

2020

Vulgar Love: The Sicilian School and the New Aesthetic

Jason Collins

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/vernacular>



Part of the [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Italian Language and Literature Commons](#), [Medieval Studies Commons](#), and the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Collins, Jason (2020) "Vulgar Love: The Sicilian School and the New Aesthetic," *Vernacular: New Connections in Language, Literature, & Culture*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/vernacular/vol5/iss1/3>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in Vernacular: New Connections in Language, Literature, & Culture by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/vernacular>.

Vulgar Love: The Sicilian School and the New Aesthetic

Much consideration has been given in the last century to the *Scuola Siciliana*, or the Sicilian School, the first coterie of poets in an already developed but still emergent Italian vernacular, and this in spite of an almost complete lack of autograph copies of poetic works in the original language. A great deal of this scholarship or research has a taxonomic and theoretical approach to the works, their composition, and the atmosphere that fostered them, and oftentimes attempts to position the Sicilian School within the historiography of Italian literature (particularly as progenitors to the Tuscan poets and thus Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio), and even European literature as a whole (as a part of the threaded continuum that includes the French Troubadour tradition, German history, and early modern Italian poetry.)¹ Moreover, this scholarship frequently ignores the most pertinent facet of the Sicilian School's contribution to early modernity: silent reading, or perusing language for contemplative purposes and genre development (notably the sonnet.)

Despite the ambiguity of the Tuscanization of the copyists through which their works are primarily extant, scholars can compare them with bureaucratic autographed texts of Frederick's court that remain in the Vatican library. From such a comparison, an accurate account has been given foundation which informs us today of the validity of the Sicilian School as progenitors of

¹ Bruno Migliorini is the first in the contemporary era to assert the Sicilian School as predecessors of the Tuscan poets and the *tre corone*, publishing his work in 1961. Migliorini's *Storia della lingua italiana* accords a good number of pages to the subject, directly linking the Sicilian poets with the Siculo-Toscano and Dolce Stilnovo lineage. His work remains, however, a comprehensive and taxonomic (although also theoretical) survey of the Italian language. His format is didactic in the way it arranges topics and time periods. Another look at the Sicilian School is offered by Bruno Panvini in his *Le rime della Scuola siciliana*, an anthology from 1962 and 1964 in two volumes that offers critical information and insight. Recently, in 2008, there has been published a three-part critical anthology *I poeti della scuola siciliana v. 1-3* (respectively edited by Roberto Antonelli, Costanzo Di Girolamo, and Rosario Coluccia) covering Giacomo da Lentini, the other poets of Frederick II's court, and the Siculo-Toscano poets. Unfortunately, other than essays, most criticism on the Sicilian School has been in historiographies of the Italian language or literature, or anthologies.

early modern aesthetics and raises new theoretical ideas and criticism regarding this role. The secularization of philosophy started by Frederick II's Magna Curia, along with its invention of the sonnet and its choice of the vernacular, helps to better understand the development of other epochs that immediately followed as others showed influence of their example, and offers enhanced insight into the scope of modernity. The choice of the vernacular taken by the Sicilian poets laid a foundation that became the model for creative literary invention while Latin remained the language of doctrine and erudition.

Paul Oppenheimer in *Birth of the Modern Mind* begins his analysis of the sonnet with the bold avowal:

Modern thought and literature begin with the invention of the sonnet. Created in the early *duocento* by Giacomo da Lentini, a *notaro* or notary at the court of Frederick II, it is the first lyric form since the fall of the Roman Empire intended not for music or performance but for silent reading. (3)

Oppenheimer's statement raises a bold argument while inviting questions about the birth of modernity. When we think of early modernity, the word Renaissance, or *rinascimento*, immediately positions itself in our minds as the origin of that decisive moment when antiquation would cease, and the modern era would be born through the application and praxis of reassessment of classical philosophies and advancement in scientific observation. The specter of the medieval age, however, remained. As the word "Renaissance" denotes, the era witnessed a rebirth. For every birth, there must be a conception and a gestation period. That conception and early gestation was the medieval age, as the philosophers and scholars of this epoch began the process of re-appropriation of classical and late empire texts that would help establish the environment necessary for a "Renaissance." One text in particular would be of importance to the

