

Attitudes to Work and Commerce in the Late Italian Renaissance: A Comparison between Tomaso Garzoni's *La Piazza Universale* and Leonardo Fioravanti's *Dello Specchio Di Scientia Universale*

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SUMMARY: This article compares two highly successful treatises written in the second half of the fifteenth century: Tomaso Garzoni's *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* [The Universal Workplace of All the Professions in the World], and Leonardo Fioravanti's *Dello specchio di scientia universale* [On the Mirror of Universal Knowledge]. It examines how each of these books presented and considered commercial activities such as the manufacture and trading of silk and wool – which were of great importance to the Italian economy of the day – and other more humble occupations. This is an interesting comparison since Garzoni and Fioravanti personified two very different spirits of the Renaissance. The former was a learned man, anxious to construct a moralistic-literary monument, complete in every detail, while the latter was a great observer, intent on making full use of every kind of knowledge, even that which seemed lowly and contemptible.

Attitudes towards so-called manual skills in Italy during the late Renaissance were not monolithic. In a recently published essay I pointed out how, in the midst of the harsh mainstream condemnation of manual work, differing opinions were also voiced, though they remained minority opinions, in line with a tradition that came from afar, and that was rooted especially in some of St Paul's letters in which he exalted the dignity of work.¹

1. See Luca Mocarelli, "The Attitude of Milanese Society to Work and Commercial Activities: The Case of the Porters and the Case of the Elites", in Josef Ehmer and Catharina Lis (eds), *The Idea of Work in Europe from Antiquity to Modern Times* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 101–124, 105–107. In re-evaluating manual work, Bartolomeo Paganelli, from Prignano, even managed to reverse the very negative connotation of the etymology of the term "mechanic". In his *De imperio Cupidinis* (Modena, 1492), and with few classical references at his disposal, he composed a poetic celebration of technical inventions in which the only distinction he made in

What I intend to do here, developing this line of research, is to compare two highly successful treatises written in the second half of the sixteenth century, a time when the principal manufacturing cities of Italy were still expanding rapidly, with waged work controlled by the merchants becoming more widespread, to the detriment of the independent artisan. I shall examine how each of these books presented and considered commercial activities such as the manufacture and trading of silk and wool – which were of great importance to the Italian economy of the day – and other more humble occupations. This is an interesting comparison because Tomaso Garzoni and Leonardo Fioravanti, the authors of the treatises in question, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* [The Universal Workplace of All the Professions in the World] and *Dello specchio di scientia universale* [On the Mirror of Universal Knowledge],² differed widely in terms of their background and beliefs. Consequently, they approach the subject of work and occupations in different ways.

TOMASO GARZONI AND LEONARDO FIORAVANTI

Garzoni was an ecclesiastic, a member of the Augustinian order, who wrote about the world from within the protective walls of his monastery library, inspired by post-Council-of-Trent moral and educational aims, which appear not only in *La piazza universale* but in all his writings. His *L'hospitale de' pazzi incurabili* [The Hospital of Incurable Madness] and *La sinagoga degli ignoranti* [The Synagogue of the Ignorant] contrast sharply with the adverse criticism by many Renaissance writers of the scope for human knowledge. In those studies he derided the idea of the *docta ignorantia* expounded by Cusano in a highly successful book published in 1440.³

Leonardo Fioravanti, by contrast, was a well-known physicist and surgeon in his day. He performed the first successful operation in Italy to

mechanical work was between trades that were dirty because of their working conditions and shameful jobs such as those of the moneylender and toll collector, who lived on money earned by others; on Paganelli's work see Giorgio Montecchi, "Bartolomeo Paganelli da Prignano: ossia della nobiltà della stampa, arte meccanica e liberale", *Discipline del libro*, 2 (1999), pp. 117–122.

2. In this article I shall refer to the following versions of the two books: Giovanni Battista Bronzini (ed.), *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo*, 2 vols (Florence, 1996), and *Dello specchio di scientia universale dell'Eccell. Dottore et Cavalier Leonardo Fioravanti Bolognese* (Venice, 1583).

