Enhancing the Research on Sophistry in the Renaissance

Teodoro Katinis

Abstract: This contribution introduces the proceedings of the international conference *The Sophistic Renaissance: Authors, Texts, Interpretations* held in Venice on September 26th, 2016 as part of my Marie Skłodowska-Curie project *Sperone Speroni (1500-1588) and the Rebirth of Sophistry in the Italian Renaissance* at Ca' Foscari University (2015-2016). This introduction briefly presents the *status quaestionis* and the essays collected herein, discusses the challenges scholars encounter while exploring the legacy of ancient sophists in early modern culture, and addresses some promising lines of research for deepening some aspects of the subject in the future.

Keywords: Sophistry, Latin Renaissance, vernacular Renaissance.

1. Introduction

The collection of essays we publish in this issue of *Philosophical Readings* presents the results of the work done by scholars gathered for the conference *The Sophistic Renaissance: Authors, Texts, Interpretations*, which I organized in Venice. The meeting was held at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, in the splendid Aula Baratto on September 26, 2016, with the support of the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage. I intended to organize this conference as the closure event of the first year of my Marie Skłodowska-Curie project *Sperone Speroni (1500-1588) and the Rebirth of Sophistry in the Italian Renaissance* at Ca' Foscari University.[1] This was meant to be the first of two conferences. I scheduled the second one to be held in 2017, at the end of my research project, with the aim of summarizing the most important scholarly results in the exploration of sophistry in the Latin and vernacular Renaissance. I also intended to trace the possiblities of research development in the field over the next years. This second conference was never realized since my current appointment at Ghent University brought my Marie Skłodowska-Curie project to an early end.

According to my knowledge, there has never been a conference on such a subject. Indeed, although the sophists have been the subject of important international meetings, none of them have focused on the presence of ancient sophists in 15th and 16th-century European literature, which is paradoxical when one considers that the ancient sophists were reborn in this period - a time when other ancient traditions, such as Platonism, Aristotelianism and Skepticism, encountered great fortune as well.[2]

The idea of two conferences was shaped on the structure of my two-year research project that aimed to analyze the works of Sperone Speroni degli Alvarotti (Padua 1500–1588), his re-evaluation of ancient sophistic perspectives and their legacy in the early modern age. Speroni was one of the most important protagonists of the Renaissance debate on language and logic as well as civil and speculative philosophy. Educated as an Aristotelian, he eventually developed a distinctive philosophy and was the first to challenge Plato's condemnation of sophists. Starting with a focus on Speroni, the project proposed an analysis of the 15th-century Latin sources, such as Leonardo Bruni and Marsilio Ficino among others, and the exploration of the debate over sophistry in the Italian 16th-century authors, such as Torquato Tasso, Jacopo Mazzoni, and Gabriele Comanini.[3] Considering that Latin literature was the first involved in the rebirth of sophistic traditions, I intended to focus the first conference more on Latin authors and texts and the second conference more on vernacular literatures. That said, I intended to put no strict boundary between the two kinds of literature, which was clearly the spirit of Eric MacPhail's keynote address (Indiana University Bloomington), followed by Lodi Nauta (University of Groningen) – who preferred not to publish his contribution – Leo Catana (University of Copenhagen), and Marco Munarini (University of Padua). The keynote speaker for the second part of the conference was Marc van der Poel (Radboud University), followed by Stefano Gulizia (independent scholar), Jorge Ledo (University of Basel), and myself with some *Closing Remarks*. The conference ended with a Discussion Session in which the following discussants had the role of kindling the debate: Eugene Afonasin (Novosibirsk University), Christopher Celenza (Johns Hopkins University), Glenn Most (SNS Pisa), Carlo Natali (Ca' Foscari University Venice), and Luigi Perissinotto (Ca' Foscari University Venice) – who unfortunately could not attend the Conference. This collection of essays also includes the contribution of Elisa Bacchi (University of Pisa - Ghent University).

The main aim of the Conference was to explore the influence and diffusion of ancient sophistic traditions in early-modern Europe, fostering an interdisciplinary discussion among scholars and enhancing a new network for future interdisciplinary collaboration. The participants examined the ancient sophists' legacy, translations and interpretations of their works in a span of time from the beginning of the 15th century to the first part of the 17th century, and crossing paths with philosophical traditions such as Platonism and Neo-Platonism, as well as major turns in European history, such as the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. I believe the results published in this collection of essays are an important contribution towards fill-

Ghent University
Ghent, Belgium
email: teodoro.katinis@ugent.be

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ing the gap in international scholarship and enhancing research in the field.