formation of the Sicilian School's sonnet, the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine. The relevance of this research lies in its attempt to posit the Sicilian School's poetic fruition and philosophical development of aesthetics as a compelling genesis of modern ethics. Through a secularized application of Augustine's text to this new invention (the sonnet written in the vernacular), Giacomo da Lentini and the Sicilian School would forge a new philosophy of aesthetics based on a new rationale, one that, for the first time, succeeds in disassociating religious or spiritual concerns from the written word and aesthetic engagement.² The result is an innovative genre contingent upon their aesthetic invention, but the process itself, that of re-appropriating earlier philosophies, is an imperative part of the overall product that is later refashioned by the Tuscan poets and the *tre corone*.

The six sonnets of Lentini and the Abbot of Tivoli (l'Abate di Tivoli), written as a contentious debate about the nature of love and from where it originates, demonstrate this new aesthetic and a philosophy that would lead to a new course historically.

² Various commentators have placed the majority of significance with the *tre corone* — Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio — regarding the birth of the modern author and authorship. Many have turned to Petrarch as the birth of the modern author starting as early as 1869 with Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. This remains the foundation for modern scholarship on Petrarch with Kenholm Foster and John Freccero using Burckhardt's template for their investigations. While Foster's work, *Petrarch: Poet and Humanist* (1987), considers Petrarch to be the architect of modern bilingual authorship, Freccero's, *In Dante's Wake*, considers his invention in Augustinian terms. The Sicilian poets, although bilingual themselves, did not try to establish a refined Latin rhetoric like Petrarch, focusing instead on poetry. Freccero's argument gives credence to the Sicilian School as the first truly secularized form of modern authorship. Freccero asserts that Petrarch creates a poetics free of any previous reference point, but is nevertheless analogous to Augustine's *Confessions*, and itself is a poetics of confession. But Freccero notes that God is both author and subject of his own work, and in the same manner, Augustine and Petrarch follow — being both author and subject (141). Petrarch's relationship to this continuum does not use Augustine in a secular way, but instead uses Augustine as an exemplar for his own religious analogy, whereas the Sicilian Poets used Augustinian philosophy in a truly secular approach. Dante's role as modern author has to do with the rupture of the erstwhile concept of authority and the ascendancy of authorship as addressed by Albert Russell Ascoli in *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*. Ascoli examines Dante's role in writing a new poetics in the vernacular. Although Ascoli claims no attempt to situate Dante as the father of modern authorship (29), he later reasserts that Dante has a special role in this phenomenon (40). Ascoli's investigation relies heavily on his religious texts (including the *Commedia*), and Augustine's *Confessions*, but again, unlike the Sicilian poets, there is no secular appropriation of Augustine's philosophy in Dante. Boccaccio is mostly credited with modern authorship for his vernacular prose and conveys less similitude in this respect to the Sicilian school, while his sonnets are filled with religious imagery unlike Petrarch's or Dante's sonnets.

In book 10, chapter 34 of the *Confessions*, titled “Custody of the Eyes,” St. Augustine writes:

There remains the pleasure of those fleshy eyes of mine . . . we may conclude the temptations arising from concupiscence of the flesh still assail me. . . The eyes love fair and varied forms and bright and beauteous colors. Let not such things possess my soul . . . Each day they affect me all the while I am awake. No rest from them is granted me . . . For this queen colors, this light, which bathes all the things we look upon, drops down in many ways wherever I may be throughout the day . . . so strongly does it entwine itself about me, that if it is suddenly withdrawn it is sought for with longing, and if it is absent, it causes mental depression. (262-263)

Regarding this concupiscence of the flesh that initiates in the eyes, Saint Augustine reveals his conviction that it is the eyes which direct our attention to the material world — and indeed to the flesh — in search of the beautiful. The eyes thus distract us from God and our ascent to an elevated state of living. Concupiscence of the flesh is therefore concupiscence of the eyes; the two are inseparable, as the eyes invite the causes of desire. Augustine addresses this in the following chapter of book 10, “Empty Curiosity and Frivolous Interests.” The eyes are depicted as the entryway for irrational desires and therefore thoughts and contemplations. Concupiscence is inherently linked to the irrational, as it is sensual. Augustine appeals to God for solace from the eyes, which allow the outside world, and particularly a beloved, to besiege him with desire. He, in turn, beseeches God to have his attention fixed upon the Lord. To return to the rational, one must meditate upon God, turning inward.

