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Ovid in the Early Latin Literary Historiography

Abstract: During the Italian Humanism (XV century) scholars tried organically to arrange all the scattered information on life and on works of Latin writers, starting a specific “genre”, i.e. literary historiography. There were significant challenges for this attempt, as many works of Latin authors had been just rediscovered and so humanists had known them only recently. However this attempt, although only partly successful, was very valuable to us as it laid the foundations of the following development of literary historiography. This work aims at studying the introduction of Ovid’s figure and work of during his exile in some literary history treatments of the humanistic and Renaissance era.

Keywords: Ovid, exile, Italian Humanism

The successful formula introduced by Ludwig Traube who called XIIth and XIIIth centuries *aetas ovidiana*, because of Ovid’s significant popularity, has been recently put into perspective by Birgen Munk Olsen’s¹ research, which, although limited to the XIIth century, highlighted that the number of surviving manuscripts is rather low if compared to the large diffusion that Ovid’s poetry seemed to have reached during the Middle Ages: however, also this kind of study confirms that the most read works during the Middle Ages were the *Metamorphoses* followed after certain distance by *Fasti*, *Ex Ponto* e *Tristia*².

On the other hand, the Italian Humanism of the XVth century sprang up under the influence of the Ciceronian model, and at that

¹ *Vorlesungen und Abhandlungen II* (München, 1911), p. 113. Cf. F. Munari *Ovid im Mittelalter*, Zürich, 1960.

² “Ovide au Moyen Age (du IX au XII siècle)”, *Le strade del testo* edited by G. Cavallo (Bari, 1987), pp. 67-96.

time scholars tried to organically arrange and historically contextualize all the scattered information on the life and on the works of Latin writers, starting a specific “genre”, *i.e.* literary historiography. There were significant challenges for such initiative, as it was necessary to set on a chronological and literary basis authors and works which had been just discovered, after the period of silence of the Middle Ages. This attempt was very valuable to us as it laid the foundations of the following development of literary historiography.

This work aims at reconstructing a particular chapter of Ovid’s success, *i.e.* the introduction of his figure and work in the main historiographical treatments of Latin literature during the humanistic era³.

We will focus in particular on the writings of three scholars who worked for over a century, from 1433 to 1545, in two different but equally refined humanistic cultural areas: Siccio Polenton and Lilio Gregorio Giraldi Venetia and Pietro del Riccio in the area of Florence.

Polenton, author of the *De illustribus scriptoribus linguae Latinae* (finished in 1433)⁴ worked in Padua, where he lived almost his whole life, carefully putting together the information available on the Latin writers: this suggests a long and hard gathering of the sources, considering that the greatest discovery of classics was mostly by Poggio Bracciolini in the very early decades of the XVth century. There are two different drafts (and maybe an intermediate one) of the work, but the autograph manuscript (*Ottobon. Lat.* 1915), which in all likelihood contains the last will of the author, put any other questions related to the history of the text in a

³ A useful collection of texts with relevant bibliography is that of W. Stroh, *Ovid im Urteil der Nachwelt. Eine Testimoniensammlung*, Darmstadt 1969. R. Degl’Innocenti Pierini as well complains about the lack of systematic studies on Ovid’s success during the Humanistic era, *Il Poliziano e Ovidio esule. Per l’esegesi dell’elegia De Ovidii exilio et morte*, “St. Uman. Picensi” 10,1990, 215 (= “Respubl. Litt.” 16, 1990).

⁴ Of the three works, only one has a rather recent critical edition, the one edited by B.L. Ullman (Roma, Accad. Americana 1928). With regard to Crinitus, the *editio princeps* was published in Florence in 1505 (*per Phil. Iuntam*), it was followed by other reprints edited by Ascensius in 1510, 1513, 1518 (Nicola di Barra), 1525; afterwards a revised edition by Henricus Petrus was published in Basel in 1532; Crinitus’s works continued to be reprinted until the end of the XVI century. For Giraldi’s work we should refer to the Basel edition of 1545.

subordinate position. The work is composed of eighteen books preceded by an epitome containing a subject index of the authors cited in the work.

Polenton says that he wants to report only what the research of the previous scholars has already verified, proceeding with an accurate selection of the broad material available. His programmatic intention is to gather all the scattered information on the life of authors, up to the great writers in Latin of the fourteenth century, described through a global view of the Latin period, to make an organic *corpus* which can revive the memory of those illustrious men.