3. For Cusano, the *docta ignorantia* meant a "*visio sine comprehensione, speculatio*". See *De Docta ignorantia* (1440), in Ernst Hoffmann and Raymond Klibansky (eds), *Nicolai de Cusa, Opera Omnia* (Leipzig, 1932), I, p. 26. As mankind cannot grasp the infinity of a deity through rational knowledge, the limits of science need to be surpassed by means of speculation that blur the borders between science and *ignorantia*. In other words, both reason and a supra-rational understanding are needed to understand God.

remove a spleen. He was also known as an inveterate experimenter and globetrotter, who, during his adventurous life, visited most of the Mediterranean world, Spain, and Africa, and worked in Messina, Palermo, Naples, Rome, Pesaro, Genoa, and Venice. He believed that scholastic knowledge was of little use in itself, since true knowledge is none other than the theory of experience. His colourful life has been recreated by the incomparable pen of Piero Camporesi in a book eloquently titled *Camminare il mondo* [Walking the World].⁴

What these two such different personalities shared was an unconditional admiration of the printing press, one of the great innovations of the Renaissance, which they both exploited to the full, producing highly successful books – beginning with the two considered here. *La piazza universale* was indeed a veritable bestseller in its day. Between 1585 and 1665 there were fifteen Italian editions, an adaptation into Spanish, and translations into German and Latin. It then fell into oblivion, but it has been resurrected in recent years in linguistic-cultural studies.⁵ *Dello specchio di scientia universale* had similar success. Published for the first time in Venice in 1564, it reached its tenth edition in 1660 and was also translated into French, English, and German. This book is of particular importance because it started the genre of *letteratura dei mestieri* (literature on trades and professions) in Italy. Although the most complete work of this genre is in fact Garzoni's *La piazza*, it owes a great deal to the work of Fioravanti, as we shall see.⁶

TOMASO GARZONI AND *LA PIAZZA UNIVERSALE DI TUTTE LE PROFESSIONI DEL MONDO*

Garzoni's work is more organized, and his system of classification much clearer, than Fioravanti's, since his aim is to provide a comprehensive catalogue. However, it is not merely a rhetorical catalogue, but a conscious attempt to order all social functions, thus presenting the image of a perfectly organized society. Indeed, because of its richness and complexity, *La piazza*, divided as it is into 154 sections dealing with no fewer than 540 professions and trades, can be read in different ways.

4. Piero Camporesi, *Camminare il mondo. Vita e avventure di Leonardo Fioravanti medico del Cinquecento* (Milan, 1997).

5. In 1996 two very accurate editions were published, almost contemporaneously: one by Olschki Press, edited by a great anthropologist, Giovanni Battista Bronzini, and the other by Einaudi, edited by the great historian of Italian literature, Paolo Cherchi.

6. There are, in fact, strong links between these two books, as pointed out by Elvina Vidali Giorio, "Una fonte del Garzoni: 'Dello specchio di scienza universale' di Leonardo Fioravanti", *Lingua nostra*, 30 (1969), pp. 39–43. On the other hand, one cannot exclude the possibility that Fioravanti modelled his work on the encyclopaedic *Catalogus gloriae mundi*, the work of the Bourgoigne jurist Barthélemy de Chasseuneuz, published in Lyon in 1529 and printed in Italian in Venice around 1560.

So whereas Paolo Cherchi recognizes in Garzoni's precise exploration of the world of skills and occupations the desire to be associated with the efforts of the Counter-Reformation to restore the dignity afforded to manual work by the Gospels, Beatrice Collina convincingly proposes that *La piazza* should be read as an instruction manual for a prince. Giovanni Battista Bronzini, however, stresses the author's attempt, which he believes to be successful, to point out the connection between classes, and to engender harmony among the workforce in order to build up a principality in which a man is valued for what he knows and what he can do:⁷ a unitarian and harmonious reality in which it would be possible to overcome the bitter observation of Guicciardini that "often between the palace and the town square there is such a thick fog and such a high wall that, since no man can see through them, the populace know as much about what their rulers do and why, as they know about what goes on in India".⁸

Obviously, what we are most interested in is Garzoni's attitude to work and workers, and a significant indicator is the omission of the phrase "noble and ignoble", referring to all the professions of the world, in the title of the book's second edition. This is perfectly consistent with his desire to value work, in opposition to the humanist-Renaissance scepticism seen particularly in the work of Cornelio Agrippa, who had heavily criticized the arts, sciences, and the clergy in *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium* (published in Italian in Venice in 1547) while also, in *De occulta philosophia*, exalting magic, considering it the perfection and fulfilment of all natural sciences. This does not mean that Garzoni questioned the superiority of the intellectual, liberal arts, but simply that he wanted us to understand the reciprocal functioning between noble and less noble activities, without in any way reducing the distance between them.

So Garzoni too subscribed to the harmonious and organic view of society which was so deeply rooted in the aristocratic culture of his day, and he took pains to hide the conflicts, quarrels, and civil strife which, however, were also present. It was a view expressed by many other contemporary writers, such as Silvio Antoniano, who wrote "that the humblest worker wishes to be the equal of the townsman, the townsman of the gentleman, the gentleman of the nobleman, and the latter of the prince; such things are beyond reason and not to be tolerated, they are displeasing to God, and lead to a thousand sins".⁹ This was a totally hierarchic concept of society, in which everyone had a role and a well-defined place, in which he had to stay,

7. Compare the essays of Paolo Cherchi and Beatrice Collina in Tomaso Garzoni, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* (Turin, 1996), and that by Giovanni Battista Bronzini in the Olschki edition of *La piazza*.

