Maxson on Celenza, 'The Intellectual World of the Italian Renaissance: Language, Philosophy, and the Search for Meaning'

Review published on Tuesday, October 29, 2019


Reviewed by Brian J. Maxson (East Tennessee State University) Published on H-Italy (October, 2019) Commissioned by Peter Sposato (Indiana University Kokomo)


The Intellectual World of the Italian Renaissance offers an accessible synthesis of intellectual history in Italy from Petrarch to Pietro Bembo. It follows a chronological arc of texts well known to specialists, but less familiar to students or other interested readers. The book uses the topics of the relationships between Latin and the vernacular and different conceptions of philosophy as its unifying themes. It charts changes in those topics across five generations of humanist writers, while introducing readers to other important works and thinkers along the way. This book will become the standard introductory text to the subject for students, while specialists will also find here a well-written and thoughtful account of a topic that so often defies synthetic treatment.

The emergence of a synthetic book like this one invites reflection on the field as it is and as it has been over the past two decades of marked change. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Paul Oskar Kristeller’s influential argument that humanism was not a philosophical movement but rather consisted of disciplines comprising the studia humanitatis underpinned questions on the topic. Meanwhile, the newly complete Iter Italicum revealed just how much unpublished and understudied work existed. Outside of the work of intellectual historians, humanism was most commonly viewed through the lens of civic humanism, particularly Florentine republicanism, as expressed in Hans Baron’s Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance (1966). In its basics, the general narrative of humanism started with Petrarch, blossomed in fifteenth-century Florence, then Italy, and then spread with the Italian Wars after 1494. These arguments, as well as those offered by other influential scholars like Eugenio Garin, helped shape the tale told in the most common synthesis of the time, the first edition of Charles Nauert’s Humanism and Culture of Renaissance Europe (1995).

The field began undergoing major transformations around the turn of the new millennium. With the publication in 2001 of his famous short article, “The Lost Continent of Latin Literature,” James Hankins announced the coming of the I Tatti Renaissance Library. The I Tatti series aimed to publish good, affordable editions and translations of Latin humanist works from across Renaissance Europe. As of the summer of 2019, the I Tatti series has published nearly ninety volumes, while other similar series have also appeared in Germany, Italy, France, and many other places. Certainly, many humanist texts remain unedited, and even more remain untranslated, but those numbers decrease every month. The outcome of this success has become the very real, if happy problem of keeping up
with all of the new editions. The original problem of inaccessibility and a forgotten body of literature pointed to by Hankins, and also discussed by Christopher Celenza in his 2004 book, *The Lost Italian Renaissance*, is being addressed, even if much work remains.

The result of so many fine editions of new texts has been major changes in the field of Renaissance humanism as well as the field of the Italian Renaissance more generally. In 2004, Christopher Celenza wrote of a division in the scholarship between those interested in humanists and humanism and those interested in other aspects of the Italian Renaissance. Although, again, much work remains, in this area too a growing body of interdisciplinary studies has sought to integrate the history of humanists, humanist literature, and humanist thought into broader studies of the past. Cultural historians of Venice and the Veneto have been particularly noteworthy, with recent works by Stephen Bowd, Erin Maclaque, Monique O’Connell, Sarah Ross, Luka Spoljaric, and others at the forefront. Studies of humanism in more popular forms, in the vernacular and even in visual sources, have also increased in frequency, particularly in work by Federico Botana, Andrea Rizzi, and others. Patrick Baker, Anthony F. D’Elia, Ada Palmer, and others have sought to integrate more historical contexts into the study of humanist texts. Work by Alexander Lee and the late Ronald Witt has pushed the narrative of humanism into earlier centuries, long before Petrarch. Work by Oren Margolis, David Rundle, and others has challenged the idea that humanism was contained to the Italian peninsula prior to 1500. In short, older paradigms like civic humanism or the one-sided reception of Italian humanist culture by transalpine Europe have increasingly been left behind, while accepted paradigms like those of Kristeller are being tweaked and reevaluated. At the foundation of these changes and new ideas is the tireless work of textual editors and translators.

