In the third lesson of his *Della Poesia* Benedetto Varchi discusses the origin of blank verse\(^2\). He tells us that there has been some doubt as to whether its first user in sixteenth-century Italy was Giangiorgio Trissino or Luigi Alamanni. He himself would attribute primacy to Trissino, not just because he was the older man, but because he can recall that when he (Varchi) was a boy, Luigi Alamanni used to go to the Rucellai gardens in Florence with Zanobi Buondelmonti and Niccolò Machiavelli, and there, in the company of Cosimo Rucellai, they listened to Trissino, whom "they regarded more as a master and superior than as a companion or equal" ("e l’osservavano piú tosto come maestro o superiore che come compagno o eguale"). Trissino was born in 1478: at the time of his visit to Tuscany in 1513 he was nearly thirty-five years old. Alamanni, as Varchi remarks, was certainly his junior: he was barely eighteen. But Machiavelli, who is included in the company listening so respectfully to Trissino, was almost forty-four. It is certainly probable that Trissino wrote blank verse before Alamanni, for he used it in his tragedy *Sofonisba*, which was completed in 1515, and he may well have advocated its use while he was in Florence, as he did in another of his early works, the first four divisions of the *Poetica*. What is more important, it was his example and precept which influenced later tragedians, like Giraldi, just as it was he who in this, as in other respects also, was to influence Torquato Tasso. But the anecdote from Varchi is perhaps less interesting to us now for its bearing on the chronology of blank verse, for which we have other data.

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1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 22 January 1986. On Thursday, 29 May 1980 I had given a lecture on the same subject as the Henry Rowlatt Bickley Memorial Lecture at St. Hugh’s College, Oxford, but had not published the text since I intended to revise parts of it before doing so. I wish to express my gratitude to the Principal of St. Hugh’s for her ready consent to my using the earlier lecture as the basis for my Rylands lecture of 1986.

evidence, than for its testimony to the reverence felt for Trissino and the interest in what he had to say. How different from the attitudes to him of more recent students of Italian literature! For, in spite of regular brief mention of him in literary histories (as the author of the first classical tragedy in modern European literature or Italy’s first heroic epic), there is little evidence of Trissino’s being read, particularly if one considers works by him other than the *Sofonisba*. To find a copy of many of them one has to go back to Scipione Maffei’s Verona edition of 1729. And the last scholar to do a substantial amount of research on the whole of Trissino’s literary career was Bernardo Morsolin, whose biography was first published in 1878, then issued in a revised version in 1894. Moreover, Morsolin was exceptional in his own time, for Trissino had long been out of favour when he turned his attention to him. Indeed, Alessandro Manzoni, in his essay on the historical novel, had likened the status of *La Italia Liberata da Goti* in the field of the heroic epic, where nobody felt the obligation to read it, to the situation of certain princes whose titles referred to kingdoms they had lost or to which they were merely pretenders, without any

3 Tutte le Opere di Giovan Giorgio Trissino, gentiluomo vicentino, non più raccolte. In Verona, presso Jacopo Vallarsi, 1729.

4 B. Morsolin, *Giangiorgio Trissino: Monografia d’un gentiluomo letterato nel secolo XVI* (Firenze, 1894). For our knowledge of Trissino’s life and the chronology of his works this has not yet been superseded. Even substantial studies of single works or of limited aspects of Trissino’s production have been few. The most valuable are the following: A. D’Ancona, “Giangiorgio Trissino” in *Varietà storiche e letterarie*, seconda serie (Milano, 1885), pp. 247-282 (an extended review of Morsolin’s book); E. Proto, *Sulla ‘Poetica’ di G.G. Trissino* (Napoli, 1905); and E. Ciampolini, *La prima tragedia regolare nella letteratura italiana* (Lucca, 1884). There are interesting sections on Trissino in F. Neri, *La tragedia italiana del Cinquecento* (Firenze, 1904), and C. Guerrieri Crocetti, *G.B. Giraldi ed il pensiero critico del secolo XVI* (Milano, Genova, Roma, Napoli: Società anonima editrice Dante Alighieri, 1932). For a useful short sketch and bibliography, see P. Palumbo, “Giangiorgio Trissino” in *Orientamenti culturali. Letteratura Italiana. I Minori* (Milano, 1961), ii. 873-889. Since the publication of Palumbo’s bibliography a useful edition of the *Sofonisba* has been published in *Two Renaissance Plays*, edited by B. Corrigan, Manchester University Press, 1975. To mark the quincentenary of Trissino’s birth in 1978 a meeting of scholars was arranged to discuss his work in Vicenza. This was held in 1979 and resulted in an important volume of studies, *Atti del Convegno di studi su Giangiorgio Trissino* a cura di Neri Pozza (Vicenza, 1980). One of the scholars to contribute to that volume has subsequently written a valuable introduction to a reprint of the *Rime* of 1529: *Giovan Giorgio Trissino: Rime 1529*, a cura di Amedeo Quondam, nota metrica di Gabriella Milan (Vicenza, 1981).
obligation of obedience being involved ("... e ottenne perciò il titolo di poema epico, senza che ne venga obbligo di lettura, a un di presso come vari principi hanno conservato de' titoli di reami o persi o pretesi, senza che ne venga obbligo d'ubbidienza")

But, if Trissino had neither finished the Sofonisba nor started the Italia Liberata, why should he have been treated with such respect in the Florence of 1513? Was it merely because he was wealthy, as well as noble, and always travelled in state? These things may have helped, but the most impressive single feature in his presence must still have been his learning, the quality that first came to the mind of Isabella d'Este in the following year, when he left Ferrara to try his luck in the Rome of Leo X and she wrote him a letter of recommendation ("... amandolo sumamente per la doctrina e molte altre optime qualità sue")

His ability to write well in Latin, his enthusiasm for the literature of Greece, which he had studied with Chalcondylas at Milan, his interest in philosophy and his profound knowledge of early Italian and Provençal poetry must have been evident even then, for they are obvious in his earliest literary efforts. We should also bear in mind, I suggest, the value and promise of those early works themselves. For, although it is true that in 1513 Trissino had written none of the works for which he is usually mentioned in our literary histories (his linguistic theories, his tragedy, his epic), his literary career had certainly begun. He had composed some minor prose works, like the Ritratti, and doubtless a fair proportion of the Rime collected in the 1529 edition, of which he himself ascribes a number to his youth. They would certainly have added to the good reputation

5 A. Manzoni, Del romanzo storico e, in genere, de' componimenti misti di storia e d'invenzione. This first appeared in Opere varie, 1845-55. The text quoted here is taken from A. Manzoni, Opere, a cura di Riccardo Bacchelli (Milano Napoli, 1953), p. 1090.