8. Francesco Guicciardini, *Ricordi, diari, memorie* (Pordenone, 1991), pp. 213–214.

9. Silvio Antoniano, *Tre libri dell'educatione christiana dei figliuoli* (Verona, 1584), p. 296. For Antoniano – humanist, cardinal, and prime mover in the educational changes that followed the

in the order that was assigned to him. Not by chance did sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers compare this society to the biblical statue of Nebuch, with a head of gold (the prince), breast and arms of silver (the highest ranks of the nobility), other parts of baser metal (the lower-ranking nobles and honoured professions), and feet of mud (the populace).¹⁰

An example of this thinking is the passage in which Garzoni observes how all the manual (mechanical) arts, from those reputed honourable to those less honourable, are to be taken equally into consideration, because their humble nature sets off “the more noble arts, just as the clouds soften the piercing rays of the sun, which filter through the surrounding haze in spite of them”.¹¹ This passage is taken from the *Discorso universale* [Universal Comments] with which he prefaced *La piazza* and which he entitled, not coincidentally, *In lode delle scienze et dell’arti liberali e mechaniche in commune* [In Praise of All the Sciences and the Intellectual and Manual Skills in Common]. In his all-embracing catalogue of skills and trades he considered necessary to the socio-political scheme of his ideal principality, Garzoni plundered the work of the most disparate authors, often committing outright plagiarism. Fioravanti himself was a victim, although cited in *La piazza*, in a section dedicated to surgeons, as “the glorious miracle-worker Fioravanti”.¹²

LEONARDO FIORAVANTI AND *DELLO SPECCHIO DI SCIENTIA UNIVERSALE*

In his *Specchio* Leonardo Fioravanti, who lived by direct observation of and dialogue with a section of humanity eschewed by most, was not a systematic cataloguer like Garzoni. Many trades are missing from his work (suffice it to say that there is practically no mention of domestic service), and there is a strong bias in favour of his own specialism, the preparation of remedies for various illnesses. This is also confirmed by the multiple dedications which preface the book, most of which are to doctors and surgeons practising in Italy’s most important cities.¹³

Council of Trent (1545–1563) – see Elisabetta Patrizi, *Silvio Antoniano un umanista ed educatore dell’età del Rinascimento cattolico (1540–1603)* (Macerata, 2009).

10. An example of this appears in the volume which synthesizes and systematizes this train of thought by Giovanni Battista De Luca, *Il principe cristiano pratico* (Rome, 1680). Of great interest is the essay on these problems by Daniela Frigo, “La ‘civile proportion’: ceti, principi e composizione degli interessi nella letteratura politica d’antico regime”, in Cesare Mozzarelli (ed.), *Economia e corporazioni. Il governo degli interessi nella storia d’Italia dal medioevo all’età contemporanea* (Milan, 1988), pp. 81–108.

11. Bronzini, *La piazza universale*, I, p. 56.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

13. Following the obligatory dedication to an eminent person, in this case the Milanese count Giovanni Anguissola, the most important scholars and physicians of Venice, Padua, Bologna, Naples, and Rome are named and praised (*Dello Specchio*, pp. iii–x).

We need only remember the subject matter of the three books which constitute the *Specchio*, a great deal of which was the fruit of Fioravanti's own studies. The first is dedicated to "all the intellectual and manual skills", the second deals with "various sciences and many fine reflections on ancient philosophies", and the third, "some notable inventions, which it is necessary to know about, and which are most useful". Fioravanti therefore moves through the full circle of human knowledge, strong in the belief expressed in the *Ragionamento importantissimo ai lettori* [Observations of Great Importance to the Readers], with which he opens his work, that interdisciplinarianism is fundamental to knowledge. Indeed, since "no science or art can be perfect without an understanding of the others, it seemed fitting to deal with many arts and sciences in this book".¹⁴ In terms of quantity, however, the result is that Fioravanti dedicated much less space to skills and trades than Garzoni did, roughly 150 pages as opposed to 1,000.

