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DELLE DONNE, Fulvio — CAPPELLI, Guido. 2021. *Nel Regno delle lettere. Umanesimo e politica nel Mezzogiorno aragonese*. Roma: Carocci. ISBN 978-88-290-1099-8. Pp. 239. Paper. € 22.

F. Delle Donne and G. Cappelli's *Nel Regno delle lettere* describes the ideological tools of Aragonese literary production used to legitimize and reinforce the political system, namely the monarchy of the Kings of Aragon. The volume consists of a prologue (*La letteratura politica, la politica della letteratura*), two parts, and an epilogue (which reverses the initial title: *La politica della letteratura, la letteratura politica*), enriched by an extensive bibliography and a useful *Indice dei nomi e delle cose notevoli*. The two parts

focus on the reigns of the two main kings of Aragon: the first (*La maiestas e la sua legittimazione*) is dedicated to the heroic season of Alfonso the Magnanimous (from the conquest of Naples to 1458, the date of his death); and the second (*La maiestas e la sua affermazione*) concentrates on the more conscious ideological systematization during the era of Ferrante and his immediate successors (up to around 1501).

The aim of the work is both to investigate the specific and innovative features of the Aragonese ‘monarchical’ Humanism and to remove the last traces of some interpretative issues that have long dominated the existing scholarship: on the one hand, the vision of Humanism as a pure moment of refined erudition (according to De Sanctis’s or Gramsci’s readings, for instance); on the other, the idea that the only ideological novelty in the panorama of fifteenth-century Italy was the so-called *Bürgerhumanismus* of Hans Baron’s famous definition, based on the assumption “che libertà e repubblica siano il Bene, un metastorico ed assoluto Bene, e che la monarchia e l’assolutismo monarchico siano il Male, un metastorico ed assoluto Male”<sup>1</sup> — an interpretation in line with the commonplace of Florentine humanistic political literature.<sup>2</sup> *Nel Regno delle lettere* once again demonstrates that these interpretations, originating from precise historical circumstances, have to be revised in order to recognize the social, civil, and political value of the *studia humanitatis*, and to investigate the different peculiarities of the several ‘Humanisms’ present in the Italian peninsula between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries.

The first part of the volume (by F. Delle Donne) dwells on the literary and artistic propaganda tools used during King Alfonso’s exciting age: historiography, oratory, and triumphs. The chapter *Idee di sovranità: Alfonso e i suoi storici*, for instance, sheds light on the role of history at the king’s court. All the leading humanists dedicated themselves to history in those years, even receiving generous grants for writing Alfonso’s *gesta*. Antonio Beccadelli, called Panormita, for example, celebrates the Aragonese monarchs in his *De dictis et factis Alphonsi regis*, a long series of anecdotes subdivided according to the virtues of the king, which was probably intended to build a trilogy with the *Oratio in expeditionem contra Turcos* and the *Triumphus*. *De dictis* is also linked to Panormita’s *Liber rerum gestarum Ferdinandi regis*: both texts, in fact, refer to the same Greek model,

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1. I.e., “that freedom and republicanism are the absolute Good, beyond history, and monarchy and absolutism are the absolute Evil, beyond history” (my translation).

2. MARTELLI 2007, 222.

Xenophon (to the *Memorabilia Socratis* and the *Ciropedia* in particular), a highly appreciated author in Naples. In the same years, for example, Lorenzo Valla translated for Alfonso the first book of the *Ciropedia*, with the hope that the king would recognize in the text the exceptional character of his son, “Cyri nostri”,<sup>3</sup> thereby comparing the young Ferrante to one of the most legendary kings of all times.

In addition to Beccadelli, the main characters of this history ‘revival’ in Naples are the aforementioned Valla and Bartolomeo Facio. Valla was engaged in writing his *Gesta Ferdinandi regis Aragonum* on Alfonso’s father’s heroic actions, and the *Antidotum in Facium*, a capital work of Italian Humanism, which links this humanistic season with Petrarch’s age, and attacks Facio and Panormita.<sup>4</sup> Facio worked at the *De rebus gestis ab Alphonso primo Neapolitanorum rege*, a very challenging text from an ideological point of view. Because of their different approaches to history, the two humanists were opposed in a harsh polemic, examined in the chapter *Il vero, il verosimile e le nuove leggi della storia*. Facio’s strongest accusation of his rival (apparently) was the lack of *brevitas* and the absence of *probabilitas*. For these reasons, any of Valla’s collateral digressions from the narration of the king’s grandiose *gesta* were negatively judged by Facio: this is the case, for example, of Valla’s terrible portrait of Martin I — Alfonso’s grandfather — as obese, impotent, and a drunkard. Facio never attacked Valla’s grotesque account because these characteristics did not conform to the *decorum* principle, but because of their lack of credibility, as if to hide the “cortese, se non cortigiano”<sup>5</sup> spirit of his polemic (65). Valla, on his part persuaded that an author must always seek the truth (even when it is grotesque), presented the king with a very realistic and lively *historia*, which was, however, a losing model. The task of narrating Alfonso’s *gesta*, in fact, was ultimately given to Facio and not to Valla.

The second powerful consensus-building tool analysed in the volume (*Dalle azioni alle orazioni*) are the encomiastic orations, often aimed at exalting the *maiestas*. The case of the oration pronounced by the bishop Angelo de Grassis in 1443 is a peculiar example. De Grassis’s oration is essentially a *centone* of ancient works that were little known in the southern region at the time, namely the *Panegyrici latini* of the third and fourth centuries, and, in particular, the *Gratiarum actio* pronounced by Pliny the Younger in honour of Trajan. De Grassis, who had arrived in Naples from northern Italy, was

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3. SACCARDI 2014, 2.

