

SPIRITUALIZING PETRARCHISM, “POETICIZING”
THE BIBLE: TWO COUNTER-REFORMATION
SELF-COMMENTARIES

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Self-commentaries have yet to become the subject of a general comparative analysis. To this effect, the publication of the miscellany by Francesco Venturi in 2019 has been a first important step in this direction.¹ The book analyzes the self-commentary phenomenon throughout Italy, England, France, Spain, the Netherlands, and Poland between the 1400s and the 1700s. Nevertheless, in this book self-commentary is intended in a broad fashion. Following Genette’s definition of paratext, forewords, rubrics and marginal glosses are also seen as being commentaries. As a consequence, the array of works that were analyzed is extremely heterogeneous, ranging from Leon Battista Alberti’s comedies, through lyrical poetry, up to humanistic translations of the classics. Our paper is based on a much clearer-cut focus: its subject will be the religiously motivated self-commentaries by Gabriele Fiamma and Jean de la Ceppède. Both these authors published collections of spiritual lyrical poetry, and both provided these works with a commentary stemming from similar motivations. After considering what functions scholars have attributed to early modern lyrical self-commentary up to now, we first want to focus on the motivations of these huge literary tasks, in order to show just how tightly interdependent lyrical text and commentary are to each other. Then we will try to answer the questions of which ideal readers these authors had in mind, and how exactly they tried to steer and manage the process of reception.

POETIC SELF-COMMENTARIES

¹ Francesco Venturi ed., *Self-Commentary in Early Modern European Literature, 1400–1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

In trying to define the concept of sixteenth-century “analogic” discourse in *Les mots et les choses*, Michel Foucault mentions the *Historia serpentum* by Aldrovandi as an example of the collection of facts, where the utmost heterogeneous approaches are juxtaposed without any apparent hierarchization: “Savoir consiste donc à rapporter du langage à du langage.”² At the same time, the form of this knowledge as a relationship between different languages is repeatedly defined by Foucault as *commentaire*, and this commentary in turn points to an original language on which it is based, that lies underneath it.³ The *gestus* of commenting must then be considered as being not hierarchizing, seeing as it refers to a “more primal” authority. In citing Foucault’s concept of discourse explicitly, Glenn Most defines empowerment as being the most important function of commentary.⁴ Therefore commented texts are always authorities, and their commentators are legitimized by cultural institutions. One important function of commentary is to reconfirm an authority whose meaning is no longer self-evident (Most, viii–x). “Commentaries construct disturbing gaps so as to provide the relief of filling them” (xi); however, the very fact that the commented text is considered as a text in need of being commented, has something potentially subversive (xi). Both the authority of the text itself and of its creator are therefore affirmed, at the cost of establishing gaps in comprehension in the text, as in need of commentary. We will see that the concept of “gap” plays a relevant role in the greater part of studies on the subject of (self)-commentary.

The fact that self-commentary is a particular sub-genre, with partially different features from the description given above, is already evident at the start of the vernacular self-commentary tradition, in the works *Vita Nuova* and *Convivio* by Dante Alighieri. In these two works, written in Italian vernacular, the author had

² Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 55.

³ “La tache du commentaire, par définition, ne peut jamais être achevée. Et pourtant le commentaire est tout entier tourné vers la part énigmatique, murmurée, qui se cache dans le langage commenté: il fait naître au-dessous du discours existant, un autre discours, plus fondamental et comme ‘plus premier’ qu’il se donne pour tâche de restituer” (Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 56).

⁴ Glenn Most, preface to *Commentaries - Kommentare*, ed. Glenn Most (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), x.

commented on his own poetry, thereby elevating himself to an authoritative status. In the *Vita nuova*, Dante not only recounts the story of his spiritual love for Beatrice, but also his poetic apprenticeship; self-commentary in this case equals self-authorization as a poet. The unfinished *Convivio*, on the other hand, had the aim of divulging knowledge through the commentary to some of Dante's philosophical *canzoni*. What Dante accomplishes is unheard of, because his texts do not have either the authority of classical literature, or the chronological distance to the reader, which would justify the use of commentary. Similar to Most's approach, Albert Russell Ascoli has defined these texts as acts of self-authorization.⁵ Elisa Brilli has broadened this approach, by showing numerous self-commenting passages in the *Divina Commedia*, which point the reader to acknowledging a deeper meaning and thus the necessity of a commentary. These passages may even have contributed to the quick rise of commentaries to the *Commedia*, shortly after its first circulation.⁶

Bernhard Huss also stresses the function of self-empowerment in his interpretation of Lorenzo de' Medici's unfinished poetic self-commentary. According to Huss' interpretation, Lorenzo offers Neoplatonism as a reference system in several passages, but then withdraws this offer of interpretation, thereby daring to stylize himself as a platonic King-philosopher, without nevertheless being too politically compromised.⁷ The act of commenting, described by Foucault as the non-hierarchical compresence of heterogenic discourses, is here in fact a calculated game of ambivalences.

While all these interpretations underline the empowering and self-fashioning features of commentary, Sherry Roush's dissertation (2002) suggests a mode of interpretation altogether different. With her book *Italian Poetic Self-Commentary from Dante to Tommaso*

⁵ Albert Russell Ascoli, "Auto-Commentary: Dividing Dante," in *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 175–226.

⁶ Elisa Brilli, "Dante's Self-Commentary and the Call for Interpretation," *Glossator* 12 (2021): 113–30.

⁷ Bernhard Huss, "Dichtung und Philosophie in Lorenzo de' Medicis Comento de' miei sonetti," in *Para/Textuelle Verhandlungen zwischen Dichtung und Philosophie in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Bernhard Huss, Patrizia Marzillo, and Thomas Ricklin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 309–35.

