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THE RECEPTION OF ANGELO POLIZIANO'S LETTERS IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

In this essay I will attempt to account for the wide circulation of Angelo Poliziano's epistolographical texts in the first decades of the sixteenth century in France. Although my survey concentrates on editions published in Paris and Lyon, throughout my article I will also make occasional references to other Latin texts by Poliziano and to other humanist epistolary collections, as well as to further editions of Poliziano's letters published elsewhere in Europe¹.

Teaching students to write in Latin eloquently was the ultimate objective of the programme of study recommended by humanists across Renaissance Europe. Once they had acquired some grounding in Latin grammar, in most academic institutions students then began to write passages of continuous prose. The first form of written Latin composition practised in schools and universities was the letter. The initial stage in letter-writing involved little more than rewriting or adapting phrases extracted from some of the easier letters by Roman authors. Students then proceeded to themes (what we might now call an essay), usually on a moral topic. Central to both rhetorical exercises were Cicero's epistles and speeches. Classical epistolography and oratory were, however, not the only models of Latin composition favoured in the sixteenth century, and collections of letters and speeches by fifteenth-century Italian humanists also soon acquired textbook status. Eager to learn the secret of writing elegant Latin, pupils throughout Renaissance Europe spent large amounts of time reading, translating and imitating the Latin correspondence of their Italian models. They were also advised to study textbooks and manuals on Latin composition. Even after Erasmus's *De conscribendis epistolis* became widely accepted in sixteenth-century schools, Italian humanists continued to provide influential textbooks for instruction on letter-writing. Of all these treatises the most popular were the *Elegantiae* of Agostino Dati (1420-78), the *Epistolae ad exercitationem accommodatae* of Gasparino Barzizza (1360-1431), and the *De modo epistolandi* by the Venetian teacher Francesco Negro (Franciscus Niger, 1452-1523)².

From the last quarter of the fifteenth century and well into the following century, editions of the correspondence of Petrarch, Fausto Andrelini, Francesco Filelfo, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Angelo Poliziano flooded the European market. France –and Paris in particular– were not immune to this general trend (see Appendix). Interest in the Latin correspondence of Italian humanists was for the most part fuelled by printers, who frequently saw an edition of the letters of Andrelini or Poliziano as a joint enterprise involving fellow printers, booksellers, editors, teachers and lecturers. The spate of editions of humanist epistolary collections published in Paris and Lyon in the first four decades of the sixteenth century is a clear reflection of the privileged position of this body of texts in the Renaissance curriculum³. One edition from this

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² On the circulation of Dati's text in Renaissance Europe, see J. C.

Warner, « Quick Eloquence in the Late Renaissance: Agostino Dati's *Elegantiolae* », *Humanistica Lovaniensia*, 61, 2012, p. 65-240 (p. 67-71); on the dissemination of Barzizza's text in northern Europe, see A. Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 53-55.

³ One can form an idea of the printed dissemination of the letters of these four writers in early sixteenth-century Paris through reference to the first two volumes of B. Moreau, *Inventaire chronologique des éditions parisiennes du XVI^e siècle*, Paris, Service des travaux historiques de la Ville de Paris, 1972-.

large bibliographical corpus is especially noteworthy. In September 1503 Josse Bade prepared an edition of the last twenty-one books of Francesco Filelfo's correspondence (books 17-37), which he dedicated to David Lauxius (David Loys or Lowis). A native of Edinburgh, Lauxius graduated from the University of Paris in 1495, and worked as a press-corrector in the French capital before becoming a schoolmaster in Arras⁴. Aware that other epistolographers were more elegant and eloquent, Bade nonetheless advised Lauxius to use Filelfo's correspondence with his young students as «nothing is more polished and clearer than Filelfo's letters»⁵. At Arras Filelfo's collection was no doubt selected as a companion volume to the grammar by Giovanni Sulpizio (ca. 1440 - ca. 1506), an edition of which Bade also dedicated to Lauxius later that year. The choice of Sulpizio's grammar was not coincidental on the part of Bade and Lauxius: the manual includes an appendix «on composing and embellishing letters» (*«de componendis ornandisque epistolis»*), a series of precepts on letter-writing which the schoolmaster could intersperse with readings from Filelfo's Latin correspondence⁶.

