

Giovanni Pontano. *Baiae*.

The I Tatti Renaissance Library 22. Trans. Rodney G. Dennis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. xxiv + 236 pp. index. bibl. \$29.95. ISBN: 0-674-02197-5.

Pontano's *Hendecasyllabi* were published in 1505, two years after his death, by his friend and editor Pietro Summonte, who gave them their subtitle of *Baiae*, after the resort on the Bay of Naples which figures prominently in most of them. Famed in antiquity for its wall-to-wall villas frequented by wealthy Romans, Baiae enjoyed a continuous reputation for hedonism down to the Renaissance period. Where Clodia Pulcher, Catullus's Lesbia, had pursued her adulteries and Boccaccio's Fiammetta, abandoned by her lover Panfilo, had failed to find distraction among new temptations, and where neighboring Cumae and Avernus continued to offer access to the classical visions of prophecy and afterlife, Pontano was able to envision an earthly paradise of delight for himself and his friends.

Pontano's hendecasyllables are both a tribute to Catullus and an interpretation of one aspect of his poetry. Julia Haig Gaisser has described in detail the extent to which the Renaissance Catullus was the product, first, of Martial's emphasis on Catullan eroticism, or rather on a more explicit reading of that eroticism, by which Lesbia's sparrow came to be taken as equivalent to the poet's desire, or in fact the poet's penis itself as the embodiment of that desire. After Martial, and with the aid of Pontano's tacit assent to Martial's version, a "Catullan sparrow" or a "Catullan kiss" would lose any aura of metaphorical uncertainty. Repeatedly, Pontano specifies that his lovers' kisses are accompanied by darting tongues; a Catullan kiss is a French kiss; and it is in this context that Gaisser remarks that "henceforth, Catullan poetry would speak in the language of Martial, but with the Renaissance voice and accent of Pontano" (*Catullus and his Renaissance Readers*, 1993, 228).

At the same time, Pontano's hendecasyllables have virtually none of the satirical obscenity found in Catullus. This seems less a rejection of satire than a decision to explore one kind of subject matter that seems particularly suited to this verse form. Delight, *deliciae*, is literally central to some of Catullus's most famous hendecasyllables, and the word itself figures prominently in *Baiae* as well. The famous sparrow is the delight of Catullus's mistress — *Passer, deliciae meae puellae* (Cat. 2.1, also 3.4) — and Pontano's wife Ariadne is similarly (and dissimilarly)

characterized as her aged husband's delight — *Uxor, deliciae senis mariti* (1.13.1). Pontano's subject here is the richly-nuanced desire of an elderly man to summon up a love that is at once novel and a reincarnation of his first love — *et sis cura recens amorque primus* (line 8). There is an echo here as well of Dido's response to the sight of Aeneas with his son, reawakening the ashes of an old flame, *veteris vestigia flammae* (*Aen.* 4.23): Pontano too wants "to fan those ancient flames" — *antiquas volo suscitare flammās* (l. 10).

The baths of Baiae are invoked as a place where Pontano and his elderly friends can try to find the delights that are still available to them. The hendecasyllable (as distinct, say, from the distich with its summary structure) seems well suited to the extended foreplay, the toying with diminutives that fit so easily into the form (and which Pontano had charmingly employed in his earlier *naeniae* to his little son [*De amore coniugali* 2.8–19]), and the parallel display of options to be considered impartially. Those young girls will love you for your gold if not for your white hairs; or you may decide that wine will warm you more effectively. The earthly paradise that Baiae offers to refugees from Rome or Naples has been around for a long time, and it promises no miraculous return to a primeval condition. But it is filled with warmth and laughter, and old Pontano can share in its delights as spectator and as paying participant. The very real pleasures of *Baiae* derive from this sense of an old-age mode of pastoral where memory and fantasy join in a marriage of convenience. Perhaps the only escape from the jungle of the city is to the zoo of a play-world where, for a price, animals can be petted one hendecasyllabic line at a time.

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