

POGE THE FLORENTYN:
A SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF POGGIO BRACCIOLINI

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ABSTRACT: Thanks to his part in the rediscovery of Lucretius in the Renaissance Poggio Bracciolini has been much in academic news recently. But he was always there as a part of the histories of that moment, in all its twists and turns, as an example of what it was to be a Renaissance humanist in the earlier part of the XVth century. He was born in 1380 and educated first in Arezzo. But he soon moved to Florence to become a notary and from his intellectual contacts there a little after 1403 he became a member of the entourage of Pope Benedict IX to remain all his life a member of the Papal court. But, in true humanist fashion, he was busy always with his writings, taking on a range of general subjects, nobility, the vicissitudes of Fortune and many others. Also, again in true humanist fashion, he was often involved in dispute with other scholars, most notably Lorenzo Valla. Yet, amidst all this activity, he had time to travel throughout Europe, scouring libraries to uncover, as with Lucretius, long neglected texts. But perhaps his most notable achievement was the design of a new script, moving away from the less legible texts of medieval copyists to provide one, far easier to read, that was to become the model in Italy for the first printed books – as it is a model still for publishers. Few scholars of that moment can claim to have had so profound and persistent an influence on the spread of culture in Europe and beyond.

KEYWORDS: Lucretius, Humanism, Renaissance translations, rediscovery of manuscripts, Manutius

Thanks to Stephen Greenblatt and his account of the importance of Lucretius in the Renaissance, Poggio Bracciolini, the re-discoverer of this vital text, has been riding a wave of recent attention¹. But he was always a firm part of the history of Humanism in Florence and Rome in the first half of the fifteenth century, counting among his friends Leonardo Bruni, Niccolò Niccoli, and Coluccio Salutati, and among his enemies – enmity being an inevitable part of the scholarly life – figures like Francesco Filelfo, Lorenzo Valla, and Antonio Beccadelli, author of the shameless collection of poems, the *Hermaphroditus*. The various writings of Poggio, if widely known in his lifetime, were often read in later centuries, above all the *Liber Facietiarum*, a collection of mildly obscene and mildly amusing stories, some of which were included by William Caxton – I take the name “Poge, the Florentyn” from this text – in his edition of Aesop’s Fables, published in London in 1484, as borrowed from a French translation by Julien Macho, which in its turn was taken from a translation into German, put out a few years earlier, by the physician

¹ Greenblatt, 2011: 120–36; and for a recent account of this event, see Palmer, 2014: 233–49. See also Flores, 1980; Deufert, 2017: 85–90.

Heinrich Steinhöwel. According to Giorgio Vasari, writing in 1550, there was a portrait of Poggio by Antonio Pollaiuolo, together with his fellow humanist, Gianozzo Manetti, in Florence in the Guild Hall of the Judges and Notaries. And in the next century he was remembered enough to be included in Paolo Giovio's *Elogia*, published in 1546, with a portrait, later copied by Cristofano dell'Altissimo, that became his standard image, as reproduced in an engraving in the 1730s included by Ludovico Muratori in his vast compilation of the historical writers of Italy².

Yet the story of his subsequent reputation is complex. If the *Liber Facietiarum* was appreciated by some later readers, it was criticized by others and, together with Beccadelli's text, to be included in the list of prohibited books put out in 1559 under the direction of Pope Paul IV³. And in the years immediately after that, Poggio was generally forgotten, though a translation of his dialogue *Contra Hypocritas* was included in a reprint of a volume of writings by Ortuinus Gratius, edited by Edward Brown, published in London in 1690. But in 1715 the Venetian scholar Giovanni Battista Recanati published a new edition of his *Historia Fiorentina*; and in 1723 an edition of the text of the *De varietate fortunae* was put out in Paris and from that moment on he was acknowledged again as a significant figure in the cultural history of the Renaissance. Perhaps here the most notable reference to him was to be found in the last chapter of Edward Gibbon's history of Rome where Gibbon borrowed phrases from the text on Fortune to describe the ruins of Rome and the decline of the Empire, a melancholy picture, Gibbon continued, coming from a long period of distress and anarchy⁴. As he mentioned, Gibbon knew of Poggio from two immediately earlier texts, the *Poggiana, ou La vie, la caractere, les sentences et les bons mots de Pogge Florentin*, a collection of materials by the French Protestant writer Jacques l'Enfant, published in Amsterdam in 1720, and citations in the *Bibliotheca Latina mediae et infimae aetatis* of Johann Fabricius, rector of St. Sebald in Nuremberg, published 1734-1736. The *Poggiana*, as Gibbon noted, was an entertaining work but it was soon recognized to be unreliable in many of its details, or as the Reverend William Shepherd would say to explain his later life of Poggio, so ill-arranged and in many particulars so erroneous, that he

