



Giannozzo Manetti, *Biographical Writings*, edited and translated by Stefano U. Baldassarri and Rolf Bagemihl (I Tatti Renaissance Library 9), Harvard University Press, 2003. ISBN 0-674-01134-1, xix + 330

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Born in Florence in 1396, the son of a rich merchant and banker, Giannozzo Manetti spent his life dividing himself between *otium* and *negotium*. His intense activity as a merchant and diplomat did not prevent him from cultivating his passion for the study of the humanities. Thanks to his excellent knowledge of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, Manetti acquired a great reputation among his contemporaries. As a businessman and politician, he witnessed one of the most tormented periods of the Florentine history: the crisis of the republic and the reinforcement of the power of the Medicis. Manetti was forced to leave Florence in 1450, and in 1453 he became papal secretary of Nicholas V, who entrusted him with a new Latin translation of the Bible. After the death of Nicholas V in 1455, Manetti left Rome for Naples and became a counsellor to King Alfonso of Aragon. In Naples, in addition to carrying out many diplomatic and political missions for the king, Manetti composed several literary works. He died in 1459.

Manetti's various interests from ethics to science, from history to Christian apologetic, his attention to the individual and to all the aspects of the human personality, his love for Greek and Roman antiquity, and his attempt to reconcile ancient and Christian traditions, allow us to define him as a man of the Renaissance. Yet, the culture of the Middle Ages still exerted a considerable influence on his writings, as evident

especially in his striving for an encyclopedic knowledge and in the medieval Latin of his prose style.

Manetti stood at the crossroad of two cultures, and was unable to settle their contrasting issues into a systematic view. This is perhaps one of the reasons why he has, as a scholar, hitherto attracted less attention than he deserves. The comparison with other figures of the Florentine Renaissance has undoubtedly damaged him: Manetti did not have the genius and the innovative spirit of a Bruni or a Politian. As a consequence, many of his works are still awaiting study, and some have not even been edited in full. For this reason, the accurate edition and English translation of some of Manetti's biographical writings by Stefano Ugo Baldassarri and Rolf Bagemihl should be hailed as a praiseworthy initiative that will hopefully increase the interest of modern scholarship in Manetti's literary production. Biography is, in fact, just one of the many literary genres which he treated.

Baldassarri's introduction rightly emphasizes the importance of Manetti's biographical writings within the context of one of the most important phenomena of the Renaissance, the rediscovery of ancient Greek authors. Biography became popular as a literary genre following the rediscovery of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, brought to Florence by the Byzantine scholar Manuel Chrysoloras when appointed teacher of Greek at the *Studium Florentinum* (1397). Thereafter, as in Byzantine schools, students in Western schools also read Plutarch's lives and essays. Plutarch's biographies had a great impact on Florentine culture: in addition to transmitting the knowledge of ancient history, the deeds of the heroes of antiquity conveyed the basic values of ancient ethics. By highlighting the value of the individual, these biographies helped shape the new morality of the Renaissance. The Latin translations by Bruni and other scholars enhanced Plutarch's success among readers across Europe.

The volume contains the Latin text and the English translations of a selection of Manetti's biographies. Baldassarri has translated the *Lives of Three Illustrious Florentine Poets* (i.e. Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio), and abstracts from *On Famous Men of Great Age* and from the sixth book of *Against the Jews and the Gentiles*. Bagemihl has translated the last two biographies of the volume, the lives of Socrates and Seneca, which together make a literary *tour de force* dedicated to Alfonso of Aragon. Baldassarri explains his editorial choices in editing the Latin text in the detailed note on pages 289-93. Since a modern edition is available for the last two biographies only, the text of the other works has been reconstructed from manuscripts. If, on the one hand, the

availability of copies written by the author himself or by his son Agnolo may constitute an advantage, on the other hand Manetti's endless revisions, redundant style, and inaccuracies due to a hasty composition raise serious problems for an editor. In any case, a very brief critical apparatus, with discussion of some difficult passages, is given on pages 295-97.

The selection of texts, although limited if compared with Manetti's extensive production, reveals that he had deeply absorbed Plutarch's model. This is especially reflected in Manetti's interest in moral issues and in his tendency to make comparisons. For example, after expounding the lives of the 'Three Crowns of Florence' and of the two greatest moral philosophers of antiquity, Manetti compares their deeds, character, and even physical appearance, highlighting similarities and differences, thus sparing his readers the effort of doing it themselves. However, his imitation of Plutarch is anything but passive. First of all, Manetti transfers his own ideal of combining *otium* and *negotium*, literary studies and participation in public life, even in the description of the lives of men of culture. Secondly, and more importantly, Manetti's biographies "show the Florentine humanists' great self-awareness concerning the rediscovery of classical culture they were promoting" (*Introduction*, xiv).