The poets of the Sicilian School would follow Augustine's example by turning inward in a silent, meditative process that produces poetry, but they would transgress Augustine's model of philosophy regarding the eyes, as well as his linguistic and structural aesthetics by utilizing the vernacular instead of Latin to fashion a new genre of poetics.³ Regarding the first, the eyes and their link to the irrational by way of their invitation of concupiscence, the poets of the Sicilian School undertook topics of discussion that were considered irrational. As men of letters, bureaucrats, and figures outside of the feudal system that was dominant in the French territories (in comparison), they engaged in rational discourse and consideration on such topics. They assumed a man of logic could reason about matters that had previously been considered outside the realm of a logical discussion. The poetry of the Troubadours, whose influence on the Sicilian School is widely documented, most frequently focuses on the topic of love, but other themes such as politics and feudal life are present. These poets composed poetry for a court that expected them to coin poetic works that presented their benefactors with tribute and honor through allegory. The love scenarios aimed to represent aspects of the rulers' lives and the court's events and marriages, while the political sentiment and demonstrations of valor represent the benefactor's authority. Both are meant to reinforce a sovereign's rule and align the sovereign more closely to God by using divine imagery as the machination that drives the story forward and supports the structure of rule.⁴ Their work remains, therefore, inherently political. Frederick also urged his bureaucratic court composers to write and supported their efforts. There appears to be no indication that it was ever meant to be recited for entertainment, and, as the sonnets were frequently sent as a means of communication, like a letter, it is obvious they were not meant for

³ The sonnet, although within the greater genre of poetry, stands as its own genre of poetics due to its continued historical weight and transcendence of time by remaining a popular medium.

⁴ This would remain a commonality, however, being taken up again by authors such as Ariosto, whose dedication to the Duke of Ferrara leaves no doubt as to his intentions or audience.

performance. Additionally, Frederick seemed to expect no praise and the sonnets do not express such a sentiment, nor do they rely heavily on allegory, but are contemplative in their use of subtle but well-known symbols, tropes, and themes. The Troubadours' treatment of love frequently features a lover admiring a beloved, and whose pleas and emotions are in line with the irrational helplessness portrayed by Augustine, who pleads for strength and relief from his eyes, which elicits the desire for the beautiful figure he observes. Furthermore, the god of love is frequently invoked in the Troubadour tradition. Christopher Kleinhenz in his book *The Early Italian Sonnet: The First Century (1220-1321)* explains:

The principles of imitation and innovation are characteristic of the Sicilian School, and one does not preclude the other. Indeed, it is one thing to change radically the course of literature by introducing new forms and concepts, another to modify it from within by reviving the old by means of the new. Alongside the servile and essentially sterile imitations of earlier models there emerged new forms, new images, new concepts, which, at first sharing many traits with older models, later attained to a state of predominance and self-sufficiency. (25)

Kleinhenz situates the Sicilian poets as the first to separate themselves from previous models whilst imitating, at least in part, those very same models. They isolated components from previous authors and reassembled those components into a new genre. From the Sicilian poets “emerged new forms, new images, new concepts.”

The new forms, new images, and new concepts that the Sicilian School would treat were not the transitory or material concerns of life such as politics, power, and wealth —all fleeting and temporal, matters that frequently found their way into the Troubadour tradition, as well as others. Instead, like Augustine, they would address the eternal, but a secularized eternal. They

would not consider the afterlife nor the salvation of the soul, but instead love, which in general is eternal (although the poets do unemphatically mention God and use rhetoric that reveals a devout character). The rational treatment of love born of the eyes represents a turning away from the Troubadours and a reassessment of Augustine's description of the merciless ocular force.

