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Beheading the Hydra: Antonio Castelvetro, The Congregation of the Index, and an Imagined Future for Print Censorship

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Abstract: In 1587, Antonio Castelvetro, a little-known physician from a well-known Modenese family, circulated a manuscript treatise that proposed a radical new vision for a Catholic press and a reformed system of press censorship: *The Brief Treatise on the Reform of the Press* (*Trattato breve sopra la riforma della stampa*). Historians have typically treated this text with a combination of amusement and outright ridicule, but this essay explains the ways that Castelvetro's text captured a particular ethos of expertise and reform at the end of the sixteenth century in Italy. Although never implemented, Castelvetro's treatise represents a moment of creative tactics in confrontation with the hydra of print. Censorship lay firmly within the project of the Counter-Reformation—a response directed at undermining and controlling the immediate and long-term effects of religious upheaval across Europe. However, systemic solutions to managing the press were part of the creative process of Catholic Reform. As Castelvetro's treatise shows, some of these suggestions were more far-fetched and self-aggrandizing than others, but each contributed to a flourishing landscape of ideas aimed at combatting heresy and restructuring Catholic life.

Keywords: censorship; Counter-Reformation; Antonio Castelvetro; Modena; expertise; medicine; heresy; Sixtus V; Tommaso Garzoni



Citation: Marcus, Hannah. 2023. Beheading the Hydra: Antonio Castelvetro, The Congregation of the Index, and an Imagined Future for Print Censorship. *Religions* 14: 620. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050620>

Academic Editors: Diego Pirillo and John Christopoulos

Received: 11 July 2022

Revised: 20 January 2023

Accepted: 23 February 2023

Published: 6 May 2023



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1. Introduction

In 1587, Antonio Castelvetro, a little-known physician from a well-known Modenese family, circulated a manuscript treatise that proposed a radical new vision for a Catholic press and a reformed system of press censorship. *The Brief Treatise on the Reform of the Press* (*Trattato breve sopra la riforma della stampa*) sprawls across 40 manuscript pages, drawing allusions between medicine, censorship, mythology, and holy war. The press was, in Castelvetro's view, a multi-headed hydra that needed to be combatted on several fronts. Due to Castelvetro's unwieldy suggestions and unabashed self-promotion, historians have treated this text with a combination of amusement and outright ridicule. Most recently, Peter Godman described Castelvetro's vision as "veering between elation and denunciation, pomposity and dementia," having "the starkness of delirium," and standing "in the same relationship to Sixtus V's [censorship] project as a parody to the original" (2000, pp. 88–89).¹ Paul Grendler, Jean-Robert Armogathe, and Vincent Carraud have more helpfully, though cursorily, placed Castelvetro's treatise alongside other suggestions for the project of press censorship from scholars and ecclesiastics in the late 16th century (Grendler 1977; Armogathe and Carraud 2007).

In this essay, I argue that Castelvetro's treatise is more than diverting a blip on the historical radar. His *Trattato breve* is a robust, if self-serving, articulation of the belief that lay scholars served an essential role in Catholic censorship practices and press reform. Remarkably, the treatise survives in three copies from the period conserved in the Archives of the Roman Inquisition and Index, the Vatican Secret Archive, and the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice.² An eighteenth-century text suggests that Castelvetro sent a copy in his own hand to Cardinal Aldobrandini and to the Pope before traveling to Rome to present his

proposal to Sixtus V in person (Tiraboschi 1786, p. 612). Castelvetro's treatise ambitiously reimagined the role of professional expertise in Catholic society. In so doing, he placed special emphasis on how censorship and reform of the press could combat heresy and reconfigure the Catholic world. For Castelvetro, the project of censorship was not limited only to ecclesiastical authorities but should also rest in the hands of learned lay experts. Ultimately, Castelvetro's treatise vividly epitomizes the far-reaching impacts of printed books and the ambitious goals of early modern Catholic thinkers to creatively bring the many-headed hydra of the press under ecclesiastical control.