Cultural history is the real focus of Manetti's biographical writings: he views the present and the past as strictly bound to each other. This bond, broken in the Middle Ages, was reinstated at his time, and the scholars who contributed to it deserve a particular praise. In his biographies of Petrarch and Boccaccio, for example, Manetti places great emphasis on the efforts made by each man to learn Greek (*Petr.* 19; *Bocc.* 7), as well as on the revival of Greek studies in Florence and in the rest of Italy (*Bocc.* 8: "... Manuel Chrysoloras was the fountainhead from whom many eminent disciples flowed, who afterwards disseminated the Greek language ... not only through Tuscany but also through several of the chief regions of Italy as well."). The short biographical sketches contained in the sixth book of *Against the Jews* offer a schematic history of Italian literature from the Middle Ages (Cavalcanti, Latini) through Manetti's own age (Bruni, Traversari, Polenton); both Tuscan and Venetian writers are included, and each author's knowledge of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew is emphasized. In *On Famous Men*, Petrarch, Salutati, and Niccoli are described as wise men of antiquity and are praised for their contribution to the culture of their age: Petrarch for his rediscovery of Cicero, Salutati for having appointed Chrysoloras at the

Studium Florentinum, and Niccoli for having discovered new manuscripts and bequeathed his rich library to the Florentine people.

Latin, although no longer in use as everyday language, was still the language of culture in the fifteenth century. Unlike Boccaccio and Bruni, who wrote biographies in the vernacular, Manetti used Latin because, as he stated in the preface to the lives of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, he wanted the merits of the great scholars of the past "spread to the erudite and the learned" (6, p. 7). Actually, Manetti's Latin, because of its ornate style, represents a challenge both for readers and for translators. Manetti repeatedly uses rhetorical devices and often mixes classical and medieval Latin forms. He often repeats or contradicts himself, which reflects his lack of a real historical method. Baldassarri declares (p. 293) that both translators have tried to offer a 'source-oriented' rather than a 'target-oriented' English translation, by maintaining the features of Manetti's style wherever possible, even if "the results may sometime strike the reader as odd and ... foreign to the literary taste now prevalent." (One can find the same programmatic assertion in Baldassarri's Italian edition, *Vite di Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio* [Palermo: Sellerio 2003], p. 21). Indeed, the result is a fluent and even pleasant translation, which largely succeeds in conveying to readers the ample rhythm of Manetti's style and narrative taste.

The Latin text is always faithfully translated. Particularly appropriate is, in my opinion, the rendering of some proper names in the Italian instead of the English form (e.g. "Petrarca" for "Petrarch"). I would like to point out, however, just a few details which seem to have escaped the attention of the translators:

Life of Dante 27, pp. 30-31: *Hic enim [scil. Plato] in politia quam finxit*, "In the polity he devised:" *politia* seems to be a transcription of the title of Plato's work *Politeia*, generally known as *Republic*. Perhaps here Manetti is quoting "Plato in his *Republic*." Indeed, Manetti is rather prone to use Greek words in his Latin prose (e.g. *ibid.*, 41, p. 44: *gastrimargos*);

Life of Socrates 18, pp. 182-183: [Socrates] *fidibus canere instituit*, "he learned to sing to the lyre:" if Manetti is using *fidibus canere* in the traditional classical meaning, "to play the lyre" would be a more appropriate translation;

Life of Seneca 3, pp. 236-237: *matre vero Helbia*, "his mother was Helbia," and 14, pp. 248-249: *Ad Helbiam matrem*, "To his Mother Helbia" (the title of one of Seneca's consolatory epistles; see also *Index*, p. 326): the name of Seneca's mother is usually written 'Helvia.'

"Helbia," if it is not an 'author's variant' (which would have deserved a word of explanation; see p. 292 for a similar case), seems to be due to the exchange between *b* and *v*, common in manuscripts.

In any case, these details do not undermine the value of Baldassarri's and Bagemihl's edition. A fair number of short notes indicating the sources used by the author, a succinct bibliography, and an analytical index, placed at the end of the volume, complete a work which will certainly help modern readers rediscover a neglected figure of the Renaissance. It cannot be emphasized enough how much modern scholarship needs such works.