Among Italian authors of Latin letters Poliziano was perhaps the one who attracted the most attention in early sixteenth-century France. Poliziano, as editor, had included his correspondence in a collection of epistles by Italian humanists, often himself and his addressees, which was first published in the posthumous *Opera omnia* of 1498⁷. I would like to start by briefly examining the typology of French editions of Poliziano's correspondence, which in the end does not differ very substantially from that of other European locations. The texts, of course, featured in the Parisian and Lyonese editions of Poliziano's complete works, issued respectively by Bade and Sébastien Gryphe in the 1510s, 1520s and 1530s. The first individual edition of Poliziano's correspondence dates back, however, to 1499 when Bade edited the totality of Poliziano's Latin letters for the Lyon press of Nicolas Wolf, with whom Bade worked in the city between November 1498 and February of the following year. In the preface to this collective volume of Italian humanist epistolography –dedicated to Anton Koberger, «easily the best of booksellers»⁸– Poliziano is accorded a prominent position by Bade: his letters open the collection, and the volume features an «*epigramma de Angelo Politiano*» at the end⁹. Bade and Wolf's edition was reprinted in quick succession in the years to come: twice in Paris (by Thomas Kees for Denis Roce sometime between 1507 and 1511, and by Pierre Gaudoul in 1515), and once in Lyon around 1510 (by François Regnault).

Josse Bade realised that there was a market for Poliziano's correspondence. In 1517 he published a new edition of the letters, which now included an extensive commentary by François Du Bois (Franciscus Sylvius, ca. 1483-1536)¹⁰. A commentator on Cicero and Sallust, Du Bois was at that time professor of rhetoric at the Collège de Lisieux, from where he addressed his prefatory letter to his edition. Du Bois's annotations to Poliziano should therefore be considered as a natural development arising from his lecture-hall practice. Bade's 1517 edition was the first in

⁴ On Lauxius, see E.F. Rice, jr., *The Prefatory Epistles of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and Related Texts*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1972, p. 19-20.

⁵ *Epistolarum Francisci Philelphi... unus et viginti libri reliqui qui post sedecim sunt reperti*, Paris, Badius Ascensius, 1503, sig. A 1^r: «*Quamquam enim et elegantiores et argutiores iam prodierunt, quorundam epistolae, nihil tamen est Philelphicis concinnius atque lucidius*» (copy used at the British Library, 1084 m. 4).

⁶ Bade himself wrote a *De epistolis componendis compendium* (Paris, Badius Ascensius, 1504).

⁷ For the printing history of Poliziano's letters, see M. Martelli, *Angelo Poliziano: Storia e metastoria*, Lecce, Conte, 1995, p. 205-265.

⁸ See P. White, *Jodocus Badius Ascensius: Commentary, Commerce and Print in the Renaissance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 148, n. 11.

⁹ *Illustrium virorum epistolae meri sales, merae facitiae, meri lepores, merae argutiae, merae urbanitates, merae delitiae, merae veneres venerumque gratiae*, Lyon, 1499, sig. a 1^r: «[...] *legat epistolas quibus Politianus, cuius primae ac plurimae censentur hic partes, sic scribendum contendit ac se scripsisse fatetur*».

¹⁰ *Illustrium virorum epistolae ab Angelo Politiano collectae, et a Francisco Sylvio Ambianate diligenter expositae*, Paris, Badius Ascensius, 1517. On Du Bois, see M.-M. de La Garanderie, *Christianisme et lettres profanes: essai sur l'humanisme français (1515-1535) et sur la pensée de Guillaume Budé*, Paris, Champion, 1995, p. 109-112 and J. Lecoq, *La Poetica de François Dubois*, Habilitation thesis, Paris, Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2000.