² For the portrait by Pollaiuolo see Wright, 2005: 535; and for the portrait by dell'Altissimo, see Galleria degli Uffizi, 1979: 613; and the engraved portrait from Muratori, 1731: 30.191, most easily accessible in Pittaluga, 2005: xl. It might also be noticed that since the time of Giuseppe Richa, writing in 1757, it has been suggested, without reason, that the figure of Joshua on the façade of Florence Cathedral is a portrait of Poggio, for which see Janson, 1963: 36ff.

³ For an account of the later history of the *Liber Facietiarum*, see Sozzi, *Le Facezie e loro fortuna europea* (1982). See also Pittaluga, 2005.

⁴ For this citation see, with his footnotes, Womersley, 1994: 3.1062.

had been compelled to compose a new life, correcting the mistakes. This new account appeared first in 1802, followed by a second revised edition in 1827 with translations into Italian, German, and French. And it was this biography, together with an entry in Girolamo Tiraboschi's *Storia della letteratura italiana* – he had been one of the first scholars to criticize the *Poggiana* – and an edition of Poggio's letters published in 1825 by Cavaliere Thomas de Tonelli, that were enough to firmly re-establish his fame and importance⁵.

After this Poggio was noted often in the ever-increasing number of the histories of the culture of the Renaissance, in Jules Michelet, in Jacob Burckhardt and in John Addington Symonds, even if he was not always admired⁶. In 1914, he was the subject of a substantial and still authoritative biography by the Swiss scholar, Ernst Walsler, a student both of Burckhardt and the medievalist Clemens Baumker. And most recently, in many of the studies of this period he is there, amidst his enemies and friends, in the writing of Eugenio Garin, P. O. Kristeller, Hans Baron, Nancy Streuver, Rudolf Pfeiffer, Riccardo Fubini, and many others. For two particular achievements he could always be praised. The first was in his role as a great scholar-detective, as Peter Gay put it, re-discovering many Greek and Latin manuscripts, long languishing in the monasteries and abbeys of Europe, as recorded by Remigio Sabbadini in his study of these activities, published in Florence in 1905 (1.77 and 2.191-95). The second was his role in the development of a new humanist script, studied and celebrated in recent years, notably by Stanley Morrison, Albinia de la Mare, James Wardrop, and the American scholar Berthold Louis Ullman⁷.

Much then in the life of Poggio is now familiar in our histories of the Renaissance; but it is helpful to lay out here a general account of his life, full as it was of opportunities and difficulties.

Poggio di Guccio, to give him his family name, was born in 1380 in Terranuova, a small town near Arezzo, that, to honor its famous native son, added his name to its title in 1862. Poggio's father was a notary, or perhaps also a druggist, a «spetiale», his mother, Jacoba Frutti, the daughter also of a notary⁸. The surviving tax records suggest that the family

⁵ Shepherd, *The Life of Poggio Bracciolini* (1802). This edition is now online: <<http://www.elfonspell.com/PoggioLifeCh1.html>>. And for Shepherd himself, see Rundle, 2012: 177-93.

⁶ For a negative comment, to the effect that Poggio and his generation were mere followers of Petrarch, see Voigt, 1859: 410; and Fergusson, 1948: 159-63.

⁷ For these studies see, Morrison, 1972: 264-76; de la Mare, 1963: 1.62-84; Wardrop, 1963: 3; and Ullman, 1960: 21-57.