6 The full text of the letter is printed in Morsolin, op. cit., p. 394 (Doc XXVI).

7 On the chronology of the Rime, see the observations of Amedeo Quondam in his introduction to the Rime:

Il 1529 è certamente una datazione tarda, che segna il termine ante quem valido e funzionale per la sola raccolta, non per i singoli testi. Se questa osservazione vale per quasi tutte le edizioni di "rime" che sono (e saranno) pubblicate in questo convulso volgere di anni, assume un particolare rilievo per il Trissino: con la sicura esclusione delle rime di occasione (per papa Clemente VII, per il cardinal Ridolfi, per la morte di Cesare Trivulzio), che si situano negli anni immediatamente a ridosso dell'edizione, il nucleo "amoroso" delle Rime risale, infatti, molto più addietro, agli anni cortigiani del Trissino, alle sue relazioni con
enjoyed by his learned conversation; indeed, I should be prepared to argue that some of the short poems published in the *Rime* were among the best things Trissino wrote. Moreover, he may well have composed some of his theoretical works: in the 1524 edition of the *Epistola de le lettere nuovamente aggiunte ne la lingua italiana* he refers to his *Poetica* and a grammar as works already written, although even the first four divisions of the *Poetica* were not actually to be printed until 1529, the year in which the *Grammatichetta* (which may have been the grammar he had in mind) also appeared. It is certainly possible that in 1513 he may


8 The publication of Trissino's works falls into two distinct periods. Those which were completed in his youth and his prime were published in two groups in the fifteen-twenties. Those which were written or finished in the following two decades appeared in the late forties. At Rome in 1524 another son of Vicenza, Ludovico degli Arrighi, justly renowned as a calligrapher before creating the beatiful type he used for printing, published Trissino's *Epistola de la vita che dee tenere una gentildonna vedova*, his *Orazione al Serenissimo Principe di Venezia M. Andrea Gritti*, the *Ritratti*, the *Sofonisba* and the first version of the *Epistola de le lettere nuovamente aggiunte ne la lingua italiana*. The second version of that *Epistola* appeared from the press of Tolomeo Gianicolo at Vicenza in 1529, along with a number of other opuscules which bear witness to Trissino's linguistic preoccupations: the Italian translation he had made of Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, which he brought to the attention of sixteenth-century scholars (albeit in a manner which so tied it to his own linguistic theories that some of them felt obliged to deny his attribution of it to Dante), the *Grammatichetta*, the *Dubbi*
have discussed various aspects of his theoretical preparation for his tragedy *Sofonisba*, for that was completed in Rome in 1515.

Careful theoretical preparation there certainly would have been, for if there is anything that strikes us repeatedly in our reading of Trissino’s works, it is this: he knew exactly what he was trying to achieve. By that I do not simply mean that, as the dedications to some of his books indicate, he was eager to give Italy certain genres which the classical literatures possessed, but which Italian did not yet have, and that he was determined to make use of Greek (as well as of Latin) literature in filling some of the gaps. I mean that throughout his life practice was accompanied by a very considerable amount of theory. The first four divisions of the *Poetica*, which consist mainly of very detailed examination of Italian metrics, with the added interest of advocacy of blank verse for tragedy and epic, clearly belong to the same period of his life as many of the *Rime* published in the same year and possibly the *Sofonisba* (although the first four divisions of the *Poetica* were probably revised in the light of practice just before publication). But the first published text of the *Sofonisba* shows that before 1524 Trissino was also involved in spelling reform. Almost immediately after its publication he explained in his *Epistola de le lettere nuovamente aggiunte ne la lingua italiana* the orthographical principles he had adopted. The stormy reception accorded to that opuscule led to his being drawn into the controversies of the *Questione della Lingua* and to his developing the linguistic theories which were to be a dominant feature of his mature years, when he devoted a good deal of time to the composition of linguistic treatises and grammatical works and to bringing Dante’s *De grammaticali*, the *Castellano* and the *Alfabeto*. In the same year and place the first four divisions of the *Poetica* were published and, as if to show that the 1529 harvest was not wholly theoretical, the collected *Rime* and the Latin poem *Encomium ad Maximilianum Caesarem*. Then followed a long period of silence, scarcely broken by a very rudimentary Latin grammar, *Grammatices introductionis liber primus* (Verona, 1540); Trissino was engaged in his twenty-year struggle with the heroic epic. *La Italia Liberata da Gothi* was printed in three instalments: Books I — IX by Valerio and Luigi Dorici at Rome in 1547, Book X — XVIII and XIX — XXVII by Tolomeo Gianicolo at Venice in 1548. Trissino also saw to the publication of his comedy *I Simillimi* (Venice: T. Gianicolo) in 1548. The last two divisions of his *Poetica* were still unpublished when Trissino died in 1550: they appeared in Venice, printed by A. Arrivabene in 1562-3. The fragmentary *Dell’Architettura* did not see the light of day until the nineteenth century.
vulgari eloquentia to the attention of his contemporaries. Finally, the Aristotelian doctrines of the last two divisions of the Poetica (Divisions V and VI) seem to have been both a preparation for, and a defence of, his practice in his epic La Italia Liberata da Gothi: for, although he clearly knew his Aristotle before the publication of the first four divisions of the Poetica in 1529 (indeed before the composition of the Sofonisba), he left the final revision of Divisions V and VI late enough to include his own plays and epic as examples.

The first four divisions of the Poetica are, in my view, worthy of some respect. After dealing, in the first division, with choice of language (using arguments which we shall find more fully developed in Il Castellano) and choice of word, Trissino proceeds to a detailed analysis of Italian metrics. He makes use of Dante's De vulgari eloquentia and of Antonio da Tempo's Summa Artis Rithimici Vulgaris Dictaminis but contributes a great deal of his own. It is true that, although some of the deductions he makes from his careful analysis of individual poems are valuable, his preoccupation with the details of the prosody of Latin and Greek is frequently unhelpful in his discussion of Italian lines. But it is equally clear that he has been extremely thorough in his choice of examples and in his examination of them; his treatise reveals very wide reading in Italian poetry and some knowledge of Provençal and Spanish as well. There is, too, not merely breadth of knowledge but catholicity of taste: Trissino is not prepared to become one of the exclusive brethren of the new Petrarchism. His Poetica is clearly a rejection of the scale of values proposed in Bembo's Prose della volgar lingua of 1525, and his appreciation of Dante, Guittone, Cino, and moreover, of various non-Tuscans as well, alongside his enthusiasm for Petrarch, is entirely consonant with the linguistic theories in which he will encourage writers to seek a widely-based Italian language (not a Petrarch-based poetic language and a Boccaccio-based prose as advocated by Bembo). Nonetheless, Petrarch remains a dominant figure both in his own poetic preparation and his theory.

