

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT LITERATURE



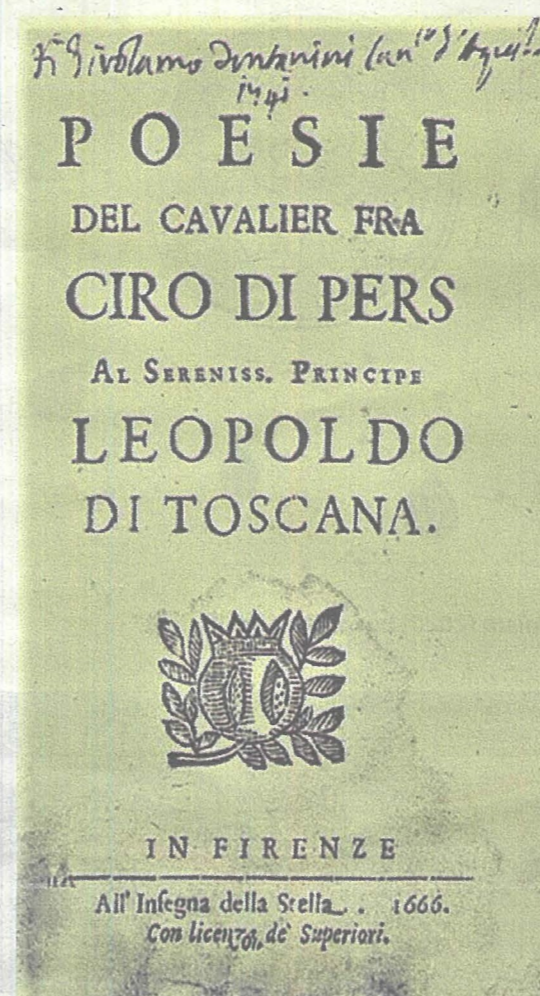
Grand Master Antoine de Paule, who ruled over Malta when knight Ciro di Pers served on the island.



A portrait of the knight of Malta and baroque poet di Pers in his younger days.



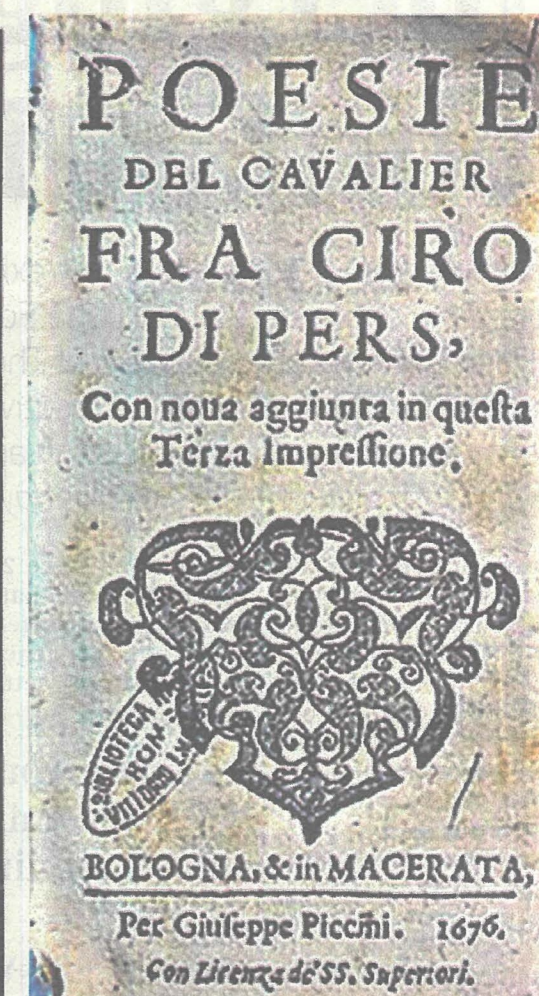
Di Pers wearing the uniform and decoration of the Order of Malta in his older years.



Another book of poems by di Pers published in Florence in 1666.



A book of poems by di Pers published posthumously in Venice in 1677.



Another edition of the poems of di Pers, published in Bologna and Macerata in 1676.

Fra Ciro di Pers – poet and knight of Malta

GIOVANNI BONELLO



The 17th century was quite unfair when it came to distributing literary excellence. It proved generous with some European countries, and rather mean with others. In neighbouring Italy, with inevitable exceptions, literature in the *seicento* overall lagged, rarely reaching the summits of previous or later centuries. Italian visual art and music peaked, but not so with literature.

While extreme flourishes of creativity worked excellently for music, painting, architecture and sculpture, baroque excesses tended to sound shallow and artificial when transposed to writing. The leading and perhaps most gifted Italian exponent of this exaggerated *manierismo*, Gianbattista Marino, summarised the aesthetic philosophy of Italian Baroque literature in his famous verses: *‘E’ del poeta il fin la meraviglia / chi non sa far stupir, vada alla striglia’* (my loose

translation: It is the poet’s duty to amaze / Those who can’t surprise, put out to graze).