2. Situating the Author

Antonio Castelvetro was a physician and nobleman from Modena, a city in the papal states about 40 km northwest of Bologna. The Castelvetro family of Modena was quite famous and was very closely involved in censorship proceedings in the second half of the seventeenth century, though usually as the censored, not the censor. Lodovico Castelvetro, the famous poetic commentator, was declared a heretic by the Inquisition in Modena and then lived the rest of his life in exile in Geneva, Lyon, and Vienna (Marchetti and Patrizi 1979). Lodovico Castelvetro was joined in exile in Geneva by his two nephews Lelio, who was later burnt at the stake as a heretic, and Giacomo, who escaped the Venetian Inquisition thanks to the intervention of an English ambassador and then lived the rest of his life in exile (Biondi 1979b; Firpo 1979; Pirillo 2018, pp. 119–41, 153–62). Giacomo Castelvetro eventually married Thomas Erastus's widow and was involved in publishing a number of books, from which his name was later expurgated by careful Catholic readers.³

Although Antonio Castelvetro's family included several high-profile Protestants, he appears to have been a faithful Catholic who was deeply devoted to the Church. Like Giovanni, the elder brother of Lelio, and Giacomo, who denounced his brother to the Inquisition in Modena, it is tempting to see Antonio Castelvetro's involvement in reforming the press as a kind of expiation for his family's very public betrayal of the Catholic Church (Toppetta 2019, pp. 318–19; Biondi 1979a). Speculation aside, we do have a few early memories and records of Antonio. According to the eighteenth-century local historian Girolamo Tiraboschi, he was "excellent in every type of Letters, especially in Greek" (Tiraboschi 1781, p. 430). Aside from the treatise on censorship, Castelvetro left behind no other published documents, though Giovan Battista Spaccini, the tireless chronicler of Modena, did reproduce a poem that Castelvetro delivered in praise of Cardinal Alessandro d'Este when he passed through Modena in March 1599 to buy two houses (Spaccini 1993, p. 221). Castelvetro died in November 1612, and aside from the lengthy treatise on the subject of press censorship, we have no other information directly about him.

There is, however, a collection of documents in the archives of the Congregation of the Index of Prohibited books in Rome about the expurgation of the works of Lodovico Castelvetro, which point to the continued involvement of orthodox, Catholic members of the family in the censorship of Lodovico's work and legacy (Fraginito 2005, pp. 121–22; Fraginito 2019; Caravale 2022).⁴ As early as 1597, expurgations of the works of Castelvetro were underway in Modena (ACDF Index V, f. 117). In 1599, the inquisitor of Modena, Giovanni da Montefalcone, alerted the Congregation of the Index in Rome that relatives of Lodovico Castelvetro had asked him to review some manuscript poetry so that they could consider printing it (ACDF Index III, v. IV, f. 117). In 1601, the new inquisitor, Arcangelo Calbetti da Recanati, sent an update that he was picking up the unfinished work of his predecessor, noting that the Castelvetro relatives had "many works written in pen by this author [Lodovico Castelvetro] stored in their houses" (ACDF Index III, v. VII, f. 185). Calbetti went on to convene a congregation to review and expurgate these works with the bishop Gasparo Silingardi and ten other theologians and canonists (ACDF Index III, v. VII, f. 188–89). In the same period, another censor in Florence, Baccio Gherardini, had been tasked with expurgating Castelvetro's *Poetica* (ACDF Index II, v. O, f. 410). Members of the Castelvetro family remained committed to the processes of expurgatory censorship in the

decades that followed Antonio Castelvetro's treatise, and it is likely that he played a part in these efforts.

There is remarkably little information about Antonio Castelvetro's career as a physician, and most of what we know is gleaned from absence rather than presence. In 1599, the Paduan physician Marcantonio Olmo, who taught at the University of Bologna, published a collection of works about beards with a printer in Modena (Olmo 1599). Among the short, miscellaneous texts reproduced in the volume is a letter addressed to Antonio Castelvetro, which refers to him as a Modenese nobleman, philosopher, and physician (Olmo 1599, pp. 51–52). The letter is primarily an exchange of information about Helena Antonia of Liege, a dwarf and bearded woman at the court of Maria of Austria. Castelvetro suggested that Gisbertus Vossius, a physician he knew, would send him a picture of her if Olmo wanted (Olmo 1599, p. 52). Olmo responded that he did indeed want a copy of the image—perhaps the very same copy that circulated in the collections of Ulisse Aldrovandi—though Olmo noted he had already purchased a copper engraving of Helena in Brescia (Olmi and Tomasi 2011, pp. 141–42). This exchange sheds light on the extent to which Castelvetro was part of the exchange of information and evidence in the medical republic of letters. Olmo's letter also suggested that if Castelvetro decided to have the portrait reprinted rather than wait for the image from Vossius, he should be sure to pass on Olmo's own greetings to the Inquisitor of Modena when he took the pages to have them checked before printing (Olmo 1599, p. 54). In addition to sending greetings to the inquisitor, Castelvetro's poem in praise of a visiting cardinal also indicates that he was, at least locally, well respected for his learning, and his family's fame was not entirely tarnished by the Protestant inclinations of many of its members.