WOOLLEN MANUFACTURING IN THE WRITINGS OF GARZONI AND FIORAVANTI

In spite of this, it is possible to compare these two books by examining what they say about commerce and occupations, and by noting whether observations are based on the perceived importance of the work, and the possible ranking of the professions and trades.¹⁵ Some interesting facts emerge when we consider how Garzoni and Fioravanti examine the textile industry and its most important activities. This was the basis of the economic success of the late Italian Renaissance, starting with the processing of wool, in which cities such as Milan, Florence, and Venice, as well as many smaller centres, still excelled. It should be noted that towards 1570–1580 – that is, when Garzoni was writing *La piazza* and Fioravanti supplementing and reprinting his *Specchio* – around 150,000 bolts of cloth per year were produced in central and northern Italy, much of which was exported.¹⁶

Fioravanti's comments on this are particularly interesting. After underlining the importance of this activity – a skill which is "noble all over the world, as everyone knows [...] and the masters of this skill are all wealthy and noble men" – and having described in detail the complexity of the production process, from the selection of the wool to the making of the final product, he gives us a realistic glimpse into the organization of this sector, and the unstinting effort that went into the success of Italy's

14. *Ibid.*, pages not numbered.

15. Unfortunately, Garzoni and Fioravanti did not mention gender in their evaluation of the different occupations.

16. See Paolo Malanima, *L'economia italiana dalla crescita medievale alla crescita contemporanea* (Bologna, 2002), p. 192.

wool-manufacturing centres. He observed that the manufacture of wool is “a job that is most lucrative for those who order it to be done: but for the poor workers who actually do it, it is very bad, since they can never earn more than a meagre living, for all the profits go into the pockets of the merchants”. He added, however, that “it cannot be said that this is not better for the artisans, even though they live in poverty, than to go begging in the world”.¹⁷

Thus, Fioravanti demonstrated that he was well aware of the change that the sector had undergone since the late Middle Ages, with the gradual disappearance of autonomous artisans and the merchant class taking control of the whole production process as two of the characteristics of the developing market economy. He clearly understood the great importance of the woollen mills as a source of employment. Confirmation that his appraisals were the result of his own observations comes from the fact that he cited some of the most important manufacturers of woollen cloth in Venice at the time, such as Camillo Molgora from Milan and Giovanni Piero Girardoni.

Fioravanti’s remarks in the section dedicated to weaving and weavers, which naturally refers to the working of the wool, are also worthy of note. He makes it clear that a job which is considered among the meanest and most humble actually required great skills, which ranged from the ability to recognize “the quality of all the different kinds of yarn” to knowing how to carry out the complex operations involved in weaving. In the production of the best quality goods, this kind of expertise called for skills which could be acquired only after a long apprenticeship.¹⁸

Fioravanti was well aware of the numerous skills required of weavers, and concluded this section by saying that

[...] since we are dealing with an art which is extremely intricate, it calls for a much more detailed description; this I do not give, since my knowledge of it is limited. And it is no surprise that I do not know everything about the art of weaving, since among the weavers themselves those doing one job do not know or understand what the others do.¹⁹

This situation was not surprising given that the wide variety of goods produced by the Italian weaving industry was the fruit of a policy of strict specialization, which meant that “the person doing one type of weaving cannot do another type, nor even understand it”.²⁰

17. *Dello specchio*, p. 58r.

18. Some illuminating ideas on the importance assumed by the guilds in the transmission of these skills were put forward by the late Larry Epstein, as recalled by Maarten Prak, “S.R. Epstein (1960–2007) and the Guilds”, *International Review of Social History*, 53 (2008), Supplement, pp. 1–3.

19. *Dello specchio*, p. 26r.

20. *Ibid.*

Garzoni also reconstructed the complex chain of production in this sector, and presented the various and numerous end products in much more detail than Fioravanti, listing dozens of articles, from the finest cloths to the humble beret and mattress. However, it is interesting to note that when writing about the woollen mill, he departed from the mere citation of books only in order to formulate more concrete considerations, when he repeated, almost to the letter, the work of Fioravanti, although he took care not to quote him. In section CII, “De’ lanaiuoli o lanefici e mercanti di lana” [On Wool-Workers, Woollen Mills, and Wool Merchants], Garzoni wrote that the activity “yields much more to the merchants than to the poor workers, who, even though they barely manage to earn a living, represent the great number of artisans who would finish badly if it were not for this work”.²¹ It is significant that the author, consistent with his ideological purpose, did not include in his evident plagiarism the more polemic and less politically correct ideas of Fioravanti – that this art is bad for the workers, and, above all, that the total profits went into the pockets of the merchants.