4. For the interpretation of this work see REGOLIOSI 1981.

5. E.g., “Courteous, if not courtly” (my translation).

probably aware of the rarity of these texts, and therefore he felt free to defraud the ancient source producing an audacious rhetorical operation.

The chapters *Il trionfo dell'Umanesimo monarchico* and *Da un trionfo all'altro* examine in depth the organization of triumphs, which represent a milestone for ideological and political construction. The triumph of 1443, for instance, was probably carefully studied by Panormita, who also prepared a description of the event, the aforementioned *Triumphus*, which Delle Donne relates to other contemporary accounts, such as Porcelio Pandoni's *Triumphus*, and also to different types of sources, for example the marble slab of the arch in Castel Nuovo celebrating the triumph (see Fig. 2 in the work). All the sources speak of a grandiose and highly symbolic event, with strong ideological choices that innovate the model of the ancient triumph: one of these was the refusal of the crown, which recalls Caesar, but also highlights Alfonso's desire to not submit his authority to ecclesiastical power; or again, the clemency and moderation towards the losers who were not paraded in front of the king's chariot in the procession. This choice aimed at another important objective, namely pacification with the local nobility, whose support would have been indispensable for the Trastámara family. The triumph, in short, reset the monarchical ideological system using classical images and virtues, and it also suggested an ideal descent of Alfonso from the Roman emperors — those of Iberian origin in particular, as Giannozzo Manetti wrote in an *Oratio* to the king of 1452.

The second part of the book (by G. Cappelli) begins with the detailed description of an event comparable to the triumph of 1443: the solemn opening of the Aragonese Parliament in Castel Nuovo in 1484. In this case, too, the *maiestas* is exposed to the collective eye and it represents a “pubblico spettacolo” (as Giuniano Maio wrote in *De maiestate*; 163), which has several connections with the architecture of the *specula principum*. As at the time of Alfonso, the intellectuals continued to direct the public representation of power also during Ferrante's reign, as illustrated in the chapter *Potere e sapere: Ferrante e i suoi teorici*. Humanists produced innovative theoretical treatises on the state and on power, useful to legitimize Ferrante's difficult position, as an illegitimate son and a non-native (he was born in Valencia). Among the others, a prominent role was played by Francesco Patrizi, bishop of Gaeta in 1461, author of *De institutione rei publicae* dedicated to Pope Sixtus IV and of *De regno* dedicated to Alfonso Duke of Calabria, which was one of the most influential political works in sixteenth-century Europe.<sup>6</sup> It outlined a detailed program for the education

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6. HANKINS 2010, 468–69.

of the prince, based on the humanist faith in the formative possibilities of an integral education.

The true leader of Ferrante's season undoubtedly was Giovanni Pontano, whose works follow the descending parabola of the Aragon crown: while Pontano's first writings (not only the political treatises) show the enthusiastic belief that the intellectual can modify the prince's actions thanks to his rhetoric, the last texts present tormented disillusion. One of the most significant texts in this respect is undoubtedly Pontano's *De obedientia*, which provides an ethical and scientific-based legitimization of monarchical government through the famous image of society as a human body.

Alongside robust theoretical treatises and official orations, also less specialized genres such as poetry (addressed in the chapter *Poeti di corte*) exploited the mechanisms of political propaganda. Indeed, court poetry is rich in political themes, which are not only echoes of historical events, but theoretical reflections: representative in this regard is the production of Giovanni Aloisio (author of the *Naufragio*, in which the love theme flanks ideological issues), in addition to that of the supreme Latin and vernacular poet of the time, Jacopo Sannazaro. As in Pontano's case, Sannazaro's writing follows the path of Aragonese power: *Arcadia*, for instance, shows signs of a collective decline; his *Rime* are structurally tied to the Neapolitan world, and they link the poet's biographical love story first to the rise and then to the decline of King Ferrante.

Poetry is not alone in being exploited to transform a complex ideology into a widespread mentality. *Nel Regno delle lettere* offers a rich overview of the production bordering on literary texts, such as legal theoretical reflections, texts on military doctrine (for instance, the works by Orso Orsini, Paride dal Pozzo, and Belisario Acquaviva) and writings on economic topics. One of the leading writers in this respect was Diomede Carafa, a high-ranking bureaucrat of the Aragon court: he was the author of a number of short manuals in vernacular on various subjects, entitled *Memoriali*, in which the economic-fiscal factor is analyzed as a potential threat to social peace.

The path designed in the book concludes with works representative of the decline of the grandiose Aragonese season in Naples, symbolically fixed at 1494, the year of Ferrante's death and of the French invasion (although the kingdom still held out for a few more years). In literary production, optimism gave way to insecurity. Particularly significant examples of this phase are Giuniano Maio's *De magnanimitate*, which constitutes an extreme theoretical attempt to defend the *maiestas*, using the idea of the

sacredness of power and the concept of ‘magnanimity’, the attribute par excellence of the strong leader; and the *Eremita* by Antonio Galateo, the last great Aragonese intellectual. His dialogue, which takes place at the gates of heaven between a hermit, Saint Peter, and other saints, addresses the problem of the possibility of influencing power and, in a perspective of radical disenchantment, it denies the leading role of the intellectual. In short, these humanists’ last acts mark the awareness of the impossibility of a collaboration between the intellectual and power. Also in Naples the great humanistic dream<sup>7</sup> — namely, the illusion of deriving from Antiquity the intellectual and moral energies needed to regenerate the modern world in depth — had been definitively shattered in the clash with History.

Clementina Marsico  
*Università di Firenze*  
Andrea Severi  
*Università di Bologna*

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7. RICO 1998.