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Rizzi, Andrea. Vernacular Translators in Quattrocento Italy: Scribal Culture, Authority, and Agency

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Rizzi, Andrea.

Vernacular Translators in Quattrocento Italy: Scribal Culture, Authority, and Agency.

Turnhout: Brepols, 2017. Pp. x, 233 + 5 ill. ISBN 978-2-503-56785-3 (hardcover) €75.

Andrea Rizzi's monograph truly inspires a shift in our opinion of the *studias humanitatis* and the scribal culture of Quattrocento Italy. In this publication, he brings to the reader's attention what an important role the vernacular translation of classical Latin and Greek texts played in promoting the culture and an appreciation of magnificent texts of the past. Of course, fifteenth-century Italy and Italian humanism are known for the revival of the classics. Nevertheless, what has been deemphasized—all the way to the twenty-first century—is that without the concurrent vernacularization of the Latin texts, their revival may have not flourished as much, considering that an increasing number of people in power were not schooled in Latin for various reasons. The author's aim is to shed light on the role that translators played as agents of culture.

According to Rizzi's investigation, in the Quattrocento at least eighty-one scholars were producing translations of the texts of antiquities. Rizzi explains how most of these scholars would, one way or another, deprecate their vernacular works because of a high regard for the Latin language. To analyze their thought process, he takes advantage of paratexts of the literary productions of these translators. His study is divided into seven chapters to provide a general survey of this group of cultural agents, their motivation, the opinion on translations in the era, and, most importantly, the four common traits that he outlines as authority, eloquence, collaboration, and friendship.

In chapter 1, the reader is introduced to a list of major vernacular translators who are not often studied. However, we can reshape the "contours" of humanism when we begin to take into account their cultural contributions (33). In the next chapter, a noteworthy number of prefatory texts are examined to provide an overview and analysis of the self-perceived agency of these Quattrocento scholars. These prefaces are part of the texts produced mainly in the courts of Naples. Rizzi explains how the translation of classical texts was part of the training and education of these humanists, who employed the prefaces they wrote to their own benefit by dedicating them to prospective employers and supporters in the hope of economic or status gains. Chapter 3

shifts the reader's focus to the cultural productions of these translators beyond Neapolitan territory, particularly to Florence. Rizzi shows how humanists who produced scholarly writings in Latin quickly realized that, by translating their work into the vernacular, they would gain a wider appreciation of their labour, further establishing their authority as Latin scholars. He maintains that the use of vernacular in translations and cultural productions was a major factor in shaping the literary culture of Quattrocento Italy (89).

To discuss the concept of authority, specific attention is given to the works of Leonardo Bruni in chapter 4. Bruni, as the author puts it, "was the quintessential humanist of his time" (89). Rizzi further states that Bruni is an ideal figure for this study, given "the tremendous success of his Latin translation and rewritings of classical texts, and the vernacular versions of his work that followed" (91). Chapter 5 exposes the dilemma of Latin eloquence versus vernacular intelligibility, and the role that translators saw themselves playing in presenting the rich wisdom of ancient philosophers and thinkers. What is interesting is the fact that those who transformed such texts claimed to have smoothened what they saw as the verbosity of unrefined languages in classical texts. In chapter 6, the author underlines how translators, while acknowledging their submissiveness towards the higher status of their dedicatees, were aware of their agency in imparting history lessons to Quattrocento rulers, through their efforts in the translation of ancient texts that offered a hope for political and moral reformation as well as intellectual improvement. The last concept studied is friendship. In chapter 7, Rizzi describes how Quattrocento translators used the preface to underscore a rapport with their dedicatees, often asking for their approval and recommendations so that the translator could perfect the work before it was spread among a wider audience.

Vernacular Translators in Quattrocento Italy is well worth reading. It provides discussion and analysis on a subject that is not often discussed at length among scholars of fifteenth-century Italy. Not least, Andrea Rizzi's work saves Quattrocento translators from the "mud of oblivion" (33).