Campanella, which examines six Italian self-commentaries from the 14th to the 17th centuries, Roush achieves an important, pioneering study.⁸ She defines poetic self-commentary as “a unified work of poetry and the poet’s own paraphrase, gloss, or other ostensibly interpretive prose intervention” (Roush, 5). Against the background of a problematisation of the “author’s intention,” the idea that self-commentaries can best reveal the meaning of the text appears to be misleading (7). Instead, Roush claims that the main feature of self-commentaries is their remodelling of the original text, thereby originating “an entirely new poetic vision,” in addition to their tendency “to subvert pedagogical intent” (6). However, the shortcoming of Roush’s study is that she seems to privilege a somewhat numinous concept of poetry. She claims an “underlying Trinitarian view of the poetic text,” that is, a “three-dimensional dynamic between poetry, self-commentary, and a reflective acknowledgement by the two of the otherness of their inspiration” (13); so finally self-commentary brings out the work’s “ultimate incomprehensibility” (14). Through self-commentary, the author “opens” his work in order to let its meaning be completed and transformed by the “Other.” Josiane Rieu shares this approach, in finding for Jean de la Ceppède’s poetic self-commentary the definition of *poétique du vide*, which explicitly finds similarities in Wolfgang Iser’s concept of empty spaces. Thus the commenting author opens his text to the collaborative construction of meaning by the reader.⁹

In cases such as the confessionally motivated self-commentaries by Gabriele Fiamma, Jean de la Ceppède, as well as Girolamo Benivieni, stressing the “openness” of these texts seems to be misguided. We believe, on the contrary, that these authors intended to use commentary to steer the reception process of poetry. They exercise control over their own texts, and at the same time project the authoritative position of a poet inspired by God, leaving

⁸ Sherry Roush, *Hermes’ Lyre: Italian Poetic Self-Commentary from Dante to Tommaso Campanella* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

⁹ Josiane Rieu, “Contemplation et Écriture: les théorèmes de La Ceppède,” in *Échos poétiques de la Bible*, ed. Josiane Rieu, Béatrice Bonhomme and Aude Préta de Beaufort, 81–103 (Paris: Champion, 2012), 102.

nonetheless room at times for “weak” practices of commentary.¹⁰ Both authors are fervent followers of Tridentine doctrine, and represent a rather powerful movement of the late 16th century that has been described as spiritual Petrarchism. Before turning to a case study that elucidates the authors’ commentarial strategies, we first have to contextualize the works of our two poets.

GABRIEL FIAMMA’S TOLERANT ASSIMILATION OF PETRARCHISM

Gabriel Fiamma (1533-1585), a renowned preacher and Bishop of Chioggia, published his *Rime spirituali* in 1570, just a few years after the closing of the Council of Trent.¹¹ The collection contains 150 poems, mostly sonnets and *canzoni* as well as Fiamma’s own translations of a number of Psalms. Together with the author’s own commentary, the *Rime* fill about 500 pages. In his foreword to the readers, Fiamma explains the main scope of this publication. First, he wants to offer young people an alternative to Petrarch’s poems. He sees the custom of giving them Petrarch to read in order to acquire good Italian as very dangerous, since Petrarch may teach “Platonic” and “philosophical” love to the elder, but he teaches lascivious love to the young. With his spiritual poems, Fiamma wants to propose a morally safe model for good language and poetry, and also restore poetry to its original, sacred goal (“Ho adunque ritornata la Poesia Toscana alla religione”).¹² Furthermore, he aims to give his poems an explanation in order to make them

¹⁰ The obsession with controlling the reception process can also be seen in the religiously motivated self-commentary of Girolamo Benivieni (1500). As Robert Leporatti writes, Benivieni tries to enclose his text in a tightly woven web of commentary in order to discourage any interpretational freedom (Roberto Leporatti, “Girolamo Benivieni tra il commento di Pico della Mirandola e l’autocommento,” in *Il poeta e il suo pubblico. Lettura e commento dei testi lirici nel Cinquecento*, ed. Massimo Danzi and Roberto Leporatti, 373–98 [Geneva: Droz, 2012], 385).

¹¹ Gabriel Fiamma, *Rime spirituali del R.D. Gabriel Fiamma, Canonico Regolare lateranense, esposte da lui medesimo* (Venice: Francesco de’ Franceschi, 1570) (online: https://books.google.de/books/about/Rime_spirituali.html?id=kBB7AQAACAAJ&redir_esc=y). All following quotes refer to this version.

¹² The following quotes refer to the foreword, which is without pagination.

understandable even to the “simple-minded” ones (“ruminarlo a’semplici”). He also wants to protect them from possible misreading by those “modern Heretics” (“moderni Eretici”) who “profane” everything (“vanno profanando ogni opera”). Indeed, according to Fiamma, commentators of poetry always have trouble understanding what the poets want to express and often make them say things they never intended to utter. In the past, Fiamma had had troubles with the Inquisition: in 1562 he had been denounced in Naples for some of his sermons and writings, and had been acquitted only two years later – he therefore knew that about which he was talking.¹³ His self-commentary therefore pursues both a pedagogical and a self-defensive function.

In his seminal book, Marc Föcking has interpreted Fiamma’s work as an “annulment” of Petrarchism.¹⁴ In comparison to some of his contemporaries, who sharply condemn Petrarch for his lascivious poetry, Fiamma is quite tolerant (Föcking, 227). In fact, he frequently quotes him, states that he is writing “con l’imitatione del Petrarca” (81) and also makes it clear that the author of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* wrote more honestly about love than superficial readers may claim, even if his verses contain too much “sighs, tears, and vanity.”¹⁵ This open-mindedness allows Fiamma to use Petrarch not just as a language model, but also to adopt his specific representation of antithetical emotions (Fiamma, 237). The Petrarchan hate-love towards Laura is now changed into the oxymoronic love mixed with contempt that Fiamma’s speaker experiences for his mortal body (237). As already in Benivieni, Fiamma uses the Petrarchan theme of ruefulness in order to describe general human peccability. Furthermore, he transfers the

¹³ Paolo Zaja, “Natura e funzione del paratesto nelle Rime spirituali di Gabriele Fiamma (1570),” in *Soglie testuali. Funzioni del paratesto nel secondo Cinquecento e oltre. Atti della giornata di studi, Groningen, 13 dicembre 2007*, ed. Ph. Bossier and R. Scheffer, 61–101 (Rome: Bulzoni, 2010), 62.