The chapter on Ovid is to be set in the general economy of the *De illustribus scriptoribus*: we are in the middle of *aetas Ciceroniana* and manuals focus particularly on Cicero. In fact the core of the eighteen books which form the work contains no less than seven books dedicated to the figure of the Arpinas, in which Sicco composes a real treatise of Roman history, where the figure of Cicero gains probably higher importance than that one he had in the historico-political context of his time.

In such a distribution of the subject it is possible to find a vague and still approximate preview of the Wolfian distinction between “inner history” and “outer history”, which will meet with a lot of success in literary manuals between the end of the XVIIIth century and the beginning of the XIXth century.

The second book is the most interesting, as it deals with poetry as a whole, with its origin, with its function and with the importance it had among the ancients; after the ancient poets and the great comic poetry, that of the Republican era (Catullo), Polenton deals with the Latin poetry of the Imperial period, where the figure of Ovid covers the pages 65-71 of Ullman edition. The number of the pages dedicated to Ovid is very exiguous if compared to the broadness of Ovid's literary production available. The treatment is preceded by detailed biographical data on his country, parents and brother; the author underlines also the strong hostility of the father towards the poetical activity of his son as well as Ovid's efforts to support his father's will, although, later, his passion for poetry had the upper hand⁵.

Afterwards the author lists some alleged youth works with the following titles: *De medicamine faciei*, *De medicamine aurium*, *De*

⁵ A careful revisitation of Ovid's autobiography is in the recent study of A. Luisi *Lettera ai Posteris. Ovidio, Tristia 4,10*, Bari, 2006.

cuculo, De culice, De nuce, De philomela, De scachis, De vetula, De puellis, De vino. From these titles one can deduce that, along with ascertained Ovidian works, the humanistic culture attributed other works to the Poet: in particular the *De medicamine aurium* might be a “spurious” extension of the *De medic. fac.*; the *De culice* is reminiscent of the ‘Virgil’s’ *Culex* and implies an unsure attribution to different authors of presumably not authentic works; the *De nuce* is of doubtful Ovidian attribution. The other titles are quite unknown⁶.

Works such *Bellum giganteum* and some not better specified tragedies (of which we have only some fragments of the *Medea*) are attributed to the mature period of the Poet. Then there are the two books of the *Heroides*, the three books *amatorii*, “quos alii sine titulo, alii Amorum appellant”, where Sicco clearly uses two different sources of documentation. However the *Halieutica* (on fishes and on fishing) are missing, though of unsure Ovidian attribution⁷. The author mentions also the three books of the *Ars amatoria* described as “res quidem lasciva nec legi ab ullo digna qui ... gravia et pudica velit”; the two books *De remedio amoris*, the twelve books *De Fastis*⁸, and finally the *Metamorphoses*.

Right after this list of Ovid’s works, Polenton tries to reconstruct the presumable cause of the exile of the Poet, ascribing it to his intrusion, though unintentional, into Augustus’ secrets, even if doubts about the nature of such secrets still remain. It is common knowledge that before leaving for the exile Ovid tried to burn his works, in particular the unfinished ones, whereas the Emperor, unable to make a specific accusation against the Poet, spread the rumour that he was exiled for publishing the *Ars amatoria*. At this point (page 68) Polenton makes a critical observation which puts traditional data in doubt: “quantum omni coniectura et ratione percipio, exilii causa obiecta illa ac vulgo credita haudquaquam vera fuit”, underlining that the *Amores* and the *Ars amatoria* had been published twenty years before the exile (to tell the truth only

⁶ For pseudoOvidian works see P. Lehmann *Pseudo-antike Literatur des Mittelalters* (Leipzig-Berlin 1927) and F.W. Lenz „Einführende Bemerkungen zu den mittelalterlichen Pseudo-Ovidiana“, *Das Altertum* 5, 1959, 171-182.

⁷ A well structured and documented study which aims to demonstrate the Ovidian authenticity of this work is that of F. Capponi *P. Ovidii Nasonis Halieuticon*, I (Leiden 1972), pp. 3-162.

⁸ For the question of the composition of *Fasti* see beyond.

the *Amores* date back to 23, the *Ars* dates back to 1 AD), and that other great poets had written, and with great honour, poems with lascivious content as well⁹.

Polenton tries to imagine what Ovid felt in Tomi, briefly recovering the information given by the Poet himself in the exile works (*De tristibus* and *De Ponto*, according to Sicco the latter consists of five books, but, in reality, according to our manuscript tradition consists of four books), then he cites the *Ibis*, a book *De triumpho Caesaris Augusti* and a book *De laudibus Iulii* written in getical language, in honour of the imperial family and played in public with great success.