The book under review here, Christopher Celenza’s *Intellectual World of the Italian Renaissance*, fits within this historiographical context. Celenza traces the history of humanism as viewed particularly through changes in the debate over the nature, function, and relationship between Italian and Latin, as well as the relationship between humanism and philosophy. In some ways the narrative is quite traditional. For example, the book acknowledges thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century humanists before truly beginning with Petrarch. The book’s chapters usually focus on summarizing and analyzing the best-known humanist writers and their more successful texts. The approach is very much within the tradition of the history of ideas or literary scholarship, with historical contexts a backdrop against which texts are read rather than an equal partner in the process. The book overwhelmingly focuses on Florentine writers, with supplements from figures writing from the papal court; other centers like Venice, Milan, and Naples are mostly absent from the book.

But in other ways this book is a dramatic shift from previous attempts to summarize and interpret Italian Renaissance humanism. The relationship between vernacular and Latin writings take center stage here, a reflection of recent scholarship that has emphasized vernacular humanist texts and social humanists. This approach enables Celenza to dispel old quandaries in the historiography about how to fit, or even if one should fit, vernacular translations or vernacular writings that were clearly associated with humanists or humanism. Against a limited conception of what is and is not philosophy, Celenza argues for various types of philosophical thought such as rhetorical, ethical, and metaphysical. The impact is that Marsilio Ficino and others like him have no problem fitting into Celenza’s narrative. The ghost of civic humanism, particularly the classic version of the crisis of 1401/2 and the triumph of republicanism, does not make an appearance in the book. The texts described are, in 2019, all accessible to students and scholars in their original language or in
translation—something almost unthinkable when Albert Rabil edited his three-volume synthesis of humanism in 1988, or when Nauert wrote his student text in the late 1990s. Additionally, Celenza’s book breathes a sense of wonder and possibility about the still incomplete project of fully incorporating humanists and humanists texts into Renaissance and even European history. The narrative consistently returns to the theme of implicitly, and at times explicitly, situating humanists and their writings into the narrative of later works by better-known writers. In short, Celenza’s book is designed to bring students to an exciting field while also taking stock of where the scholarship is and to encourage further advancements in the editing and translating of new texts as well as their incorporation into the scholarship.

The book argues that debates over the Latin and Italian languages helped define the Italian Renaissance, and that key changes in the debate happened, more or less, across five different generations of thinkers. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Latin reigned unchallenged as the language of intellectual discourse, and this intellectual discourse occurred in universities. During the fourteenth century, Dante proposed the use and importance of the vernacular as a means to expression. Consequently, he wrote his treatise in defense of the vernacular, and penned his *Divine Comedy* in the vernacular. Petrarch was heir to this new debate about the nature, development, and relationships between languages. Although Petrarch wrote his famous vernacular sonnets, he viewed Latin as the only stable form for learned expression. Petrarch’s heir, Boccaccio, agreed, and largely abandoned the vernacular writings of his youth in favor of serious Latin scholarship. By the time Coluccio Salutati was cementing the status of Florence as the leading humanist capital in Europe, humanists like Niccolò Niccoli and his friends were arguing that Latin alone was fit for learned discussion, while the vernacular was only useful for frivolities and for the masses.

Major changes occurred during the first half of the fifteenth century. In the 1430s members of the Roman curia, then housed in Florence, debated the nature of Latin in antiquity. Bruni argued that ancient Romans, like Renaissance Florentines, had possessed two languages and that Latin, then as now, was a language of the elite. In short, Latin was permanent and largely inaccessible to the masses. Biondo Flavio, by contrast, argued that Latin was a vernacular language in antiquity, understood by all, and that the language had undergone changes over the centuries. Celenza argues that this and similar arguments by Leon Battista Alberti and others removed one of the major differences between Latin and vernacular languages. Unlike previous thinkers, for them Latin and the vernacular were both languages for expression, languages that changed, and languages with histories. Debates over language continued in the later polemics between Poggio Bracciolini and Lorenzo Valla. Both men agreed that the Latin language was ever-changing, but they disagreed about what that meant. For Poggio, a writer had to rely upon the authority of classical writers and their use of the Latin language. Valla, by contrast, was comfortable with adding new rules and practices to the language, even as people needed extensive training to understand the proper usages of Latin.