These details from Castelvetro's life indicate that we should understand him to be one of the physicians in late sixteenth-century Italy who was deeply connected to ecclesiastical authority and invested in the projects of early modern Catholicism. Like Ulisse Aldrovandi, Castelvetro had personal relationships with local ecclesiastical officials. Castelvetro's fellow Modenese physician, Giovanbattista Codronchi, would submit expurgations of prohibited medical texts to Roman censors in the 1590s and early 1600s, as would the physician and historian from Ravenna, Girolamo Rossi (Marcus 2020, pp. 78–130). Since these other three physicians all published, and some of them extensively, we can assume that Castelvetro was less well-known in his own day, in addition to ours.

3. The *Trattato Breve*

Castelvetro's treatise survives in three copies, two of which are held in archives in the Vatican and the third in Venice. My analysis here is based on my own transcription of the copy in the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, though my notes will point to the version that Peter Godman published so that others can more easily consult the text (ACDF Index II, v. P, f. 114–43; Godman 2000, pp. 376–404). Linguistically, the text toggles between Italian and Latin, and the translations from both languages are my own. Castelvetro's text began with a reflection on the past. Italy's important cities gained the "first position" in arms, letters, agriculture, navigation, and commerce—and Rome in particular through arms and agriculture—but also through the blood of Christ, who had as his weapon the word of God (Godman 2000, pp. 376–77). In this sense, Castelvetro's vision presents a surprising twist on the usual description of Rome's power as faith and learning (Grafton 1993, p. 45). For Castelvetro, the learning itself was a metaphorical weapon.

According to Castelvetro, abuses of the press had led to the Reformation.⁵ It was now urgently necessary to reform printing to the great utility and benefit of the papacy (Godman 2000, pp. 377–78).⁶ Quoting extensively from the Fifth Lateran Council's decrees on printing, Castelvetro highlighted how the press meant that many books could be had at little expense.⁷ This gave men the opportunity to educate themselves. However, it also led to scandal as people proceeded to lapse into error both in faith and in their lives and morals. The Fifth Lateran Council rightly noted that this error "has often given rise to various scandals ... and there is daily fear that even greater scandals are developing"

(Godman 2000, p. 377). The Fifth Lateran Council also established that books printed in Rome needed first to be licensed by the Master of the Sacred Palace, and in other localities, needed to be approved in writing by the bishop or local appointee. All this was necessary, in the words of the Council, “so that thorns do not grow up with the good seed or poisons become mixed with the medicine.” Castelvetro clearly understood the early decrees on censorship. Elsewhere in the treatise, he also discussed more recent institutions of censorship, including the decrees of the Council of Trent, the Index of Prohibited Books, and even the Congregation of the Index that had been created to oversee its functioning.

After the foray into past censorship projects, Castelvetro’s individual voice appears prominently in the first person. “Since I have meditated on and practiced this reform for many years,” he began, “I can remedy in a brief time the abuses of the press and reform it in all the Catholic Church” (Godman 2000, p. 378). Castelvetro presented himself as particularly well-informed and well-positioned to weigh in on the state of affairs in 1587. Through his contemplation of censorship and its past decrees and through his present engagement with the systems of censorship—perhaps in relation to members of his own family—Castelvetro had established a degree of expertise and authority. Additionally, Castelvetro’s use of the term remedy to fix the situation was highly intentional. Castelvetro was drawing on the linguistic possibilities offered by the metaphors of medical cures, a set of tropes to which Catholic officials would also turn repeatedly.⁸ His role as a physician also prepared him to heal the infection of heresy in his beloved Church. In fact, he deployed this language repeatedly in the lengthy introduction to his solutions to the problems of the press. Describing the problems of the present treatment plan, Castelvetro explained that since the press was suffering from “a universal infection, the inquisitors deputized could not help universally, since they could not apply the medicine in each location [that was affected]”. Moreover, he forcefully stated, “Because the nature of the sickness has not been well understood, instead measures have been taken to remedy the effects and not to remove the cause.” (Godman 2000, p. 385)

