any reason (or right), especially as I am here without my heart and without you to defend me, from whom is wont to come my strength and force?]
The shift from tyrants, lions, and tigers to eight days without receiving a letter is surely humorous, as is the wonderful twist—enhanced by internal rhyme—in line 8. The final paradoxical conceit, that her defense comes from her enemy, must have elicited the same type of admiration as was elicited by Parabosco's lover who was preserved by the hope of death. This poem's attraction is the detached entertainment it can draw from an engaged, passionate unhappiness. Again we are dealing with a divided self.

Stampa also indulges in wordplay on people's names. Poem no. 252, for example, gives us two different meanings for *conte* within a pair of rhyming lines:

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vi pregherei che 'l valor e 'l bel volto
e l'altra grazie del mio chiaro conte
a la futura età faceste côte.
```

[I would pray you that the valor and handsome face and other graces of my illustrious count you make known to future ages.]

In these lines, the very identity of her "count" is made to imply her "re-counting" of his praises and his worthiness to be widely known. Similarly, her sonnet to Speroni (no. 253) opens with a pun on his name:

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Speron ch'a l'opre chiare ed onorate
spronate ognun . . .
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[Speron, you who spur on everyone to illustrious and honored works . . .]

This sort of wit, which may seem frivolous and was certainly not unique to her, imitates Petrarch's games with the variations of "Laura" and enhances the sense of Stampa's professional seriousness through its display of technical skill. Thus wit, as a demonstration of artistic control, was seen as appropriate even to a tragic complaint that one was dying of love; for both wit and pathos raised the social level of the verse. It was not the sentiment that was taken seriously, but the artistry.
While the men around her could at times be completely playful—Parabosco, for example, in his outrageous love letters, or Perissone in his villanesche—Stampa had reason to avoid the low style despite her desire to entertain. Singing was an ambiguous social talent, for while it permitted an upward career, it was also associated with the seductions of the courtesan. Like Stampa, the courtesans Tullia d’Aragona and Veronica Franco played instruments and had a good knowledge of music; and Pietro Bembo wrote to discourage his own daughter from learning an instrument, “che il sonare è cosa da donna vana e leggera. E io vorrei che tu fossi la più grave e la più casta e pudica donna che viva” [For playing music is a matter for a light and loose woman. And I want you to be the most serious and chaste and modest woman alive]. Just as Veronica Franco—who, like Stampa, attended the Venier salon as well as holding her own salon—had elevated her status and earnings by a display of costly furnishings and clothing, so Stampa, whose status as courtesan has been disputed but seems probable enough, needed to enhance her social value by adopting only the higher and more correct style. Her emphasis on her own fidelity, despite her torments and her lover’s cruelties, similarly ennobles her self-presentation. A socially less admirable role is displaced by the stance of an innocent, faithful, and tragic victim, whose continuing praise of the noble object of her loyal passion increases her social worth by its very persistence. The celebration and adornment of her own fede becomes indistinguishable from the celebration of her lover: “fate fede a colui de la mia fede, / che ’n tante carte omai celebro ed orno” [no. 23; Give him credence of my faith, which (or whom) in so many pages by now I celebrate and adorn].

Stampa’s personal aims coincided with the increasing participation of women not only in writing poetry but also in composing and performing music and with their increasing professionalization as musicians. The women who in 1580 formed the first female group of professional musicians at the court of Ferrara included a merchant’s daughter, as was Stampa. Even by the 1560s and 1570s, women of humble origins had risen to international stardom as performers. Stampa was certainly aware of the new possibilities for women’s cultural participation afforded by the life of the salons. It has even been suggested that Stampa’s family encouraged her musical training with the intent of directing her toward a position as entertainer in a court, or at least toward the patronage of a patrician.