I believe that this careful attention to scores of examples of Italian versification can be clearly seen to bear fruit in his own

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9 For the originality of Trissino, particularly in his intuition concerning his derivation of Italian metres from classical metres, see E. Proto, Sulla 'Poetica' di G.G. Trissino (Napoli, 1905), esp. pp. 14-47.
Rime. There he frequently shows an admirable skill in handling the metrical forms traditionally used for love-lyrics, and the dignity of language of the traditional Italian love-lyric is strong enough to preserve him in at least a number of the Rime from the weakness and triviality of diction which he was to display in the longer Italia Liberata (and occasionally in the Sofonisba). It must be admitted at once that many of the sonnets written by Trissino were unoriginal Petrarchan exercises. But it is, I think, a pity that our literary histories allow us to forget that the best part of Trissino's own writing was not in the tragedy or the heroic epic (where he was merely first) but in some of his short poems. Here he showed that he could at least arrange his narrative and his reflections in a quite elegant pattern within the sonnet form. A good example is

La bella fronte colorita, e bianca  
De la mia donna, impallidir vid'io  
Il giorno, che da lei mi dipartio,  
Come a chi cosa dilettedevol manca.

Dapoi con voce pargoletta e stanca  
Le dolce labbra si soave apri,  
Che solo in quelle ripensando, oblio  
Quant'è la vita in me gravosa, e manca.

Il suon che nacque fuor di quelle rose  
Dicea: Ti priego almeno, che vogli amarmi.  
Poichè fortuna al mio disir s'oppose.

Questo, diss'io, Madonna, addimandarmi  
Uopo non è; che tutte l'altre cose  
Salvo che questa, il Ciel porria vietarmi.

Is Trissino confined to the traditional material of the love-lyric in his successful poems? There is one (later) short poem by him which, although not as elegant as the one just quoted, may well attract our attention because it seems to be obviously about Trissino's real ambitions in life. It is a sonnet in which he expresses his admiration for the achievement of a friend who was also a tremendous rival in literary and linguistic theory, a friend who had secured the success Trissino wished to attain, Pietro Bembo:
Bembo, voi sete a quei bei studi intento,
Ch'acquistan vita a l'uom quand'egli è morto,
E come buon nocchier ch'è giunto in porto,
Più noiar non vi può contrario vento.

Io pur mi trovo in mar pien di spavento,
Che 'l lito è lunge, ed il viaggio è torto.
Però mi volgo al ciel, avendo scorto
Ogni soccorso uman fallace e lento.

O fortunato, che sì cari frutti
Cogliete omai de le fatiche vostre,
Che le faran gradir mill'anni e mille.

Quando fia mai ch'un bel seren si mostre
A gli occhi miei? Quando saranno asciutti?
O quando notti avran dolci e tranquille?

And yet it seems to me that, if we look more closely at this sonnet, we shall find that it is merely an ingenious adaptation to another subject of the material of the traditional love-sonnet: after the opening lines, we have a description of the poet as tossed on a stormy sea, with all the vocabulary needed to describe a lover in that predicament (nocchier, porto, contrario vento, pien di spavento, ogni soccorso uman fallace, etc.); and the whole of the final tercet could originally have been written for a love poem. The only difference is that, instead of comparing the lover's predicament with the porto at which he longs to arrive, the poet contrasts his with the porto where Bembo is already in safety. The truth is that all Trissino's successful short poems deal with those areas of human experience for which his predecessors (mainly Petrarch in love-poetry, though Trissino sometimes echoes Dante and Cino too) had already provided him with a basic vocabulary which had both weight and delicacy.

It must be added that the successful short poems to which I refer are few in number: I think that there are about half a dozen of them which give me greater pleasure than anything Trissino wrote in any other genre, with the exception of brief extracts from the Sofonisba and one short composition in rhyme written for the Chorus in his comedy I Simillimi.

For, among Trissino's Rime, there are quite a few insipid and vacuous poems and some indeed which merely convince us that we
should not regard his frequent expression of the suffering of love as having much weight. Consider, for instance, the handling of antithesis at the end of the sonnet *Sott'un vel d'or con leggiadretti nodi*. After listing some of the lady's qualities, the poet adds:

\[
\text{Tutte queste cagion del mio mal foro,}
\text{Anzi del ben; perché dolor non sento}
\text{Che si dolce servir né duol né pesa.}
\]

There is a world of difference between describing love as both a great joy and a great pain (as some Petrarchists do) and stating (as Trissino does) that it is a *mal* which is really a *ben* because it is neither a pain nor a burden. This merely convinces us that the poet's passions, described elsewhere in the collection, are trivial.

But there is something much worse than empty convention lurking in the *Rime*: there is also a silliness which is apt to wreck poems which are clearly intended to be serious, a silliness of which the poet seems to have been quite unaware. It is as if he had had no candid friend to laugh at him and to help him to weed out the incongruous. When I come across poems which have the characteristic I am trying to describe, I am reminded of Speroni's remark that Trissino never showed his poems to others in order to consult them about them, but only in order that they should be admired\(^\text{10}\).

Consider this as the first quatrain of a love-poem:

\[
\text{O dolce valle, ove tra l'erbe e fiori}
\text{Talor Madonna sospirando siede,}
\text{Terra beata ove s'afferra il piede,}
\text{Che ti fa respirar di tanti odori.}
\]

If Trissino really wanted us to understand that the *tanti odori* in the air rise from the soil of that blessed spot, not from the lady's foot, he should have seen that some syntactical rearrangement was desirable, even if moving *piede* from the rhyme-position created difficulties for him.

If that kind of humourless insensitivity destroys the atmosphere of his *canzoniere* as a whole, it at least does not prevent us from rescuing the poems it does not affect (and from the *Rime* one

\(^{10}\) “Il Trissino, il quale credeva di essere il più dotto uomo del mondo, mai non mostrava le cose sue per consigliarsene con chi le vedea, ma si per far ammirare chi le vedesse” (*Opere*, Padova, 1790, Vol. IV. ‘Discorso ottavo su Virgilio’).
could make a pleasant, if very small, anthology). But it could clearly be disastrous if recurrent in a long poem, where the narrative should have some cumulative effect.

I think it is fair to conclude that some at least of the qualities of the best of the *Rime*, the technical agility and the decorum in diction, are to be connected with Trissino's theoretical preparation in his writing on versification and the reading in early Italian verse which served as a basis for his frequently questionable conclusions. The defects that mar the worst of them have nothing to do with that study.

When Trissino turned from lyric poetry to tragedy he left the tightly disciplined and well practised forms of the Italian sonnet, madrigal and *ballata* for blank verse, for in it he reserved rhymed verse for the Chorus. In form the *Sofonisba* was to be modelled on the work of Greek tragedians. For the plot, however, Trissino looked to Rome.