¹⁴ Marc Föcking, *‘Rime sacre’ und die Genese des barocken Stils. Untersuchungen zur Stilgeschichte geistlicher Stilgeschichte in Italien 1536-1614* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1994).

¹⁵ “[V]eggasi nel Petrarca, che di questi amori molto più honestamente, che non fanno per avventura quei, che leggono con poca considerazione le sue rime, ha fatto professione: nondimeno è tutto pieno di sospiri, di lagrime, & di vanità” (Fiamma, 12).

description of Laura as an angelic creature to God or Christ (245). But while Petrarch is frequently quoted, he is so only as one poet among others. Moreover, his stylistic originality is downplayed through claims that he took certain metaphors from the Bible (248). Fiamma, finally, renders Petrarchism “harmless” (249) – not by positing an opposition between sacred and profane poetry, but by claiming that all profane poetry is just a modern, less worthy offshoot from the sacred, and that profane poetry has to be lead back to its purer origins.

Using Foucault’s definition we could say that Fiamma’s commentary refers to a text that is more authoritative and closer to the origin than his own poetry, which is derived from this source exclusively. Therefore, in his second sonnet he claims to have been inspired by God. Nonetheless, he refuses to stylize himself as a “strong” prophetic authority. As he will do on several other occasions, he imagines a possible objection from a critical reader, in this case, that he may be mistaken about the origin of his inspiration. He concedes that he cannot guarantee the truly divine nature of his inspiration, but prays directly to God, that He may inspire him, and show His inspiration by the effects, that is, his own poetry.

Language, rhetorics, and the adequateness of poetic language are a constant theme in Fiamma’s work. He makes it clear that if the language of profane poetry may be exaggerated or purely metaphoric, this is not the case for sacred poetry. While profane poets, in singing someone’s praises, cannot avoid exaggeration and lies, the spiritual poet can praise God and remain truthful (Fiamma, 5). Since God’s greatness is ineffable, he never risks to praise him “too much.”¹⁶ Also, the commentary to sonnet XLIII opposes the miracles of human rhetorics to the true miracles achieved by God.¹⁷ And sonnet LXII praises Saint Paul’s “conchetti,” because they are “senz’arte” (Fiamma, 204–205). The theory of the *furor poeticus*, then, really applies to spiritual poets, because they write with God’s help.¹⁸

¹⁶ “Quei molti epiteti, overo aggiunti, che li vogliamo nominare, senza necessit , altrove sarebbono vitiosi: ma qui sono posti necessariamente; per mettere sotto gli occhi meglio che si pu  la perfettion della vita di Dio” (Fiamma, 9).

¹⁷ Fiamma, 159; see also F cking, *Rime spirituali*, 246.

¹⁸ “  stato giudicato sempre, che i Poeti habbiano un non so che nella mente, c’ha del divino, piu tosto che dell’humano [...] Il che

On the other hand, however, Fiamma is conscious of the limits of his poetic language. Some metaphors can't perfectly apply to God, they are just "improper" language.¹⁹ Sometimes he also feels compelled to justify his rhetorical decisions: in the commentary to sonnet CVII (Fiamma, 366: "Marmo, che'l mio thesor chiudi, & ascondi"), where he describes the grief of the Virgin in front of her son's tomb, he explains that the fact that Mary speaks so eloquently about her grief is not against the rule of poetic *decorum*, that is, in this case, *verisimilitudo*. While Mary was truly annihilated by pain, this did not alter her eloquence nor her intellect. Like no other mortal, she could express this pain in a high style ("altamente") (Fiamma, 367). In other cases, he feels compelled to distance himself from his own fiction. While Fiamma's commentaries usually refer to the lyric speaker as the "autore," he sometimes makes clear that he speaks not for himself, but by means of a lyric persona. He does this when he deems the identification with the persona too compromising. In sonnet XXII, it is a sinner who did not manage to free himself from his bad habits.²⁰ And in sonnet XV, the speaker who in his youth followed the "song of the sirens" and later changed his "style" in order to nourish himself from "tears" of repentance, may well be interpreted as an author of profane poetry (Fiamma, 56–58).

By renouncing the position of the authoritative, undisputed prophet, Fiamma through his commentary unwillingly brings to light the deficient and fictional character of his lyrical discourse. The refusal of stylizing himself as the omniscient and absolute instance shines through in the passages where Fiamma concedes that he might sometimes be mistaken in his opinions. Thus, in the commentary to his first *Canzone* for example, which he presents as

de' Poeti Christiani si può dir veramente, perche Dio benignissimo aiuta sempre l'opera sua" (Fiamma, 430–31).

¹⁹ "Et la similitudine in tutto non corrisponde. Percioché, mentre il nostro fonte materiale si comunica; si parge, & si spande: il che non avviene in Dio" (Fiamma, 7); "Si dice finalmente, che la Sapienza è partorita da Dio, ma questo impropriamente" (Fiamma, 99).

²⁰ "Si veste l'auttore la persona d'uno, che nella sua prima età habbia cercato di fuggir gli affanni della penitenza, procurando di godere i piaceri vani" (Fiamma, sonnet XV, 56); "Per questo l'auttore, togliendo la persona di colui, che fin da principio fa un mal'habito nel peccato, scrive questo sonetto" (Fiamma, sonnet XXII, 79).

the continuation of the biblical episode of the fiery furnace, he admits the difficulty of explaining the verse “Et aquae omnes, quae super caelos sunt, laudent nomen Domini” from Psalm 148 (Fiamma, 27). In his interpretation, he follows the opinion of several “dotti, e santi huomini,” without therefore wanting to state an alternative reading as false.²¹ Also in regards to rhetoric and stylistic subjects, he sometimes leaves the question to the reader.²² We could describe this relative tolerance by Fiamma as a “weak” commentating praxis. Tolerance can also be remarked in the extensiveness of the narration of pagan myths. Fiamma even seems to take pleasure in dissertating, say, about the number and the attributes of the Muses. He justifies the use of mythology in referring to the old *integumentum* argument: pagan fables may teach the illiterate noble truths.²³

On the other hand, Fiamma does not shy away from often separating himself from the opinions of the “eretici,” that is the Protestants (Fiamma, 250, 375, 426, 454, 489, 491, 492). He also often addresses his readers in order to prevent possible objections.²⁴ In these recourses to the readership, Fiamma points to possible “disturbing gaps”,²⁵ immediately filled by his commentary. But what kind of readership does he have in mind? In his foreword, Fiamma had stated that he was appealing to young people, who with the help of his poetry could learn the elegant and correct Italian vernacular language. But his commentary is filled with learned quotes, and not only in Italian, but also in Latin and Greek. There is therefore a remarkable divide between intended and implicit readership.

