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The Italian Mind: Vernacular Logic in Renaissance Italy (1540 – 1551). Marco Sgarbi (Review)

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The Italian Mind: Vernacular Logic in Renaissance Italy (1540–1551). Marco Sgarbi.

Medieval and Renaissance Authors and Texts 12. Leiden: Brill, 2014. ix + 246 pp. \$142.

Expanding the field of early modern logic texts in English, French, and Spanish, the present volume introduces the authors and their works of logic in Italian. Against the background of Quattrocento humanism, the study focuses on the major figures of the Accademia degli Infiammati (Academy of the Burning Ones). The meaning of its name may be gathered from its motto: “Burning the mortal, to the heavens the immortal shall go” (228). Although the academy lasted in Padua for only two years (June 1540–May 1542), Sgarbi claims that the thinkers it attracted, the texts it produced, and the academies it spawned transformed logic from the humanist-rhetorical model of the fifteenth century to an epistemic model characteristic of early modern science.

Chapter 1 gives the historical background of sixteenth-century logic. Sgarbi recites the tired clichés about Scholasticism now commonplace in Renaissance studies. Scholastic “subtleties,” “meaningless sophistries,” and “logical formalism” had severed the relation of *res* (objects) from *verba* (words). Inspired by Valla’s *Dialectical Disputations*, Quattrocento humanists restored the relation of *res* to *verba*, dialectic to rhetoric, wisdom to eloquence. Valla, however, ignored the logic of his own day: his diatribes were aimed not at the living *logica modernorum*, but rather at the dead *logica vetus* of Boethius. In a similar way Sgarbi disregards contributions of Scholastic logic that are relevant to his study.

Chapter 2 further examines the split between *res* and *verba* and argues that the humanist program for joining them itself precipitated a crisis. Insisting on grammatical and rhetorical purity, most humanists privileged Greek and Latin as the only languages of competent thought and openly expressed their disdain for the vernacular (*volgare*). Debate among humanists on the merits of the *volgare* (see Mazzocco, 1993) led to a movement on its behalf, namely, vernacular humanism. Influenced by the humane and practical philosophy of Pietro Pomponazzi, the academy arose “with a view to combatting the degeneracy and rhetorical purism of the humanists who were still tied to classical Latin on the one hand, and linguistic anarchy on the other” (42). One consequence of this development was a renewed rupture between knowledge about things (*res*) and expressions of that knowledge (*verba*). Just how a fatal flaw in Scholasticism could become a redeeming virtue in vernacularism is not explained. Chapters 3, 4, and 7 are devoted, respectively, to Sperone Speroni and his students Bernardino Tomitano, Benedetto Varchi, and Alessandro Piccolomini — all of whom were leading members of the academy. Chapters 5 and 6 treat Antonio Tridapale and Nicolò Massa, nonmembers who were influenced by the academy. Chapter 8 sums up the academy’s contributions. It opposed the “hyperphilologism” of the humanists and vigorously promoted the vernacular not only as a medium for expressing logic, but also for reasoning and speaking correctly. It treated the vernacular as a “language of culture.” It stressed the role of logic as an instrument (*organon*) for scientific discovery. Finally, it recognized that a learned vernacular could empower the maximal number of persons. After the academy’s demise, vernacular logics declined in quality.

Sgarbi stresses the importance of printing for the development of vernacular intellectualism; yet almost all of the works that he describes remain in manuscript. If vernacular logic was as significant as Sgarbi represents it to have been, why were these works not published? Like Valla, Sgarbi ignores late Scholastic logic, yet Scholastic topics appear in the texts that he discusses, for example the oppositional square, syllogism, and consequences. His study could have been strengthened — and the texts properly evaluated — by comparing them to Scholastic works such as Paul of Venice’s *Logica Parva*. Printed mainly in Venice in more than 10,000 copies, it was the leading logic handbook in Italy and available in Padua, home of the academy.

Finally, scholars have assumed that Scholastic logic had no connection with vernacular language. This assumption is questionable. As a second-order discipline,

logic was never about itself: it was always about the syntactical and semantical properties of first-order languages such as university Latin or the many vernaculars that students spoke. As the research of Tony Hunt (1991) and Robert Black (2001) has shown, students in France and England learned Latin by translating sentences into French and English. A similar practice was likely followed in Italy. Scholastic tracts on the proof of terms (*probatio terminorum*) make no sense from the point of view of formal logic. They make a great deal of sense, however, as protocols for translating Latin sentences into the vernaculars. Given limited grammar instruction, the study of logic was the first opportunity university students had to learn the syntax of their own vernaculars. These matters aside, Marco Sgarbi's study is the most informative account to date of sixteenth-century vernacular logic and will remain an important resource for years to come.

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