a run of printings of Du Bois's commentaries which were soon expanded in successive editions, the first only three years later. Rather than simple reprints of the original text, each new edition incorporated additional material specifically prepared for the environment where the books were to be used. Thus, Paris November 1520 (but also December 1520, printed, like so many of Bade's best-sellers, by his rival Nicolas Des Prés) open with a preface by Du Bois signed from the Collège de Boncourt. The contents of each letter are first summarized by Du Bois in an «*argumentum*» followed by a short note on a specific passage written by Bade, while the margins of the page are filled with Du Bois's commentaries. In addition, the numerous Greek passages in the letters (as well as two Greek letters by Ermolao Barbaro also included in the volume) are translated by Jacques Toussain, who had already rendered all the Greek texts included in Bade's 1512 edition of Poliziano's *Opera omnia*¹¹. A further edition of Poliziano's letters (Paris 1523) reproduces the same scheme as its predecessor but includes a preface by the editor Nicolas Pertat (Pertatius), to whom I shall return later in my essay. Except for a new prologue by Du Bois written from the Collège de Boncourt, the last in the run of printings of Poliziano's letters (issued in 1526) features the same introductory texts as the edition published six years previously¹².

Printed in folio or in user-friendly octavo format, Poliziano's Latin correspondence enjoyed considerable exposure in early sixteenth-century France. Interest in Poliziano's epistolary texts did not, however, arise in a vacuum. Rather, this phenomenon coincided with attention to other rhetorical writings by the Italian, namely his speeches, which were included, for example, in several Parisian editions of Filippo Beroaldo (for example, that of 1520)¹³. The variety of uses to which Poliziano's Latin letters could be put accounted for their popularity. For instance, the title-page of Wolf's edition of 1499 advertises the wit, pleasantness and urbanity of the texts (see n. 9). The epithet applied to Poliziano («*ille eruditionis heros Angelus Politianus*») which features in the title of the afore-mentioned edition of his letters published in Lyon around 1510, illustrates further the sort of reputation accorded to the Italian humanist by early printers and editors of the texts. Given Poliziano's wide network of correspondents, his letters also provided the reader with all sort of information about contemporaries of the author. As is well known, Poliziano's letters had been the public forum for renowned controversies on literary imitation between Paolo Cortesi, Bartolomeo Scala and Poliziano himself¹⁴. In his collection of epistles, first published in the posthumous *Opera omnia* of 1498, Poliziano had included, in addition to his correspondence, the famous epistolary exchange between Giovanni Pico and Ermolao Barbaro on the subject of Latin prose. All this material –and in particular the letters that passed between Poliziano and Cortesi– were well known in Paris at the beginning of the sixteenth century¹⁵. Indeed in his 1512 edition of Poliziano's *Opera omnia* Bade acknowledged the value of such a corpus as a valid document on polemics regarding literary imitation even if he criticised some of the contents of the texts¹⁶.

Another humanist who became acquainted with all these materials was Erasmus, who first read Poliziano's letters around 1500. Erasmus found Poliziano's criticism of exclusive imitation of Cicero to be particularly appealing, but for him the value of Poliziano's letters went well

¹¹ See L. Delaruelle, « L'étude du grec à Paris (de 1514 à 1530) », *Revue du seizième siècle*, 9, 1922, p. 132-149 (p. 136-40).

¹² *Illustrium virorum epistolae ab Angelo Politiano partim scriptae, partim collectae, cum Sylvianis commentariis et Ascensianis scholiis, non parum auctis et diligenter repositis cumque vocabularum minus idonearum aut minus rite usurpatarum adnotatione*, Paris, Badius Ascensius, 1526.

¹³ For the circulation of Beroaldo's speeches in sixteenth-century France, see now A. Severi, *Filippo Beroaldo il Vecchio un maestro per l'Europa. Da commentatore di classici a classico moderno (1481–1550)*, Bologna, Società editrice il Mulino, 2015, p. 64-76.

¹⁴ On these controversies, see M.L. McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 187-227.

¹⁵ See A. Moss, *Renaissance Truth and the Latin Language Turn*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 74-76.