At the same time, Vittoria Colonna had recently opened the way for women to publish their own verse. Being taken seriously as a woman of artistic ability, therefore, was a major concern for Stampa, one that she demonstrated repeatedly in self-deprecating references to her own sex while she expressed the hope that talent, both poetic and musical, would allow her to rise above the usual limits.49

Considering Stampa’s poetry as the work of a woman who sang poems before an audience provides us with important new insights into her work. What might seem like hackneyed metaphors of the poet’s singing come alive as references to real musical performance enhanced by her construction of a dramatic persona. Her aim was not only literary immortality on paper but also direct sensual and aesthetic appeal to the audience present before her. Finally, understanding that Stampa was a performer of poetry helps her combination of entertaining wit and tragic pose become both more apparent and more understandable. Aware of the overlapping aspirations of women, merchants, musicians, and poets in mid-sixteenth-century Venice, we may find that the aspects of social performance in Stampa’s work help us appreciate why she wrote the way she did.

NOTES


"chi compone i canti, Parabosco; chi fa versi, Parabosco; chi suona, chi ha mille virtù, Parabosco" [who composes the songs, Parabosco; who writes the verses, Parabosco; who plays, who has a thousand virtues, Parabosco]. Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.


6. Abdelkader Salza includes these poems and others about Stampa in his edition of the Rime of Veronica Franco and Gaspara Stampa (Bari: Laterza, 1913), 190-94. Molino’s sonnet ends: "Nuova sirena / poggii cantando un colle alto, ed in cima / fe'l verde eterno, e l'aria ognor serena" [A new siren, singing, climbed the high hill and on its summit made the green eternal and the air always serene].


8. Emphasis added.

9. The only mythical figure to whom she twice compares herself (no. 124 and no. 152) is Echo, reduced by her unrequited love to a voice with a name:

che, quasi ad Eco imagine simile,

di donna serbò sol la voce e 'l nome.

(no. 152)

[who, almost the image of Echo, retained only the voice and name of a woman.]

Walter Binni, Critici e poeti dal Cinquecento al Novecento, 3d ed. (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1969), 3-16, is the critic who most emphasizes the musicality of Stampa’s verse, while associating that quality with superficiality as a poetry of '"piacevolezza.' Musicality in this sense, however, does not imply the presence of actual music but refers to the harmonious flow of the lines of verse.


13. The most famous of these were the series of volumes published in Venice by Petrucci in the early 1500s.

14. This style of singing was taken up by Caccini for theatre music, both so that the text might be more clearly rendered than in polyphonic singing and so that the performer’s sprezzatura might be allowed to display itself. See Nino Pirrotta’s discussion in *Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi*, trans. Karen Eales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 245–48. Surely the dramatic possibilities of this style of singing were already present in salon song performances.


16. The *Dialogo* was published originally in 1554, the same year Stampa’s poetry was published and just a year after her death. Doni and Stampa were the same age.


19. See also Phillippy’s discussion of this poem, “Gaspara Stampa’s *Rime,*” 3–4: “The poem replaces the eternal perspective of divine judgment . . . with a plea for an earthly judgment” (4).

20. These lines also support a vision of her performing solo before the audience.


23. Ibid. Thus, for another example, Luca Di Marenzio in the preface to his 1588 volume of madrigals refers to his own change of style: “questi Madrigali da me ultimamente composti con maniera assai differente dalla passata, havendo, & per l’imitazione delle parole, & per la proprietà dello stile atteso ad una (dirò così) mesta gravità.” [These Madrigals recently composed by me in a very different manner from the past, having both through the imitation of the words and through the quality of the style achieved (as I call it) a mournful gravity.] Marenzio Di Luca, *Madrigali a Quatro Cinque, et Sei Voci, Libro Primo* (Venice, 1588), cited in James Haar, “Self-Consciousness about Style, Form, and Genre in 16th-Century Music,” *Studi musicali* 3 (1974): 223. One may recognize here, through the composer’s concern for a music suited to the words, the influence of Bembo’s advocacy for a style that combined dolcezza with gravità.


