THE INTELLECTUAL WORLD OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

Language, Philosophy, and the Search for Meaning

In this book, Christopher Celenza provides an intellectual history of the Italian Renaissance during the long fifteenth century, ca. 1350–1525. His book fills a bibliographic gap between Petrarch and Machiavelli and offers clear case studies of contemporary luminaries, including Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini, Lorenzo Valla, Marsilio Ficino, Angelo Poliziano, and Pietro Bembo. Integrating sources in Italian and Latin, Celenza focuses on the linked issues of language and philosophy. He also examines the conditions in which Renaissance intellectuals operated in an era before the invention of printing, analyzing reading strategies and showing how texts were consulted, and how new ideas were generated as a result of conversations, both oral and epistolary. The result is a volume that offers a new view on both the history of philosophy and Italian Renaissance intellectual life. It will serve as a key resource for students and scholars of early modern Italian humanism and culture.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107003620
DOI: 10.1017/9781139051613

First published 2018

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-107-00362-0 Hardback

For Stephen J. Campbell

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PREFACE

This book grew out of three trajectories. The first has to do with a continued interest in Italian Renaissance intellectual life, especially in its Latinate variety.[1] The remarkable *I Tatti Renaissance Library*, under the general editorship of James Hankins, has provided an ever-expanding series of Renaissance Latin texts (with corresponding English translations). The field can be taught and researched now by a much broader constituency than ever before. As that project has grown and come to maturity, there has been a second, more recent scholarly emphasis on what we can call "vernacular classicism." Under this rubric one can include studies of the diffusion, in Italian vernaculars, of thought-worlds identified with the culture of ancient Greece and Rome.[2] But there has as yet been little work attempting to unite the Latinate and vernacular tendencies; to discuss their qualitative differences; and to show, indeed, that they were linked. Finally, the third trajectory has to do with the broad meaning that "philosophy" possessed in the Renaissance. There are historiographic reasons as to why Italy's long fifteenth century has traditionally taken up so little space in the history of Western philosophy.[3] But suffice it to say that, instead of fitting fifteenth-century thinkers

[1] The journal *Humanistica lovaniensia* is invaluable on this front, not least its yearly "Instrumentum bibliographicum neolatinum." Much work on Italian Renaissance studies, up to 2003, is discussed in David Rundle and Martin McLaughlin, "Introduction," *Renaissance Studies* 17 (2003), 1–8 (an introduction to a volume of *Renaissance Studies* devoted to the *studia humanitatis*, the five humanities disciplines of grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy, that together formed the disciplinary core of Italian Renaissance humanism). Since then, see Christopher S. Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Jonathan Woolfson, ed., *Palgrave Advances in Renaissance Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2004); James Hankins, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Michael Wyatt, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[2] See David Lines, "Beyond Latin in Renaissance Philosophy: A Plea for New Critical Perspectives," *Intellectual History Review* 25 (2015), 373–89.

[3] See Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance* and idem, "What Counted as Philosophy in the Italian Renaissance? The History of Philosophy, the History of Science, and Styles of Life," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (2013), 367–401.

into Procrustean beds of "philosophy" versus "literature," "Latin" versus "vernacular," the goal here is to let Renaissance thinkers speak on their own, premodern terms.

Premodern: recognizing the differences in the basic conditions under which Renaissance intellectuals operated is paramount.[4] A key precept of this book is that technologies condition, though they do not determine, literary output. Much of fifteenth-century intellectual life occurred before the existence of printing with moveable type, and all of the long fifteenth century is circumscribed within a culture in which the basic circumstances of reading and writing were vastly different from those of today. Importantly, for the Italian Renaissance intellectuals highlighted in this book, reading was social and generational. The material consulted, the reading strategies adopted, and the conclusions reached tended to be the results of conversations both oral and epistolary. And those conversations played themselves out among intellectuals who were parts of discernible generational cohorts.[5]

This book is episodic, rather than synthetic, more a series of soundings than a linear narrative; because of the themes pursued, it circles back chronologically on more than one occasion. Most of all, it is an invitation to future work.