Like Augustine's *Confessions*, the general tone of the Sicilian School's canon of sonnets, or characteristics that make up the overall tenor, and in particular Lentini's, is based on phenomenology, or intuitive experience.⁵ Their fruition is philosophical and attempts to propose issues to resolve. The structure of the sonnet, then, which sees its first two quatrains propose a problem and the remaining two tercets resolve the problem, is meant to serve as a theoretical space. Augustine only investigated, through confessions, what he sought to resolve. The Sicilian poets accomplish the resolution, but without religious intention and without generating a replicate that emulates the relation between Man and God, where God is supplanted by an unattainable lady and Man is the love-struck devotee. Dante and Petrarch devise such philosophical works that are decidedly religious in quality via tropes and allusions, even if religious imagery is absent from these works. There is little room for conjecture or gratuitous invention. The canon almost entirely treats the topic of love, calmly contemplating its torments and paying homage to its power. Only a small number of the sonnets examine other matters, including one by Lentini that considers the subject of friendship, recalling the rationale of Cicero's *Laelius: On Friendship*. Eight of the sonnets belong to two *tenzoni* that do not depict amorous emotion, but instead are conversations or debates on the nature of love. The first series

⁵ Tone is meant to indicate multiple lines of demarcation in common that set it apart from previous influences such as the Troubadours, as well as those that came after, including Dante, Petrarch, and the sonneteers of the early modern era —Michelangelo, whose sonnets were of a homosexual nature, and Pietro Aretino whose libertine sonnets, *Sonetti lussuriosi*, the author wrote in accompaniment to Marcantonio's Raimondi's and Giulio Romano's depictions of sexual positions.

is among Jacopo Mostacci, Pier della Vigna, and Giacomo da Lentini, with Mostacci inviting an explanation of the origins of love and giving his opinion, and the other two responding with their own definitions. The second series is the *tenzone* between Lentini and the Abbot of Tivoli, also on the nature and origin of love. I would contend that the two *tenzoni*, although individual, are not necessarily separate, but linked and that, in fact, the last poem in the first *tenzone* by Lentini summons the second *tenzone*.

In Lentini's response in the first *tenzone* "Amor è un disio che ven da core," he explains:

Amor è un disio che ven da core/per abondanza di gran placimento;/e gl' ochi in
prima generan l'amore;/e lo core li dà nutricamento . . . quell amor che stringe
con furore,/ da la vista degl' ochi à nascimento./Chè gl'ochi rapresentan a lo
core/d'ogni cosa, che veden, bona ria,/com'è formata naturalmente;/ e lo core
che di zo è concepitore,/zo che imagina e place, quel disia . . . ⁶ (61)

The explanations given first by Mostacci and then by della Vigna respectively articulate that love does not appear nor manifest itself, but rather is a quality derived from the pleasure of a beloved. Love has no material tangibility to our sensory perception. Della Vigna rejects this notion and describes it as an invisible force akin to magnet and metal. In his response, Lentini draws on the two explanations offered but adjusts them to offer what is at once both a physiological and phenomenological explanation. The person afflicted by love sees his to-be beloved, and it is through his sight that the object of affection is introduced. He becomes aware of it, and a process of contemplation takes effect in his heart, which deems the object dear. Awareness then

⁶ "Love is a desire that comes from the heart through abundance of great pleasure; and the eyes generate love at first, and the heart nurtures it there . . . That love that grasps with fury is born of the eyes. For the eyes present to the heart everything that is good, bad, and how it is naturally formed; and the heart, that which imagines and pleases that desire, is the conceiver." All translations are mine.

gradually progresses through knowledge. Lentini remarks that it is the eyes that present to the heart what is good. As Kleinhenz notes, Lentini is “concerned about the mechanics of love, its progressive realization from internal apperception to unbounded desire” (64). Kleinhenz’s use of the word “mechanics” expresses the scientific nature of Lentini’s calculation of love as being of biological and mental origins, and not of spiritual or divine providence.

Lentini’s assessment diverts from Augustine in that the eyes, and indeed the concupiscence of the eyes, can be contemplated scientifically, rhetorically, and poetically. There is not an appeal to God, but an attempt to understand, itemize, and therefore benefit from what does not have to be a helpless affliction of the eyes. Augustine’s entire *Confessions*, like Lentini’s sonnet, is a scientific and almost Aristotelian taxonomy leading to the comprehension of the self. Lentini is, therefore, still in line with Augustine’s phenomenological process and progresses through that process. While science is entwined with God for Augustine, this is not the case for Lentini and the Sicilian School that see the eyes as tools of taxonomy. Augustine shows his belief that all things in the material world subject to scientific scrutiny are created by God and are, thus, under his domain. For this reason, Augustine entreats God to relieve him of the desire caused by sensory processes like sight.

