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DIBATTITI

THE ITALIAN EXCEPTION: A DEBATE
ON RONALD WITT'S "TWO LATIN
CULTURES OF MEDIEVAL ITALY"

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The Italian Exception: A debate on Ronald Witt's “Two Latin Cultures of Medieval Italy”

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Ronald G. Witt (1932-2017) has been one of the leading American scholars of Italian humanism. He devoted his whole career to the subject, focusing in particular on the origins of humanism. His last book, *The Two Latin Cultures and the Foundation of Renaissance Humanism in Medieval Italy*, published in 2011, represents the outcome of this extended and coherent research, which Witt first embarked on in the 1970s.

As the author himself states, the book constitutes a “prequel” to his most important study, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients. The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni*, which was published in 2000 and translated into Italian in 2005¹. The perspective offered by that volume was already reflected by its chronological framework, the 13th-15th centuries: setting out from the mid-1200s in order to outline a history of the origins of Italian humanism – primarily understood, in Paul Oskar

¹ Witt 2000 (2005). The title of the Italian edition is: *Sulle tracce degli antichi. Padova, Firenze e le origini dell'umanesimo*. The statement may be found in Witt 2012, IX (2017, 13).

Kristeller's footsteps, as literary classicism² – Witt suggested pushing back the date of its origin by almost a century, to the Padua of Lovato Lovati and Albertino Mussato. The “return to the Ancients” in the writing of Latin poetry promoted within Paduan literary circles made these intellectuals not merely pre-humanists, but the veritable founders of a new relationship with Classical culture, which was to pave the way for the developments in 14th and 15th-century Tuscany and for the return to the Classics as a model for prose writing as well. According to this reconstruction, Petrarch was not the founding father of humanism, but rather a third-generation humanist who – like Coluccio Salutati after him – integrated Christian sensibility within a movement that was inherently secular at first.

The attempt to bring together the different facets of early humanism within this interpretative framework left an underlying problem open that Witt had been addressing since he had first embarked on his research, a problem related to the original socio-cultural context of this movement. From the mid-13th century onwards, the leading figures behind the return to the Classics were lay intellectuals, notaries or judges from the cities of the Kingdom; but this was precisely what constituted the Italian exception. Witt notes that, whereas in the rest of Europe, clerics «largely monopolized intellectual life roughly up to 1500, in Italy by the thirteenth century the majority of intellectuals were laymen [Witt 2012, 1 (2017, 17)]». The appearance and progressive rise to prominence of lay intellectuals in the Kingdom of Italy raises a number of questions: when did such a unique situation in the European context come about? Through what processes and why? What role did it play in the development of humanism?

The Two Latin Cultures attempts to answer such questions. The study of the history of Latin culture and literacy in the Kingdom of Italy (i.e. in the centre and north of the Italian peninsula) in the centuries lea-

² For a comprehensive discussion of Witt 2000 (2005), see: Black 2000.

ding up to the birth of humanism is therefore regarded as a prerequisite for understanding the whole phenomenon, which according to Witt is inextricably bound up with the emergence of the figure of the lay intellectual. To clarify its origins and causes, the book goes back five centuries, selecting the late 9th-century Carolingian conquest as the starting point for an overall investigation of the Kingdom's culture, and then carries the analysis forward to the year 1300 or thereabouts.

Witt had actually started planning the whole study, covering the period between the 8th and the 15th century, in the 1970s: it was the breadth of the research project, along with the fact that "the development of the Latin culture of Italy in the period before 1250 had never been given a conceptual framework", that eventually led him, in the 1990s, to narrow down the scope to the 13th–15th centuries and to temporarily leave aside the investigation of previous phases [Witt 2012, IX (2017, 13)]. *The Two Latin Cultures*, therefore, represents the completion of Witt's original project.

The answer which Witt provides to the questions raised about the Italian exception is embedded in the very title of the book: from the early Middle Ages, there were two Latin cultures in the Kingdom of Italy. One was the ecclesiastical and traditional book culture it shared with the rest of Europe; but there was also a second, documentary and notarial culture that was in the hands of lay professionals. This was to evolve into a genuine book culture, the new legal culture, over time, starting in the 11th century. This was a key century for both cultures, on account not just of the return to the study of Roman law, but also of the impact that Church reforms and the struggle between papacy and empire had on cathedral schools and traditional ecclesiastical education. The complex interaction between these two cultures over the centuries created unique cultural conditions in the Kingdom, which were to lead to the 13th and 14th-century developments, whereby a notary or judge in an Italian city might read Latin Classics and even choose to imitate them in his own writing.

As should be already evident from this basic overview, Witt's book has an extensive scope – it discusses, at least potentially, all the “narrative” and “documentary” Latin sources across five centuries – and investigates a key topic in the history of Italian and European culture in the Middle Ages and beyond. Aside from the author's specific interest in the origins of humanism, I would argue that the importance of this work within the context of medieval studies lies in two factors: it explicitly presents itself as a general history of the Latin culture of the Kingdom of Italy in the Early and High Middle Ages [Witt 2012, 1 (2017, 17)] – something which had never been attempted before – and, even more importantly, it integrates documentary culture into the reconstruction for the first time, assigning it the utmost importance.

The publication of the English volume in 2012 did not fail to attract the attention of Italian and international scholars, giving rise to a debate surrounding the central thesis that informs Witt's overview, as well as specific aspects of his reconstruction. The author himself has taken part in this discussion through the pages of the journal *Storica*, within the context of a debate coordinated by Amedeo De Vincentiis in 2014, and also involving Giuliano Milani, Antonio Sennis and Charles Michael Radding³. Witt took account of only some of the considerations put forward in this debate and ~~the reviews~~ of his volume when, in 2017, he published an Italian edition entitled *L'eccezione italiana. L'intellettuale laico nel Medioevo e l'origine del Rinascimento (800-1300)*. The publication of the Italian translation of the book and the growing reception of Witt's overview by international scholarship have inspired the present debate, which is the outcome of a seminar held in October 2018 as part of the *Seminari di ricerca medievistica* of the *Dipartimento di Storia Culture Civiltà – DISCI* of Bologna University.

³ De Vincentiis 2014. Among the many reviews of the English edition of the book, one might mention Grévin 2013 and Bartoli 2015.

In the light of the wide range of topics and the chronological breadth of Witt's work, we chose to organise the discussion by drawing upon different fields of expertise and different research focuses. We divided the book according to chronological and thematic criteria, asking four scholars with different research backgrounds to focus on specific parts or aspects: I provided a reading of the first half of the book, devoted to the 8th–11th centuries (parts 1 and 2), entrusting Alberto Cotza with the second half, devoted to the 11th–14th centuries (parts 3–5). I then asked Vera Fravventura to provide a cross-reading of philological and literary topics (Witt's traditional book-culture) and Dario Internullo to discuss the "other culture" of the Kingdom of Italy – the documentary and later juridical one.

Given the importance of Witt's study for the international historiographical debate, we have chosen to present our readings in English, so as to more easily promote dialogue between different research traditions. Therefore, quotes from the book in our discussion are given in English, but are always followed by a double reference to the original 2012 edition and to the 2017 Italian one.

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