The Sophonisba whom he creates as the heroine of his play is based on the woman most of us recall as Sophoniba, the daughter of Hasdrubal, the Carthaginian general, in Livy's history. She was married to Syphax, King of Numidia, and turned him away from alliance with Rome in the Second Punic War. In Trissino's version, as in Livy's history, Syphax is captured by Massinissa, a Numidian prince in alliance with Rome. Livy says nothing of Sophonisba's having been promised in marriage to Massinissa before she was given to Syphax; but the Greek historians Dion Cassius and Appian said she had been, and Trissino decided to follow them (thus allowing Massinissa to make much of that promise in his later justification of his conduct to his Roman allies). For Massinissa falls under the spell of Sophonisba at their first meeting after the capture of Syphax. When she reveals to him that she would rather die than be sent to Rome to walk as a prisoner in Scipio's triumphal procession, Massinissa promptly marries her. Scarcely has he done so when Laelius arrives to rebuke him: in his view, Sophonisba on Syphax's defeat had become a captive of the Romans, who alone had the right to decide her fate. Eventually Massinissa and Laelius agree to abide by the decision of Scipio. Scipio Africanus, fully aware of the pro-Carthaginian and anti-Roman influence Sophonisba has already had on Syphax, is stern with Massinissa: she must be handed over. So Massinissa is reduced to sending her the poison which is to be her last opportunity to escape from the shame of being Rome's
prisoner. In Trissino's version, Massinissa still hopes that he may himself get to her in time to save her from death and send her away by sea to Carthage; but she has taken the poison before he arrives.

The play has some very obvious virtues. Trissino's choice of theme is suitable for tragic treatment, and he made a good selection from those episodes in the history which seemed likely to interest his audiences. There is a moving scene between Erminia and Sophonisba (11.1723-1905) and one highly dramatic confrontation between Lelio (Laelius) and Massinissa (11.881-1031). At least twice the Chorus, which uses rhymed verse, has some very good lines (11.639-51; 1125-51). There is a strict unity of action and of time. When I say that, I realise that some members of my audience will wonder what right I have to list that fact with the obvious virtues of the play. I can only answer that, if we wish to appreciate the contribution Trissino made to Italian tragedy, one of the things we should do is to read a previous attempt to write a tragedy on the same theme, for there is one: the *Sofonisba* of Galeotto del Carretto, dedicated to Isabella d'Este in 1502. That certainly suffers from lack of unity. What is more, when we have read it, although we may still not be convinced that Trissino's choice of blank verse is the only possible one for Italian tragedy, we are inclined to believe that it is a good deal better than making all the characters speak in *ottava rima*. (I mean the single characters: Galeotto's Chorus is allowed a variety of metres, presumably in order to accommodate the author's totally irrelevant sonnet on Envy.) It is difficult to find in Galeotto del Carretto anything that points in the direction of Corneille or Racine. I hasten to add that there is a vast distance between Trissino's play and the best French tragedy, for one cannot compare Trissino for dramatic tension or poetry with the major French writers, but he was clearly on the same road and travelling in the same direction. Certainly Trissino's choice of a historical subject, his use of blank verse for most of the play, his relative dignity of language (albeit with rather weak patches here and there) and his strict unity of action did provide a useful start for classical tragedy in Italy, even if Giraldi was soon to turn away from Greek models in order to

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11 Published in Venice in 1546 by Gabriel Giolito de Ferrari. See now the edition of Galeotto del Carretto's *Li sei contenti* and *La Sofonisba* edited by Mauda Bregoli-Russo (Madrid, 1982).
imitate Seneca. Moreover, since Mellin de Saint-Gelais’s adaptation of the *Sofonisba* was performed in France in 1559, his play has a recognised place, too, in the history of the French classical theatre.

And yet, when one has listed the *Sofonisba’s* obvious virtues, and given Trissino credit for having seen that imitation of Greek tragedy could give Italy an important kind of drama it previously lacked, one has to add that the *Sofonisba* is not a very good play. And the defects are really as obvious as the virtues. They are mainly flatness and lack of dramatic interest in too many scenes. Trissino achieves a reasonable degree of decorum in most of the play, and here and there some powerful lines (some of them none the worse in their context for being adaptations or translations of good lines from Greek plays)¹². But Trissino’s blank verse does not achieve the concentration of his rhymed verse, and there are places where his language has neither the strength nor the dignity the occasion demands: an example is the passage I shall shortly quote. Indeed, Trissino’s language never has the same assurance in other areas of human experience as it does when he is dealing with what the Petrarchan tradition has already dealt with. I think this must be partly due to his being a non-Tuscan author who did not speak the language he wrote and who did not have the talent to create an adequate language for those experiences not previously described and analysed in the literature he had read.

The reader of *La Italia Liberata da Gothi*, with the advantage of hindsight, is perhaps too tempted to look for bathos in the *Sofonisba*. There are, I think, some examples, but less than

¹² There is an example in the scene in which Sofonisba leaves her son to Erminia’s care:

*SOF.* Ma tu sorella mia, primieramente

   Prendi ‘l mio figiolin da la mia mano.

*ERM.* O da che cara man, che caro dono!

*(Sofonisba, 1853-5)*

Here the debt is to Euripides:

*ALCESTIS.* ἐκ τοίσδε παῖδας χειρὸς ἐξ ἐμῆς δεξιοῦ.

*ADMETUS.* δέχομαι. Φίλον γε δῶρον ἐκ Φιλῆς χειρὸς.

*(Alcestis, 375-6)*
Trissino's performance in old age would lead us to expect. One instance is, however, surely to be found in the altogether too casual language used by the Chorus in the description of Sophonisba's death which it gives in answer to Massinissa's anguished questioning:

Massinissa: O misera Regina, o sventurato, Anzi infelice matrimonio nostro. Dunque ella prese subito il veneno?
Coro: Ella nol prese già subitamente, Si come intesi, ma non stette molto.

Massinissa: Il servo, che il portò, mi disse, come L'avea posto giuso; e se n'andava A visitare in casa alcuni altari; Ond'io pensai che prender nol devesse.
Coro: E fu ben vero, ma lo prese poi, Come subitamente fe' ritorno.

Massinissa: Troppo fu presta, e ed io son stato Fuori d'ogni dever tiepido e lento, Mentre cercava via da liberarla.
Coro: Dunque le volevate dare ajuto?

But such episodes are comparatively few.

The theory which corresponds to the Sofonisba is (as Trissino makes clear in his dedication of the play to Pope Leo X) what Aristotle said about tragedy, and I therefore do not need to summarise it. Trissino wrote out most of it in the fifth and sixth divisions of his Poetica, sometimes translating, sometimes interpreting or misinterpreting. From that treatise I wish to quote only one short passage: that in which Trissino comments on his own play as an example of the kind of tragedy he is discussing, for that indicates some features he considered important and which he thought his play possessed. After giving us a summary of the action of the Sofonisba he continues:

Questa adunque è la azione, e il resto sono episodii. E però il poeta dee distendere prima la azione simplice e poi ponervi i nomi e inserirvi gli episodii. I quali episodii denno essere pochi e brevi e concenienti alla
azione, come sono ivi la venuta di Catone e il parlar di Scipione con Siface, et il sacrificio di Sofonisba et altri simili, i quali sono pochi e brevi e convenientissimi ...

It seems to me that the weaknesses of the 

Sofonisba are essentially failures of the imagination and of language in scenes that should have been more dramatic, but that some of its main virtues (economy, sobriety, unity of action) are due to strict accord between practice and theory.

