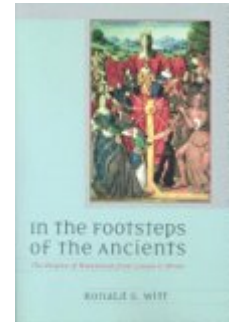




Ronald K. Witt. *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2000. xiii + 562 pp. \$193.00 (cloth) ISBN 90-041-1397-5; \$49.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-391-04202-5.

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In Defense of Humanist Aesthetics: Ronald G. Witt's Study of Early Italian Humanism

In Defense of Humanist Aesthetics: Ronald G. Witt's Study of Early Italian Humanism

Ronald K. Witt has presented us with a magisterial study of early Italian humanism. Arguing against the grain of current scholarship, he insists that the question of its origins remains a serious historical issue. Analyzing changes in humanist style and aesthetic ideals, Witt revises several important constituents of the prevalent understanding of the first century and a half of its history. By correcting what he considers the most significant misconceptions about the genesis of humanism in Italy, he not only hopes to induce a better understanding of its subsequent development, but also to allow us to set it apart more clearly from "twelfth-century French humanism."

In his introduction, Witt familiarizes the reader with the genesis of his approach. He starts with what probably still is the prevalent and most comprehensive definition of Italian humanism. Paul Oskar Kristeller describes the humanists as "essentially rhetoricians and heirs to the tradition of medieval *dictatores*" (p. 1), who, like their medieval predecessors, taught rhetoric and grammar in the schools or served as notaries and lawyers, and were distinguished from them only in that they drew on classical texts for models of writing and delivering speeches.[1] Although conceding that Kristeller's definition may be the only one that allows us to speak of a humanist movement at all, Witt takes issue with the marked absence of etiological interest in Kristeller's outlook. Already in an

earlier publication, Witt pointed to the profound discrepancy between Kristeller's description and the actual literary developments in Renaissance Italy: until late in the fourteenth century, chancellors, notaries, and teachers of grammar in their professional work carried forward medieval rhetorical traditions, and, insofar as they were humanists, owed little or nothing to the tradition of the *ars dictaminis*. [2] It was only in their private works that these professionals started to imitate ancient literary examples and introduced significant stylistic changes, thus initiating a tradition of searching ancient texts for literary models.

In his new study, Witt continues to develop his account of the genesis of early Italian humanism. Through close observation of stylistic changes in Latin literature between 1250 and 1420, he emphasizes that the development of early humanism must be understood as a process of gradual classicizing of the Latin language, beginning with poetry and followed by a "conquest of prose genres" dragging on for almost two centuries. This classicizing process starts with the first surviving Latin poems written by Lovato dei Lovati in 1267/68 and remains restricted to poetry and grammar until Mussato's first historical work in prose in 1315. Only towards the end of the fourteenth century did humanists finally come to promote the Ciceronian reform of oration and public letters, the genres of primary concern to *dictatores*. Witt goes on to show that humanists exploring the linguistic universe of ancient poetry and prose became increasingly aware of ancient culture as an alternative and model for their

own urban and secular societies and gradually developed a consciousness of the historical contingency of both ancient Rome and contemporary Italy. Continued efforts of stylistic imitation of the ancients fuelled a continuing cognitive revolution.

As Witt explains in his first chapter, his measuring of changes in style and literary tastes demands a reassessment of the question of French influence on Italian vernacular and Latin literature between 1180 and 1250. According to Witt, the interest of the earliest Italian humanists in poetry and the closely related study of grammar rather than oratory was to some extent inspired by a “massive invasion of French scholarly and literary influences” ending “the dearth of literary culture” in twelfth-century northern Italy (p. 17). While sympathetic to the claim of medievalists that the Renaissance did not constitute a sharp break with the Middle Ages, he contrasts a twelfth-century discontinuity in northern and central Italy with twelfth-century southern Italian and transalpine evidence for a continuity in the study of ancient Latin literary texts. He thus predates the generally acknowledged contribution of French literature to the flourishing of Italian vernacular literature around 1300 by more than a century. Witt’s argument for a strong North-South divide in Italian vernacular and Latin culture “lends credence to the humanists’ own claim that they deserved credit for restoring the pagan authors to Italian schools” (p. 496). Lovato dei Lovati’s early poetry thus comes to be seen as a determined effort “to establish Italian cultural independence after more than seventy years of nurture by France” as well as the manifestation of a deeply felt need to defend “Italy’s peculiar political, urban, and lay character” (pp. 496-497). Witt does not, however, support his argument with the necessary extensive discussion of Franco-Italian cultural transfer between the ninth and the early thirteenth centuries, simply because, as he explains, this book is the second of two volumes on the genesis of early Italian humanism, although the first is yet to be produced. We, therefore, will have to await his forthcoming study for a detailed presentation of evidence for one of the major premises of this volume and for a fuller explanation of the still obscure process of transmission of culture from France to Italy during the early middle ages.