¹⁶ *Omnium Angeli Politiani operum tomus prior...particula*, Paris, Badius Ascensius, 1512, sig. A 1v: « [...] in his autem epistolis non unus est Politianus qui eas scripserit, sed complures alii, verum et docti, et eloquentes cum primis omnes, omnibusque de eruditione aut de amicitia, mutuaque laudatione farrago est ».

beyond the mere record of specific literary controversies: he held the texts in the highest regard as models of style. As he noted in a passage from his *De conscribendis epistolis*:

It is not the concern of this essay to discuss further who deserves the ultimate prize in this art. If, leaving aside the Greek writers, I may be permitted to state my preferences in the genre under discussion, I should be inclined to assign the first place to Cicero, Pliny, and Poliziano: but on this matter everyone is entitled to his own opinion¹⁷.

The merits of Poliziano and of other humanist epistolographers were time and again praised by Erasmus. His *Adagia* are known to have been influenced by Andrelini's letters. In addition, Erasmus admired Pico's correspondence for its elegant style and spiritual values, an opinion echoed in the title of a 1535 edition of Pico's letters published in Antwerp (*Iohannis Pici Mirandulani Epistolae non piae minus quam elegantes*). Moreover, Erasmus's views on letter-writing and the most famous Italian practitioners of the art were clearly shared by some of his contemporaries. In his survey of humanist epistolographers, Juan Luis Vives, who had sojourned in Paris from 1509 to 1512 and again in 1514 (when he befriended Nicolas Bérauld), praised Poliziano in his own *De conscribendis epistolis*. Indeed, Poliziano's epistles were recommended by the Spaniard as suitable conversation material for boys, since «their themes attract the young like fights and contests»¹⁸.

Erasmus's views on Italian epistolary writers also exerted a strong influence on some of his friends and admirers in Paris. One of them was Thierry Morel, of Vitry-en-Perthois. Morel taught from 1520 to 1523 at the Collège de la Marche, and from 1523 onwards at the Collège de Saint Michel, of which he was also the principal¹⁹. This is the title («*archididascalus*») with which he is addressed by his fellow «Champenois» Nicolas Pertat in the dedicatory letter prefacing Morel's edition of Poliziano's letters. In the liminary poems, by Pertat and by a certain Ioannis Quaretius whom I have not been able to identify, the Collège de Saint Michel is acclaimed as a Parnassus, worthy home for Morel, «priest of the citadel of Apollo» («*arcisque Phoeneae antistes*»). Pertat and Quaretius praise Morel as a pedagogue who is equally concerned with his students' good morals and wise elocution. The list of texts edited by Morel during his tenure at la Marche and Saint Michel seems to confirm these preoccupations. Around 1520 he dedicated an edition of Mantuan's *Bucolics* to three of his students at La Marche²⁰. In his opening letter Morel highlighted the moral message underlying Mantuan's pastoral poetry, a text that was meant to strengthen the student's grammar while at the same time giving him his first introduction to Graeco-Roman history and culture without any fear that it might poison the minds or contaminate the morals of the youth²¹. Linguistic and educational values were also obvious in Cato's *Distichs*, to which Morel prepared a series of annotations later in the 1520s²².

¹⁷ Erasmus, *De conscribendis epistolis*, *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, I 2, Amsterdam, North-Holland Publishing Company, 1971, I, 364 B : « *Caeterum cui palma debeat in hoc genere, non est huius instituti pluribus verbis persequi. Si quis omissis Graecis, patiat quinquam ullo in genere anteponi, M. Tullio, et Plinio, et Politiano primas detulerim. Sed hac sane in re fruatur suo quisque iudicio* ».

¹⁸ Juan Luis Vives, *De conscribendis epistolis*, ed. by C. Fantazzi, Leiden, Brill, 1989, p. 109 : « *Allubescunt haec quidem adolescentibus velut pugnae et certamina* ».