²¹ “Onde l’auttore, se bene afferma questa, non biasima pero l’altra” (Fiamma, 27).

²² “Ma, quanto meglio, e più veramente si convengano queste lodi a cosa divina, ovvero a cosa mortale, si lascia giudicare ad ogniuno” (Fiamma, 97).

²³ “Queste favole sarebbono indegne di essere mescolate fra le cose sacre, se non havessero sentimenti filosofici, e molto nobili, col mezzo delle quali insegnarono gli antichi a’ popoli rozi molte cose utili” (Fiamma, 95ff.)

²⁴ “E perche potrebbe dire alcuno, che non è facile l’innamorarsi delle bellezze di DIO, poi che non si possono vedere, mostra l’auttore quattro vie, che possono guidar l’huomo a contemplar la divina bellezza” (Fiamma, 12).

²⁵ Most, preface to *Commentaries – Kommentare*, x.

Very similar to Fiamma's goal of spiritualizing Petrarchism, Jean de La Ceppède aims to bring profane back poetry to its purer, biblical origins. His commentarial attitude towards poetry is, however, quite different from Fiamma's tolerant assimilation of the profane poets.

JEAN DE LA CEPPÈDE'S PROPHETIC SELF-FASHIONING

Although Jean de la Ceppède published his *Théorèmes* some decades after Fiamma's *Rime*, it seems plausible that he had already started composing them in the 1580s, not long after Fiamma's edition. The *Théorèmes* by La Ceppède are a complex work that intertwines poetic text and commentary in a quite unique form. These *Théorèmes* – “meditations” following the etymological sense – are 515 sonnets commented by the author himself, which have as subject the last hours of Jesus' life, his death on the cross and the days from the resurrection to Pentecost. The first part of this monumental work was published in 1613, dedicated to the new queen of France, Catherine de' Medici, and the second part appeared in 1622, this time with young king Louis XIII as dedicatee. These two illustrious dedicatees should already shed some light on the importance of the author on the one hand, and the work on the other. La Ceppède was a major member of Aix society, the capital of the region of Provence, which had become part of France only a century before the first date of publication. In the decades before the edition of the *Théorèmes* Provence had experienced political unrest, due to the French Wars of Religion that lasted until the peace under Henry IV, husband of the already mentioned Catherine de' Medici. La Ceppède, as an influential political figure, had suffered from this unrest, and had been cast out from political life in the brief years of sympathy for the *Ligue* in the region, but later regained his primary role as a loyal servant of the crown after the *Ligue* was beaten. We can understand that as an active member of Provence politics, the author could not possibly untangle his thought from the contemporary situation, even in a work that apparently steers clear of any political controversy, having as a subject the last days of Jesus Christ. Paul Chilton, in his important work on the poetry of La Ceppède, stresses this point, underlining the penitential nature of especially the first part of the *Théorèmes*, where the attrition of mankind in the eyes of the suffering of our Lord must also act as the contrition of the inhabitants of France in the face of the violence that

overwhelms them, seen as a just punishment imparted by God.²⁶ In turn, the second part primarily expresses triumph, of course the triumph of mankind finally saved by the sacrifice of Jesus made man, but also the triumph of now peaceful France.

This framework makes apparent the coherence of the foreword *A la France*, since the *Théorèmes* must act as a purifying work that can benefit all of the Nation. It is also this foreword that is interesting for our current subject because the tone of the whole, extensive, and multifaceted work is set through these initial words, which have as central theme the function of poetry in general, and sacred poetry in particular. La Ceppède condemns poetry for corrupting itself over its history, losing its primary function, which it had in biblical times, of mediating between mankind and divinity, delivering the messages of the latter to the former in a way that could be accessible to both the ignorant and the “initiated” reader (and listener) at the same time. This important function had given way in corrupt poetry, intended to flatter sovereigns and most of all to treat themes far removed from the original one, that is first of all love. The author uses a complex allegory of poetry as a woman who has to be undressed from her corrupted habit and then clothed anew with the pious garments of sacred poetry in order to regain her former glory.²⁷ This allegory is taken from Jerome.²⁸ The word “étouffe” is of utmost importance here, because it allows the completion of the allegory with a term that on the one hand refers to the outer appearance of the verse, and on the other clearly alludes to the subject matter, which are therefore both in a functional relationship. The ultimate sacrifice of Jesus is understood by La Ceppède – of course in harmony with Counterreformation orthodoxy – as the

²⁶ Paul A. Chilton, *The Poetry of Jean de la Ceppède: A Study in Text and Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 7–14.

²⁷ Jean de la Ceppède, *Les Théorèmes sur le sacré mystère de notre redemption*, ed. Yvette Quenot (Paris: Société des textes français modernes, 1988), 52–54. All quotes from La Ceppède refer to this edition (for the second and third book: Jean De la Ceppède: *Les Théorèmes sur le sacré mystère de notre redemption* [Première partie], Livres II et III, édition critique publiée par Yvette Quenot [Paris: Société des textes français modernes, 1989]).