2. A brief *status quaestionis*

The scholarship on ancient sophists in the Renaissance is relatively recent and, before presenting the papers in these proceedings, it might be useful to recall the studies that have focused on this subject or have been relevant for the development of current and future studies.

One could be tempted to include the study or the sophistic legacy in the contiguous field of the history of rhetoric, but this would be misleading for our understanding of the specificity of the transmission and reinterpretation of the sophists and their works throughout the Western tradition, a specificity that Eric MacPhail's pioneering monograph *The Sophistic Renaissance* (which clearly inspired this conference title) preserved very well. The first feature of the sophists is that they not only use speech as a means of persuasion, but they also imply powerful philosophical approaches which are definitely rejected by the two main streams of Western tradition (i.e. Platonism and Aristotelianism), but embraced and used by other alternative philosophies (i.e. Skepticism).

MacPhail's book, published in 2011, has been the only extended study available on the rebirth of sophistry in early-modern European literature with a focus on Latin authors, in particular the humanists and Erasmus, and French literature, in particular Montaigne and Rabelais. Without summarizing MacPhail's well-known monograph, it is worth recalling that it not only collects and discusses the fortune of ancient sources in the Renaissance, but also explores their reinterpretation in new forms not always immediately recognizable, for example the use of rhetoric to destroy rhetoric in Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, which is a *topos* that goes back to the conflict between Socrates and the sophists in Plato's dialogues. In other terms, MacPhail's study adopts an historical approach, but also suggests research directions from a theoretical perspective.

The presence of sophists in 15th and 16th century Latin literature has been the subject of other contributions, which have focused on the legacy of a specific sophist (for example the legacy of Protagoras of Abdera studied by Charles Trinkaus in his pioneering essay published in 1976) and the presence of sophistry in authors and texts of the Renaissance.[4]

The relevance of ancient sophists in understanding the vernacular literature of the Italian Renaissance is a growing line of research that has already had several contributions, although a complete exploration is still far from being achieved. Given his explicit defense of the sophists, Speroni Speroni degli Alvarotti, a Paduan philosopher and rhetorician usually labeled as an Aristotelian by historiographers, has been the subject of a number of studies.[5] As a matter of fact, his "trattatelli" *In difesa dei sofisti* and *Contra Socrate* represent a unique case for the study of the rehabilitation of sophistry in the Renaissance, while other works of his discuss the topic, imitate sophistic rhetoric, or clearly refer to sophistic sources. The debate over sophistry in the works of Torquato Tasso and Jacopo Mazzoni has also been discussed in previous scholarship and we can count on several studies.[6] Indeed, as it results also from these proceedings, the rebirth of sophistry and the debate over it seems to be particularly vivid and rich in the Italian environment, so that we can expect further discoveries on Italian authors and texts. Important achievements have been reached also for the Spanish literature thanks to Merkl's studies on the reception of Protagoras of Abdera, through Marsilio Ficino's translations and commentaries on Plato, in Miguel de Cervantes.[7] But we still lack explorations of other vernacular contexts.

Several scholars have warned not to consider sophistry as a uniform movement, or, in other words, they have suggested working on each specific sophist respecting his identity and the specificities of his work and thought. Since the 19th century, thanks to tools like the collection of sophistic fragments published by Diels and Kranz, this is not a difficult task anymore, and although we can still recognize some general common aspects in the authors of both the First and Second Sophistic (as the two major periods of the ancient sophistry are called) we also can clearly see the specificity of each source. For the authors of the Renaissance that was not an easy task, since some of their major sources for knowledge of the sophists, i.e. Plato and Aristotle, tend to identify the nature of sophistry (or the sophist as a kind, for example in Plato's *Sophist*) rather than the specificity of each sophist. I think the Hydra, as a metaphor of sophistry, as it is presented in Plato's dialogue *Euthydemus* (297c–d), expresses quite well this ambivalent identity of sophistry, which is one of the reasons why I chose Antonio del Pollaiolo's painting *Hercules and the Hydra* (c. 1475) as the icon of our conference: sophists are many different individuals who share important features, for example the use of rhetoric as a powerful mean of persuasion, but also keep their own identity, which allows us, for example, to call both Protagoras of Abdera and Gorgias of Leontini 'sophists' but with a full awareness of their deep differences. It is not my intention to deepen this aspect of the subject, which is a task for specialists of ancient sophistic literature considered by itself and before its impact on the Renaissance culture, but it is worth remarking that this ambivalence between the actual sophists, perceived as different from each other, and their belonging to the same kind, at least in the eyes of classical sources, also affected the Renaissance reception, as this also emerges from the papers here published.