When Trissino published a canzone to Clement VII and the text of his 

Sofonisba in May or June 1524 he employed in the printing the first version of a new system of spelling he had devised for Italian. This he described and defended in the Epistola del Trissino de le lettere nuovamente aggiunte ne la lingua italiana published in October or November of the same year. His use of the term lingua italiana, rather than lingua fiorentina or lingua toscana, in the title of that epistle as a description of Italy’s literary language incensed Tuscan writers even more than his suggestions for spelling reform. The attacks then made on Trissino forced him to formulate his views on the Questione della Lingua, as well as making it necessary for him to write further on spelling. He modified and added to his original orthographical proposals, and the final version of his orthography can be studied in the Dubbi grammaticali and Alfabeto of 1529.

In order that Italian orthography should be able to represent the distinctions between close and open e and close and open o, Trissino argued that two Greek letters, epsilon and omega, should be added to the alphabet. The existing e could then be used to represent the close e, while ε could indicate open e. Similarly, he suggested in 1524 that o should stand for close o, while ω could represent open o. (In the case of this second suggestion he reversed his position in 1529: then he wanted ω to be close o, since by that time he believed it to represent a closer sound in Greek, while o should represent open o.) Another of his proposals concerned the difficulty the reader of Italian has in deciding whether the letter z represents a voiced or voiceless consonant. He suggested keeping z for the voiceless consonant and using ç for the voiced. For the corresponding capitals he would use Z and ʒ. He tried, too, to

13 Giovan Giorgio Trissino, “La quinta e la sesta divisione della poetica” in Trattati di poetica e di rettorica del Cinquecento, a cura di B. Weinberg (Bari, 1970), ii. 32.
deal with the problems of distinguishing between the various sounds represented by the letters i, j, u and v. In the case of the first pair he would use i for the vowel, j for a consonant; and in the second u for the vowel and v for the consonant. In words like *kiamo, kiodo, genocki*, he used k, presumably because he felt that the sound following the consonant [k] was in these instances [r] not [l]. Arguing that no g was audible he wrote *lj* instead of *gli* for the lingual palatal, e.g. *volja*. He also raised the problem of the different sounds represented by the letter s, but did not make any clear recommendations for dealing with it.

Some of Trissino's suggestions obviously had merit. If one thinks that it is worth persisting with a seven-vowel system, then one needs some means of distinguishing between close and open e and close and open o. Similarly, it would be useful to know at a glance whether z in Italian spelling stands for a voiceless conson-

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14 In talking of a distinction between the semi-consonant [j] and the vowel [i] I am, of course, using my own terminology, not Trissino's. In relation to the use of c he distinguished three sounds: one “piu integro e chiaro”, as in *chino*; another “piu corrotto et ottuso”, as in *cino*; and a third “mezzano, fra l'acutessa de l'uno e l'ottusità de l'altro”, as in *chiave, occhi*. These descriptions of his are from his *Dubbi grammaticali*. For a discussion of their historical interest in relation to the observations of other commentators on the language, see G.C. Lepschy, “[k] e [c]” in *Saggi di linguistica italiana* (Bologna, 1978), pp. 217-229.


In the *Epistola*, Trissino lists the capital letters corresponding to the new ones he had introduced as E, Ω, Z Λ V. From this statement, in which he first clearly names the letters he refers to and then gives the equivalent capitals, we can see that at the time of writing it he thought of E as the capital of e. The reader will also deduce this from the title of the 1529 edition: *EPISTOLA DEL TRISSINO/DE LE LETTERE* ... (The words “de le” appear frequently enough in the text for us to know that he intended a close e in them.) But in the *Alfabeto of 1529*, we see that he came to regard E as the capital of e, and E as the capital of e. His vowels the were:

Aa Ee Îe Îi Îo Òo Òw Uu

Although I have given examples of Trissino's symbols in the text of this lecture, I have avoided using them in quotations and titles in order to avoid unnecessary difficulties in printing, e.g. I have written *nuovamente* not *nuovamente*. 
ant [ʦ] or a voiced one [dz]. But, in view of the anti-Tuscan attitude Trissino was assuming in the *Questione della Lingua*, it is perhaps surprising that he thought it worth the trouble to indicate open and close e and o; he might have concluded that, since these vowels have a different distribution in different regions (and since some regions manage without the distinctions that exist in Tuscan), the gain would not be great enough to justify the effort. It is certainly hardly surprising that his proposals should have had little effect and that he should have found himself on the winning side only in the matter of the distinction between u and v (a reform already suggested by L.B. Alberti in the Quattrocento, but not generally accepted in Italy until the end of the Seicento). For, to have some hope of success, he would have needed to be more selective: to choose the elements he considered really important and to advocate them strongly and consistently. It must be said, too, that his suggestions were typographically awkward. It was inept to suggest a ʒ as the capital of c; the reader would hardly regard them as representing the same sound unless he kept an explanation by him. And it was disastrous to confuse his readers by suggesting in 1524 that o should stand for open o and in 1529 that it should represent close o. It might have been more convenient to use accents, e.g. acute and grave accents, to indicate the close and open quality of vowels. (The use of accents and dots was a possibility Trissino considered in the *Epistola* and rejected on the grounds that such little things are liable to be lost). Such accents could certainly have been used to indicate stress, an important feature of pronunciation for the indication of which Italian orthography made (and still makes) inadequate provision. To the solution of that problem Trissino made no contribution, although it should surely be included in any important reform of Italian spelling.

Printing in the Italian language had begun eight years before Trissino's birth. When the trickle of volumes that appeared in the seventies of the fifteenth century became a flood in the first quarter of the sixteenth, writers were forced to think about their linguistic practice. In an Italy which did not have a common spoken tongue, what kind of effort could give them a suitable literary language? Bembo published in his *Prose della volgar lingua* in 1525 an unequivocal answer: one could learn to write well by writing "with the style of Boccaccio and of Petrarch" ("con lo stile del Boccaccio e del Petrarca"), prose like...
Boccaccio's, verse like Petrarch's. In other words, he advocated a language based on a literary elaboration of fourteenth-century Florentine. Others were prepared to admit the supremacy of Florentine, or at least of Tuscan, but rejected the archaizing attitude implied in too rigid an adherence to fourteenth-century models. Others again sought more eclectic solutions, some of them favouring a lingua cortigiana, a language which could be based on the speech of cultivated people from various parts of Italy who gathered in court society, particularly the papal court, and whose language could be expected to have a broader base than Tuscan. The very title of Trissino's Epistola de le lettere nuovamente aggiunte ne la lingua italiana showed his anti-Tuscan attitude. A. Firenzuola's reply was entitled Discacciamento de le nuove lettere inutilmente aggiunte ne la lingua toscana. Ludovico Martelli's Risposta alla Epistola del Trissino was rather more polite, but it showed that he, too, was angered by use of the term "Italian" to describe a literary language he regarded as "Florentine" or "Tuscan".