²⁸ Jerome, *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Stridonensis Presbyteri epistolae secundum ordinem temporum ad amussim digestae et in quatuor classes distributae*, ed. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 22, Ep. 70.2, col 666.

definite act of Love, the divine kind of course, and the praise of divinity in human poetry had also to be understood as originating from the love that mankind must direct to God and his human incarnation. As deducible from the foreword, poetry had corrupted itself because it had become an instrument in the hands of the unjust.

The sonnets are organized in a sequence that we can synthetically describe as “narrative,” in the sense that they are often enhanced paraphrases of the text of the Gospels (such as Sonnets XIV and XXIV of the first book, where the dramatic scene of the capture of Christ is depicted), and thus follow the events therein described. These more descriptive sonnets alternate with texts that meditate on the mysteries described, deplore the state of humanity in distress and celebrate the new beginning announced by the prophets. Fiamma in his Foreword explicitly states his poems to be learning material for the youth, and at the same time his desire to establish a spiritual Petrarchism. La Ceppède on the other hand defines his work as a prophetic writing, in which the implicit content is destined to the learned reader, and the explicit to the simple one.²⁹ François Rigolot has argued that commentaries in French Renaissance culture tend to have two different types of addressees (“commentataires”). On the one hand, the humanist evangelical movement (“humanisme évangelique”) as represented by Erasmus and his followers, focuses on a reader who shall be enabled to enter into direct contact with the word of God, free from erudite paternalism (Rigolot, 53). The function of this sort of commentary is “performative,” since it aims to enhance a receptor’s attitude in which he or she shall receive the Gospel and act according to it (54). Here, commentary becomes a sort of negation of commentary and the reader is deemed capable of interpreting the text by himself (55). On the other hand, Rigolot considers the apprentice reader (“lecteur apprentif”) as addressed by Ronsard (in his *Franciade*) as an “intellectualised” reader, a product of the humanist culture that had arisen in France from 1550 onward. Because of its linguistic ambiguity, the poetic text requires Commentary. The reader is seen as the commentator’s pupil, who has to be instructed by erudite glosses. But as Rigolot himself admits, this distinction is not so clear-cut as it would seem and the two types of addressee may mingle.

²⁹ “[E]scrit dedans pour les doctes, & dehors pour les ignorans” (La Ceppède, *Théorèmes*, 56).

In fact, in Fiamma's and La Ceppède's cases the question is more complex, since we have to deal with texts marked by poetic ambiguity, but at the same time claiming a status of truth close to that of the Bible. Therefore both commentators feel compelled to elucidate the poetic ambiguities and rhetoric strategies of their texts, but at the same time stress the fact that their poems, rather than being a poetic fiction, refer to Bible and (often) use the Bible's language.

The imagery of the *Théorèmes* is in most cases very daring (Sonnet XIII, for example, is a severe reproach of the cowardly behavior of the apostles, and Sonnet XVIII presents Jesus's prophetic vision of the tortures he will soon have to endure), and is clearly influenced by two very distinct lines of poetry – in a broader sense –, which both contain a high potential for “exaggeration,” in its etymological sense, that is, to surpass the bounds of both “decorum” and, more dangerously, the severe doctrine as outlined by post Tridentine catholic Church. The first line is the tradition stemming from the humanist sixteenth century, mainly filtered through the poets of the *Pléiade*, and is mostly lay neo-platonic tendencies (Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie, Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas); the second line, sacred in truth, but nonetheless dangerous, is what La Ceppède himself calls “les contemplatifs,” a group of Christian poets and mystics not really defined by chronological or confessional borders (Pierre Crespet, Antonio de Guevara, et alii).

His claim to a prophetic poetry is already outlined in his preface *A la France*. There it is stated that there is a parallel between the “first poet” Moses and modern religious poetry (and here La Ceppède immodestly thinks of himself). But the contemplation of the Cross is also a spiritual exercise, where the Grace of God touches the observer.³⁰ So La Ceppède is somewhat doubly inspired by God, as a modern prophet and a devout follower of Ignacio of Loyola. The self-stylization as a poet inspired by God is stated clearly in the three introductory sonnets at the head of the three parts (Invocation of the Holy Spirit, of Maria, etc.).³¹

³⁰ See Chilton, *Poetry*, 96–97, on poetry and the contemplation of Christ on the cross as a spiritual exercise.

³¹ Antoinette Gimaret, “La prophétie dans les Théorèmes spirituels de Jean de La Ceppède,” in *Les voix de Dieu. Littérature et prophétie en Angleterre et en France à l'âge baroque*, ed. Line Cottegnies et al. (Paris: Presses Sorbonne nouvelle, 2008), 73–87.

FUNCTIONS OF COUNTER-REFORMATION SELF-COMMENTARY

Which functions does La Ceppède's commentary take in regards to lyrical poetry? The commentary is not of the word-by-word kind that frames the text completely (as in Fiamma), but rather is organized in footnotes, which at times synthetically cite the source of a quote, but other times offer profuse explanation. As demonstrated by Yvette Quenot, La Ceppède finds his source material for his poems and his commentary mainly in contemporary commentaries to the Bible.³² Other authorities, such as Augustine or Thomas Aquinas, are not cited directly but rather through the aforementioned contemporary works.³³

In the same way as for Fiamma's *Rime spirituali*, this commentary is in no way conceived in a different timeframe from the sonnets. On the contrary, Chilton convincingly proves that in some cases the commentary was conceived beforehand, and that the sonnet related to it is simply the conversion in a lyrical, synthetic image of that analytic structure of reasoning.³⁴ The commentary therefore does not have the function of redirecting the interpretation of the sonnets in a more suitable fashion, be it moral, ethical or other, and a chronological hiatus, be it true in fact or artificially constructed, is not present and is in fact avoided by the author. Like

³² Yvette Quenot, *Les lectures de La Ceppède* (Geneva: Droz, 1986). See also Yvette Quenot, introduction to Jean De la Ceppède, *Les Théorèmes*, 21.

³³ "Quand La Ceppède allègue les noms les plus illustres des théologiens anciens, ou bien il ne les a pas lus, du moins de première main, ou bien il ne les a pas découverts lui-même et s'est contenté de les vérifier" (Quenot, *Les lectures*, 151).