¹⁹ On Morel, see M.-M. de La Garanderie, « Recueils parisiens de lettres d'Erasmus », *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 31, 3, 1969, p. 449-465 (p. 459-460), and M. Reulos, « Thierry Morel », *Contemporaries of Erasmus: A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and the Reformation*, ed. by P.G. Bietenholz and T. Deutscher, Toronto-Buffalo-London, University of Toronto Press, 1985-1987, II, p. 460.

²⁰ *Baptistae Mantuani Bucolica seu Adolescentia in decem aeglogas divisa ab Iodoco Badio Ascensio familiariter exposita et a Theodorico Morello non paucis labeculis emaculata*, Paris, Bernard Aubri, 1520 (copy inspected at BL 11405 e. 35). Interestingly, Pertat also published an edition of Mantuan's bucolic verse in Paris in 1528 (Moreau, *Inventaire chronologique*, III, p. 440).

²¹ *Baptistae Mantuani Bucolica*, sig. a I v : « *In manus (dum per ocium tumultuarium licebit) sumite, complectimini, adamate et ad verbum animo praesenti legite* ».

²² *Cato cum commento familiari*, Paris, Pierre Grosmons, 1528.

Yet, Morel's chief interest was in initiating his students into the skills of prose composition in Latin. To that end he produced, for example, an edition of Lorenzo Valla's *Elegantiae*²³. Morel's preoccupation with the development of a sound Latin style is also shown in the editions of humanistic letters or of letter-writing manuals for which he was responsible. In 1522 he commissioned an edition of Francesco Negro's *De modo epistolandi* for the use of his students at La Marche²⁴. One of Morel's first editorial projects shortly after taking up his post at the Collège de Saint Michel in 1523 was a selection of Erasmus's correspondence, which was reissued two years later²⁵. The volume was again marketed as suitable material for teaching and Erasmus's letters were labelled by Morel as « *studiosis iuvenibus admodum utiles* ». The year 1523 also saw the publication of an edition of Poliziano's correspondence by Morel, which included Du Bois's commentaries. Signed « *ex musaeo nostro divi Michaelis* », Morel's edition places Poliziano's letters in a university context. In the preface to the edition, Pertat notes that the letters were used by Morel in his teaching at Saint-Michel:

*En studiosa iuventus multis nominibus se tibi debere intellegit, quippe qui huic adornandae indefesse excubans hasce non minus politas quam doctas Politiani epistolas palam interpretandas (Herculeus siquidem labor est) suscepisti, ut tuo sub auspicio feliciter merens illam loquendi sartagine[m] literariamque pestem propulasaret*²⁶.

CONCLUSION

The manner in which collections of Italian humanist letters were handled in the Renaissance classroom has much to do with the local perspectives and needs of those who prescribed the texts. The same letter by Petrarch, Angelo Poliziano, Francesco Filelfo or Fausto Andrelini could be used for a variety of pedagogical ends. Though the terminology employed by editors and printers is, at best, elusive, and the words « *puer* », « *adolescens* » and « *iuvenis* » are very often used without distinction on titlepages, in prefaces and in dedicatory poems, we can nonetheless establish a basic typology²⁷. Broadly speaking, Filelfo's letters were viewed as suitable material for the elementary stages of the rhetoric curriculum. Significantly, Filelfo's texts very rarely merit annotations. Most editions of his correspondence include a thorough table of contents at the beginning and tend to present each letter with a heading summing up the contents of the text. For example, in two 1511 Parisian editions of only eighty letters from Filelfo's textual body of over two thousands documents (*Epistolae octoginta epistolarum genera complectentes acriori lima nuper recognitae*), the letters are grouped thematically (letters of encouragement, persuasion, consolation, request and so forth), following Erasmus's typology as laid out in the *De conscribendis epistolis*. By contrast, Poliziano's Latin correspondence appears to have been employed at a more advanced level within the teaching of rhetoric, if we are to judge it from Du Bois's commentaries, which tend towards « *enarratio* ». This seems to be confirmed by the only non-French edition of Poliziano's letters discussed in this essay: Andreas Cratander's edition of Poliziano's epistles, which was published at Basle in 1522. In his preface, dedicated to an ideal « *eloquentiae candidatus* », Cratander praises Poliziano's elegant themes, and distinguishes him from his predecessors and contemporaries for his erudition and balanced style:

²³ *Elegantiarum libri sex denuo recogniti cum de reciprocis pronomibus libello*, Paris, Pierre Vidoue for Jean Petit, 1523.