THE SILK TRADE IN THE WRITINGS OF GARZONI AND FIORAVANTI

The other activity which was experiencing growing success in Italy at that time was the silk trade. There was widespread rearing of silkworms, and an imposing array of spinning and weaving machinery was set up to process the raw silk produced. There were numerous excellent centres of this activity, which provided a steady flow of produce for export, from Milan to Venice to Bologna. Thanks to this development, some 23,000 looms were in operation in the peninsula by the end of the sixteenth century, mostly concentrated in northern and central Italy.²²

Also in the case of silk, Fioravanti insisted upon the decline in the earning power of the work in “an art which further enriches the rich and helps the poor”. In the chain of production which links the countryside, where the silkworms are reared and the silk obtained, to the city, where it is woven, he emphasizes the role of the merchants, who dominated the sector and took charge of the most delicate phases of the process, such as the dyeing. These were people of great standing, not only financial, but also social and political, if what he says is true, namely that “throughout Italy, this art carries great privileges, and in many cities

21. Bronzini, *La piazza universale*, II, p. 898.

22. The number of looms can be calculated from the accurate count by Francesco Battistini, “La tessitura serica italiana durante l’età moderna: dimensioni, specializzazione produttiva, mercati”, in Luca Molà, Reinhold C. Mueller, and Claudio Zanier (eds), *La seta in Italia dal Medioevo al Seicento* (Venice, 2000), pp. 335–352, 344–345.

has its own independent court, which administers justice in complete freedom".²³

Garzoni, on the other hand, besides repeating Fioravanti's detailed description of the whole productive process (without citing the source), dedicated ample space to the variety of products from this sector, and to the changing tastes of purchasers in favour of silk: "is it not obvious that there is as much difference between a lady dressed in silk and one in woollen cloth, as there is between luminous day and dark night?" It is worth noting that in the usual description of the shortcomings of the art, with which he concluded all his commentaries, he directed his criticism not at the workers, accused only of "frequently" stealing the silk given to them to work, but at the merchants who

[...] underpay them [the workers], avoid paying tax by smuggling out the finished goods, buy the silk from women who have obtained it cut price, so that even the Jews in the bank would have qualms of conscience, and make a thousand deals and contracts among themselves and with others, all illegal.²⁴

So Fioravanti alone gave a realistic view of work and workers in these two important sectors. What he looked at, however, is the organizational aspect of the sector, and the logic behind the functioning of the system, created and dominated by merchants and their capital, which was widening and extending market relations. He said nothing about the conditions of workers, or how the work was allocated to the different sexes, aspects which were dealt with, albeit summarily, by other contemporary writers.

One such writer was Count Giovanni Maria Bonardo, whose description of the "miseries of the life" of those engaged in the mechanical arts begins precisely with the woollen mill. "I will not speak again of the toils of transforming wool into cloth, I shall say only that from the middle of the summer when the wool is cut, sometimes until the following summer, without a single day of idleness, the cloth is laboriously formed." Of the utmost importance in this work were the spinners, whose task was "vile and wearisome", and the weavers "who have no sensibility which is not used up in their weaving".²⁵ His writing shows clearly his awareness of the hard work involved in pre-industrial trades. It was a wearing existence even without factories and assembly lines, because the hours of work could be extended to the bitter end,

23. *Dello specchio*, p. 58v.

24. See section CL, "De' setaiuoli ove si comprendono gli accavigliatori, bavellari, agguindilatori, filatori, le maestre, i tessitori e i mercanti da seta" [On Silk Workers, including Thread Crossers, Flossers, Winders, Spinners, Teachers, Wavers and Silk Merchants], in Bronzini, *La piazza universale*, II, p. 1124.

25. Giovanni Maria Bonardo, *Della miseria et eccellenza della vita humana, ragionamenti due dell'ill. s. Gio. Maria Bonardo Frateggiano, conte & caualiere. Nel qual con infiniti essempli, cauati da più famosi scrittori, s'impara quali siano i trauagli, et quali siano le perfettioni di questo mondo. Fatti alla illustriss. signora la sig. Lucrezia Gonzaga marchesana* (Venice, 1586), pp. 17–18.



Figure 1. Silk worker.

Biblioteca Riccardiana Firenze, Ricc. 2580, Libro d'arte di seta, second half of the fifteenth century, Florentine school. Used with permission.

without any “day of idleness”, and many jobs, such as weaving, required the total involvement and attention of the workers, who were given no rest.

MERCHANTS IN THE WRITINGS OF GARZONI AND
FIORAVANTI

When describing the woollen mill and the silk factory, Garzoni was even less interested in the aspects of the actual work and limited himself, from his strictly hierarchical standpoint, to assigning the most important role to the merchants. However, with reference to the undisputed protagonists of the manufacturing and commercial success of the most important cities in Italy between the Middle Ages and the early modern period, his basic point of view seems very different from Fioravanti's. In his lengthy treatment of merchants, Garzoni, after a fairly technical section (again taken largely from Fioravanti), and some mannered praise for the positive role that merchants played in the economic life of their day, then dedicates much of what follows to a moralistic invective because "looking at it afterwards more closely, and bringing into discussion the strength of this profession, I see it as ragged and ruined, and am aware of the thousand vices and faults contained within it".