The knight of Malta Ciro di Pers distinguished himself among the more remarkable Italian poets in this vein, called *Marinismo* or *Seicentismo*, though of the more moderate sort, steering clear of extravagance, forced artificiality and clever word-play for the sake of... word-play that was clever.

It is no insignificant tribute to Ciro di Pers that *The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature* dubbed him “one of the most interesting of the Baroque poets”.

A literary critic in the 19th century, when *Marinismo* had fallen entirely out of fashion, published an encyclopaedia of all the literary glories of the Order of Malta. The Marquis of Villarosa obviously included Di Pers, of whom he had this to say: “Very early on he won distinction for sharpness of intellect, and for his love of good literature, having made himself known in lyrical poetry, of which he sent some works to print... he won the praises of many, as in his poetry he avoided the depraved taste that had then begun to hold sway in Italy.”

I am focussing on di Pers because of his strong Malta connections – he was a proud knight of

Malta, lived on the island for a considerable time and refers to Malta in at least two of his published poems. His life story has some interest too.

Fra Ciro dei Signori di Pers, a noble family from Udine, was born, only son, to Giulio Antonio Pers and Ginevra Colloredo on April 17, 1599 (Malta counted at least five Colloredo knights). He received an excellent academic and humanistic education with an accent on the works of St Augustine, Aristotle and Plato, and also showed a keen interest in the study of theology.

In 1620, he fell in love with his cousin Taddea Colloredo, a deep unrequited emotion which he never succeeded in shaking off and which profiled the rest of his life. For whatever reason, but probably at the instigation of her family, the object of his obsession repulsed di Pers’s advances and turned down his offers of marriage.

On the rebound, he settled for joining the Order of Malta. But Taddea had by now captured his passions irreversibly. As ‘Nicea’, she inspires virtually all his lyrics, up to her early death in 1636. Though his love-poetry sometimes verges on the timidly erotic, it is rarely overtly so. His long

poem *Against loving only one beauty* shows that on occasion, he faltered in his monogamous love for Nicea: “Lisetta has two lovely eyes / and Clori splendid breasts of living ivory / Lisetta’s eyes I love, and Clori’s bust no less”.

Differently from many other coeval restless spirits who dabbled in the arts, Pers’s name was never touched by scandal, violence, misbehaviour or gossip. And, unlike his Grand Master, di Pers seems to have kept faith to his vow of chastity throughout his life.

Di Pers professed in the Order on May 4, 1626 and landed in Valletta from Pisa exactly one year later. Fra Signorino Gattinara Junior, nephew of his ferocious namesake and a renowned Italian knight who ended his career as General of the Galleys and Admiral of the Order, received Ciro formally on May 28, 1628. Some confusion, however, surrounds these dates.

The printed list of Italian knights of Malta states that Ciro was received in the Order on May 26, 1627, in a joint ceremony with Fra Giacomo Giussano from Milan. A side annotation adds “renowned for his printed lyrical poems”. The same source reveals

that in 1658, a Fra Girolamo di Pers from Friuli also joined the Order.

Di Pers was in Malta during the rule of Grand Master Antoine de Paule, very likely staying, like all other Italian novices, at the Auberge d’Italie, at a time when nothing very noteworthy seemed to be going on. Perhaps the salient episode that enlivened the routine in 1628 was a confrontation by the Order’s galleys with an unidentified sail that later turned out to be English.

“The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature dubbed [Pers] one of the most interesting of the Baroque poets”

“A ship that appeared hostile had been spotted off Malta; it had just looted a Maltese *tartana* laden with wine. Four galleys exited the harbour to intercept it and found it to be English, overweening with contempt, without a trace of deference, either by

saluting with a cannon-shot, or by dipping its sail. The galleys were obliged to sport around the English ship all day long with cannon fire, until it acquiesced sheepishly, acknowledging the superiority of their forces.”

While in Malta, Di Pers carried out the compulsory military training courses required of every novice, on the galleys of the Order – principal among them the *carovane* at sea. He celebrated one of these Maltese *carovane* with a long poem only printed after his death.

The training *carovane* of young knights could turn into perilous corsairing adventures, or into boring cruises round the Mediterranean. Di Pers’s fate fell in between – he did see some moderately exciting action at sea while in Malta. In detailing the August 1627 *carovana* under General Fra Francesco Carafa, the official historian of the Order highlights the participation of di Pers “the knight from Friuli, expert in all the sciences and poet of high renown”.