Thus, Castelvetro appointed himself as healer extraordinaire ready to propose a fix to what he saw as the most insidious evil facing society. What was the etiology of this disease that Castelvetro sought to cure? Castelvetro here drew on mythology. “Some, to explain in a word the nature of this disease, would call it a Hydra, depicted as a serpent with many heads, that occupied and infected a very great and fertile country, which we will heal” (Godman 2000, p. 384). The problem with the hydra was that each effort that had been made in the past had cut off one head, but still, for each that was removed, “seven more were hiding,” and because of this, the infection continued to grow. Castelvetro went still further, playing on the similarity between the feminine “heads” (*teste*) and the masculine “text” (*testo*), suggesting that the hydra of print had many heads because, for each text of a book, print made sure that there were a thousand copies (Godman 2000, p. 384). How could the Catholic Church defeat the hydra? Castelvetro, riffing a bit on traditional mythology, explained, “Your Holiness [that is Pope Sixtus V], you are the real Hercules and with your supreme authority you can extinguish the Hydra” (Godman 2000, p. 386). Hercules was a common comparison for rulers in this period, and Henry IV’s defeat of the Catholic League occasioned fascinating political uses of this story and imagery (Van Der Linden 2017, pp. 151–53). Sixtus was more rarely likened to Hercules, though his image appears in a fresco in the Salone Sistino of the Vatican Library with a quotation likening him to Hercules (Mandel 1994, pp. 79–80). Sixtus was closely involved in the selection of scenes and themes for the Salone Sistino, a project that was intended to emphasize the doctrinal purity of the Church within the space of the newly expanded library (Frascarelli 2012, p. 232). What Hercules was to the Lerna, Sixtus would be to the proliferation of heresy in the long aftermath of the Reformation.

Ultimately, Castelvetro thought that a strong papacy under the leadership of Sixtus V was the antidote to the press, which had turned into a monster. Interestingly, once Castelvetro reached the stage of his treatise where he began proposing solutions, he no longer employed medical metaphors or terminology. Instead, he turned to pragmatic steps

that would increase the utility of printing for the Church and would save the papacy huge sums of money.⁹ Castelvetro proposed doing away with the many congregations of the proliferating Catholic bureaucracy and instead consolidating the licensure of new printing in Rome under a single cardinal. Ecclesiastics and laymen in colleges would spearhead the time-consuming task of expurgation, or selectively censoring texts, a process that was underway in a haphazard form at the time Castelvetro was writing and would only be formalized in 1596 as part of the enactment of the Clementine Index (Fagnito 2001). These teams of censors would form what Castelvetro described as a “universal seminary of every nation.” It would draw from the men in religious orders who were “obliged to read, interpret, preach, and defend the word of god.” More radically, Castelvetro imagined this college would be full of the men who came to Rome from all over the world either as exiles from their homes or those who left to study in Italy’s many important universities (Godman 2000, p. 397). These men would “purge the infected books,” with Castelvetro drawing a connection once again between medicine and censorship. Castelvetro’s expression “purgare i libri infetti” is interesting because, elsewhere, he uses the more common “espurgare” to talk about expurgation. In this passage, he is intentionally drawing attention to the lay role in the enterprise with his medical language.

Interestingly, Castelvetro’s plan, as outlined above, was not a completely unique suggestion in the period. In February 1585, William Damasus Lindanus, the Bishop of Roermond (and, beginning in 1588, the bishop of Ghent), submitted a set of proposals following a meeting with Pope Gregory XIII.¹⁰ He, too, suggested that men would be convened in a college to correct books. They would live and eat together and would rectify the insufficiently careful work of Spanish and Italian inquisitors (BAV, Barb. Lat. 1501, ff. 367v–368r). Lindanus was more tentative than Castelvetro and indicated that they should start small with only eight or ten individuals who would be drawn from across Europe. Both agreed that censorship should be institutionalized and centralized, for in Lindanus’s words, “It is not the task of one or another private individual to respond to everything” (BAV, Barb. Lat. 1501, f. 364v).