The book with which we are dealing is mainly concerned with the evolution of humanism in those 170 years between 1250 and 1420, from Lovato dei Lovati’s (1240/41-1309) first to Leonardo Bruni’s “fifth generation of humanists.” Witt does not any longer regard Lovato and Albertino Mussato (1261-1329) as pre-humanists, but

rather as humanists proper: they edit texts, recover ancient writings, and, most importantly, develop a classicizing style and give their linguistic efforts a first, if vague, institutional form.[3] Lovato, Mussato, and Albertino da Brescia, just before them, are also the first to recognize that ancient urban experience provided a morality relevant to life in contemporary Italian communes. Witt identifies the struggle of urban ethical models—of the monarchical as well as the republican variety—with the chivalric ethos for domination of Italian civic life as a leit-motif of the humanist enterprise.

Witt thus comes to characterize Petrarch as a third-generation humanist rather than the “father of humanism.” His revolutionary role in the development of humanism is that of devising the first clear conception of the humanist enterprise and redefining an earlier unreflective lay secular movement as Christian. Witt is anxious to emphasize the ambiguity of Petrarch’s legacy. Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), the Florentine chancellor and leader of the fourth generation of humanists, fully subjected the *ars dictaminis* to ancient style and provided his fellow citizens with a historical vision of their political identity, even though, late in life, his confrontation with Petrarch’s work led him to denigrate his humanist achievements. It was left to the fifth generation of humanists, Leonardo Bruni and his contemporaries to revive “the earlier, secular spirit of humanism” (p. 392). Practicing Ciceronianism as a “self contained language game” (p. 441), they unwittingly, according to Witt, came to exclude medieval transcendental preoccupations. The linguistic conventions of Ciceronianism would not have encouraged them to record their religious experiences. Witt uses funeral orations to serve as illustrative examples of how pagan linguistic forms in this generation completely marginalize Christian content, and the spirituality of Bruni and his generation remains an open question. Still, one would have wished for a more daring discussion of how Bruni and his contemporaries, at least in the eyes of their contemporaries, came to terms with Christianity. As Witt himself rightly points out, had they not done so, their impact on European intellectual life would have been far less marked.

Witt’s strong emphasis on the linguistic and aesthetic motivation of Quattrocento humanists may have led him to formulate a less convincing generalization. Without really providing evidence, he suggests that the reviving interest in the Church Fathers in the second quarter of the fifteenth century can be explained by the attempt “to create a refined, if necessarily eclectic, Latin, capable of winning equal recognition with the diction of the secular

Ciceronians” (pp. 504-505). Would not reformers nurturing humanist predilections have found that classical texts had the potential to be applied to yet another field of human endeavor, namely that of religious reform? And would they do so not simply or exclusively because they wished to excel as humanists among humanists? Such apparent disregard for genuinely, perhaps even primarily, theological interest in humanists fails to appreciate the diversity and complexity of background, interest and emphases in individual authors.

Redrawing the map of early humanism, Witt cannot avoid tackling the question of why Florence, something of a cultural backwater in comparison to Padua and Bologna around 1300, had well surpassed them by 1400 and become the center of the revival of public oratory. With regard to Hans Baron’s thesis that Florentine political discourse changed after 1404 in response to an external threat to the city’s liberty, Witt concedes that the temporary respite from Milanese aggression may have strengthened Florentine confidence in republican institutions.[4] He nonetheless proposes that the “crisis” of Florentine humanism ought to be conceived of as the result of an interplay between the stylistic idealism and textual focus of the first Ciceronianism and the need of the Florentine patriciate to find a discourse favorable to the political constitution that had emerged by 1400. Witt suggests that a century of translations of ancient Latin works into the vernacular made Florentine patricians receptive to appeals to the classics as sources of moral discipline and political wisdom. The humanist ambition to invade public discourse eventually converged with the patrician desire to afford their sons an education that ensured respect and prestige, helped by the fact that the effective collapse of the consensual system of guild-politics during the latter half of the fourteenth century apparently increased the desire of the Florentine patriciate to replace a chivalric ethic associated with factionalism and violence by a Roman civic ethic.[5] Accordingly, Witt emphasizes that the contribution of Ciceronianism to the debate of political constitutions, republican or monarchical, is negligible. His suggestion is that the increasing respectability of humanist education continued to indoctrinate the student, “whether residing in a republic or lordship” (p. 493), with civic values irreconcilable with those of a still energetic chivalric ethos.