According to Garzoni, merchants, as we have seen, already harshly criticized in the section dedicated to the silk factory, were not only fraudulent by nature, but above all

[...] are the ones who murder the world many times over with their falsified rubbish, with rotten and tainted goods, who bring about famine in the provinces and the cities, hoarding excess food and keeping it hidden, so that the poor gentleman and the miserable populace fall dead from starvation in the streets, they cause their creditors to fail, they ensnare and skin the citizens with documents and bonds of the very devil, they devour the substance of the whole populace through usury and interest, they put up their prices and cause shortages whenever they wish.²⁶

Garzoni is very harsh in his criticism, and it is not by chance that section LXV deals not only with merchants, but puts them together with *banchieri, usurai, fondaghiere e merciai* [bankers, usurers, wholesale grocers, and drapers]. Associating merchants with moneylenders, who were "known to be infamous", and with drapers, who, on a smaller scale, used the same incorrect dealings and tricks as the merchants to deceive and harm their fellow men, clearly emphasized the negative connotations of the category.

Here again Garzoni aligned himself with the current of thought, prevalent in his time, which reflected the increasing desire of the urban aristocracy to close ranks against the merchants, who were on the rise and aspiring to nobility themselves. Indeed, in the course of the sixteenth century an ever-widening gap emerged between commerce and the

26. Bronzini, *La piazza universale*, I, p. 664.



Figure 2. Jewish Paduan merchant.

Biblioteca Riccardiana Firenze, St. 12886, P. Bertelli, Diversarum nationum habitus, Patavii, apud Alciatum Alcia et Petrum Bertellium, 1594–1596. Used with permission.

discharge of public office, attested to by the growing insistence on the idea that the nobility were born with certain qualities and requirements – blood, birth, and honour – which were automatically transposed to

political virtue. These “natural” virtues were the prerogative of a single class, and effectively marginalized the members of the merchant class, who could neither possess them nor cultivate them since they were occupied the whole day in “lowly activities and mechanical arts”, as Memmo wrote in a volume published in Venice in 1563.²⁷

Evidence for this changed attitude to commerce in this period, which in view of its political and social reappraisal led to greater emphasis being laid on its negative aspects, can be found in the most important Italian cities, from Genoa to Milan. In Genoa, the inclusion of the silk industry among the mechanical arts led to a reduction of about 300 in the number of people who could consider themselves noble. In 1575 the College of Jurisprudence in Milan prohibited access to the nobility to “those who, even though only through agents, have been involved in squalid commercial activity”, reaffirming, in 1593, that “people, whether they themselves or any of their ancestors, who might be in any way connected with commerce” could not become noble.²⁸

It is also significant that in early modern Milan the only pragmatic sanction against luxury, which imposed precise and differentiated modes of behaviour according to sex and social class, was that of 1565. This was in fact a period of great vitality in the local economy, accompanied by remarkable social mobility, and it was consequently deemed necessary to observe the boundaries between the classes, also by safeguarding external symbols such as attire, before eventually cutting off access to the nobility, which, as we have seen, happened quite soon after.²⁹

Fioravanti’s treatment was much more lucid and devoid of any moralistic tone when dealing with an activity which he regarded as “an art involving great memory and intelligence”. He showed the very essence of big business, demonstrating a sound knowledge of the Venetian situation by giving a detailed description of the flow of merchandise to and from the city. His merchant was not a merchant-entrepreneur, but one involved in business on an international scale. He perceived, with great modernity, how the merchant’s real capital lies in his knowledge of the market and the

27. Giovanni Maria Memmo, *Dialogo del magn. caualiere m. Gio. Maria Memmo, nel quale dopo alcune filosofiche dispute, si forma un perfetto prencipe, & una perfetta republica, e parimente un senatore, un cittadino, un soldato, & un mercatante, diuiso in tre libri* (Venice, 1564), p. 92.

28. On these topics see Rodolfo Savelli, “Tra Machiavelli e S. Giorgio. Cultura giuspolitica e dibattito istituzionale a Genova nel Cinque-Seicento”, in Aldo De Maddalena and Hermann Kellenbenz (eds), *Finanze e ragion di stato in Italia e in Germania nella prima età moderna* (Bologna, 1984), pp. 249–321, 295, and Mocarelli, “The Attitude of Milanese Society to Work and Commercial Activities”, pp. 114–115.