Returning to Castelvetro’s plan, after works were licensed by the high cardinal and revised by the learned men of all nations who came to Rome, they would then be printed at the Vatican Press. The Vatican Press was central to Castelvetro’s plan, so much so that in the Index to the miscellaneous volume containing his treatise in the Roman Inquisition Archive, his work is listed as “Typographie Vaticane dispositio per Castelvetro cum responsis Secret. Indiciis” (ACDF Index II, v. P, f. 169r). This emphasis was also an important strategic point for Castelvetro. Sixtus had founded the Vatican Press in the same year that he circulated his treatise. This was a novel invention and is generally accepted as the first state-run press in Europe. In 1576, Giovanni Carga, a secretary to Cardinal Benedetto Lomellino, proposed a Roman press as the solution to heresies and errors in printed works. His proposal is held in the Archivio Segreto Vaticano and suggested that the Roman press be responsible for creating ideal copies of books that other printers would reproduce exactly under the eye of appointed inquisitors (Grendler 1977, p. 234; Bowers 1949).

Many ideas were circulating about how to set up an ideal Roman press, though Vatican officials soon learned that newly founded presses were not born fully formed (Sachet 2020). Documents from the early years of the *Typographia Vaticana* suggest that it was not yet the finely tuned machine that Carga and Castelvetro hoped it could be. At the end of an inventory of materials for printing a musical book by Pierluigi Palestrina, an unknown hand commented that “with these orders [the press] should wait and continue to print and reprint other books . . . since you do not buy a press to print one book only one time” (ACDF Index XVIII, f. 389r). It is clear that there was still room for improvement. Castelvetro’s ultimate aspirations for the Vatican Press were grand. “The Roman press,” he asserted, “will be superior to all the other presses and bigger and better than the others” (Godman 2000, p. 397). The aspect of the *Typographia Vaticana* that would set it apart from other presses, in Castelvetro’s view, was that all of the editions issuing from the press would be corrected by learned and pious men. This was an idealistic innovation and a divergence

from general practice (Grafton 2011). Castelvetro wanted each new edition to be an exact replica of earlier editions. Booksellers wishing to print a new copy would be able to find the initial edition housed in the great Vatican Library, which had just undergone a wonderful renovation and reorganization during Sixtus's papacy (Grafton 1993; Piazzoni 2012).

Castelvetro's formulation about the role of the Vatican Library is fascinating and sheds new light on his vision for the role that major libraries could play in scholarship and governance. He wrote:

At the Vatican Library, there will need to be kept under careful custodianship and for perpetual memory, as in a holy archive, ancient codices with which one can conduct textual comparisons and printed books in which the corrections appear. They will additionally keep the press corrections and then a copy of the printed work, as is done by notaries, archivists, and keepers of records (Godman 2000, p. 395).

A book printed at the Vatican press would have value as a scholarly tool. While it by no means replaced the ancient copies of manuscripts, the scholarly effort that went into checking and correcting works that were printed well meant that the object should be preserved. According to Castelvetro, future editions would reproduce exactly the same text, and the Vatican Library would draw on the archival scholarly practices of notaries and others to preserve copies of the entire process.¹¹

The idea of using the state library to maintain a record of textual printed patrimony was adopted, not in Rome in 1587 as Castelvetro proposed, but in Venice in 1603. The Venetian Senate decreed that anyone who printed books within the Venetian state was obliged to deposit a copy of the work in the Library of San Marco. They even stipulated that the text should be bound in parchment. As a sign of having complied, they would receive a certification from the librarian (Nuovo 2013, pp. 218–19; Zorzi 1998, p. 928; Infelise 2007, pp. 71–77). This law had the effect of enhancing the prestige of the city's public library, the Biblioteca Marciana, and also of creating an archive of the city's print industry. The Bodleian Library would adopt a similar plan in coordination with the Stationer's Company of London through which a copy of every book published and registered in England was given to the library (Jackson 1969). Castelvetro's treatise is far-fetched in some regards, but it was remarkably forward-thinking in others. We might wonder whether the copy of Castelvetro's treatise held in the Marciana today could even have inspired a contemporary reader to propose these initiatives.