Witt’s method of close and dense analysis of content and style of a comprehensive body of texts produced by a wide range of major and minor humanists yields a rich harvest. He succeeds in confirming that late-fourteenth- to early-fifteenth-century human-

ism changed the western European conceptualization of time, space, and politics. Tirelessly filtering their ideas through an ancient Latin vocabulary and syntax, humanists would ultimately transform the way they thought and felt. Witt finds the increasingly differentiated humanists’ view of the past and its relation to the present, along with their growing awareness of the “intricate layering of human events in time” (p. 501) reflected, for instance, in the more sophisticated use of the subjunctive mood. In the case of Florence, he agrees with Felix Gilbert, who saw the alliance of humanist confidence in the capability of human reason informed by the past to construct the future and the “new sensitivity to historical change” collapse after the French invasion of 1494.[6] Whether chapter 25 of Machiavelli’s *Il Principe* really has to be read as an effort to rein in fortune, as Witt suggests, or rather as a testimony to the futility of reason and will, remains debatable. Machiavelli’s understanding and use of the pagan concept of fortuna is more than ambiguous and accommodates a strong sense of the limits of human endeavor.

Cautious not to endorse linguistic determinism, Witt nonetheless acknowledges and differentiates Kenneth Gouwens’s observation that imitation of ancient concepts, styles, categories, and vocabularies had a profound impact on humanist intellect and attitude.[7] Witt exemplifies how the imitation of ancient Latin style gradually and increasingly produced changes in cognition and visual perception. And while he does not wholeheartedly endorse Michael Baxandall’s hypothesis that rhetorical criteria effectively shaped non-linguistic spatial representation and exhibits caution concerning Baxandall’s claim that Cicero’s style could have dominated humanist thought as a whole, he still agrees that those criteria defined the approach of the humanistically trained art critic.[8]

In conclusion, Witt’s study emerges as a spirited defense of the humanist endeavor to imitate ancient style and vocabulary as such. He chastises Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, for instance, for their failure to appreciate what the humanists themselves thought was important about humanism. Their belief held that the “indwelling power of the ancient Latin language ... could potentially transform both society and self” (p. 507).[9] Highly critical of the tendency to reduce the aesthetic dimensions of writing and reading to mere ideology, Witt insists that the learning of a foreign language as such equipped the student with what “he needed to serve his community and think conceptually” (pp. 506-7) and that it carried with it a structured approach to and vision of

reality. Whether and to what extent readers will subscribe to Witt's passionate defense of humanist education, of course, depends on the extent to which they are prepared to share his belief in the lasting power of linguistic training per se to transform the political and social universe of individuals and society. Written in lucid English and well organized, Witt's study revises and refines our grasp of the chronology and character as well as the variety and historical significance of the Italian Renaissance, while taking into consideration and discussing the contributions and positions of many other scholars in the field. This book makes essential reading for students of the history of Italian Renaissance humanism as well as the history of its scholarship.

Notes

[1]. For Kristeller's original definition, see, for instance, his "Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance," *Byzantion* 17 (1944-45), pp. 346-74.

[2]. Ronald G. Witt, "Medieval Italian Culture and the Origins of Humanism as a Stylistic Ideal," in *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, ed. Albert Rabil, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), vol. 1, pp. 29-70.

[3]. For a view of Lovato and Mussato as pre-humanists, see Natalino Sapegno, *Il Trecento* (Milan,

1960).

[4]. See the revised, one-volume edition: Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

[5]. See John Najemy, *Corporation and Consensus in Florentine Electoral Politics, 1280-1400* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

[6]. Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

[7]. See Kenneth Gouwens, "Perceiving the Past: Renaissance Humanism after the 'Cognitive Turn,'" *American Historical Review* 103 (1998), pp. 55-82.

[8]. See, for instance, Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition, 1350-1450* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[9]. For the argument that the focus of humanist education on the ability to write and speak hampered the moral and intellectual development of students, see Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 22-25.

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