The Abbot of Tivoli’s first sonnet in the *tenzone* with Lentini is in sharp contrast to the rational stream of logic given by the *notaro* in his sonnet, because the Abbot’s is a representation of the outmoded Occitan tradition. It avoids sensory perception or phenomenology as explanations. His sonnet, “Oi! Deo d’amore, a te faccio preghera,” instead of explaining or debating the nature of love or what love is, deifies love. He declares, “E son montato per le quattro scale,/ e som asiso; ma tu m’ài feruto/ de lo dardo de l’auro; ond’ò gran male,/chè per

mezzo lo core m' à partuto" (62).⁷ The allusion in these verses does not attempt a phenomenological tactic in describing the causes of his condition, but is a mere poetic elocution of his present condition filled with tropes and signifiers that harken back to the Provençal tradition and even the Latin tradition, as Kleinhenz notes. The most obvious is the image of a man being struck by Love's golden arrow and thereafter becoming an object of Love's affliction. The sonnet recalls Guillaume de Lorris' work in *Le Roman de la Rose*, which, just to furnish one example, bares the lines, "The God of Love, who had maintained his constant watch over me and had followed me with drawn bow, stopped . . . and when he saw that I had singled out the bud that pleased me more than did any of the others, he immediately took an arrow" (20). The reference to the "God of Love" and that which causes the pangs of love are identical in use and imagery to the Abbot's. Also like the Abbot, De Lorris alludes to the senses and the objects of sense perception. They are a present factor, but they do not play a phenomenological role in inductive reasoning.⁸ It is the arrow that causes the affliction. Dana E. Stewart explains that "the appearance of optics in Giacomo's lyrics can be seen as part of a larger trend among the Sicilian poets to redefine love in terms of new scientific and medical material that was emerging at Frederick's learned court" (49).

Lentini, in his response "Feruto sono isvariatemente," chastises the Abbot's assertion that love is deified, declaring "ed io lo dico che non è neiente,/ ché più d'un Dio non è, nè essere osa" (63).⁹ The rebuke by Lentini recalls Augustine's idea put forth throughout the *Confessions* that devotion to God is singular, as well as his refutation of the Manichees and of all things

⁷ "Oh God of love, I pray to you . . . And I have climbed the four steps and stand atop; but you have wounded me with the golden arrow; for through the heart you have parted me, where I now have pain."

⁸ In the Abbot of Tivoli's first sonnet in the *tenzone*, he explains that he was made in God's manner and lists various traits like hair, four limbs, and a face, but fails to say anything about what role those features play in perception. Nor do they relate senses like sight to a logical account of falling in love.

⁹ "And so, I say that it is nothing, for there is not more than one God nor dares to be."

superstitious and profane. However, the subject, in spite of its religious tone, is not a religious edict of any kind, but a secular discussion of poetics and, indeed, aesthetics. He ends his sonnet with a warning to the Abbot of his sin, which is an ironic and perhaps intended comment to a religious man by a bureaucrat whose king, Frederick, was excommunicated three times.¹⁰

In the three remaining sonnets, the discourse continues in much of the same fashion until the Abbot's conceit in the sonnet "Qual omo altrui riprende spessamente." In this response, the Abbot refuses to address the issues raised by Lentini, instead choosing to dismiss him as a man "ca non credo ca lealmente amiate" (64).¹¹ The Abbot defines Lentini as a man unexperienced in love, but paradoxically, offers no phenomenological proofs, no list of experience of his own. Lentini expresses in his reply both a coyness regarding his ability to articulate his feelings, and a fear of being misunderstood. He, nevertheless, ventures to be honest. He confesses in the last lines that he is saturated with love like a sponge is water, playing on a very Augustinian use of metaphor similar to the imagery used in the *Confessions* in reference to God, but again, here it is generalized and taken out of strictly religious terms.

That the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine would be the antecedent of the sonnet is a natural conjecture to make. As previously stated, the nature of the sonnet is that of a confession. A confession requires an interlocutor to be the ears of God. This interlocutor is, in a traditional oral confession, the priest. He enters into dialogue with the confessor. For both Augustine and the Sicilian poets, the interlocutor is the reader. They meant their works to be read. Augustine was offering a model of confession. The Sicilian poets removed the role as intermediary from the

¹⁰ It is widely documented in Italian history texts as well as those addressing the history of the Holy Roman Empire that Frederick II, members of his family including his son Enzo of Sardinia, and his associates, even the entire city of Pisa at one point, were excommunicated.