One final note: This is a book about intellectuals in the Italian Renaissance. Simple as that sentence might sound, the terms "intellectual," "Italian," and "Renaissance" all need explanation. It is best to begin with "Italian," since it will give us a sense of place; to have a sense of place make sense, we also need a feeling for time. The time in question is what I will be calling the "long fifteenth century." For now, it is enough to know that the period in question runs from about 1350 to about 1525 – a "long" century indeed. Italy during this period was not a country, the way we think of countries today. It was instead a collection of city-states, small political units bigger than cities and possessed of a powerful sense of independence and cultural identity. Living in one of them, one would have felt patriotism toward the city and a strong belief that it – not "Italy" – was one's real home. Still, there were times during the long fifteenth century when certain intellectuals did refer to Italy as a unity. Usually these instances occurred when the person in question was in exile or when invaders from beyond the Alps found their way into the Italian peninsula. In other words, only threat or absence

[4] See Christopher S. Celenza, "What Did It Mean to Live in the Long Fifteenth Century?" in Rivka Feldhay and F. Jamil Ragep, eds., *Before Copernicus: The Cultures and Contexts of Scientific Learning in the Fifteenth Century* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017). For a view stressing some of the premodern conditions of Italian Renaissance life, see Guido Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[5] Ronald G. Witt's focus on generations and communities of intellectuals evinces the kind of social and interactive reality of premodern intellectual life that is central to my approach: Ronald G. Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

could evoke the idea of Italy as a whole. So there never emerged the kind of national spirit that later arose in, for example, France and England by the sixteenth century. Italy remained fragmented, something to keep in mind when we refer to the "Italian" Renaissance.

As to "Renaissance," this term is much less complicated. Among certain segments of society, a renewed and concentrated interest in the ancient world – in the language, art, and culture of ancient Rome and then ancient Greece – took hold in Italy. This tendency had its origins in a time much earlier than the long fifteenth century and can be documented even in the thirteenth century, in the northern Italian city of Padua.[6] If the term itself is uncomplicated, the questions surrounding it have multiplied over the past three or four decades. Was the Italian Renaissance a phenomenon only for male elites? The answer, more or less, is yes, especially if we are thinking about the long fifteenth century. Accordingly, the question arises: How can it still be relevant and important, given the concerns of scholars in the twenty-first century?

The answer to this third question revolves around, and radiates outward from, the meaning of the third term: intellectual, which conjures up different things for different people. Today "intellectual" can sometimes bear negative connotations. For some, it evokes snobbish elitism or, even worse, a lack of effective participation in the world: the intellectual does not matter and is on the margins. For others, the term can sometimes suggest the classic stereotype of the romantic individual, alone and thinking deep thoughts, who, when ready, puts pen to paper and releases writing into the world.

To get beyond those stereotypes, in any era, one needs to look at intellectuals in a broad fashion, considering how they worked, their stated goals, their unstated assumptions, what sorts of professional positions they filled, how they situated themselves in relation to current institutions, what sort of materials they had at hand when doing their work, and so on. This book reveals Renaissance-era intellectuals as they were: social creatures, immensely learned in a deep but in many respects limited way, and enmeshed in a thoroughly premodern world when it came to everything from living conditions to theories of human rights. Far from Romantic individuals, most of the Renaissance intellectuals we will meet were highly social, whether in the traditional sense (privileging social interactions with others) or through letter writing, reflecting thereby an intellectual's sociability, something that does not require personal contact in the literal sense but that implies a conversation: that the enterprise of reading and writing is something to be shared.

The short version: we are talking primarily about a period that spans the years 1350–1525 in what we now consider Italy, and the primary subject matter will be the lives, careers, and writings of intellectuals.

[6] See Witt, *In the Footsteps*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to editors and publishing houses for permission to use some material drawn from the following: Christopher S. Celenza, "Creating Canons in Fifteenth-Century Ferrara: Angelo Decembrio's *De politia litteraria*, 1.10," in *Renaissance Quarterly*, 57 (2004), 43–98; "Petrarch, Latin, and Italian Renaissance Latinity," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 35 (2005), 509–36; "End Game: Humanist Latin in the Late Fifteenth Century," in Y. Maes, J. Papy, and W. Verbaal, eds., *Latinitas Perennis II: Appropriation and Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 201–42; "The Platonic Revival," in J. Hankins, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 72–96; "Marsilio Ficino," in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011 (8000 words), online at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ficino/; "Late Antiquity and the Italian Renaissance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. S.F. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1172–99; "Coluccio Salutati's View of the History of the Latin Language," in N. van Deusen, ed., *Cicero Refused to Die: Ciceronian Influence Through the Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 5–20; "Introduction: Salvatore Camporeale and Lorenzo Valla," in Salvatore I. Camporeale, *Christianity, Latinity, and Culture*, tr. Patrick Baker, ed. Patrick Baker and Christopher S. Celenza (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1–15.