Reading Sicco's chapter dedicated to Ovid one may get the impression that, censored the Ovidian euphony of the Middle Ages, when some works of the Poet were used for the linguistic education of the clergy, Ovid's "popularity" was steadily declining during Humanism; this appears evident if we consider the little and quite superficial knowledge that Sicco has of Poet's works, to whom, as shown, he attributes several works of unsure authenticity, as well as the reduced number of surviving manuscripts, as already emphasized by Munk Olsen.

Let's move now to another cultural context, the Florentine one between the end of the XVth century and the beginning of the XVIth century where a scholar of great importance, Pietro Del Riccio, Latinized in *Petrus Crinitus*, came to prominence: this man, a pupil of Angelo Poliziano, already old at that time, became one of his favourite disciples. He attended assiduously the house of his Master and after his death (1494) he tried to acquire the huge bibliographic material collected by his Master over many years, arranging also the print of Poliziano's works, then published in Venice by Aldo Manuzio in 1498. This operation was not very easy as the end of seignior of the Medicis in 1494 coincided with the death of the men of the highest cultural importance; moreover there were violent attacks against Poliziano which aimed at denigrating even his memory: his books were partly confiscated by the new regime and partly dispersed, whereas his papers were saved by Pietro del

⁹ For the issues related to the cause of Ovid's exile, which doesn't absolutely need to be dealt with here, see the recent comprehensive study of A. Luisi-N.F.Berrino *Carmen et error. Nel bimillenario dell'esilio di Ovidio*, Bari 2008.

Riccio and are gathered today in miscellaneous manuscripts kept in the *Staatsbibliothek* in Munich¹⁰.

The most interesting work of Crinitus in this context are the five books *De poetis Latinis*, the first part of a wider plan which included also the section on prose writers, of which only a preliminary chapter dedicated to Sallust has remained.

The treatise on Latin poets maintains a strictly chronological order and proceeds by means of cards which are independent of one another and which contain everything was known on the biography of the single poets in the Florentine area at that time. Seventy years after Polenton's immature attempt in the *praefatio* dated 1505, Crinitus declares that he made a choice among the available materials; this proves that the cultural process had matured in the meanwhile so much so that in the second half of the XVth century humanists were able to devote themselves to the criticism and comments of the classics rediscovered in the previous decades. In particular, while in the first part of the work a certain flattening of the single figures of the poets is evident, for the following eras it is possible to note a higher critical awareness, so some authors acquire greater and more appropriate importance compared to the others.

Here Ovid is introduced in a concise but effective way (ff. 99r-100v) with detailed biographical information from sources which are different from the ones used by Sicco¹¹. With regard to the works, Crinitus claims that "De ipsius operibus haud magnum operae pretium est pluribus agere, cum multi de hoc scripserint eaque vulgo satis nota sint ex commentariis nostrorum grammaticorum": from this expression one can deduce that the critical work on Ovid's works not only had begun but it was already widely widespread. Crinitus follows the *grammatici veteres* with regard to the authenticity of works such as the *de obitu Drusi* (not cited by Sicco) as well as "epigrammata et poemata complura" (p. CIIIv). He expresses strong doubts about the attribution to Ovid of the poems *de vocibus avium* and *de pulice* (= *de culice* ?) "et alia indigna prorsus atque aliena ab ingenio et doctrina tanti Poetae". As already said, Polenton didn't know the *Halieutica*, which are known (but only as a title) by Crinitus, who, however, considered

¹⁰ For these events, see V. Branca *Poliziano e l'umanesimo della parola*, Torino 1983, pp. 322-328.

¹¹ The sources used by Crinitus are much more numerous than the ones of Sicco and are almost always explicitly cited, making the treatment more reliable.

them lost: this is another confirmation that the circulation of this work during the humanistic era must have been extremely modest.

Then Crinitus tries to reconstruct the reasons for the exile (on which we don't focus as they were widely discussed in the conference), mentioning the most traditional ones (the *ars* and Julia's adulteries) and inclining to the latter based on a known passage of Sidonius Apollinaris (*carm.* 23, 158-161), who following the *ars* 3,538 (*et multi, quae sit nostra Corinna, rogant*), insinuated that Ovid used the alias Corinna to refer to August's daughter.

The success of these two treatises was also very different: while the Polenton's one remained little known and even unpublished for centuries (the *editio princeps* - as said - dates back to 1928), Crinitus' one, who could rely on the great culture and on the rigour of the critical method of his Master Poliziano, achieved a wide diffusion and was published in various editions, even though only until the end of XVIth century. In fact, while Polenton devoted himself to a too much wide research field (poets and prose writers), which still needed to be cultivated and so wasn't much known at that time, Crinitus was more cautious and analyzed only a specific category of writers (poets), obtaining much more reliable results.