Trissino replied fully in Il Castellano, which purports to be an account written by one Arrigo Doria of a discussion of Trissino's Epistola which took place in Rome. The main speakers in the dialogue are Giovanni Rucellai, castellan of Castel Sant'Angelo, who defends Trissino's Epistola and puts forward his views on the Questione della Lingua, and Filippo Strozzi, who puts the Florentine case, often echoing the arguments of Martelli's Risposta. Rucellai's defence of Trissino depends on the distinctions he makes between genus, species and individual. The person to whom he is speaking, he argues, is Filippo Strozzi as an individual, he belongs to the species Man, and to the genus Animal. When people from other countries talk about the language spoken in Italy, they call it Italian. This is the genus, Tuscan the species, Forentine the equivalent of the individual. Strozzi then attempts to approach the question historically. Writers must take their language from spoken usage. Since Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio were all Florentines, their language was Florentine or Tuscan. And because the first writers in Italy had been Florentine and Tuscan, the language of literature was based on Tuscan. Rucellai gets round this point by demanding to know whether "first" is used in a chronological sense in this argument. When Strozzi is too conveniently made to say that it does, Rucellai finds it easy to list poets who wrote before Dante and Petrarch and
who lived in other regions than Tuscany, like Guido Guinizzelli of Bologna or the poets of the Sicilian school. He then maintains that the works of Dante and Petrarch are closer to the writings of these non-Tuscan predecessors than to the work of those who have written in pure Florentine, like Burchiello, Matteo Franco or Luigi Pulci: Petrarch avoided the excessively particular (i.e. Florentine) in favour of the general. In reply, Strozzi urges that the writings of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio should be shown to people in the countryside around Ferrara, or Vicenza, or Genoa: there they would not be understood, but near Florence they would be. Rucellai reverts to variations on the themes of genus, species and individual. If we consider human speech as a genus, we can divide it into species, e.g. Italian, Greek, Hebrew. But if we consider each of these as a genus, we can divide it into species: the genus Italian can be divided into Sicilian, Tuscan, Venetian, each of which has peculiarities of pronunciation, idiom and vocabulary. But each of these in turn could be considered a genus divided into species, e.g. Tuscan divided into Florentine, Sienese, Lucchese, Pisan, Aretine, and so on. And each of these could be considered a genus and divided into species, "come la lingua Fiorentina si divide in lingua Certaldese, in Pratese, de Lancise, S. Miniatese, de la Città, e simili". But each of these units could be divided into contrade, and then those into households, and those into individuals. For we all have linguistic peculiarities. There are even some differences distinguishing his speech from that of his brother Palla. But if those differences were removed, Palla and he would have a common language. Similarly, if the differences that distinguished S. Miniato, Certaldo and other such places were removed, one would be left with a common Florentine. A similar process of elimination would yield a common Tuscan. Finally, if we removed the pronunciations, idioms and words that distinguished Sicilian, Apulian, Tuscan, Romagnol, and the other regional languages of Italy, should we not have a common Italian? A man who mixed Florentine and Lucchese could not be said to be speaking either Florentine or Lucchese, but he could be described as speaking Tuscan. Similarly, a man who mingled Florentine and Roman could be described as speaking Italian. (He does not tell us whether a man mingling Sicilian and Neapolitan, or Piedmontese and Lombard, would equally be speaking Italian). Unfortunately, when Rucellai returns from this exercise in logic to concrete examples, it is to make an assertion which must have
been difficult for Trissino's readers to believe. In order to counter Strozzi's claim that the language of Dante and Petrarch would not be naturally understood in other regions than Tuscany, he simply states the opposite: "Anzi, più vi dirò: ch'el Petrarca meglio s'intende in Lombardia che in Fiorenza ..." He goes on to point out that Petrarch's language has been best studied and illustrated by scholars from outside Tuscany (a rather different matter), and he praises the Italian style of some contemporary non-Tuscan authors, notably Bembo and Sannazzaro. He also seems to suggest that there had once been a common Italian which had been lost, for, when discussing the problem of reading Petrarch, he alleges that that poet is better understood by women, who are more conservative of linguistic purity, than by men. Then comes the argument from vocabulary: since there are words in Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio that are not Florentine, their language cannot fairly be called Florentine: it must be called Italian. Finally, there is an appeal to authority. Trissino had brought Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* to the attention of sixteenth-century writers and translated it into Italian. Rucellai interprets Dante's arguments in support of a *vulgare illustre* that was courtly and common, not identifiable with one dialect, but containing elements common to several, as supporting Trissino's argument for a common and national Italian for the use of Cinquecento writers.

The fundamental weakness of Trissino's argument in *Il Castellano* stems from the use he makes of the distinction between genus, species and individual. This leads him to speak as if there had been a common Italian language to which Piedmontese, Calabrian or Sard bore the same relationship as Tuscan: they would all be equally species of the genus Italian. Moreover, the manner in which he claimed that Lombard ladies, because of their linguistic conservatism, could understand Petrarch, suggested that they had possessed a common or national form of Italian. But, of course, there never had been a common Italian language which had become divided into Piedmontese, Sardinian, Tuscan, and so on. What had happened was that Latin, variously spoken in the various regions of Italy, had developed into a large number of Italian dialects, and that the literary language in use in Trissino's day was based on an adaptation for literature of *one* of those dialects, that of Florence. As Machiavelli emphasised in other words, a phonological and morphological examination of the
literary language and the form of most of its vocabulary would show its Florentine origin. Trissino was, of course, right to point out that there were non-Florentine elements in the literary language, but these were certainly not such as to put other dialects into the same relationship to it as Florentine. He was also wrong to make use of the argument of the *De vulgari eloquentia* without any allowances for differences between Dante's search for a *vulgare illustre* for certain special purposes and his own and his contemporaries' quest for a language suitable for literature in Italy in the Cinquecento.

Yet, behind Trissino's arguments were some sound observations and some sound instincts. He was right to point out that no linguistic community, however small, is homogeneous, and he grasped the principle that the literary language is bound to develop into something different from the dialect of one city or one region. Moreover, his fundamental ambition was surely a healthy one: that Italy should achieve a more broadly-based literary language. But the Italy in which he lived was divided into several states: it had no political capital, and there was no hope that a common spoken tongue could develop. Bembo had seen that in those circumstances he could point the way to the achievement of a common literary language by providing Italian writers in different parts of the peninsula with a guide to a language they could study in the way in which they studied Latin or Greek. To adopt the language of the great Florentine writers of the Trecento as a basis was to suffer some of the disadvantages of using a dead language, as Parini and many others were later to note. But this course had great practical advantages. A common literary language could be acquired by study of Bembo's *Prose*