Castelvetro's proposal suggested that in addition to standardizing texts, printers and booksellers should reform and standardize their professional practices as well. Under stricter regulations, Castelvetro envisioned that they would become more like the other regulated professions, such as notaries, chancelleries, and minters (Godman 2000, p. 394–95). Like copyists, they would be expected to use good paper and good ink, clear characters, and standard spelling. They would also standardize the price of books as merchants and notaries had standard prices for services. However, Castelvetro had not taken the next step of working out the financial stakes of his proposed reform process. He knew that the costs of censorship were already high, and he laid out the expenditures that he imagined were already taking place (Godman 2000, pp. 387–88). While Castelvetro imagined scores of learned men paid to correct books by the page, he cut the booksellers decisively out of the deal. In his view, booksellers would surely lower their prices on their more expensive products so that customers would have yet another incentive to buy Roman. In effect, every underemployed learned man in and around the Catholic Church would be able to find work in the Vatican Press. Alas, Castelvetro's perfect plan would completely undermine the incentive that had caused the exponential increase in printed materials over the previous hundred fifty years: profit.

Castelvetro obviously miscalculated the finances of his plan, but he was not entirely rosy-eyed about implementing this reform. He knew that his system of censorship would require some degree of enforcement. Further, someone would need to see to it that every form of printing privilege previously conceded was immediately revoked. Under Castel-

vetro's system, only one privilege would remain, which allowed the possessor to reprint the exact Roman edition of a book in any Catholic location but with "nothing added or removed" (Godman 2000, pp. 394–95). Castelvetro expected that in the event that someone were to ignore these regulations, others would immediately see it as their own duty to rise to denounce that person to the local inquisitor (Godman 2000, p. 395). His censorship apparatus, thus, relied on individuals to police their colleagues and inquisitors to mete out punishment.

Amidst these misunderstandings of finances and human nature, it is worth pointing out that Castelvetro was no Luddite. He did not think that the press should be abolished. Instead, he urged that, "It is of evident utility to the Holy Church and to public and private scholars to retain use of the press and to reform it" (Godman 2000, p. 378).¹² At the end of his treatise, he went so far as to propose that good books could unite both the faithful and infidels, citing as evidence recent events in both the East and West Indies. In the future, thanks to good, correct books, the heathens and infidels would all convert. Castelvetro's invocation of the past and future conversion of the infidel went some way toward blending ideas of otherness across time as well as across space (Charry 2009). Castelvetro's intent in this regard was even militaristic: "We must put the ecclesiastical military into unceasing formation," he declared (Godman 2000, p. 398). This military was not literal, but was instead comprised of people who would read, preach, interpret, and defend the word of God.

It is the time to recognize, invite, and virtuously detain in Rome the infinite poor learned men of every province and through them to convince their nations of the primacy of Roman editions—to the Court of Rome and to the Holy See, the heart of sons and fathers will convert. We will erect the biggest and the best libraries, that no pope has ever done before . . . and we'll place in this arc and tabernacle that is Rome, the true sense of the Holy Scripture. And we'll place in this archive under the perpetual custody of pious and learned officials, all that in this Catholic church *must be considered and read as authentic* (Godman 2000, p. 397).

Castelvetro's treatise was a call to arms, but in this case, the arms were books, and the armory was the Vatican Library. Nor was he alone in his use of militaristic imagery. Lindanus's treatise had drawn on this same metaphor, suggesting that those who correct books should be located near the Vatican Library so that they would have "spiritual arms" close at hand (BAV, Barb. Lat. 1501, f. 368r).

Anticipating possible pushback against his proposal, Castelvetro concluded by enumerating a series of "responses to objections that one might make about the reform of the press" (Godman 2000, p. 398). These responses again hinged on the necessity of print for princes in his day and age. Print was not only important for the Papal State, which sought to extend the word of God across the globe, but it was essential for any state. He described the press as "most useful for good governance . . . because it introduces a most gentle (*suavissimo*) way to keep states united in faith and their subjects obedient and loyal" (Godman 2000, pp. 399–400). Rome, under the supreme authority of Pope Sixtus V, could use Castelvetro's plan for a reformed press to consolidate control over the worldly realm.

Castelvetro's treatise concluded with a summary of his proposals, which outlined his plan with enhanced clarity and sometimes actually substantive differences from the lengthy prose of the text. In the opening lines of the summary, he minced no words in describing his own position in this new order: "I demand the title of First and Forever (Primo et Perpetuo) Inventor and Reformer, Master and Regent of the Press" (Godman 2000, p. 401). The summary then made provisions for establishing the colleges of learned men that Castelvetro proposed. The major difference between the content of the summary and that of the full treatise is telling. At the heart of the matter, Castelvetro saw himself as founding and ruling over this community of learned men who would heal the Church and convert the heretics by reforming the press. Scholars would be the state's military, and a physician would serve directly under the Pope to oversee the whole enterprise.