Let's talk now about the third and the last (in chronological order) of these writers of literary historiographical treatises, Lilio Gregorio Giraldi, a humanistic scholar of the so called second generation. Like Polenton, he came from the cultural area of Venetia: he was born in Ferrara in 1479, many years after Guarino's death (1460), when the period of full splendor of the Humanism of Ferrara was potentially already ended. In addition to works of antiquarian and mythological scholarship, Giraldi wrote the *de poetis nostrorum temporum* in the space of 37 years (from 1514 to 1551). It contains more than 200 descriptions of poets from various countries who wrote in Latin, *i.e.* a sort of report of the European culture of the time.

Lesser known than the *de poetis*, but more interesting writings with regard to the specific field of the history of Greek and Latin literary historiography are the eighteen¹² dialogues entitled *Historiae poetarum tam Graecorum quam Latinorum*: as one can deduce from the title, it is the history of Greek and Latin poetry divided per literary genre and published during the years of full

¹² Note the return of number 18, may be drawn from the work of Polenton, the author coming from the same part of the country.

maturity of the author although it had been composed long time before (see prol. P. 2 of ed. Basel, 1545: “olim paene puer, ceu ingenii crepundia composueram, nunc vero demum sub tuo nomine dare constitui”). For the first time it provides an organic enough report of the poets of Greek literature who were not included in the two previous treatises.

Like the scholars who preceded him, Giraldi pays more attention to the biographical description rather than to the introduction of the works of the various poets. On the other hand he used to quoting passages from their works, so his work can be considered a literary history with an anthology of texts which follows a structure anticipating by some centuries the most current manuals of literary history.

The chapter on Ovid seems to be rather balanced (pages 492-500), at least for what concerns the biographical events of the poet, not without the unavoidable *querelle* on the possible causes of his exile. Giraldi emphasizes the difference between exile and relegation, whereas the introduction of the works appears rough and quite confused as the works are put on the same level, whether they are authentic, doubtful or spurious, important or less important. Reading this treatise one gets the impression that Ovid’s poetry didn’t arouse particular interest in Giraldi, maybe because of an almost unavoidable comparison with the great Greek poetry.

The *vexatissima quaestio* on the composition of the *Fasti* concerns this context, *i.e.* it is not sure whether Ovid wrote only the first six books or also the other six which were lost. Humanists too did not always agree on this subject: Polenton had only reported that the Poet *de Fastis XII* (scil. *libros*) *edidit*, whereas some years later, around 1453, the humanist from Ferrara Battista Guarini regretted the loss of the latter six books in the X chapter of his *de ordine docendi ac studendi: utinam totus is liber ad nos pervenisset!*¹³, confirming that in the cultural area of Venetia in the middle of the fifteenth century scholars didn’t have any doubts about the whole drafting of the work by Ovid. Similarly Giraldi (Battista Guarini’s pupil) claims that, along with the tragedy *Medea*, the other six books of the *Fasti* had been written as well, but they had lost *temporum iniuria* (page 498).

So, within the Guarini’s school of Ferrara and the Humanism of Veneto in general, scholars were already strongly persuaded of the

¹³ Cf. B. Guarini *Opuscula*, edited by L. Piacente, Bari 1995, p. 153.

accidental loss of the other six books of the *Fasti* during the course of tradition.

Pietro del Riccio provides instead a rather different solution to the question of the composition of the *Fasti*. He knew very well Poliziano's comment on *Fasti*; in fact he claims that Ovid wrote the first six books of the work but not the other six and he ascribes this interruption to a *importunum obitum Germanici Drusi et adversam exilii fortunam (ut plerique putant)*. However, to tell the truth, he notices also that Ovid himself claimed that he had written twelve books in the famous couplet: *Sex ego fastorum scripsi totidemque libellos / cumque suo finem mense libellus habet*. ("Is tamen alicubi asserit duodecim a se compositos"). And his position before these two seemingly contrasting pieces of evidence seems to be extremely uncertain.

In conclusion, Italian Humanism doesn't rediscover Ovid's works, but receives a detailed documentation directly from the Middle Ages, although it shows many difficulties in critically distinguishing the certainly authentic works from the uncertain ones and the certainly spurious ones. Humanists focus also a lot on the controversial problem of the causes of the exile and finally, with some divergent opinions on the composition of the *Fasti*, seem to be strongly influenced not only by their own cultural level but also by the opinions circulating in the different "schools" where they came from.

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