29. Luca Mocarelli, “‘Lusso dannoso e lusso discreto’. Il lusso nella Milano settecentesca tra prescrizioni legislative e comportamenti”, in Antonella Alimento (ed.), *Modelli d’oltre confine. Prospettive economiche e sociali negli antichi Stati italiani* (Rome, 2009), pp. 295–308, 296–297.

product, “knowing the products that are well-received in one place rather than another”, and he was equally realistic about the bad business practices that could devour accumulated capital. On the astuteness and trickery so harshly criticized by Garzoni, he had little to say, evidently considering them inherent to the profession, and limited himself to advising that “the merchants should be content to sell their merchandise at a fair price, and not be overcome by greed or tempted by high profits”.³⁰

A note of criticism was present in Bonardo since the Venetian nobleman limited himself to pointing out, in great detail, the problems and difficulties that made the practice of commerce so complicated, and of uncertain success, “because the selling price of goods bought at a high price so frequently drops, meaning that no profit is made [...] buying dear and selling cheap [...] the increases and falls in business because of the constant changes in the currency, domestic theft, robbery by strangers, taxes”. This was an extremely precarious situation, therefore, which led him to conclude that “miserable merchants are not safe at sea, nor on land, neither in the wood nor the city, not even in the town square or their own home”.³¹

THE MECHANICAL ARTS IN THE WRITINGS OF GARZONI AND FIORAVANTI

The difference between Garzoni and Fioravanti is even more apparent in their treatment of the trades they considered to be lowly. Here we will consider what Garzoni and Fioravanti had to say about stonemasons and shoemakers. When, after a few mannered praises, Garzoni goes on to consider the meanest occupations such as these, he lays great emphasis on their faults and tricks. So, even though stonemasons carry out work of “strict necessity, since they construct dwelling places”, they are not precise and they prolong the work unnecessarily in order to earn more, “thus as a penance they frequently fall from the roof, or the wall or the stairs, and break their necks”.³² Similarly, shoemakers undoubtedly produce useful articles, but they knew little about ancient footwear, and above all they “often cheat you with the stuff they give you [...] difficulties and lies are commonplace with them, as with all such people who serve others”.³³

30. *Dello specchio*, pp. 35r–38v.

31. Bonardo, *Della miseria et eccellenza della vita humana*, p. 20.

32. See section XCIII, “De’ muratori o fabricatori et de’ biancheggiatori” [On Bricklayers, Builders, and Decorators], in Bronzini, *La piazza universale*, II, pp. 843–844. Bonardo’s tone is quite different (*Della miseria et eccellenza della vita humana*, p. 19) when he says “but who is more unfortunate than the bricklayer or the carpenter who when building walls or adjusting beams is in danger, a thousand times a day, of falling from on high and breaking his neck?”.

33. See section CXXXI, “De’ calzolari, o caligari et ciavattini” [On Shoemakers and Slipper-Makers], in Bronzini, *La piazza universale*, II, p. 1031.



Figure 3. Stonemason.

Biblioteca Casanatense Roma, Rari 212, F. Indovino and A. da Carpentieri, Il mezzo più sicuro per vincere al lotto, o sia nuova lista generale de' Sogni, col Nome di tutte le cose, e numeri corrispondenti all'Estrazioni (Macerata, 1796). Used with permission.

The attitude of Fioravanti is totally different; he exalts the art of the stonemason – the most necessary after the provision of food and clothing – to the point where he deals with them before architects. He does not limit himself to the technical abilities and skills required of such workers, but points to the redistributory nature of the building industry, noting how “in no other case will a man so willingly pay others, as when he is having a sumptuous and magnificent house built [...] yet since this is what he wants to do, the art of the stonemason is necessary”. He also appreciates the significance of houses as status symbols, remarking that some houses are built with “stupendous facades, which add nothing to the comfort of the owner and serve no purpose other than to be seen by others”.³⁴ Even in the case of shoemakers, whose art he considers the lowliest of all, Fioravanti indicates many positive elements, from the protection of our feet to the aesthetic aspect, reaching the conclusion that “among the other arts this is most necessary and worthy of doing”.³⁵

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What considerations does this comparison suggest? First, that though dealing with the same subject, the two authors made very different appraisals.

Garzoni built his argument on scholarship and his principal objective was the formation of a humanist prince,

[...] in this scene and this rich display you will easily understand the good and the bad that all the workers of the world can do; since the prince who governs must take care of so many people and so many things, perhaps there could not be any book more useful than this.³⁶

The prince must indeed know the world, since his basic role is to heal the more serious rifts and put the different classes back into their designated places. According to Giovanni Battista Pigna, a writer well-known to Garzoni, the prince had to reduce the nobles and the populace “to their (just) dimensions and mediocrity”. That was no easy task since, if it is true that “gentlemen have a preference principally for honour, and plebeians for profit”, it is also true that without the intervention of the prince to keep

34. *Dello specchio*, p. 78v.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 73r.