3. The collected papers

MacPhail's essay focuses on the study of religion as a human institution and argues that Niccolò Machiavelli and Michel de Montaigne followed the sophists' approach in addressing religion from a social-thought perspective. Particularly interesting is Montaigne's variation on the fragment of Protagoras of Abdera's *Peri theon*. The essay explores, therefore, a possible use of sophistic perspective by vernacular authors as a response to important questions of their time. We should highlight that even when there is no sign of direct contact between the early modern authors and sophistic literature, the influence of the latter on the former is still worth investigating, as it is in any research of hidden textual sources, and even more.

One may argue, in fact, that because of the *damnatio memoriae* of the sophists, which caused the survival of only fragments and indirect sources and a stigma around them, we should not expect clear references to them as if they were classics of the Western philosophical canon. Even when they were reborn in the 15th and 16th centuries, the sophists were never treated like Plato, Aristotle and all the other well-accepted founders of Western civilization. The history of the sophists and their legacy over the centuries is, so to speak, a telluric tradition, a hidden history, and somehow a "storia notturna" (to use the expression of the well-known Carlo Ginzburg's book title on early modern witchcraft, which also deals with the difficulty of retracing a deceiving cultural phenomenon). One could say that the study of the sophists' fortune requires quite a divergence from the traditional source-oriented approach. Traditionally (perhaps now less than before) students learn to look at the sources of a text to understand its identity and assess its originality against tradition, but with sophistic sources the historian often cannot proceed in this way. The presence of a sophist or a sophistic approach or argument in an early modern text rarely emerges clearly and very rarely is clearly stated by the author. The legacy of sophistry in literature is a deceiving presence and, for the most part, difficult to detect. Coherently with its nature, sophistry appears in the Renaissance in the most paradoxical ways: for example, the "speaking against speech", the use of rhetoric against itself to confirm its power (MacPhail 2011, II.3), or the rebirth of sophistry thanks to the rebirth of its worst enemy, i.e. Plato, as it was with the Latin translation of Plato's entire work by the humanist and philosopher Marsilio Ficino who wanted to reestablish the authority of Plato but, quite ironically, also reintroduced sophistry to Western culture.

To Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Gorgias* is dedicated Leo Catana's contribution. Catana stresses the fact that, although sophistry had been known through Aristotle's works before Ficino, the translation of Plato gave an identity to the ancient sophists as they act as actual characters in his dialogues and interact with Socrates and other interlocutors on an imaginary stage. Plato let us meet his enemies while he humanizes them – so to speak. Analysing Ficino's commentary to the *Gorgias*, Catana highlights what we mentioned above: ancient sophists are treated as a homogeneous group, which contradicts the sources, as now scholars know very well. Furthermore, Catana points out that Ficino looked at the sophists, particularly Callicles, as he is depicted in Plato's *Gorgias*, not only as a rhetorician but also as a thinker with political and natural law theories, which confirms the necessity of studying the sophistic reception as a field different from the history of rhetoric. This brings the author to wonder about the possible impact of the sophistic rebirth in the Renaissance on political theories in the early modern period, which not only brings the reader back to MacPhail's discussion on Machiavelli in these proceedings, but also to an interesting association with sophistry by political thinkers. To mention only one example, Thomas Hobbes entitled the second part of his *Art of rhetoric* "the art of sophistry", which witnesses an interest in the subject on the part of one of the most influential political thinkers in the Western tradition. How much does Hobbes rely on the Renaissance interpretative filter for his knowledge of the sophists? And, even more importantly, did sophistic theories and Renaissance interpretations of them play a role in his thought?

The transmission of sophistic approaches and ideas to Renaissance authors did not happen only through Plato and Aristotle – to mention the major philosophers addressing sophistry – but also thanks to authors of late antiquity who influenced the rhetoric and literature of the Renaissance. As argued by Marco Munarini's work, Synesius of Cyrene (4th century), a Neo-platonic rhetorician and philosopher belonging to the school of Hypatia, could have had an important part in the development of some aspects of the philosophy of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. The demiurge power of speech, the role of imagination, the divine conception of man, and other major aspects of humanist anthropology, in the way in which Ficino and Pico shaped and transmitted it to the following centuries, may have been shaped, or at least inspired by, sophistic rhetoric and philosophy of late antiquity.