³⁴ "It is reasonable to suppose that many of the sonnets are dependent on the notes, and on the sources given in them" (Chilton, *Poetry*, 59). Quenot believes that the poems were composed mainly during La Ceppède's exile in Avignon, and that the footnotes were composed afterwards (Quenot, introduction to *Les Théorèmes*, 20–21); she cites the dates of publication of some of the works cited by the author as his sources, which in itself is not evidence enough. We see the contemporary composition of text and commentary as more plausible, since the poems oftentimes are a pretext for explanations that underline the orthodoxy of the author – as for example in the first footnote to the word "Cieux" in the introductory poem, where the identification of God and Christ is done by synecdoche.

Fiamma, furthermore, La Ceppède states that he wrote the commentary in order to avoid malicious interpretations that could accuse him of heresy. In Fiamma this fear seems to be justified – he in fact had to explain himself before the Inquisition on one occasion³⁵ – whereas in La Ceppède it could also be the result of a rhetorical topos, a claim to modesty before the immodest purpose of self-commentary. Nevertheless, the aim of proving his orthodoxy through the apparatus of ca. 25000 annotations appears evident. The self-commentary authorizes the verses by showing that they are based on biblical or at least religious sources. And if there is no antecedent in Christian literature, he at least quotes a scientific text, be it medical, natural or philosophical. Even when he refers to images that originated in Latin pagan poetry, the authorities are in some degree accepted or mediated through Christianity. So he often cites from Virgil, but with preference for the “prophetic” *Eclogae*, and when he cites Ovid, it is the moralized one.³⁶

But the commentary has more than a mere servient, authoritative function. In the case of Sonnet I,1,37 for example, Jesus is depicted as praying in the garden of Gethsemane, and thereby he sweats blood, which allows La Ceppède a twenty-four-page-long excursus on the subject. In this excursus the author wants to demonstrate that the sweating of blood by Jesus (Luke, XX 44) does not have to be intended figurally, but rather literally. In other words Christ has actually sweated blood as a part of the humanity he has embraced. This demonstration is carried out using not only biblical and patristic sources, but also treatises on medicine, and even some cases taken from recent history. Not only does the Bible authorize the poem, but the poem with its commentary demonstrates the factual truthfulness of the Bible. We have to grasp this two-way authorization function of the *Théorèmes* and its sources in order to understand that the self-commentary is much more than a supplement to the poetry.

It is also important to note that La Ceppède shows a clear interest in the historical context of the Gospel. Thus, in the commentary to poem I,1,45, he consecrates a commentary of 80 lines to the question of the value of the thirty silver coins, the price of Judas’ treason. In order to estimate the precise value of this sum, he even consults the protestant Bible of Robert Estienne, at the time

³⁵ Paolo Zaja, “Natura e funzione del paratesto,” 62.

³⁶ Chilton, *Poetry*, 68.

the philologically most accurate (La Ceppède, 183–5). This commentarial attitude has been described by Antony Grafton as a new mode of historical philology, developed in Italy from the 1460s onward, and interested in reconstructing the precise meaning of ancient texts.³⁷ On the other hand, Fiamma’s attitude towards the classics seems to correspond rather to a more traditional scholarship (represented in Grafton’s article by Christoforo Landino and his school) that considers ancient authors as “unproblematic objects for imitation in the present” (Grafton, 619).

In La Ceppède’s poems we can find a sometimes very daring transposition of profane love poetry’s imagery into the Sacred, and it is the task of the commentary to steer the reader away from this profane origin, and instead redirect them to the foremost religious authorities. Differently from Fiamma, La Ceppède very seldomly cites lyrical poets explicitly, classical or modern (Ronsard and Belleau are rare exceptions), even if he demonstrably reuses motives stemming from profane and more accurately Petrarchan lyrical poetry. La Ceppède also differs from Fiamma in his rare distinction toward the Protestant doctrine: he seldom polemicizes, and when he does so, his enemies are the Jews and medieval heresies.³⁸ Similarly to Fiamma, the Frenchman explicitly declares the use of lyrical *personae*.³⁹ Nonetheless it is crucial for him that his poetry should not be intended as profane inventions, and the commentary proves to be extremely useful, because it strengthens the truth of the material through the quoting of authorities.⁴⁰

³⁷ Anthony Grafton, “Renaissance Readers and Ancient Texts: Comments on Some Commentaries,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 38, no.4 (Winter, 1985): 615–49 (630).

³⁸ Quenot, *Les lectures*, 204, highlights the fact that La Ceppède is not interested in polemics against the protestants – only in rare occasions does he take distance from their creed.

³⁹ Julien Gœury underlines the multiplication of the lyrical self: there is no intimistic relationship between “I” and “You,” instead “le modèle lyrique se transforme en un enjeu Communautaire” (Julien Gœury, “La relation dévote, une relation queer? Le cas des Théorèmes de Jean de La Ceppède,” *Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature* 41, no. 81 [2014]: 243–55 [248]).

⁴⁰ “A aucun moment le mensonge délétere de la fiction ne doit en effet menacer la réception du poème” (Julien Gœury, *L’autopsie et le*

SPIRITUALIZING PETRARCHISM: TWO SONNETS ON CHRIST'S DEAD BODY

In order to compare La Ceppède's and Fiamma's commenting strategies, we have chosen two texts that share striking thematic similarities as well as a common reference to Petrarchan images. Fiamma's sonnet *Ov'è la fronte* describes the pain experienced by Mary at the burial of her son:

Ov'è la fronte, più che 'l ciel serena,
D'ogni spirto celeste amato obietto?
Ov'è 'l santo costume, e 'l sacro aspetto,
D'ogni ben nato cor laccio, e catena?

Ov'è la voce d'armonia sì piena
Ch'ogni empio, e rio voler rendea perfetto?
Ov'è la luce del bel raggio eletto
Che fea dolce de l'alma ogni aspra pena?