The debate shifted once again for writers after Poggio and Valla. In the 1470s and 1480s many Florentine men began to focus their efforts around writing or commenting upon vernacular works. By these decades, Celenza argues, “there was no doubt that ancient Latin had once been a native language and hence was no longer a living language; that Tuscan was a language that could and should be used for literature of high cultural import; and that the proper way to go about realizing Tuscan’s full potential was by understanding the attributes of Latin that had made it a success” (p. 295). Within this framework, Celenza examines poems by Lorenzo de’ Medici, the teaching and
commentaries by Cristoforo Landino, and vernacular works by Angelo Poliziano. The treatment of the language debate ends with an analysis of additional works by Poliziano, Paolo Cortesi, and Pietro Bembo. Poliziano argued for a much stricter correlation between standards of good Latinity and the prose of Cicero than Cortesi, who contended that works from antiquity should be more of a guide to be used and combined as circumstances required—that is, a “flexible Ciceronianism” (p.374). After Cortesi, the debate shifted to the significance of classical models for the Italian vernacular under writers like Bembo and others. Tuscan rather than Latin emerged as the primary model for learned expression at the end of the long fifteenth century.

Interwoven with this narrative is an interpretation of the relationship between humanism and philosophy, which is particularly central in the book’s second half. At the book’s beginning, philosophy was the purview of university professors writing in Latin. However, humanists developed their collective identity and their approaches often in explicit opposition to philosophy as it was conceived and practiced in formal institutions. By the early fifteenth century a writer like Bruni was using Plato to explore a philosophy aimed at practical living. Bruni was also ensuring that original works and translations circulated in the vernacular to make them more accessible to more people. Humanists like Bruni, Poggio, and many others used the dialogue format both to increase readability and as a reflection that their philosophy was not about making logical arguments, but about the messiness of real life.

As the decades progressed and humanism became more mainstream, writers like Lorenzo Valla and Marsilio Ficino adopted more of the scholastic framework still popular with university philosophers. Nevertheless, both writers remained concerned about deeply practical matters: Valla, the reform of the church; Ficino, with integrating Platonic philosophy with Christianity and then popularizing those results for a wider audience. Later thinkers, too, focused on presenting agreement between previous thinkers, popularizing their results, and working towards the betterment of society. When challenged, Pico della Mirandola and others claimed that their work, while different than that practiced by scholastics, was still philosophy, for, as Celenza writes, “philosophy was, is, and always will be much deeper and broader than purely verbal argumentation” (p. 337). The book shows these points as central to Angelo Poliziano’s Lamia, where Poliziano explicitly discusses the purview of philosophers, and presents a conception of philosophy based more on practicality and history than the then-common usage. Celenza concludes that thinkers during the long fifteenth century considered philosophy very differently than people today. Instead of seeing philosophy as an umbrella term for “different schools of philosophy” (p. 402), Renaissance thinkers saw the central philosophical debates as between the approaches of those in and outside of institutions or over the place of authorities in the thought and writing of today.

The Intellectual World of the Italian Renaissance should become a primary introduction to humanist literature for advanced undergraduates and graduate students. By the end of the narrative many of the best-known humanist writers and their best-known works have been presented, summarized, and situated into a loose chronology and interpretative framework. At times the book’s multiple threads—accessible synthesis, theses about language, and theses about philosophy—overwhelm a focused narrative. Some chapters, for example, focus on language, some on philosophy, some on background, while other chapters attempt to weave the various threads together. Thus, readers might sometimes struggle to fit the three themes together. Indeed, Celenza himself writes that his thesis about language “fragmentarily” (p. 402) runs through the book. But this structure is a product
of the book introducing so much, and making major contributions to two very ambitious historical questions. Historians and students of thought, culture and society, as well as literary scholars and students will all find much to ponder here.


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.