The history of sophistry within the Latin literature of the Renaissance does not end in the 15th century and is not limited to Italy. As Marc van der Poel demonstrates in his paper, an interest for sophistry is documented in the work of the Frisian scholar Rudolph Agrippa, while the French Jesuit Louis de Cressolles establishes the first comprehensive history of the Greek ancient sophists in his *Theatrum*, published in Paris in 1620. Interestingly, Agricola's judgment about the sophists is entirely positive, whereas several parts of Cressolles' work criticizes the art of ancient sophists from the Platonic point of view. Writing some fifty years after the Council of Trent, Cressolles establishes his survey of sophists to reinforce the doctrine of the Roman Church, as required at his time. Although recognizing the relevance of Fumaroli's (1994) chapter on Cressolles and the related notion of "sophistique sacrée", Van der Poel goes further and argues that the *Theatrum* is above all a broad collection of testimonies, the first of the early modern age and still useful to be consulted. It is worth mentioning that in so doing Cressolles shares with Ficino the ironic destiny of condemning sophistry while he contributes to its diffusion and legacy. Between Agricola and Cressolles, other authors refer to the ancient sophists. Van der Poel addresses in particular the *De instrumento probabilitatis* of the humanist Juan Luis Vives, who explicitly refers to Agricola's *De inventione dialectica*. Van der Poel's contribution opens the path for exploration of the sophistic Renaissance of Europe's Latin literature during the humanist era and beyond, following the variety of perspectives offered in different times and cultural contexts.

If Cressolles was the first early modern author to build a detailed inventory of ancient sophists, Aldus Manutius printed the first collection of ancient rhetoricians' texts which also included sophistic pieces: the two volumes of the *Greek Orators* (1513). Gulizia's contribution focuses on the insertion of the ancient sophist Alcidamas in the first volume as a case study for the analysis of the transmission, management, and printing of the materials coming from the Byzantine world to Venice, where printing activity at the time was one of the largest and most intensive in Europe. Indeed, in Venice one detects a concentration of printing initiatives that marked the rebirth of soph-

istry for the entire Western world. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the 16th century, Manutius published Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists* in 1503, Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen,* along with other sophistic texts in 1513, and the whole of Plato's works in the same year, to mention only some of the publications that are directly related to the ancient sophists, which fostered their fortune.[8]

Jorge Ledo's broad project of mapping the Latin vocabulary of sophistry in the Renaissance is a different way of looking at the inventory of activities developed at the time, although he does not focus on names, theories or works, but rather on linguistic terms related to sophistry. Indeed, after an extensive introduction to the subject, Ledo discusses different categories of words which rivals use to attack each other in several kinds of intellectual debates and on a variety of subjects. Ledo aims at reconstructing the origin, evolution, and uses of this lexicon, which sheds light not only on the humanist critique of scholasticism but also and more widely on the sophistic sources of disputation in the early modern era. Indeed, the variety of terms analyzed in Ledo's paper includes not only *sophisma*, *sophista,* and others which immediately refer to sophistry, but also terms less directly related to the subject and still overlapping its semantic area, such as *altercationes* and *argutiae*, which Ledo detects in several early modern *logothecae* – a term that he borrows from Guillaume Budé. The linguistic perspective adopted by Ledo's paper suggests looking at the evolution of language (in this case Latin, but future research projects should also address the vernaculars) as the major channel for the diffusion of sophistry. One may wonder how much of an impact the translation (not only literally but also culturally) of sophistic notions, ideas, arguments, and strategies had on the metamorphosis of sophistry, this strange creature (Hydra for Plato, "testuggine" for Speroni, Proteo for others) that had survived all *damnatio memoriae* from ancient Greece to the Renaissance. But one may also wonder the opposite: how much the injection of sophistic elements, and the debate over them, had had an impact on the evolution and transformation of language and culture in the early modern period. In other words, and without overestimating the role that sophistry played in Europe since the 15th century, the assessment of this aspect of the subject may contribute to the understanding of the conflict and debate that had such an important part in numerous aspects of European Renaissance culture.

The use of the Second Sophistic – particularly Lucian of Samosata – for the exploitation of mythological and animal metaphors, and the conflictual climate of the Reformation are discussed in Elisa Bacchi's contribution on Erasmus' ethics and its rhetorical origin. Bacchi argues that Erasmus, influenced also by the Italian humanist Leon Battista Alberti, does not conceive of his aesthetic and rhetorical means as a mere external apparatus, but rather as a substantial part of his ethical discourse. The debate between Erasmus and Martin Luther along with his intellectual and friendly exchange with Thomas More, which are the relationships addressed by Bacchi, give the opportunity to see how Erasmus exploits the sophistic tradition and its allegories to face the urgent issues of his time. This essay demonstrated that MacPhail's book, in which Erasmus plays a major role, has actually opened and inspired further promising research exploration in the field.

