



**Martine Furno.** *Le Cornu Copiae de Niccolo Perotti: Culture et methode d'un humaniste qui aimait les mots.* Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1995. 252 pp. ISBN 978-2-600-00100-7.



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At the heart of the Western project known as Renaissance Humanism was the study of the classical languages, and at the heart of that study was the practice of humanist commentary. Martine Furno's examination of one of the more famous humanist commentaries, the Martial commentary given the title *Cornu Copiae* by its author Niccolo Perotti, situates this vast lexicon of classical information in a tradition which begins in the late antique world and continues into the sixteenth century with the work of Robert Estienne. While her study takes only a portion of the commentary as evidence for her analysis, it carefully restores to the modern reader the precise nature of Perotti's understanding of language. Throughout he is portrayed as a transitional figure and as a somewhat mediocre (or average) humanist; he still retains many medieval habits of mind in his interest in etymology, while he has much less of the historical sensibility of his immediate predecessor Valla or the brilliant acumen of a successor like Poliziano. We should not of course fault him for not realizing his full potential as a philologist at a time when that discipline was being invented, and so it is not surprising to discover that he

lacked a sophisticated sense of historical periodization (p. 140) or that he did not practice canonical exclusivity in the use of classical authors, as would later be the case when the vogue for Ciceronianism descended upon Europe. It is also not surprising to discover that Perotti did not advance any great theoretical paradigms in his study of the Latin language, a lack which one can sense in even the most talented of humanists. Humanism was an eminently practical project for the classroom, first and foremost, and it is in such a context that Furno places Perotti's work.

The main task of Furno's book is to suggest a genre for Perotti's work, and after commenting on the similarities which the *Cornu Copiae* shares with medieval encyclopedia and humanist commentaries, Furno settles on the term "dictionary" as the genre which most accurately describes it. Insofar as the *Cornu Copiae* primarily glosses words, her instincts here are correct, though I would have liked to see a bit more attention to Perotti's work as a commentary, since this was the most prominent type of humanist literary production in the second half of the quattrocento. Fur-

thermore, while Perotti's work does anticipate later dictionary efforts, and while the posthumous Aldine edition with its celebrated index moved the *Cornu Copiae* further in that direction, I suspect Perotti and his contemporaries would have seen the work as another--albeit much larger--commentary on a classical author. Furno interestingly notes that Perotti occasionally pursues digressions whose function is not to gloss a word but to allow the text of Martial to serve as a "pre-text" for broadly informative cultural observations, reminding us that humanists did not allow the rules of "genre" to constrain their antiquarian tastes and interests. Finally, lurking in the columns of painstaking lexicography are traces of a restless and Faustian "will to explain everything" (p. 163) that remind us of the enormous ambitions of the humanist mind, though it is hard for us to fathom how a lexicographer--Samuel Johnson's "harmless drudge"--could have entertained such grandiose notions of polymathy, even if it were true that Martial had been hitherto "understood by noone" (p. 129), as Perotti claimed.

The larger milieu of Perotti's commentary is discussed at one point, and it is here that I feel Furno could have engaged in greater theoretical speculation. She notes, correctly, that three major changes occurred in the quattrocento which influenced both the demand for and the production of Perotti's work: the increase in the corpus of extant works from antiquity, the increasingly secular cast of education, and the invention of the printing press (p. 114). I would add to those factors another important change. The humanists used the commentary, the oration, and the poem as legitimating credentials for themselves in an age which lacked a formal system for "credentialing" humanistic knowledge beyond the arts degree. Their quarrels, and the heat which those quarrels generated, are an important and somewhat neglected background for works like the *Cornu Copiae*, and they point to an emergent professionalism, a need for self-promotion and for the buildup of intellectual capital, so to speak. While the concepts of

"culture" and of the "intellectual" are often portrayed as phenomena that the Enlightenment spawned, they have their roots in the humanists, and no more overdetermined example of the intellectual capital that such a process demanded can be found than Perotti's massive tome--an icon, in some ways, of an earlier information age's explosive growth. Even the humanists could succumb to the need for invidious distinction, and no reader familiar with the sometimes vicious infighting of the humanist avant-garde in the quattrocento can avoid seeing Perotti against this background. Having said this, I should note that Furno pays some attention to the humanist pursuit of "glory" (pp. 101-102) and suggests that a concept of "intellectual property" can here be seen in its infancy (p. 94).

Furno's careful work also pays close attention to the medieval background and suggests a fairly strong affiliation between Perotti and Isidore of Seville. Additionally, she notes the strong influences of Valla's *Elegantiae* and, to a lesser extent, of Tortelli's *De orthographia*. Perotti emerges from her study as a humanist struggling between two worlds, between language conceived as an ensemble of words traceable back to primitive etymons, as had been the case for the middle ages, and the newer, humanist conception of language as more radically contingent, subject to the unpredictable forces of *usus* which operate in history. That Perotti retained such strong ties to medieval traditions is extremely significant for those modern scholars of fifteenth-century humanism who have placed such great emphasis on Lorenzo Valla's theoretical innovations; this fact suggests that some humanists may have missed or simply ignored the power of Valla's conception. In any event, Furno's study, which contains an exhaustive bibliography and several appendices that amass evidence in support of some of the book's arguments, will serve as a useful accompaniment to the modern edition of the *Cornu Copiae* that has been under way since the first volume ap-

peared in 1989, edited by Jean-Louis Charlet and Martine Furno herself (4 vols. to date, 1989-95).

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