¹¹ "That I don't believe has truly loved."

reader, intending him as their sole audience. Lentini maintains that God is already knowledgeable of everything, as the one true God.¹² It stands as yet another unvoiced reproduction of an oral tradition set within new boundaries both linguistically and stylistically. Even in the *tenzoni*, with their deliberative nature, or the sonnets of a didactic nature, the discourse is reflective and revealing.

The sonnet, as argued by many, was for silent reading. This would be a revolutionary aspect of the sonnet, because previously the poetry of the Troubadours was meant to be performed, heard, and revised for an audience. Such practice, therefore, allowed for Latin to remain the language of silent discourse, scholarly writings, and the language of a universal, written communication. In Lentini's time, there was a reading population, however small, but this population consisted of copyists, bureaucrats, and religious men, primarily priests, who used silent reading for scholarship and doctrinal studies. Poetry remained in the oral tradition as material that was meant to be recited or performed, until the Sicilian School. Oppenheimer describes the phenomenon of writing for silent reading undertaken by the Sicilian School in the following manner:

One of the first effects of Giacomo's discovery was a change in attitudes towards words and reading. The well known [sic] anecdote of Saint Ambrose reading silently in his cell, as early as the fourth century, and astonishing his fellow monks, who were accustomed only to hearing words read aloud with lips moving, illustrates the pervasive conviction that all written language was somehow meant to be performed, even in private. The anecdote, recounted by Saint Augustine in

¹² See note 9. With the declaration "ché più d'un Dio non è, nè essere osa," Lentini removes God from further flippant discussion or mention.

his *Confessions*, illustrates too an early medieval fascination with silent reading. Hundreds of years old by the time Giacomo wrote his first sonnet, the story anticipates a time when the masses of men and women would begin to read and write silently and alone, and to confront their values in a new literature of the self. (24-25)

The statement by Oppenheimer introduces two pertinent pieces of information regarding this examination: first, it reveals the connection that the sonnets had to the meditative work of Augustine's *Confessions*, essentially assigning a lineage to the two. Second, it refutes the practice of a sung sonnet, or one set to music, all the while indicating a dramatic shift in form from the work of Augustine and his immediate descendants of the meditative prose, a shift that would create a new genre and *modus legendi*. To address the first matter, one must look at the authors of prose in a style first offered by Saint Augustine, those who inherited both his philosophy and his medium: the confession in prose. Two examples well-known to us are *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, and the writings of Heloise and Abelard. Both recall Augustine's metaphysical need to expunge a past based on phenomenology, philosophy, and his current state. Boethius seeks solace in philosophy as a means to understand and accept providence, or a fate determined by God. Heloise and Abelard rationalize and debate the effects of real events on the soul, and theirs is a confession of love. Both are religious in tone and intent, even though Boethius is careful not to over-imbue his work with religiosity. In addition, Heloise at one point rejects the assertion that she should have to devote her life to a calling that she has emphatically not received by taking vows to become a nun. Nevertheless, the discussion of God, and the debate leads much to the same conclusion as Augustine, to live a life of divine ascendancy.

The Sicilian School takes the elements of cool reasoning proposed by Boethius, and the rational discussion of passion exposed by Heloise and Abelard, but the Sicilian School dismisses the narrative prose of Augustine and Boethius, and the epistolary prose of Heloise and Abelard. The poets respond to social and authoritative exigencies of their time, spawning this new genre from repetitive, rhetorical action in response to them.¹³ These include Frederick's pragmatic attempts to employ the language of his new territory and kingdom, to cultivate a secular and erudite court, and to find a voice for reflections on love.¹⁴ The Sicilian poets make it clear through a complete lack of discourse regarding God that they intend to shape the sonnet as a secular invention that responds to new social exigencies, one that utilizes Augustinian philosophy and Aristotelian taxonomy. The result reveals a genre and a body of work that considers love under the rationale of calm logic instead of the afflicted passion of Augustine. Dante and Petrarch would reintroduce a religious theme through love for the unattainable Lady representing man's love for and devotion to God, and a never-ending desire to arrive closer to that which he cannot fully attain.¹⁵