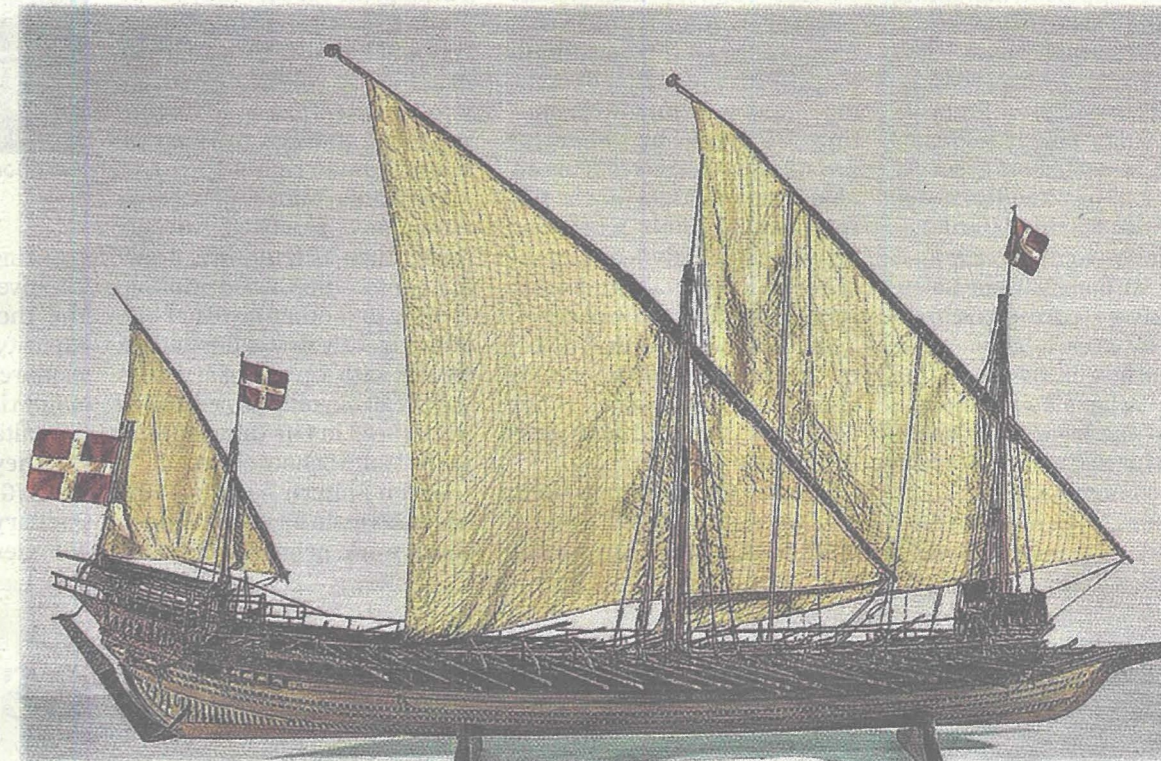
With Carafa and the five galleys of the Order, di Pers sailed all the way from Valletta, first to Syracuse and then to the Barbary coast, to Egypt and Alexandria, to Syria, Cyprus and Southern

Anatolia and reached the Seven Capes, without experiencing anything particularly thrilling. Finally, the corsairs stuck gold, captured a large Ottoman merchant vessel, and enslaved 70 Turks – quite a rich booty in terms of ransom money.

It is rather disappointing that, although di Pers seems to have considered his membership of the Order of Malta one of the highlights of his career, he only refers to Malta in two of his surviving poems. One, rather lengthy, he titled *Voyages on the galleys of Malta*, a poetic narrative of his August 1627 *carovana* in the Mediterranean, also dedicated to his unforgettable Nicea, and overweight with classical and mythological erudition.

But Malta is only a departure point, and a safe haven on return: “... when departing from the low shores of Melita in five bold boats whose wombs are pregnant with arms and heroes...” He describes his return to Malta after the perilous raid in the Ottoman seas “... we entered Malta’s sighed-for harbour, destination of long and laboured burdens”.

The second mention of the island is in the title of a sonnet he wrote in memory of his mentor, the old warrior Fra Coriolano



A galley of the Order of Malta, similar to the ones on which di Pers saw action while serving in Malta.

Cavalcanti, Master of the Order’s novices who died in Malta when Di Pers was undergoing his military training, *In morte del Cav. Fra Coriolano Cavalcanti, Maestro dei Novizzi in Malta*.

Di Pers returned to Italy sometime in 1629, never to leave his native land again. He must have been particularly proud of his Maltese knighthood. All his known portraits portray him wearing the Order’s habit and the white eight-pointed cross.

The poet’s health started declining in the late 1650s, with increasingly painful episodes of bladder stones. His vesical calculi he rendered into some of his more endearing and popular verses.

A biography, published posthumously in a collection of his poems in 1689, states that di Pers was affected by “stones in his bladder, that caused him atrocious and incessant pain, and forced him to abandon his studies

and writing poetry. He composed little else after that, saving for some playful sonnets about his tormenting illness”.

He died on April 7, 1663, aged 64. Most of his poetry was published after his death in the 17th century. During his lifetime, he repeatedly asserted that he did not consider his verses good enough for publication. Almost totally disregarded after his death, his poetic fame has recently witnessed a robust revival.