4. Conclusion and future research

We are aware that this collection of essays does not cover some important parts of the history of the Sophistic Renaissance that could have a place here. We are also aware that important connections of sophistry with other traditions and fields are not mentioned. As mentioned above, this conference was meant as a first attempt to gather scholars *to start* enhancing the study of the subject. In the spirit of the Venetian meeting, I believe it is worth at least mentioning some directions we could take in the future to further our exploration.

The relationship between sophistic sources and the rebirth of skepticism in the Renaissance seems to be one of the most promising candidates. Indeed, the connection between skeptics and sophists appears several times and in several forms in the 16th century, for example in Montaigne or even more clearly in Sextus Empiricus' use of Gorgias and Protagoras, as already noted by MacPhail (2011), but also in some important Italian authors, such as Speroni and Jacopo Mazzoni.

Another line of research is suggested by the metaphor of persuasive speech as a *pharmacon*, in fact, both poison and medicine, depending on the speaker's use and intention, presented by Gorgias in his *Encomium of Helen* - that is, the relationship between the history of sophistic rhetoric and the history of medicine. This topic has already had attention regarding the ancient world, for example in Gleason's study (1995) on oratory in ancient Rome. Here, she refers to the relevance of the physiognomical knowledge of time for the analysis of sophists' self-presentation. Given the 15th and 16th-century rebirth of ancient sophistic and medical texts, it would be worth exploring if the connection established in the ancient world flourished again in the Renaissance, even in different original forms, considering that both medicine and rhetoric plaid an important role in university as well as in public life at the time, as it did in the Venetian area.

Furthermore, specific primary sources deserve further study – in particular Cressolles' *Theatrum* (1620) and Dornavius' *Amphitheatrum sapientiae socraticae jocoseriae* (1619). Regarding the former, it would be interesting to analyze which sources and scholars he uses. The latter is interesting for its traces of reception of the ancient sophists one might find given the tight connection between the paradoxical *Encomia* and sophistry in the Renaissance: for example, Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* – among the most well-known works – and Speroni's *Dialogo della Discordia* – whose relationship with sophistry is recently an object of scholarly interest (Katinis 2015).

We already mentioned political thinkers and theory related to the Renaissance reception of sophistry (Machiavelli and Hobbes) and we could add others, usually not considered political thinkers, who acknowledge the originality of sophistic fragments on ethics and politics. Speroni, for example, supports an extreme form of relativism in assessing the value of laws in different republics on several occasions. How much of the intense connection between ancient sophists and the city (i.e. the 'natural'

environment of the sophist) was reflected in early modern interpretations? To what extent are Renaissance thinkers interested in sophistry because of the analogy they perceived between their time and the ancient political environment of Greece?

Other directions of research are possible and it is not my intention to make a list of them, yet, in whichever manner the exploration continues, philological and translation enterprises (sometimes not very welcome in the current academic environment) should be considered precious allies of any further research activities.

The contributions collected in these proceedings demonstrate, among other things, that the Renaissance of sophistry and sophists began centuries before the modern philological, historical and theoretical enterprises of Diels and Kranz, Untersteiner, De Romilly, Cassin and others who have aimed at rediscovering this neglected part of Western tradition. The Sophistic Renaissance started in the Latin texts of Italian humanists and was transmitted, through translations and interpretations, over the centuries thanks to the interest of early modern scholars who saw in sophistic literature an ally or an enemy to destroy, a treasure to preserve or a danger to avoid - in any case worthy of investigation.

I do not dare to claim that a new field of study is open - and I would gladly avoid adding a new item to the overproliferation of categories and sub-categories of studies characterizing our time – but I hope this effort of revealing the hidden history of the Sophistic Renaissance will inspire and attract scholars from different disciplines to extend the exploration that started with MacPhail's book in 2011 (aside from a few older and narrower contributions before it).

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Notes

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[2] An important meeting on the legacy of the sophist was held in Germany in 1979, see the proceedings in Kerferd.

[3] Althought my Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship had an "early termination" after the first year, my research project was completed at Ghent University and the final outcomes are now published in a monograph (Katinis 2018).

[4] See Struever (chapter I) on Gorgias of Leontini and the Humanism, Bausi on Leonardo Bruni, Nauta (255-260) on Protagoras of Abdera and Lorenzo Valla, Allen and Katinis (2013 and 2018) on Marsilio Ficino, and Giglioni on Gerolamo Cardano,

[5] Pozzi, Girardi, Fournel (216-220), Katinis 2018 (chapters II and III).

[6] Scarpati, Scarpati-Bellini, Russo, Katinis 2018 (chapter IV).

[7] Merkl 2004 and 2011.

[8] MacPhail 2011, 39-40.