36. The quotation is taken from Garzoni’s dedication to Alfonso II d’Este in Bronzini, *La piazza universale*, I, p. 6. His desire to include everything was echoed in the preface to *L’autore a’ spettatori* [The Author to the Spectators], in which Garzoni recalled the “very lowly skills which I have described” and concluded, not without a certain satisfaction, that he has created a “monstrous” building because of “the great number of people it accommodates all together” (*ibid.*, pp. 47–48). It is certainly not a coincidence that Garzoni’s work opened with section I, “De’ signori o principi, et de’ tiranni” [On Lords or Princes, and Tyrants], and finished with section CLV, “Degli humanisti” [On Humanists].

“these two such different natures within their own confines, one will aspire to be a magistrate, and the other will interest himself in merchandise”.³⁷

This was Garzoni’s perspective in attempting to restore order and sense to the bustling life of trades and professions, and it led him to study the multitude of human activities rather as an entomologist studies insects – calmly and clinically. So he takes particular care to reveal the cunning tricks and faults of the humble, without trying to find any meaning in their work.

Fioravanti on the other hand based his work on direct observation and, beyond praising each activity, he attempted to restore dignity to all types of work. His interest was not that of the cataloguer, but of a professional and a participant, and he offered considerations which would be inconceivable to Garzoni. An example of this can be found in what each of them wrote about tailors. To Garzoni, they were people who offered beauty and dignity to all, especially when they made fine clothes,³⁸ but to Fioravanti they represented an opportunity to question the social hierarchies of the time. It is worth quoting his reasoning:

[...] for all honours and robes are but smoke. And the truth is that we are born equal and we die equal, the greatest and the least alike, for we are born naked, and in the end we die and abandon our faculties. So I conclude that when all is said and done, we are all the same.

His criticism of dressing in a certain way to show distinction, an unassailable requirement in the most important cities at the time, inevitably became directed at tailors. For Fioravanti their art did not require the skill and competence one might suppose “since making clothes is nothing more than draping a piece of cloth over someone and cutting away the excess, thus the garment is made”.³⁹

What clearly differentiated the two authors was also the ranking of the professions, which is evident in their work. Garzoni, besides having no doubt about the superiority of the intellectual arts, offers us a catalogue apparently based on aesthetic criteria and the desire of the curious scholar to compile a history of what is lowly and neglected.⁴⁰ The structure of Fioravanti’s writing is different: he puts human occupations on a functional scale, ordering them according to how necessary and useful they are. Thus, he begins his treatise with agriculture and animal husbandry, and puts among the first the arts of the blacksmith and the woodworker, since very few skills, if any, can be practised without recourse to these.

37. Giovanni Battista Pigna, *Il principe [...] nel qual si descrive come debba essere il principe heroico, sotto il cui governo un felice popolo, possa tranquilla & beatamente vivere* (Venice, 1561), pp. 35–36.

38. See section CXX, “De’ sartori” [On Tailors], in Bronzini, *La piazza universale*, II, pp. 999–1000.

39. *Dello specchio*, p. 27r.

40. Bronzini, *Introduzione*, in *idem*, *La piazza universale*, I, pp. xx–xxiv.

Furthermore Fioravanti does not make the traditional distinction between liberal and mechanical arts, preferring instead to distinguish between using one's hands and pure knowledge (skills and sciences):

[...] so that everything that calls for the use of hands can justly be defined as skills, yet medicine, surgery, and anatomy are all manual: therefore I call them skills, as I do all the others. The sciences are composed of memory and intellect, they can be defined as reasoning, and manual work plays no part in them.

Fioravanti goes even further, maintaining that knowledge alone is of little use in itself, as he confirms when speaking about anatomy: "this knowledge is of very little importance, because when one is unlucky enough to be injured [...] one needs to be treated and cured: which cannot be done by knowing about anatomy, but only by medicating with tried and tested remedies". Indeed he claims that "it is far better to operate well than to know how to speak about it [...] therefore we can rightly affirm that anatomy is nothing more than knowing how our body is made. But the truth is that it cannot be used in medical treatment".⁴¹

In short, it can be said that Garzoni and Fioravanti incarnate two very different spirits of the Renaissance, although both were driven by the same inexhaustible curiosity and thirst for knowledge. The Augustinian was a contemplative, learned man, anxious to construct a moralistic-literary monument, complete in every detail. The restless physician-surgeon from Bologna, however, was a student of first-hand experience, a great observer intent on making full use of every kind of knowledge, even that which seemed lowly and contemptible: a man who was not in the least scholastic, and who would never have agreed with the distinction between noble and ignoble arts included in the original title of Garzoni's *La piazza universale*.

41. *Dello specchio*, pp. 52v and 51v.