²⁴ *Epistole Francisci Nigri per Theodoricum Morellum, Campanum, spongia deletili emaculate*, Paris, s.n., 1522 (copy inspected at Bibliothèque nationale de France, Rés. Z-204). The volume was dedicated to Jean Champagne, a conspicuous follower of Erasmus (see La Garanderie, *Christianisme et lettres profanes*, p. 107-108).

²⁵ *Desiderii Erasmi breves epistolae studiosis iuvenibus admodum utiles*, Paris, Simon de Colines, 1523, and Pierre Gros mors & Jean Petit, 1525.

²⁶ *Illustrium virorum epistolae ab Angelo Politiano partim scriptae, partim collectae, cum Sylvianis commentaries et Ascensianis scholiis, non parum auctis et diligenter repositis cumque vocabularum minus idonearum aut minus rite usurpatarum adnotatione*, Paris, Badius Ascensius, 1523, sig. aa 2^r (copy used at BNF, Rés. Z-798).

²⁷ On the difficulties understanding the exact meaning of these words in the sixteenth century, see C. Gilbert, « When Did a Man in the Renaissance Grow Old? », *Studies in the Renaissance*, 14, 1967, p. 7-32. In his essay, Gilbert concludes that maturity came early for Renaissance men and that a man was considered to be old at forty.

*Quis vero est sinistre indoctus qui nesciat Politianum tantum valuisse cordata elocutione, praeter omnium aliarum doctrinarum divinam quandam ac consummatissimam cognitionem, ut non eruditissimos solum suae aetatis homines longo intervallo a tergo reliquerit, sed et qui mille ante se annos et amplius scripserunt, suae quasi quodam fulgore eloquentiae obscuraverit?*²⁸.

²⁸ «Who is so perversely ignorant not to know that Poliziano, apart from a certain divine and most perfect knowledge of all the other disciplines, had such a strength with his wise elocution, that not only did he surpass the most learned men of his own age but, as if with the splendour of his eloquence, he also outshone those who had written one thousand years or more before him ? », *Angeli Politiani et aliorum virorum illustrium epistolarum libri duodecim*, Basle, Cratander, 1522, sig. a 2^r (copy used at BL, 10905 bbb. 11).

APPENDIX

This appendix includes a selection of editions of letters by fifteenth-century Italian humanists published in France in the early sixteenth century.

Fausto Andrelini

Publii Fausti Andrelini Froliviensis poetae laureati atque oratoris clarissimi) epistolae proverbiales et morales longe lepidissimae nec minus sententiosae, Paris, 1508 (two editions), 1516, 1521, 1528

Francesco Filelfo

Epistolarum Francisci Philelphi...unus et viginti libri reliqui qui post sedecim sunt reperti, Paris, 1503

Epistolae octoginta epistolarum genera complectentes acriori lima nuper recognitae, Paris 1511 (two editions)

Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini

Epistolae et varii tractatus Pii Secundi Pontificis Maximi, Lyon, 1510 and 1518

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola

Aureae epistolae Iohannis Pici Mirandulani, Paris, 1502, 1508 and 1510

Pomponio Leto

Pomponii Laeti epistolae aliquot familiares, Paris, 1511

Angelo Poliziano

Illustrium virorum epistolae meri sales, merae facetiae, meri lepores, merae argutiae, merae urbanitates, merae delitiae, merae veneres venerumque gratiae, Lyon, 1499 and ca. 1510; Paris, between 1507 and 1511, and 1515; *Illustrium virorum epistolae ab Angelo Politiano collectae, et a Francisco Sylvio diligenter expositae*, Paris, 1517, 1520 (two editions), 1523, 1526; the letters are also included in Poliziano's *Opera omnia* (Paris and Lyon in the 1510s, 1520s and 1530s)

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