⁸ I take this account of Poggio's life from Bigi & Petrucci, 1971: 13.640-46. See also, Walsler, 1914; and the comprehensive annotated bibliography by Craig Kallendorf of Poggio's life and works, «Poggio Bracciolini», in Oxford Bibliographies Online: Renaissance and Reformation: <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399301/obo-9780195399301-0095.xml>> (09/2019).

was financially comfortable but when Poggio was still young his father, fleeing creditors, sold his house and moved to Arezzo. According to a contemporary, Poggio got himself into trouble there but, whatever the case, it was in Arezzo that he was able to attend school to learn Latin and all the elements of formal handwriting. By the end of the century, when he was twenty years old, he moved to Florence where he completed his studies as a notary, soon being received into the guild of judges and notaries, the «Arte dei giudici e notai», all the while supporting himself as a copyist of legal documents. It was then, most importantly, that he met Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni, the latter whom perhaps he had known also in Arezzo. In 1403, with their support and their recommendations, he moved to Rome and entered the service of Cardinal Landolfo Maramaldo, Bishop of Bari and then, a few months later, again on the recommendation of Salutati, he joined the Chancery of Apostolic Briefs in the curia of Pope Boniface IX as scriptor, as abbreviator, then, rising further in the ranks, as *scriptor penitentiarius* and finally, under Pope Martin V, as *scriptor apostolicus*.

This was the general pattern of his life, even amidst the factionalism then within the Vatican Court where he was attached for many years, serving in all eight successive Popes. Yet he was never fully attracted to the ecclesiastical life, always thinking of himself rather as a Florentine and keeping up contacts with his friends there and in other cities, with fellow humanists like Niccolò Niccoli, Carlo Marsuppini, Ambrogio Traversari and, very usefully, with Tommaso da Sarzana, later Pope Nicholas V, the founder in 1448 of the Vatican Library. All the time he was engaged with the usual humanist activities, writing treatises on a ranges of subjects, *On Greed* (the *Dialogus contra avaritiam*), *On Marriage in Old Age* (*An seni sit uxor ducenda*) – he did indeed finally get married when he was 56 – *On the Unhappiness of Princes* (*De infelicitate principum*), *On the Misery of Life* (*De miseria humanae conditionis*), and many other pieces on major and minor subject. Most significantly he wrote a history of Florence (*Historia populi florentini*) – it was this text Recanati had reprinted – continuing the narrative of Leonardo Bruni, the *Historiae Florentini populi*. And it was at this particular time of his life that he wrote the *Liber Facietiarum*, the text that kept his name familiar even into the nineteenth century, to be seen in the remarks in 1840 of the writer and critic Frédéric de Mercey, who called him a Florentine Voltaire, a jester, full of wisdom, politics and genius, if then later to Ludwig von Pastor – and perhaps this response is not unexpected in a historian of the Papacy – it was clear that much of Poggio's work and doubtless this text, was, as van Pastor said, unfit to be translated⁹.

⁹ For these late comments on the *Facetiae* see de Mercey, 1840: 823; and von Pastor, 1891: 1.29.