To Ronald G. Witt, who before his death read a copy of this manuscript and offered valuable suggestions, my deepest thanks, as ever. My former colleagues at Johns Hopkins University have offered endlessly stimulating conversation and ideas regarding the topics covered in this book. Thanks especially to Shane Butler, Bill Egginton, Earle Havens, Silvia Montiglio, Larry Principe, Eugenio Refini, Matt Roller, and Walter Stephens. To my wife, Anna Harwell Celenza, thanks as always for reading, critiquing, suggesting, and, mostly, for being there all these years. Finally, this book is dedicated to another former Johns Hopkins colleague, Stephen J. Campbell, in admiration of his scholarship and gratitude for his friendship.

ABBREVIATIONS

Bruni, *Ep.* = Leonardo Bruni, *Epistolarum libri VIII*, ed. Lorenzo Mehus, 2 vols. (Florence, 1741; repr. with intro. by James Hankins, Rome: Edizioni di Storia e letteratura, 2007)

Bruni, *The Humanism* = *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, ed. and tr. Gordon Griffiths, James Hankins, and David Thompson (Binghamton: MRTS, 1988)

Bruni, *Opere* = Leonardo Bruni, *Opere letterarie e politiche*, ed. P. Viti (Torino: UTEP, 1996)

Bruni, *Schriften* = Leonardo Bruni, *Humanistisch-philosophische Schriften mit einer Chronologie seiner Werke und Briefe*, ed. Hans Baron, Quellen zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters und der Renaissance, 1 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1928; reprint, Wiesbaden: Sändig, 1969)

Celenza, *Poliziano's Lamia* = Christopher S. Celenza, ed., *Angelo Poliziano's* Lamia *in Context: Text, Translation, and Introductory Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2010)

Ficino, *Commentaire / Commentarium* = Marsilio Ficino, *Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon, De l'amour / Commentarium in convivium Platonis, De amore*, ed. and tr. P. Laurens (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2002)

Ficino, *Op.* = Marsilio Ficino, *Opera Omnia* (Basel, 1576)

Ficino, *Platonic Theology* = Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 6 vols., ed. and tr. Michael J.B. Allen and James Hankins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001–06)

Garin, *Pros.* = Eugenio Garin, *Prosatori latini del Quattrocento* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1952)

Hankins, *Humanism and Platonism* = James Hankins, *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2003)

Hankins, *Plato* = James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1990)

Kristeller, *Studies* = Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 4 vols. (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1956–96)

Kristeller, *Supplementum* = Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Supplementum ficinianum*, 2 vols. (Florence: Olschki, 1938)

McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation* = Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995)

Patota = Leon Battista Alberti, *Grammatichetta e altri scritti sul volgare*, ed. Giuseppe Patota (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1996)

Pico, ed. Garin = Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e scritti vari*, ed. Eugenio Garin (Florence: Vallecchi, 1942)

Pico, *Op.*, = Pico della Mirandola, *Opera Omnia* (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmo, 1971), a facsimile of Pico della Mirandola, *Opera Omnia* (Basel, 1572), with additional material

Pico, *Oration* = Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man: A New Translation and Commentary*, eds. Francesco Borghesi, Michael Papio, and Massimo Riva (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

Poggio, *Lettere* = Poggio Bracciolini, *Lettere*, 3 vols., ed. Helene Harth (Florence: Olschki, 1984–87)

Poggio, *De avaritia*, ed. Germano = Poggio Bracciolini, *Dialogus contra avaritiam (De avaritia)* (Livorno: Belforte, 1994)

Poggio, *De nob.* = Poggio Bracciolini, *La vera nobiltà*, ed. and Italian tr. Davide Canfora (Rome: Salerno, 1999).

Poggio, *Op.* = Poggio Bracciolini, *Opera Omnia*, 4 vols., ed. Riccardo Fubini (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmo, 1964–69).

Poliziano, *Op.* = Angelo Poliziano, *Opera Omnia* (Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1498)

Poliziano, *Silvae* = Angelo Poliziano, *Silvae*, ed. and tr. Charles Fantazzi (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004)

Rizzo, *Lessico* = Silvia Rizzo, *Il lessico filologico degli umanisti* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1984)

Tavoni = Mirko Tavoni, *Latino, grammatica, volgare: Storia di una questione umanistica* (Padua: Antenore, 1984)

Valla, *De vero* = Lorenzo Valla, *De vero falsoque bono*, ed. and tr. Maristella Lorch (New York: Abaris, 1977)