25. Haar, Essays, 121.


28. J. R. Hale, Renaissance Europe: Individual and Society, 1480-1520 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 247. Outside Italy, Thomas More’s Utopia, while praising the expressive effectiveness of utopian musical settings of poetry, lists only the darker emotions: “All their music, whether played on instruments or sung by the human voice, so renders and expresses the natural feelings, so suits the sound to matter (whether troubled or mournful or angry), and so represents the meaning by the form of the melody that it wonderfully affects, penetrates and inflames the souls of the hearers” (Hale, Renaissance Europe, 252).


33. Einstein, Madrigal, 1:200.

34. Phillippy, “Gaspara Stampa’s Rime,” esp. 15, links the abandoned pastorella pose to Ovid’s Heroides, suggesting these as a model for Stampa’s own female-voiced complaints to her absent lover.

35. Identity is restored momentarily in the unification of voices in lines 12-13, only to be ruptured again by the final shift in tone. Here is the complete poem:

Qui, dove avien che ’l nostro mar ristagne,
conte, la vostra misera Anassilla,
quando la luna agghiaccia e l’ sol favilla,
pur voi chiamando, si lamenta ed agne.

Voi, dove avien che l’Oceano bagne,
la notte, il giorno, a l’alba ed a la squilla,
menando vita libera e tranquilla,
mirate lieto il mar e le campagne.

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36. Compare also 

STAMPA’S POETRY FOR PERFORMANCE

E sì l’assenzia e ’l poco amor v’invola
la memoria di lei, la vostra fede,
che pur non le scrivete una parola.
O fra tutt’altra mia miseria sola!
o pena mia, ch’ogn’altra pena eccede!
Ciò si comporta, Amor, ne la tua scola?

[Here, at the edge of our sea, count, your
tretched Anassilla laments and suffers,
when the moon chills and when the sun
sparkles, still calling you. You, where Ocean
bathes, night and day and dawn and dusk,
leading a free and tranquil life, look about
happily at the sea and fields. And absence
and slightness of love so steal from you the
memory of her and of your promise, that
you do not even write her one word. O my
misery unique among all others! O my
pain, which exceeds all other pain! Is this
tolerated, Love, in your school?]

37. Compare also

Poiché da voi, signor, m’è pur vietato
che dir le vere mie ragione non possa.
(no. 131)

[Since you forbid me, lord, even to speak
my true reasons.]

Signor, per cortesia,
non mi dite che, quand’andaste via,
Amor mi negò ’l pianto.
(no. 230)

[Lord, please, do not tell me that, when you
went away, Love denied me tears.]

38. Compare also “Prendi, Amor, de’ tuoi lacci il più possente” [no. 80; Take,
Love, your most powerful snares] or “Ecco, Amor, io morro” [no. 196; Behold,
Love, I shall die].


41. This type of wit is analogous to the contemporary musical punning that sets the word *lofty* with high notes and the word *dark* with black notes, or to the derivation of melodies from the syllables of words and names, such as the use of notes equivalent to “mi fa” or Josquin’s setting “Her-cu-les” with re-ut-re.


44. Borsetto, “Narciso ed Eco,” 223–24, suggests that Stampa actually lowered the style of her poems by the inclusion of realistic conversation or epistolary informality and the occasional use of proverbs. She interprets this as a rejection of *auctoritas* and offers this self-abasement as a reason for the lack of further editions of her work. Other reasons are also suggested, however, such as the morally rigorous climate of the Counter-Reformation (233) or the divergence of Stampa from Petrarch’s narrative (186). There is indeed a certain freshness to Stampa’s language compared to that of the most artificial Petrarchans; however, her general tone remains within the higher rather than the lower style, which could descend to a vulgarity totally absent from her poems.


47. Ibid., 103.


49. See the work, cited above, of Vitiello, Bassanese, and Zancan.