But let us return to the particular activities of concern to us here. In 1414 Poggio had accompanied Pope John XXIII to the Council of Constance where it was hoped that the schisms that had disrupted the Papacy for so long – there were also two other papal claimants, Gregory XII and Benedict XIII – could be settled. This was not to be and in 1415 John XXIII was forced to flee Constance for his life, the anti-Popes Gregory XII and Benedict XIII were deposed, to be succeeded two years later in November 1417 by Pope Martin V who was then able to assume the full and unique authority of the papal office. Poggio saw much in Constance that was troubling, above all the burning of the Czech theologian Jan Hus – his letters describing this event have been published separately – but he stayed there after John XXIII left, using the time when the Holy See was vacant to travel and search for classical manuscripts in the nearby monasteries and cathedrals of Switzerland, Germany, and France. This activity was not new for him since earlier in 1407 he had visited libraries in Montecassino and Naples and in 1415, perhaps while on a mission for John XXIII, he had found two texts of Cicero in the Abbey of Cluny, the *Pro Murena* and the *Pro Sexto Roscio*, only partially available before. But in the investigations he was able to make in 1416 and 1417, on four separate expeditions, travelling sometimes with friends, he uncovered an extraordinary number of new texts, waiting to be rescued, as he put it, from the barbarians, so little sensible of their value; the full text of Quintilian, the first books of the *Argonautica* of Valerius Flaccus, the commentary of Asconius Pedianus on five orations of Cicero and another, also ascribed to him though written at a later date, on four of the Verrine orations, the commentary on twelve lines of Virgil by Priscianus, texts by Lactantius and the *De Architectura* of Vitruvius, the full text of the *De re militari* by Vegetius Renatus and those of many others authors, of Manilius and Silius Italicus and Ammianus Marcellinus and Tertullian, other significant writings of Cicero, the *Silvae* of Statius, a second codex of Quintilian, writings by the grammarian Flavius Caper, by the Byzantine writer Eutyches, by the grammarians Marcus Valerius Probus and Nonius Marcellus. And, of course, to return to where we started, he discovered the full text of Lucretius, probably in the Benedictine monastery in Fulda, a copy of which he sent to Niccolò Niccoli who made a transcription which became the model for many other copies.

This was a remarkable record, the re-discovery of so many classical and post-classical writers, famous and less known. And yet, despite the reputation among humanists that these discoveries brought Poggio, the next years were difficult. At the end of the Council of Constance he returned to his position as Apostolic Secretary to Martin V. But after a year, recognizing that there was little chance of further preferment at the Papal Court, he accepted an invitation from Cardinal Henry Beaufort, Bishop

of Winchester – later Cardinal Beaufort was to be one of the inquisitors of Joan of Arc – and traveled to England, where he remained four years, from 1418 to 1423. He was not happy there; he did not like the climate, perhaps also the food, and certainly the character of the English disappointed him. The nobles, he wrote, think it disgraceful to reside in cities and estimate the degree of a man's nobility merely by the extent of his estates. Above all he missed his friends and the expeditions he made to the libraries in English monasteries were disappointing, the only manuscript of any value he discovered being one of the *Chronicle* of Sigebert of Gembloux, a minor monk of the tenth century. But this failure to discover any new texts led him back to read the Christian Fathers, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Ambrosius, and St. John Chryostomus, an experience that served him well as material for the moral treatises he was to write in the years that followed, reminding him how so much of what he read in later writers depended on what was to be found in those earlier texts.

On his return to Italy, he went back also to his position of secretary under Pope Martin V, noting, as before, the endless political and ecclesiastical battles in and around the Papal court. He also resumed his search for forgotten texts, finding a manuscript with a large part of the text of Petronius and, in 1429 in the library of Montecassino the treatise on aqueducts, *De aquaeductu*, by Frontinus, and the *Matheseos* of Firmicus Maternus, a text already known to Petrarch. His position at the Papal court also allowed him, scrupulously or unscrupulously, to collect manuscripts from scholars passing through. From 1434 onwards he was back in Florence with Pope Eugene IV, being then posted to various other cities, to Bologna and Ferrara, to Florence again and Siena and then back to Rome. It was also at this time, having married his young bride Selvaggia dei Buondelmonti and abandoning his mistress Lucia Panelli and their many illegitimate children, that he purchased a villa in the Valdarno, raising the money necessary by selling a manuscript of Livy that he had transcribed. This country seat he filled with classical sculptures and coins and inscriptions, some of which were praised, as he remarked in one of his letters, by the sculptor Donatello¹⁰. His last years were spent, not always to his liking, as Chancellor of the Florentine Republic, a position he referred once as a public servitude, held under the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici, but one that allowed him leisure enough to edit his correspondence and complete his history of Florence. Less nobly perhaps, this position gave him the time and energy to indulge in new controversies, with such figures as Guarino da Verona, Bartolommeo Facio and, most notably, with Lorenzo Valla. In 1459 he died and was buried in the Church of Santa Croce in Florence.