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16 I am assuming here that the *Discorso over Dialogo circa la lingua fiorentina* is by Machiavelli. Doubt was cast on both the date usually assumed to be that of its composition and the attribution of it to Machiavelli by C. Grayson, "Machiavelli e Dante. Per la data e l'attribuzione del Dialogo intorno alla lingua" in *Studi e problemi di critica testuale*, ii (1971), 5-28. The attribution to Machiavelli was defended by F. Chiappelli, *Machiavelli e la 'lingua fiorentina'* (Bologna, 1974). Other important contributions came from C. Dionisotti, "Machiavelli e la lingua fiorentina" in his volume *Machiavellerie* (Turin, 1980), pp. 267-363, and O. Castellani Polidori, *N. Machiavelli e il Dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua* (Firenze, 1978). I accept Professor Grayson's argument that the dialogue does not belong to the years 1514 or 1515 and could not have been written before 1524-5; it seems to me to be clearly an answer to what Trissino wrote in 1524 and the use he made of Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*. 
della volgar lingua (or grammars based on that work and its theory) and by judicious imitation of the authors Bembo recommended (principally Petrarch for verse and Boccaccio for prose). This task was to be further facilitated in due course by the publication of a dictionary compiled on Bembist principles: the Vocabolario della Crusca of 1612. Centuries later, when Italy became one nation, the situation was transformed. Then the Italian literary language, based on fourteenth-century Florentine, but with additions from other dialects and other languages, became increasingly used outside Tuscany, and no longer merely as a vehicle for literature. It has, in the period following unification, consequently become increasingly deflorentinised, detuscanised, and it is still rapidly absorbing non-Florentine contributions. In these new circumstances, Trissino’s basic ideal (that of a language more broadly based than Tuscan and really Italian) can be of interest once again. His linguistic theories, in that respect at least, are more relevant to our time than they were to his own. On the other hand, it should be added that in his own time some of Trissino’s arguments, like those in which he pointed out how well some non-Tuscan writers like Bembo and Sannazaro had written in Italian, and those in which he indicated the need for a literary language broader than the dialect of one city, were at least an encouragement to other non-Tuscan authors. That they did not fall on deaf ears is obvious if we read the comments on language of such practitioners as Bandello.

I think I should not conceal from you another comment on Trissino’s linguistic theories, of a kind rather different from my own. In the Archivio di Stato at Florence among the Strozzi papers is a letter from Bernardo di messer Giorgio to Cardinal Salviati, written in March 1525, giving him an account of affairs at Rome. Salviati is informed that the mind of Giovanni Rucellai, castellan of Castel Sant’Angelo, is now wandering. This Rucellai

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17 The arguments of Trissino’s Castellano are clearly echoed by Bandello in the preface to Part III of his Novelle. There, having defended himself for not having written in Tuscan, he writes: “Se la lingua tosca mi fosse natia o apparata l’avessi, molto volentieri usata l’averei, perciò che conosco quella esser molto castigata e bella. Nondimeno per quello che a me ne paia, il coltissimo ed inimitabile messer Francesco Petrarca, che fu toscano, ne le sue rime volgari non si truova aver usate due o tre voci pure toscane, perché tutti i suoi poemi sono contesti di parole italiane, communi per lo più a tutte le nazioni d’Italia” (Tutte le opere di Matteo Bandello a cura di Francesco Flora (Milano, 1943) ii. 248.)
is, of course, the one whom Trissino used as mouthpiece for his linguistic doctrines in *Il Castellano*. The writer of the letter attributes the castellan's unhappy mental condition to his acceptance of Trissino's view on the need to distinguish in writing between close and open vowels. The relevant passage reads:

... Non Lascérò di dire a V.S.R.ma che quelli maladetti o chiusi et o aperti hanno avuto tanta forza, che hanno cavato messer Giovanni Rucellai del seminato; el quale di idropisi et febre sta in modo che di lui non ci è speranza; e si pensa che fra due giorni habbi a terminare la vita e il fantasticare. Ha humori melancolici bellissimi; e quali, secondo si intende, li fanno dire di belle cose ... 18.

And there follows a report in cruel detail of one of the comic scenes in which his derangement apparently abounded. Trissino's own old age was to be marked, not by madness, but by a kind of senile fussiness, an unbearable preoccupation with repeated explanation of the obvious in clear, simple language, frequently in blank verse. He tells us, in his dedication of the work to the Emperor Charles V, that he laboured for twenty years to produce the twenty-seven books of *La Italia Liberata*. In it he strove to follow the precepts of Aristotle and the example of Homer: "Mi sono sforzato servar le regole d'Aristotle, il quale elessi per Maestro, si come tolsi Omero per Duce, e per Idea". Trissino boasts, too, that he has made use of nearly everything written in Latin and Greek in order to acquire the knowledge necessary to write it: "... mi è stato necessario rivolgere quasi tutti i libri della lingua Greca, e Latina, per cavare da essi gli ammaestramenti, le istorie, le dottrine, e i fiori che in essi ho riposti." And that pride in his own learning is one of the major sources of his readers' distress. In letters accompanying the gift of certain books of his poem to Charles V and to Ferrante Gonzaga, Trissino emphasised what they could learn about the art of war from the *Italia Liberata*, and he took pains in the preparation of maps and plans to illustrate the action. His main effort, in fact, seems to have gone into the collection of historical detail; the narration is an after-thought, and unbearably pedestrian in most of the twenty-seven books. The principal action is strictly

historical: Trissino takes us back to the time of Justinian and reports the campaign of Belisarius against the Goths. When the imagination is allowed to fill out the detail, it is frequently with an excruciating concentration on the trivial: when the warriors sit down to a banquet, Trissino emphasises that they all wash their hands first. One of the richest sources of bathos in the poem is his imitation from Homer and Virgil of the intervention of the gods. Trissino has to fit this into a Christian context. His way of doing so gives us angels managing divine intervention on God's behalf and doing so in such a way as to help both sides and to leave us with the impression that Trissino's God, although almighty, either seems inexplicably ill-informed for much of the time about what goes on in His name or neglects His business. Not only are the angels disconcertingly unscrupulous in the way they frustrate each others' plans; the Blessed Virgin herself seems malevolent and bloodthirsty. Consider the speeches in which she implores God to wreak vengeance on Christian soldiers who have behaved unworthily and He replies. The Virgin ends her request with these words:

Piacciavi dare ai perfidi Ariani,
Che fan guerra con loro, ardire, e forza
Tanta, che faccian qualche orribil strage
De le lor crude, e scelerate membra;
E così farete voi alta vendetta.
De i miei nemici co i nemici vostri (Book X).