Ov'è la man, che 'l fier nemico estinse,
Et ha tolta a l'Inferno ogni suo possa;
Per cui tant'hebbe il mondo affanno, e guerra?

Ov'è 'l mortal, che 'l verbo eterno cinse?
Ahi quanto ben s'asconde in poca fossa
Et quant'hoggi splendor s'en va sotterra.
(Sonnet CVI, 356)

Where is the forehead, more serene than the sky/ beloved object of every heavenly spirit?/ Where are the holy manners, and the sacred appearance,/ chain and bond for every well-born heart?//Where is the voice, so full of harmony/ that wanted to render perfect every sinful and evil man?/ Where is the light of the beautiful, elect ray,/ that sweetened every harsh sorrow of the soul?//Where is the hand that extinguished the fierce enemy/ and took every power from Hell, from where so much sorrow and struggle came to the world? //Where is the mortal one, who was embraced by the eternal word?/ Oh, how much

Théorème: Poétique des Théorèmes (1613–1622) de Jean de La Ceppède [Paris: H. Champion, 2001], 421).

good hides itself in such a small grave/ and how much
splendor is buried today.

However, in La Ceppède the speaker is Mary Magdalen, the ancient
sinner, who mourns the dead Christ:

Quelle voy-je à ce coup (dit-elle) cette face,
Cet objet désiré des bien-heureux esprits,
Qui toutes les beautez de ce bas monde efface,
Qui serene l'azur de l'étoilé pourpris?

Quels voy-je ces flambeaux, qui des feux de Cypris
Triomphant, ont mon cœur fait devenir de glace
A l'amour impudique, à fin de donner place
A l'amour sacre-sainct dont il est ore épris?

Quelles voy-je ces mains, qui les Cieux massonnerent?
Quelles voy-je ces pieds, qui les ondes calmerent?
O méchef, ô desordre, o mer d'afflictions.

O trop fidele Amant, que seul je porte en l'ame,
Voulez-vous que pour moy tant de perfections
Tapissent desormais sous une froide lame?⁴¹

What face – said she – do I see/ This object desired by the
fortunate souls/ Which effaces all beauties of this lower
world/ And brightens the azure of the starred fields?//
What flames, which over Cyprean fires/ triumphed, and
that my heart made of ice/ Towards lascivious love, so to
give room/ to the sacred love to which it is now bound//
What hands I see, that fashioned the celestial skies?/ What
feet I see, that calmed the waves?/ Oh woe, oh calamity,
oh sea of afflictions.// Oh too-faithful Lover, whom alone

⁴¹ La Ceppède, *Théorèmes*, Première partie, III, Sonnet XCVIII, 640–41. Quenot remarks that in this case the French version of Louis de Granada, *Traicté de l'oraison et Meditation... mis en vulgaire par F. de Belle Forest* (Paris 1608) is a source for La Ceppède, who nevertheless only lets Mary Magdalen give voice, whereas in the source material both Magdalen and the Virgin Mary speak.

I carry in my soul,/ Do you wish that this entire perfection
for my eyes/ Be covered by an icy wave?

These two sonnets share a thematic similarity, stemming first of all from the situation described, that is, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The rhetoric outline of both poems is based on the repetition of unanswered questions, which contribute greatly to a noticeably pathetic tone in these two texts. In the first sonnet, Mary invokes the now absent beauty and grace of her Son, only to complain in the last verses that all this now lies under the ground. In the second sonnet Mary Magdalen describes what she directly sees: the eyes of once incomparable beauty, and the hands and feet of Jesus, which accomplished miracles and now are inert to her loving contemplation. Fiamma openly uses Petrarchan metaphors, such as the loving chain that Laura uses to bind Petrarch, whereas here all receiving hearts are tied to the image of Jesus. Mary numbers all the most important traits of a Petrarchan portrait of the beloved, the visage, the voice, the eyes and the hands, but adds to the topic description of beauty the strength of these body parts, thanks to which Christ could defeat the Evil.

In La Ceppède's poem the language of love can be more explicit, thanks to the mediation of the character of Mary Magdalen herself, who speaks as an *ex* mortal lover, now converted to divine love. The "désir" of the first quatrain isn't personal, but common to all virtuous souls, and in the second quatrain we see a complete reversal of a classical theme of the heart transformed into ice. As Gœury has pointed out, there is a degree of ambivalence in this play between lyrical voices, the speakers (that is, the usually male speaker of the poems and the female voice in this one) tend to superpose one another, and thus opening up the possibility of a queer interpretation.⁴² Here the flames of divine love, in surpassing those of mortal desire, renders the heart impenetrable, "frozen" (de glace) to all human passion. As a mechanism that further amplifies the *pathos* connected to this scene, the two levels – of divinity and of humanity – are bound together, and the glory of creation, completed by the hands of God, together with the miracle of walking on water, are evoked just to further increase the idea of human frailness in a man dying on the cross.

⁴² Gœury, "La relation dévote, une relation queer?," 243–55.

The sacrifice of martyrdom is of course accomplished in the name of divine love, and the focus of both these poems is in fact that of the necessary unevenness between the immense sacrifice of God, and the insufficient, mortal love that can be our only response. La Ceppède more fully involves the readership emotionally: in Fiamma's sonnet the reader can empathize with the closing lamentation of the absence of Christ, but in the French poem he is brought to feel the same guilt as Mary Magdalen, both sinners who with their sinfulness have caused the "cold wave" of death to bury our Lord.

At the beginning of his commentary, Fiamma promises the reader a great pleasure ("gusto grandissimo," Fiamma, 356) in the following reading, if he proves capable of imagining Mary's unmeasurable pain at the burial of her son. In what follows he emphasizes that it is not Petrarch's mournful *Ov'è la fronte che con piccolo cenno* that is the model of his poem, but rather the Latin poem by a Basilio Zance, where the absent beauty of Chris is mourned by Mary in similar fashion, and from which the commentator cites a couplet as proof.