¹⁰ For a note on the villa in the Valdarno see Rorimer, 1955–1956: 246–51; and Bacci, 1963: 65–87. For the praise Donatello offered a piece of ancient sculpture see Janson, 1963: 101.

About Poggio's establishment of a new script, despite its importance for the subsequent study of the classical texts much less, until recently, has been said; nothing, for example, is noted of this activity by Girolamo Tiraboschi or the Reverend Shepherd. The first scholars to remark upon the significance of this aspect of his work seem to have been Nicola Barone, August Wilmanns and in 1918 the historian Emile Bernheim. But still it was not until a few years later, in the studies of Alfred Hessel and Berthold L. Ullman, that any fuller scholarly attention was given to the development of this script, the so-called *lettera antica*, based on the model of the Carolingian minuscule and then to the ways in which it supplanted the Gothic script, the so-called *lettera moderna*, that had previously been used in the transcription of manuscripts.

Poggio had begun his life in Florence, beyond his notarial duties, as a copyist of manuscripts for Salutati and it was in just such a copy of a text by Salutati, the *De verecundia*, written between 1402 and 1403, that the forms of this script first appeared. There is much we might say of its significance. For if Poggio's recovery of the ancient manuscripts can be seen as his way of rescuing them from the ravages of time, something similar was implicit here, that the beauty and clarity of this new script could also suggest a transcendence, defining forms that existed beyond any particular or specific moment. The reception and diffusion of this script had a clear effect for if in his informal writings Poggio might continue to use the cursive Gothic script in the transmission of classical texts he was able, both from his authority as a scholar and with the patronage of Salutati and Niccoli, to establish the significance of this script for such purposes and train other scholars to work in this new style, however much time and effort it required, who then could take it with them as they moved to other scholarly centers. In time the details of the forms of this script were enriched by the evidence of the letters of the classical inscriptions which were, at that moment, being ever more noted and scrutinized. Here scholars in Venice and Padua were especially important, figures like Felice Feliciano and Fra Giovanni Giocondo, both of whom carefully transcribed and illustrated the inscriptions they recorded, the forms of which, now beyond any correct requirements of epigraphy, became part of a whole new practice of writing. The next step in the development of this script, seen now in another burgeoning medium, appeared in Venice in products of the press of Aldus Manutius who was so concerned to produce a cursive variant of the *lettera antica* which, as a printed script, could stand as a form of writing and legibility, before this time, seen only in the rarest of manuscripts¹¹.

¹¹ For this account of Manutius, see Davies, 1999.

This is the last step in our history. And if Manutius was also much concerned with the development of a printed script to represent Greek writings that he had – here he knew the market for such books was limited to those few in Italy who could read that language – he printed many texts in Latin, and above all, as is now fully recognized, the magnificent text of the *Hypnerotomachia Polyphili*, published in 1499¹². This was written in what could be called the Aldine roman, a script defined now more fully in accord with the demands and ideals of typography than anything seen in the script of manuscripts. We return to where we started; that the last book Aldus printed was a text of Lucretius, edited by the Venetian Andrea Navagero and published in 1515, almost a hundred years after Poggio's discovery of this text in the dusty library of the monastery of Fulda.

We can end with what is, I venture to say, a profound parallel to this history of Poggio and the transformation of a new written script into the world of printed books in which still we live, as we read in Ricci's essay in this volume on «technologies of writing». The Reverend Robert Palladino, who died recently, was a scholar of calligraphy who taught for several years at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. In one of his classes was Steve Jobs who, so the story goes, was fascinated by the care and beauty of the calligraphic forms Palladino demonstrated, so much so that when it came time to decide what script should be used on his new internet devices, it was this script he chose as a model¹³. Poggio/Manutius; Palladino/Jobs. We are the beneficiaries of them all.

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¹² For a recent account of the authorship of this text, see Ariani & Gabriele, 1998: LXIII-XC.

¹³ For Palladino, see most easily his obituary by Margalit Fox, «The New York Times», 6 March 2016: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/06/arts/design/rev-rob-ert-palladino-83-scribe-who-shaped-apples-fonts.html>> (09/2019)

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