

Monk's Tale, Chaucer highlights the crucial role of the poet in memorialising famous people and events.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this volume is that it convincingly shows the value of reading Chaucer in the context of European-wide circulation of people and ideas. By reading and repurposing Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio critically and selectively, Chaucer was able to capture phenomena as central to medieval scholarship as prophetic writing or political uses of public art on the cusp of change. Implicitly, this volume issues an important correction to the prevailing narrative about Chaucer's inability to imitate the Italian poets structurally: perhaps Chaucer has been able to absorb his Italian influences so successfully not despite the fact that his Dante is a "Dante of fragments" (Warren Ginsberg, *Chaucer's Italian Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 30), but because of it.

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Building the Canon Through the Classics: Imitation and Variation in Renaissance Italy (1350-1580).

Eloisa Morra, ed.

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It is no longer possible to talk of the "translation" of classical literature in Renaissance Italy without acknowledging the diverse and complex processes the term encapsulates. The essays of this volume explore the various ways that the classics were imitated, adapted, domesticated and revived by authors who were, at the same time, working to build and position themselves within a canon of their own. This dynamic between old and new, authority and personal authorial identity involved an evolution – traced by the chronologically-ordered essays – in attitudes towards the traditional humanist view of *imitatio* and a shift in status of the *auctoritates* from timeless authorities to historical sources. In the process, the Italian humanists succeeded in developing a classical literary canon that spread throughout Europe, and in carving out space for their own literary creations within it.

A key contention of the volume is that, throughout the long-fifteenth century (1350-1580), the earlier humanistic model of close study, imitation and memorization of the classics gave way to a more creative mode of readership in which the inner mechanisms of the classics were still adopted, but did not supplant the individual style and authorial identity of the modern Renaissance writer. Recently, scholars studying the vernacular tradition in particular have theorized a broad definition for "translation" with regard to the reception of classical works in this period; in his *Vernacular Aristotle*, for example, Eugenio Refini defines translation as "forms of adaptation, abridgment and rewriting" (3) in which the translator interprets and revivifies the original for the contemporary audience. This volume takes this broad definition of translation and offers a series of vignettes that masterfully

depict the growing confidence and conviction of Renaissance authors in “translating” classical sources for their own ends.

Jaspreet Boparai’s essay marks the midpoint of the volume and its subject, Politian, is positioned as an exemplary moment in the broader shift it narrates, so it is prudent to begin our discussion here. Politian’s status as a key figure in the particular historical narrative the volume seeks to relate is actually made most apparent in Eloisa Morra’s introduction than in the essay itself. Here, Morra usefully describes how Politian sharply criticized the traditional humanist view of imitation and the lack of originality of Ciceronian imitators, arguing strongly for the value of his own personal authorial voice: “non enim sum Cicero; me tament, ut opinor, exprimo.”

Politian’s extensive oeuvre of poetic and prose works in Latin and the vernacular reveals a complicated network of relationships with ancient and early modern texts. Boparai approaches this subject through a study of the contents of his library, and analysis of his reading practices there. Along with Maddalena Signorini’s piece, this chapter’s attention to the material aspects of the formation of the literary canon is a particular strength of this volume. Boparai’s study shows that in the Medici library Politian had access to scientific works by Hellenistic and imperial-era scholars, antique and Byzantine commentaries, scholia and anthologies, along with grammatical texts. The manuscripts she examines reveal that Politian put great time and effort into copying out extracts from Greek texts and commentaries, and show that his knowledge of Greek verse was based largely on scholia and late antique commentaries, rather than the texts themselves. The evidence of his library suggests a lack of interest in Greek tragedy, which has consequences for our interpretation of his play *Orfeo*, written in the vernacular in 1480. Examining the play alongside the materials from his library, Boparai finds that Politian does not make any particularly obscure or learned references to Greek or Latin literature in his play and shows that, despite some apparently covert references to Euripides, it should not be identified as a “Greek tragedy in Italian” as previous scholars have claimed.

Morra states in the introduction to the volume that the essays are organized around this piece: those in the first part of the volume, preceding the Politian episode, are therefore concerned with the processes of selection and imitation by which Renaissance intellectuals decided the fate of classical authors. The second part of the volume, by contrast, looks at those authors who, following Politian, approached the classics with less reverence and more creativity than their predecessors. In fact, all of the essays portray Renaissance authors engaging with the classics on their own terms. Valentina Proserpi’s chapter on the misfortune of Homer’s poetry in Renaissance literary canon shows the complex, deeply subjective role played by translation in the formation of *auctoritates*. When Homer was finally translated at the bequest of Petrarch in 1358–9 – after a long absence in the West – Italian humanists could not accept that the translation of the so-called father of poetry could be accurate: how could Homer be so archaic? How could his account of the Trojan war in the *Iliad* contradict so heavily those accounts they already knew and trusted? In his long-absence, it seems, Virgil had taken his place as the favored “father of poetry.” In the anxious search for better Latin translations of Homer that followed, it became clear that “better” meant “more like Virgil.” As humanists generally showed little will or patience with the Greek language, Homer could only be accepted into the canon-building process if he could be made to conform, in language and form, to

Virgil. From a historical perspective too, the discovery of Homer's stylistic weakness reinforced the long-standing censure of the *Iliad* as a falsification of historical truth regarding the Trojan War. As such, Prosperi tells us, a dissatisfaction and lack of confidence in Homer resulted in a lack of translation and circulation of his works in Italy in a self-perpetuating cycle.

Indeed, a key concern of many of the studies in this volume is to show how humanist interactions with classical texts involved this negotiation between what the texts were, and what the Renaissance authors wanted them to be. Giacomo Comiati's study of humanist biographies of Horace, for example, shows how such paratexts they worked to lessen, deny or justify the poet's relationship with Epicurus in order to promote the inclusion of his entire corpus in their canon of classical authors. Comiati skillfully shows how authors and publishers quickly realized the power of format and paratexts to influence the reader's perception of a subject and, by consequence, how it was only through the intervention of original texts – such as Niccolò Perotti's metrical treatise *De metris horatianis*, and the addition of biographies to various editions of Horace's works – that the poet was reframed and appreciated for the Renaissance reader.

Comiati's attention to extra-textual apparatus is indicative of a broader shift in the relationship between authority and originality, towards the new “creative model of readership and authorship” the volume's editor defines. The emphasis shifts from imitation to variation, and the function of the classical work shifts from that of model-to-be-imitated to model-to-be-used creatively. Irene Fantappiè's piece on Pietro Aretino marks the endpoint of this narrative. Aretino's self-fashioning as an *uomo nuovo*, an author of novelty and originality, marks a new moment in which it was no longer necessary to claim the authority of *imitatio*. Despite the, somewhat ironic, fact that his work is mainly derivative from literary and classical sources, he takes an anti-classical and anti-literary posture in order to appeal to a literary market in which novelty was increasingly becoming a valued intellectual and economic factor.

The strengths of this volume are manifold. In a series of lively vignettes, it shows us the variety of strategies, and the strength of agency, with which Renaissance authors engaged with classical authorities. Many essays managed to integrate well-known developments in the production of early modern literary texts – such as Manuzio and Bembo's invention of a notation system in 1496 (Caruso) into the larger story of a shift in relationship and attitude towards the classical authors. The introduction makes claims to the essays' narrative arc that are not so explicitly apparent in the works themselves, and so is essential (and extremely thought-provoking) prior reading. Nevertheless, with attention to the material, visual, philological and paratextual elements of the works studied, the volume is as rich in methodological variety as it is in topical content. The introduction makes claims to the essays' narrative arc that are not so explicitly apparent in the works themselves.

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