Then Fiamma states that profane lyrical poetry is admissible, even justifies that its "beauty" should be used for the purposes of spiritual poetry (Fiamma, 356–57). He argues against the opinion of those who claim that only a stylistic *simplicitas* should be adequate for sacred subjects. On the contrary, he believes that the high style ("gravità," Fiamma, 357) combined with a moderate, not too affected ornated language is the most appropriate solution. Hereby, Fiamma explicitly declares that lyrical poetry as well can lay claim to the highest stylistic level (as Tasso does in the same period), and he thus contributes to the stylistic levelling of the lyrical genres, as has been observed by Ulrich Schulz-Buschhaus und Marc Föcking.⁴³ Fiamma knows (as he explicitly says) that the reader will compare his poem to the one by Petrarch, and thereby might consider it inappropriate for the religious topic that Mary speaks to her son in

⁴³ Ulrich Schulz-Buschhaus, "Barocke 'Rime sacre' und konzeptistische Gattungsnivellierung," in *Die religiöse Literatur des 17. Jahrhunderts in der Romania*, ed. K.-H. Körner and H. Mattauch (Munich: Kraus, 1981), 179–90; Föcking, *Rime sacre*. For Tasso, see Philip Stockbrugger, "Mirroring Authorization in Torquato Tasso's Rime Amoroze," *Zeitsprünge. Forschungen zur Frühen Neuzeit/Studies in Early Modern History, Culture and Science*, 24 (2020), 218–37.

a Petrarchan love-language; he therefore tries in the following word-by-word commentary to underline the biblical origin of multiple images and structures. He thus cites passages from the New Testament, where Christ's blinding appearance, his pious behavior and the extraordinariness of his speeches are described; this juxtaposition appears in truth somewhat forced. Nonetheless, at the end of his exposition Fiamma can state with surety, "every word" (Fiamma, 358) stems from the Bible.

The defensive remark that follows proves that this surety is only superficial: Fiamma concedes that the same words are also used by others (in this case, profane poets) because "words are common to all concepts" (*le parole sono comuni a tutti i concetti*, Fiamma, 358), so one cannot be condemned when using them to praise and serve God.

La Ceppède too feels constrained to found his poetry on biblical examples, and moreover feels the necessity to justify his metaphoric speech. Often, as in this case, the sources cited, and the mere reduction of the commentary indicate an increase of pathetic tension. David's Psalms are cited two times, in conjunction with loving epithets attributed to God. But it is common for La Ceppède that he stresses and renders explicit what even for an average reader would seem obvious: it is only through analogy ("*per communicationem idiomatum*") that he can aptly write that Jesus shaped the Heavens, because he obviously did not so as incarnated, but through his divine powers. The "*communicatio idiomatum*" is a theological concept and tool through which the attributes and even the actions of the immortal Logos can be ascribed to the human incarnation of Jesus Christ, and it could have remained implicit and unexplained, seen as it was commonplace to identify not only God and Jesus as parts of the Trinity, but even to attribute deeds and words indistinctly to one entity or the other.

CONCLUSION

The first questions we posited were which functions Fiamma's and La Ceppède's commentaries discharged, and what type of readership these authors had in mind. Although Fiamma declares that he is speaking to the young folk, who with the aid of his poetry can learn an elegant and proper Italian vernacular, his commentary nonetheless presupposes the knowledge of not only this particular language, but also of ancient Greek and Latin. From another perspective, this commentary proves to be similar to a handbook,

wherein Fiamma stuffs all kinds of noteworthy or curious facts to be reused in civilized conversation. An overview of these noteworthy things can be found at the end of the book, in the “Tavola delle cose notabili.” Amidst these *cose notabili* we can read a reflection on the suffering of the Virgin Mary in seeing her dead Son, an essay on her eternal virginity, and an explanation on the causes of becoming white haired with age (Fiamma, 181). La Ceppède addresses his forward to the Théorèmes to France (*A la France*), and he speaks to a pious readership, whom he exhorts to meditate – with him – about the Passion and the Resurrection of Christ. The *ductus* of his poems is often quite prosaic, but then he frequently uses extremely rare terms, which force the reader to consult the commentary. Learned digressions, as found in Fiamma, are seldom present, because his commentary aims primarily at legitimizing the truthfulness of his lyrical discourse.

The comparison of the two Petrarchan sonnets on the contemplation of the deceased Christ has shown that both authors take full advantage of the liberties accorded to the lyrical registry, in order to involve the readership emotionally. At the same time, they feel obligated to justify these poetic licenses. Fiamma for example declares that in composing his poem the Bible has been a much more important source than Petrarch’s sonnet *Ov’è la fronte che con piccolo cenno*. Also, La Ceppède tends to hide his profane sources, and points in their stead to the underlying Sacred Texts and devotional literature. More than Fiamma even, La Ceppède exhibits a strong tendency to guide the reception process of his readership by undermining as much as possible any association to profane love poetry. While commentary, according to Glenn Most’s definition, admits ambivalences and “gaps” in the text that must be commented, Fiamma and La Ceppède tend to eliminate or deny ambiguities. If their own poetic texts share some stylistic features with profane poetry, they draw their authoritative and unquestionable status from the Bible.

Fiamma and La Ceppède do not share a language, social and political *milieu*, or religious background. Fiamma operates in a society where heterodoxy is mainly a liminal problem, whereas for La Ceppède heresy – in the form of Protestantism – is a concrete and definable external enemy, historically present and dangerous. This difference explains why commentary – of course in alliance with the poetry itself – operates in Fiamma towards a noble, but quite vague aim, the morally couth education of young readers,

while La Ceppède's work is much more "militant" in intent, since it wants to be at the same time a sign of repentance and an elevation of the pious reader through the contemplation of the martyrdom of our Lord. Seen in this light, we can understand the relative "tolerance" in the treatment of the sources by Fiamma, and on the other hand the extreme fastidiousness in wanting to find a reference for every word in La Ceppède. But fear of heterodoxy, in various degrees, determines the choices of both these poets, who are both convinced of playing an active role in overturning the evil of the world by using commented poetry as a means of education, elevation and warning.

