

Giovanni Gioviano Pontano. *Dialogues, Volume 1: Charon and Antonius*. Ed. and trans. Julia Haig Gaisser. The I Tatti Renaissance Library 53. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. xxvii + 404 pp. \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-05491-2.

Giovanni Pontano (1429–1503), one of Renaissance Italy's most eminent humanists, was based in Naples, although he came from Umbria, first joining the Aragonese entourage of Alfonso I in 1447. He won the patronage of the leading Neapolitan humanist Antonio Beccadelli (Panormita: 1374–1471), and spent his entire mature life at the Neapolitan court. He was tutor and then secretary to Alfonso, Duke of Calabria, heir to King Ferrante (r. 1458–94), whose principal minister he became in 1486. He continued to serve both Alfonso II (1494–95) and Ferrante II (1494–96) as the kingdom's title was contested by the French monarchy. Pontano and his Aragonese masters were unable to avert the growing catastrophe that enveloped the Kingdom of Naples, his last ministerial act being to surrender the Neapolitan fortresses to the invading French in 1495.

Pontano's fame rests on his activities and production as a humanist. On Panormita's death, he took over leadership of the informal learned discussion group known subsequently as the Accademia Napoletana, or, more frequently, the Accademia Pontaniana. The circle's activities consisted of moral and philosophical discussions, readings of Latin works both ancient and modern, and social functions (dinners and celebrations of birthdays and anniversaries). Each member was given a Latin appellation, Pontano's being Jovianus: hence his usual name, Giovanni Gioviano Pontano.

Pontano was a prolific writer. He was particularly distinguished as a Latin poet, perhaps — so it has sometimes been asserted — the Renaissance's best. He composed in all the traditional classical verse genres, and added new forms of his own. He was a prolific prose writer too, composing treatises on moral and political philosophy, astrology, and Latin spelling, as well as a history of the First Barons' War (1458–65) in the Kingdom of Naples. He also wrote five dialogues: *Actius*, *Aegidius*, and *Asinus* will be published as a second volume in this series; the present volume is dedicated to Pontano's first two dialogues, *Charon* (ca. 1469) and *Antonius* (after 1471).

Some Renaissance humanist dialogues were weighty works, focusing on important questions. Leonardo Bruni's *Dialogues to Pier Paolo [Vergerio] of Istria* and Benedetto Accolti's *Dialogue* (mistakenly entitled *On the Preeminence of Men of his Own Age*) tackled the problem of the ancients and the moderns; Poggio's *On Avarice* considered whether wealth could be legitimately amassed; Machiavelli's *Art of War* (a humanist neoclassical dialogue, albeit written in the vernacular) argued for the superiority of ancient military practice, setting out a program of reform for modern armies. Pontano's later dialogue *Actius* embodied the first extended theoretical treatment of historical writing to appear in the Renaissance. *Charon* and *Antonius*, on the other hand, were lightweight pieces, giving a vivid picture of the discursive and even rambling conversations that would have been typical at the Accademia Pontaniana. All Pontano's dialogues follow the Ciceronian

model, purporting to report discussions not abstractly (as in medieval and early humanist dialogues, e.g., Petrarch's *Secretum*), but in realistic historical (or, in the case of *Charon*, mythological) settings: *Charon* is set on the banks of the Styx, *Antonius* at the Portico Antoniano in Naples. Pontano's dialogues are set in motion by notable recent events: *Charon* by an impending Italian war in 1469, *Antonius* by the death of Panormita in 1471.

Typical humanist and Renaissance themes pervade these two works: criticism of scholastic philosophy and theology and their practitioners; a positive attitude to the acquisition of wealth; anticlericalism; hostility to lawyers and the legal profession; mockery of human folly; condemnation of war; anti-Semitism; preoccupation with grammatical and linguistic minutiae; antipopulism and hostility to democracy; defense of Virgil and Cicero against their ancient and modern detractors; superiority of Latin over Greek culture; and misogyny. Occasionally there are intellectual flashes: the political advantage of religious superstition recalls Polybius and anticipates Machiavelli.

An important theme, particularly in *Antonius*, is the attack on grammar and grammarians. The editor correctly reads this as a critique of Lorenzo Valla's new philology, but it also needs to be linked to the efforts of humanists, in the guise of rhetoricians, to distance themselves from the common ruck of schoolmasters, disseminators of inelegant Latinity, hopelessly corrupted by traditional medieval practices.

The editor's commentary reflects her notable expertise as a scholar, particularly of classical Latin poetry. The translation is fluent and impeccable in terms of classical philology. However, when it comes to understanding contemporary history and usage, there are slips. The Sienese *Studia* (230–31) refers to the University of Siena, not to "its schools." "State" is used to translate *respublica* or *civitas*: a confusing rendering, since neither of these Latin terms is the equivalent of the public and impersonal commonwealth and apparatus of power represented by the modern state; nor did *status* mean "government" (58–59), but rather "regime."

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