4. Professional Expertise and Censorship

The Congregation of the Index's deliberation on Castelvetro's proposal was written by the Secretary of the Congregation, Vincenzo Bonardi, who would also go on to simultaneously hold the position of Master of the Sacred Palace from 1589 to 1591. His report is scarcely longer than Castelvetro's final summary. Bonardi pointed out that the author was worthy of great praise for his pious and Christian goal of "removing any sort of infection of the press . . . for the health of the soul, the honor of the Apostolic See, and the service of God." However, Bonardi also suggested that "perhaps in practice this undertaking would not succeed as easily as he [Castelvetro] imagined." Bonardi's reasons were manifold but primarily centered on Castelvetro's lack of accounting for how the finances of his operation would work. His plan had essentially proposed more services for a lower cost. Further, he wondered what made Castelvetro think that the booksellers would be willing to wait for editions printed in Rome when others were available for sale. Bonardi reflected that it already took a long time to print a book. One had only to imagine how much longer it would take if it had to pass through the hands of all the officials Castelvetro named! Further, the cost of all these services would multiply and increase the cost of the books. As Bonardi wrote, "If today books are too expensive, then they would be extremely expensive after the addition of the taxes and services of registers, revisors, correctors, listeners, archivists and other officials" (Godman 2000, p. 403). Additionally, his pessimistic report concluded that the cost of implementing Castelvetro's plan and the number of people it needed would require things that were not possible since "Christianity in Africa, Asia, and parts of Europe have been reduced to name alone" (Godman 2000, p. 404). In other words, it would take an infrastructural apparatus to implement this reform that frankly did not exist.

The future of press censorship, it appeared, was in the eyes of the beholder. Castelvetro's imagined future for print censorship had, in the eyes of the professional censor Bonardi, failed to properly imagine the contingencies of booksellers, labor, and cost. Press reform was a good and important impulse, but it could not be accomplished in the ways that Castelvetro had described. Despite this fundamental clash of perspectives, Antonio Castelvetro's treatise on press reform highlights the potential opportunities for lay experts to participate in reforming Catholic society. Castelvetro enthroned the Pope as the highest power in his proposal, but then he brought lay participation to the forefront of his vision, inserting university faculties instead of the Congregation of the Index at the head of his effort to reform the press.

Castelvetro framed his plan for the press in the language of a professional response—that of a physician treating the ills of society. However, the physician's response is also what propelled Castelvetro's vision into the realm of the implausible, a thought experiment rather than an actual solution. Physicians in the sixteenth century, especially within the context of censorship, talked about their profession as being fundamentally for the public good. Physicians did this to obtain access to prohibited books, justify their need for prohibited texts, and assert their expertise in both using and correcting them (Marcus 2020). Castelvetro gives us an opportunity to see how a particular physician took it upon himself to mobilize his expertise as a physician to treat society's ills as well as those of individuals. While Girolamo Rossi and Giovanbattista Codronchi took on this task through the expurgation of books, Castelvetro reimagined how the systems of censorship and the Catholic hierarchy might maintain a spiritually healthy society. We have long acknowledged the importance of social status, historical thought, and religious as well as scientific influences on physicians; Castelvetro's treatise is another prod to understand physicians as explicitly political and deeply interested in the governance and well-being of societies as well as individuals (Siraisi 2007; Donato and Kraye 2009; Bouley 2017; Murphy 2019).

Castelvetro's proposal for press reform can also be read productively alongside other contemporary reflections on the relationships between print and professional society. Tommaso Garzoni described print in one of his typical, exaggerated passages from his *Piazza universale*:

[It is the] art that gives understanding to the mad, that manifests the arrogant and reveals the learned. This is the art that brings fame to the honorable, that scorns and vituperates the vice-ridden, that entombs dead intellects in the depths of the earth and lifts living and sublime spirits to the stars (Garzoni 1586, p. 848).

