THE VERNACULAR ARISTOTLE

This book explores the ways in which Aristotle's legacy was appropriated and reshaped by vernacular readers in Medieval and Renaissance Italy. It considers translation in a broad sense, looking at commentaries, compendia, rewritings and abridgments alongside vernacular versions of Aristotle's works. Translation is thus taken as quintessential to the very notion of reception, with a focus on the dynamics – cultural, social, material – that informed the appropriation and reshaping of the 'master of those who know' on the part of vernacular readers between 1250 and 1500. By looking at the proactive and transformative nature of reception, this book challenges traditional narratives about the period and identifies the theory and practice of translation as a liminal space that facilitated the interaction between lay readers and the academic context while fostering the legitimation of the vernacular as a language suitable for philosophical discourse.

EUGENIO REFINI is Assistant Professor of Italian Studies at New York University. His interests include Renaissance poetics, rhetoric and drama; reception of antiquity and translation studies; and the intersections of music and literature. His publications include a monograph on Alessandro Piccolomini (*Per via d'annotationi: le glosse inedite di Alessandro Piccolomini all'Ars Poetica di Orazio*, 2009) and several articles and book chapters on Ludovico Ariosto, Torquato Tasso, Latin Humanism and the musical culture of early modern Italy.

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Translation as Reception in Medieval and Renaissance Italy

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To my parents,
Miranda and Marcello

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Series Editors' Preface

The Latin roots of *tradition* and *translation* (respectively, *trado* and *transfero*) share not only a prefix (*trans-*) but also the same basic spatiotemporal metaphors. Both, in other words, ask us to imagine a process by which something is moved from point A to point B. That the thing being moved has (or is) 'value' is further suggested by other English words derived from both ('trade', 'transfer', etc.), to say nothing of the deeper root of *trado*: *do*, 'I give'. This last verb lurks at the very heart of older notions of 'the classical tradition' as not just a 'gift' of those clever and talented Greeks and Romans, but a hulking inheritance to which subsequent ages supposedly owed both care and respect. Such notions now seem quaint (or even morally or politically suspect), supplanted by more supple accounts of 'classical reception' that emphasise the agency of person or age 'receiving' this supposed gift – a gift that, on close inspection, is revealed to be as much a product of said person or age as it is an intact legacy from the past. But what of 'translation', especially when the movement in question is from Greek or Latin? Can and should we similarly upend the hypothesis of ancient value 'transferred' to the present, in order to recover the creative work of translators and their readers in creating that very value?

This question animates Eugenio Refini's *The Vernacular Aristotle: Translation as Reception in Medieval and Renaissance Italy.* As his title makes clear, 'point A' in this study is Aristotle, who by the later Middle Ages was such an authority that he could be cited, simpliciter, as 'the Philosopher'. But if Aristotle is in some ways an exemplary figure from (and for) the classical canon, in others he is problematic. His oeuvre is vast and varied and covers an astonishing range of subjects, albeit with conclusions that are not always consistent between this or that work. This is partly the result of the origins of his texts, with most of the surviving *Corpus Arisotelicum* seemingly comprising lecture notes rather than finished treatises. The analysis is dense and minute, often mired in technical vocabulary, some of it given specialised meanings by Aristotle himself. And then, of course, there is the

fact that he wrote in Greek. That was not in itself a problem for his contemporaries, but it was already a significant mediating factor for medieval readers who knew him only in Latin translation. Later, as Latin too began to yield to the vernacular, the Philosopher slipped, for many, even further out of reach.

One might suppose, therefore, that the proliferating translations of Aristotle into the vernacular in the late medieval and early modern period represent nothing more than an effort to rescue his works from a linguistic dead end, preserving their value as an ongoing gift to posterity. This, indeed, was part of the stated intent of his translators. But as Refini's probing portrait reveals, the story is far more complex. On one hand, as translators grappled with the text and their task, their work inevitably became one of interpretation as much as one of translation. (Here too, as Refini points out, there lurks a pun, in that *interpres* is the Latin word for 'translator'.) On the other, far from being destined only for a 'lower', Latinless audience of non-specialists, their translations circled back to inform 'higher' work of Aristotelian exegesis and new philosophy still conducted in Latin. Vernacular translation, in other words, was an integral part of Aristotelian reception throughout the period in question.

This fact is interesting in its own right, revising a crucial chapter in the reception of a major classical author and shedding new light on late medieval and early modern philosophical thought more generally – and not just in 'academic' philosophical circles. But Refini's book offers even more: namely, a model for the study of what his introduction labels 'translation as reception'. His case studies, organised around specific projects of translation, provide close analysis not just of the resulting texts but of the physical books in which they circulated and the readers through whose hands (and sometimes, under whose annotating pens) they passed. The dynamism of Aristotle's late medieval and early modern life, in Refini's colourful reconstruction, embraces not just abstract concepts and rebarbative terminology, but a messy world of books, printers, merchants, patrons and a remarkably varied cast of readers. Reception in such scenarios is often double or triple, while seemingly linear movements like tradition, translation and transmission are shown to trace geometries of extraordinary complexity.

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The idea to write this book came to my mind towards the end of my time as a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Warwick within the AHRC-funded project 'Vernacular Aristotelianism in Renaissance Italy' (2010–13). Having had the wonderful opportunity to do extensive research in libraries and archives in Europe and North America, the materials accumulated proved too many to be analysed and discussed as part of the project's immediate outcomes. Thanks to another productive period of research as Ahmanson Fellow at Villa I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies (2013–14), the project of a monograph on the vernacular reception of Aristotle in late medieval and Renaissance Italy developed further and – as is typical of research projects conducted on the hills of Vincigliata – changed significantly. Increasingly concerned with the interaction of reception and translation, the project's rationale benefited enormously from the following leg of my academic journey, Johns Hopkins University, where the productive dialogue with colleagues across the humanities led to the final shape of the book.

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Notes on the Text

Sections of Chapters 2, 3 and 5 re-elaborate and expand three previous publications: 'Aristotile in parlare materno: Vernacular Readings of the *Ethics* in the Quattrocento', *I Tatti Studies* Vol. 16 (2013): 311–41; 'Shifting Identities: Jacopo Campora's *De immortalitate anime* from Manuscript to Print', in *Remembering the Middle Ages in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Lorenzo Pericolo and Jessica Richardson. Turnhout, Brepols, 2015: 67–80; 'By imitating our nurses: Latin and Vernacular in the Renaissance', in *The Routledge History of the Renaissance*, ed. William Caferro. London, Routledge, 2017: 46–61.