God answers that He can deny her nothing. There is, of course, the disadvantage that what she requests will result in harm to many innocent wretches, but He will see to it all the same:

Udito questo, il Re de l'Universo
Seco si strinse, e sospirando disse.
Diletta mia madre, ch'aveste tante
Fatiche in parturirmi, et allevarmi
Non vuol, che posso dinegarvi alcuna
Cosa, che'io veda a voi gioconda, e grata.
E d'altro non mi duol, se non ch'io scorgo,
Che nel punir questi cattivi, è forza
Far male a molti miseri innocenti;
Ma sia come si voglia, i' son per farlo.
Adunque eseguirem ciò che v'aggrada (Book X).
Here God Himself is trivialized, and there is bathos of a kind all too common in what should have been the great scenes of this epic. For the style of this quotation is not untypical. In an attempt to write a simple narrative Italian, Trissino has adopted a language which is hopelessly commonplace, feeble and colourless, and which fails to rise to anything more powerful even when God Himself is being described. As a result, the whole content loses interest, and the reader cannot feel that anything important or urgent is being presented to him. Indeed, so little energy or imagination is there in the use of language that the narration not infrequently becomes lengthy abuse of enumeration, as in Amuleo's description of Rome to Belisario:

La città nostra è popolosa tanto,
Che in due superbi amfiteatri, e grandi,
In due famosi circi, in tre teatri,
Che avemo, il popo1 vi capisce appena;
Ed ha sette bei ponti, e sette colli,
Et otto campi grandi, undeci fori,
E trentasette spaziose logge,
Quattordecì acquedotti, undeci terme
E vintinove biblioteche ...

And so the list continues down to

Quarantacinque lupanari, e mille
E trecento e cinquanta ameni laghi ... (Book X).

There are some pleasant passages in the poem, mainly in the romantic digressions (although these are generally austere and dull in comparison with Ariosto's or Tasso's). It is also incidentally interesting to note that Trissino, in a century full of Petrarchists, still held fast to a belief in the primacy of Dante:

E voltiam gli occhi al monte de le Muse,
Vedi quel, che è là presso a la cima.
Colui fia Dante, mastro de la lingua,
Ch'allor l'Italia nomerà materna;
Questo dipingerà con le sue rime
Divinamente tutta quella etade (Book IX).
Petrarch, though in second place, is still considered supreme in love-poetry:

L’altro, che siegue lui, sarà il Petrarca
Che con bel stile, e con parole dolci
Descriverà quegli amorosi effetti,
Che desta amor ne gli animi gentili;
Vincendo ogni altro, che già mai ne scrisse (Book IX).

But nothing can save the poem as a whole, and there are few lines in it which seem in their context so apt to the reader as these in Book XXIV:

Or dopo questo è ben ch’io ponga fine
A le parole mie troppo prolisse.

How could a man who studied Aristotle on heroic poetry and who took Homer as his model produce the Italia Liberata? The main and obvious answer, I suppose, is that Trissino managed to do so by not possessing either the imagination or the command of language necessary to sustain our interest in a long narrative poem. But it is not unfair to note, if only in addition to that, that he also broke the rules he himself deduced from his reading of Aristotle and set down in the Poetica:

... E parimente le favole in esso eroico denno essere di una sola azione perfetta e grande, la quale abbia principio, mezzo e fine, come nella tragedia abbiamo detto ... E non sia simile alle storie, nelle quali non si fa dimostrazione di una sola azione ma di un solo tempo nel quale siano diverse azioni comprese, le quali non tendono ad un medesimo fine ... E però ancora in questo appare Omero essere stato più d’ogni altro meraviglioso, per non si aver posto a scrivere tutta la guerra troiana, quantunque ella avesse principio, mezzo e fine. Perciò che sarebbe stato poema ed azione di immensa grandezza, tal che non si sarebbe potuto insieme tutto ben comprendere si come ora si fa essendo di grandezza mediocre e mescolata di molta varietà ...

Torquato Tasso, who studied Trissino’s practice and theory sympathetically, was indebted to him for more than just the title Gerusalemme Liberata; he also learned what to avoid. He grasped the full significance of Aristotle’s statement, repeated by Trissino,

19 Trattati di poetica e di rettorica del Cinquecento, a cura di B. Weinberg (Bari, 1970), ii. 45-6.
that Homer did not cover all the Trojan war; and he realised, too, that for variety a long poem needed a far greater proportion of the non-military aspects of life than Trissino had allowed.

Trissino’s aims in his comedy, the *Simillimi*, he clearly stated in the dedication. Although he has looked to Plautus for the idea of his plot, he has attempted to write in the manner of Aristophanes. He has tried to give back to the Chorus the place it had in the Old Comedy, for he agrees with Horace in deploring its loss. He has also removed the prologue: “vi ho ancora, secondo il costume de gli antichi Greci levato il Prologo, e ho fatto narrare lo argomento a le prime persone, che in essa parleranno ...” It is a tolerable comedy, but not lively or comic enough to be remembered, except for one feature: the best thing in it by far is a little composition in rhyme *Vento, vento marino*, written for the Chorus, which is excellent light verse. The play’s main defect is its lack of comic language, and it confirms a very acute observation on the difficulties of non-Florentine authors which Machiavelli once made when he criticised Ariosto’s comedies. Their plot was clever, he said, but, since he was writing in Italian, Ariosto could not exploit the popular speech of the region in which he lived. Had he done so, he would have been mixing foreign-sounding (Ferrarese) words and phrases with literary Italian, words and phrases which Florentines and other non-Ferrarese would not understand. But the popular speech of his region was the only popular speech he knew well. If he could not use it, then he was confined to the more academic language he had acquired from the study of Tuscan literature. Trissino also suffered from the difficulties of writing a language very different from that he had been brought up to speak (even if his reading in Tuscan and non-Tuscan authors was wide) and without having as much power of comic invention to compensate for it as Ariosto.

Giangiorgio Trissino, a man of great ambition, considerable learning and modest literary abilities, was quick to spot the gaps in Italian literature and indefatigable in his attempts to fill them. But the kinds of work he thought that Italy needed were not those he was equipped to write. That he made an important contribution to Italian literature by his advocacy of the use of blank verse is undeniable: others who came after him could write versi sciolti with poetic qualities. Within a few years Tasso had used fine blank

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20 In the *Discorso over Dialogo circa la lingua fiorentina*. See n. 14 above.
verse in *Il mondo creato*, where it doubtless came to the attention of Milton. But Trissino himself only wrote well in rhymed verse. Indeed, his talents were those of a writer of light verse in the traditional forms of the Italian lyric, and it is arguable that of all his theoretical works, the one which proved most useful to him in his own writing was that part of his *Poetica* in which he surveyed Italian metres and poetic forms, and that less for his conclusions than for the splendid collection of examples of Italian practice. However, it is also true that, with the aid of Greek models and Aristotelian theory, he succeeded in writing a passable tragedy, which, without being itself a very good play, helped to attract other writers to a kind of tragedy that was to prove fruitful in European literature. His attempt at epic in blank verse was disastrous, for he needed the discipline of short and strict poetic forms and the aid of an established poetic vocabulary in order to write well; without them in the heroic poem he proved capable only of endlessly repetitive discourse, lacking concentration and colour. His linguistic writings (*Il Castellano* and the grammatical treatises), while not of a kind which could lead to a satisfactory literary language in the conditions of his own time, contained some valid observations and some arguments which were at least encouraging to all non-Tuscan writers of Italian. His worst work, the *Italia Liberata*, together with the theorizing related to it, attracted the interest of another non-Tuscan poet, this time a great one, Torquato Tasso. As a result of that interest, it is doubtful if Trissino's modest successes will ever be remembered as clearly as his exemplary failure.