Garzoni's massive text was published in its first edition only two years before Castelvetro circulated his treatise on censorship. The two men represent fascinating, divergent approaches to the power of print in Counter-Reformation Italy. Garzoni, the encyclopedic friar from moderate social means, was obsessed with the revelatory power of print. He delighted in the ways that print had put texts into the hands of many people and had given them the opportunity to read and judge for themselves. Garzoni was not unaware of the dangers of print, both personal and intellectual (Garzoni 1586, pp. 541–49). His approach was that books were inherently revelatory—they made clear to readers whether they were good or evil, and one's approach to them was shaped by an individual's pious outlook. This was an unusually libertine approach for an ecclesiastic in sixteenth-century Italy. It also stands in stark contrast to Castelvetro's project to use censorship to actively manipulate both the people and processes involved in book production, circulation, and consumption. Castelvetro's treatise represents a substantive proposal for managing one of the most pressing concerns of the second half of the sixteenth century: the incredible proliferation and circulation of knowledge.¹³ Taken together, Garzoni and Castelvetro's nearly contemporaneous accounts of the press and its possibilities reveal the urgency of these questions to Catholic scholars in post-Tridentine Italy.

5. Conclusions

Ultimately, neither Castelvetro's centralized censorship system nor Garzoni's personalized moral compass would become the official policy of the Catholic Church, which would instead stagger forward with an approach to censorship that straddled several congregations and ecclesiastical offices (Caravale 2022). Although never implemented, Castelvetro's treatise represents a moment of creative tactics in confrontation with the hydra of print. Censorship lay firmly within the project of the Counter-Reformation—a response directed at undermining and controlling the immediate and long-term effects of religious upheaval across Europe. However, systemic solutions to managing the press were also part of the ongoing creative processes of Catholic Reform.¹⁴ As Castelvetro's treatise shows, some suggestions for reforming the press were more far-fetched and self-aggrandizing than others, but each contributed to a flourishing landscape of ideas aimed at combatting heresy and restructuring Catholic life. Writing from the perspective of a physician and a member of a family haunted by censorship, Antonio Castelvetro brought his professional and personal expertise and a great deal of hubris to bear on reforming the press. Read within these broader contexts, his *Trattato breve* shines a light on the active enthusiasm of lay experts in conceptualizing a vibrant and pious future for early modern Catholicism.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ I am grateful to the colleagues in this Special Issue for their feedback on an earlier presentation of this material and to the participants in the conference “Christian Time in Early Modern Europe” held at Princeton in 2017 for giving me an excuse to think more carefully about Castelvetro. Special thanks to Jan Machielsen for his archival generosity and to Diego Pirillo and John Christopoulos for including me in this collection of essays.
- ² Vatican City, Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Fondo Borghese I, 913, ff. 743–85; Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Ms. Ital., XI, 1, 6958, f. 16v; The most recently discovered copy (ACDF Index II, v. P, ff. 114–43) has been published in (Godman 2000, pp. 376–404).
- ³ See, for example, the copy in Padua at the Biblioteca del Seminario Vescovile, Thomas Erastus, *Varia opuscula medica* (Frankfurt, 1590), [X2]r, call number 500.ROSSA.SUP.T.3-2.
- ⁴ I will cite the archival documents that I have personally read related to the Castelvetro family in the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Vatican City (hereafter ACDF). Other scholars cited above have also noted these documents with interest.
- ⁵ The history of the role of print in the Reformation is a complex one that evades monocausal (and polemical) explanations like Castelvetro’s. For a recent account of the subject, see (Pettegree 2015).
- ⁶ On utility as a justification for censorship, see (Marcus 2020).
- ⁷ On censorship decrees from the Fifth Lateran Council, see (Minnich 2010, pp. 92–95).
- ⁸ See, for example, the letters sent to bishops around Italy announcing the Clementine Index. (ACDF Index V, f. 7r–8v).
- ⁹ On funding the inquisition, see (Maifreda 2016).
- ¹⁰ I am very grateful to Jan Machielsen for sharing this reference and his transcription with me.
- ¹¹ On archival practices, see (De Vivo 2010).
- ¹² On utility as justification, see for example (Marcus 2020) and (Seitz 2022, pp. 860–61).
- ¹³ For scholarly, rather than systemic, tools for managing this information overload, see (Blair 2010).
- ¹⁴ On the muddiness of this distinction, see Stefania Tutino’s conclusion to this Special Issue (Tutino Forthcoming).

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