The Sicilian School, instead, seizes the confessional mood and puts it in a confession booth – the sonnet. Compact at only fourteen lines, the sonnet may seem restrictive, and it is, but it is also liberating in that it demands that its author disclose a confession in a concise and comprehensible manner. It is not a sprawling text or a series of letters, but rather something that can be seen in its entirety in one snapshot. Once more, it is also poetry. The Abbot's sonnets can come under scrutiny for the fact that they do not possess the characteristics of a confessional

¹³ Regarding the feature of genre, see p. 163 of Caroline Miller's seminal work on genre studies, "Genre as Social Action." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol.70, no. 2, 1984, pp. 151-167.

¹⁴ One could argue that the poets in Frederick's court respond not only to their own amorous feelings, but also coin sonnets reflective of Frederick and his love for Bianca Lancia di Monferrato, with whom he had his son Manfred.

¹⁵ The sonnet would again become a secular space with those of Michelangelo and Shakespeare.

piece. For the Sicilian School and Giacomo, truth, not vanity, reigns. The feat of a confessional poetics for silent reading had not been attempted before by a school of poets. Poetry was sung, it was developed with music, and further improved upon. Any discussion of the sonnet invites consideration of its ties to music. By the time Claudio Monteverdi, a prolific composer of music for secular verse — sonnets, *canzonette*, and villanelles — published his madrigals between 1587 and 1651 (posthumously), the sonnet was already considered fodder for musical invention. Because of this association with music, the sonnet is widely regarded as a piece written for musical accompaniment. The authors, however, from Petrarch to Pietro Bembo and Torquato Tasso, did not explicitly pen their works for musicians. The association is an obvious one, because so many pieces have been composed for the sonnet, including many of the madrigals composed by Monteverdi throughout his career. Oppenheimer dismisses the attempt to define the sonnet as a piece with musical accompaniment, clarifying that there are no records pointing to the sonnet as a musical device, and not before 1470 for the most widely sonneteer set to music in the Italian language, Petrarch.¹⁶ He also notes that for Renaissance or Baroque music, perhaps the odd 8, 6 division of the two quatrains and two sestet could invite invention, but for the medieval composer, the odd pairing would invite discord or a new turn in the music, as would the contrary tone that usually finds its way into the sestet. This unthinkable evenness of measure would have been the norm during the Sicilian poets' time and immediately following.

The final aesthetic innovation of Lentini and the Sicilian School involves the use of language. We have the vernacular of the Sicilian School extant to us through bureaucratic documents, some bearing the name of Giacomo Lentini. There are only two poetic pieces in the original Sicilian; neither is a sonnet, and one is corrupted with Tuscanizations. The first, "Pir

¹⁶ See Oppenheimer, page 174.

meu cori alligrari” by Stefano Protonotaro, is strikingly similar to modern Sicilian dialect. The other is Cielo d’Alcamo’s “Rosa fresca aulentissima – c’apari inver la state,” which is free of Tuscanizations. The significance of their language cannot, however, be underestimated. Bruno Migliorini remarks in his *Storia della lingua italiana* that “la prima fucina di poesia che meriti di esser considerata poesia d’arte è la Magna Curia di Federico II” (123).¹⁷ They were not the first school of poets in a vernacular; they were the first school of poets whose intentions differed from those whose primary function of poetry was musical or didactic. This creates a preeminence for the sonneteers of the Sicilian School that is still present but not felt in Italy today. The concepts of Dante as *padre della lingua italiana* and Petrarch as the original modern author turning to the self could hardly exist without the Sicilian School, or at minimum, they could hardly have developed in the same vein and not with the same trajectory. Dante and Petrarch were the beneficiaries of a poetics that traveled from Sicily to the mainland and up the Italian peninsula. Through the *Scuola Siciliana*, *Siculo-Toscano*, *Dolce Stilnovo* lineage, the reader can see a continuity that shows Dante and Petrarch as refiners and augmenters of the sonnet (an important genre employed in their vernacular writings), not as inventors of it or its use of the vernacular.¹⁸ The same is true of other Tuscans, and the actuality that the Sicilian School’s poetics comes to us via Tuscan copyists speaks to the power of its influence. Indeed, the Sicilian School is the birth of the idea of an Italian language as a device for communication at an elevated level. It is the birth of the Italian language that exists through time and space, even though it was the Tuscan tongue that would later become contemporary Italian. The Sicilian poets and their aesthetic ethic would travel through the peninsula, and, as Migliorini notes, “altri nella borghesia comunale

¹⁷ “The first act of poetry that merits to be considered poetry of art.”

¹⁸ See Migliorini, 123-135.

Toscana e Bolognese hanno ormai raccolto l’eredità . . . la poesia della prima scuola ha anche una notevole efficacia linguistica sulle scuole successive” (124).¹⁹

This shift away from Latin as the means of communicating confessional texts is remarkable because it inaugurates the confessional genre in a vernacular language: Augustine, of course, had little choice, but also elected Latin because of his preference for it. It also turns away from the inheritors of Augustine’s confessional prose, Boethius and Heloise and Abelard. In doing so, the Sicilian School fomented the decline of Latin in favor of the vernacular as a replacement. And although the Latin would not disappear entirely — remaining the primary language of church and academia, even making a fifteenth-century reemergence — its communicability was permanently diminished. The example set by the language of the Sicilian School and the sonnet would find their way to Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Petrarch’s use of poetic vernacular (and Boccaccio’s use of prose vernacular) would codify the Italian language with credit for this feat, historically going, as we know, to Pietro Bembo and his *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), with his history-defying prescription that the language of Petrarch be the language of Italian verse. This codification would continue untouched for years before finally being modernized in the last three centuries, but standard Italian finds its roots in the Sicilian School’s sonnets.

Giacomo Lentini and the Sicilian School may not seem like the originators of a modern philosophy of aesthetics or an ethics of art. Certainly, the only original invention of theirs to survive in our modern times is the sonnet. Their ingenuity lies not in their hegemony of language, art, or science. Their relevance and exertion of influence rests with their reevaluation

¹⁹ “Others in the common Tuscan and Bolognese bourgeoisie have by now taken over . . . but the poetry of the first school has also a notable linguistic efficacy on the successive schools.”

of already present ethics dominating the medieval mind, notably for this argument in the Augustinian tradition, and the Sicilians' desire to link it to a new aesthetic. In reading the sonnets, we are reminded of the previous quote from Kleinhenz, "it is one thing to change radically the course of literature by introducing new forms and concepts, another to modify it from within by reviving the old by means of the new." In so generating a new aesthetic through language and genre, while retaining the philosophies of the past — and through a new, secular lense — the Sicilian School is parentage to the dawn of a new design of authorship.

Works Cited

- Abate di Tivoli. "Oi! Deo d'amore, a te faccio preghiera" in *The Poetry of Giacomo da Lentini*.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915.
- . "Qual omo altrui riprende spessamente" in *The Poetry of Giacomo da Lentini*. Cambridge:
Harvard University Press, 1915.
- Ascoli, Albert Russell. *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*. New York: Cambridge
University Press, 2011.
- Augustine. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Translated by John K. Ryan. New York: Image
Books, 2002.
- Freccero, John. *In Dante's Wake: Reading from Medieval to Modern in the Augustinian
Tradition*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.
- Kleinhenz, Christopher. *The Early Italian Sonnet: The First Century (1220-1321)*. Padua:
Milella, 1986.
- Lentini, Giacomo. "Amor è un disio che ven da core" in *The Poetry of Giacomo da Lentini*.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915.
- . "Feruto sono isvariatemente" in *The Poetry of Giacomo da Lentini*. Cambridge: Harvard
University Press, 1915.
- Lorris, Guillaume de and Jean de Meun. *Le Roman de la Rose*, selections translated in Dana E.
Stewart's *The Arrow of Love: Optics, Gender, and Subjectivity in Medieval Love Poetry*.
Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003.

Migliorini, Bruno. *Storia della lingua italiana*. Milano: Bompiani, 2001.

Oppenheimer, Paul. *Birth of the Modern Mind: Self Consciousness and the Invention of the Sonnet*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Stewart, Dana E. *The Arrow of Love: Optics, Gender, and Subjectivity in Medieval Love Poetry*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003.