



## Poliziano's 'Latini' and the didactic perspectives of teaching Latin in contemporary schools

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### Abstract

Poliziano's 'Latini' can be inscribed in the wake of the scholastic tradition of the humanistic age, in which the study of the rules of Latin syntax through short exercises, known as *themata*<sup>1</sup>, aimed at translating texts from Latin into the vernacular and from the vernacular into Latin, is widespread. Nevertheless, Poliziano's writings differ from other humanistic precedents so much that they require a study with a double perspective, one that provides for the internal analysis of the work and one that looks outwards, that is, to the other works of Poliziano, to the works of contemporary authors and, finally, to the richness of the works of 'Latin literature', from which the Medici tutor draws with great refinement. The present project aims to examine the characteristics of this short work and grasp its didactic implications, in order to formulate possible ways of teaching and learning Latin in contemporary schools.

### Project description

#### Introduction

Already in Dante's *Convivio* the term "latino", mostly used in the plural and derived from the verb *latinare*, appears with the meaning of «didactic exercises for learning Latin; theoretical and practical study of the Latin language» (GDLI, s.v.). Therefore, the expression "fare latini" refers to the practice of pupils progressing in the study of the language and grammatical categories through translations, to the point of developing a competence in autonomous composition in Latin (an exercise known as "fare l'epistola")<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Poliziano himself in *Lat. IV*, reproaching Piero for neglecting his duties as a student and imagining his motivations, defines the proposed exercises in this way «you could say to me: 'I have diligently seen the *theme* and I do not find anything in it that does not suffice for me the soul to understand, and therefore what time I have left willingly I consume in giving myself pleasure'».

<sup>2</sup> The exercise consists of composing a letter in the vernacular and then translating it into Latin. An example of a collection of letters composed around 1481 can be found in W. Bracke, *'Fare l'epistola' nella Roma del Quattrocento*, Rome 1992.



Poliziano's work is presented under the name of *Latini* in the only manuscript witness we have<sup>3</sup>, containing the twenty *latini* in double redaction, vernacular and Latin, addressed to the future pope Leo X, or Giovanni de' Medici, and dated to the summer of 1481. It was at this time that Poliziano resumed his office as teacher of Piero, Giovanni's brother, after a period spent away from Florence and while he held the Chair of Greek and Latin eloquence at the Studio.

The scant research concerning the work and the connections with other *Latini* can be extended, due to the great value that these short bilingual prose represents as a testimony of humanistic scholastic practice, as well as for their elegance and "curiosity".<sup>4</sup>

### State of the art

Poliziano's work, which remained unpublished until 1867 in the National Library of Florence, saw the light when Isidoro Del Lungo included it in the volume *Prose volgari inedite e poesie latine e greche edite e inedite*, together with other works by the poet; for the first time, in fact, the *Latini* were accompanied by an apparatus with notes and brief comments.

In 1885, however, Tommaso Casini edited a reprint of the *Latini* in the *Opere volgari di messer Agnolo Ambrogini Poliziano*, proposing only the vulgar version according to the text established by Del Lungo.

The last and most recent edition dates back to 2007 and is the edition of the *Latini* edited by Simona Mercuri; the text is based on the direct collation of the manuscript and accepts the suggestions of the first publisher only where the text presents unfixable corruptions and gaps. The critical apparatus integrates Isidoro Del Lungo's edition with new conjectures, while the richer and most substantial commentary includes notes of a historical-biographical nature, documentary notes on both vernacular and Latin sources, and notes concerning textual problems of various kinds. The exercises are presented with parallel translations, with the aim of facilitating the comparison between the two versions, unlike the manuscript and the edition of Del Lungo in which the Latin redactions are always preceded by the vernacular ones.

The perspectives of this study, from which it is necessary to start, concern first of all the problems of dating and destination of the work: the *Latini*, together with a letter in Latin written by

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<sup>3</sup> The Codex Magliabechiano VIII, 1397, is a composite manuscript that contains, in addition to the *Latini*, texts of various kinds such as treatises, political speeches, chronicles, diplomatic relations of the XV and XVI centuries. A description of the dossier comprising Poliziano's *Latini* can be found in P.O. Kristeller, *Iter Italicum*, I-VI, London – Leiden 1963-1961, vol. I, p. 133, in which it appears that on ff. 209-210 there are other adespota and anepigraphs *latini* by the same hand that copied the *Latini* of Poliziano.

<sup>4</sup> As Isidoro Del Lungo noted in the letter sent to the publisher Barbèra in 1863, defining the *Latini* as «scholastic prose placed in Latin by himself [Poliziano], for the exercise of the young sons of the Magnificent, very elegant, very curious». See P. Barbèra, *L'edizione delle opere di A. Poliziano curata da G. Carducci e I. Del Lungo per l'editore G. Barbèra*, Firenze 1895, pp. 13-14.



Poliziano to Piero de' Medici<sup>5</sup>, constitute the only testimony of the private teaching carried out by the humanist in the year 1481, after his definitive return to Florence and his reconciliation with Lorenzo the Magnificent; on the basis of the chronological clues provided by from exercises, the period of composition of the collection is circumscribed between the beginning of June and the middle of September 1481. The problem of the addressees is more complex, since the exercises are sometimes addressed to Piero alone and sometimes to both brothers who, considered lazy and negligent, are admonished to devote themselves more to their studies<sup>6</sup>. Mercuri concludes by not discarding the possibility of thinking of a double destination for the exercises: Piero, already well advanced in the study of Latin, would have benefited from them for the study of the language; Giovanni, still too young, would have understood the pedagogical implications. The scholar also considers the possibility that other young members of Florentine society also took part in the lessons.

Secondly, the genre of the work, although it is compared to the scholastic tradition of the *themata*, is defined as a true prose of art, because it presents elegance of language, variety of syntactic constructs, refinement and fluidity of style. In fact, with regard to the order of composition of the versions (vernacular and Latin) and to the authorship, the hypothesis already put forward by Mercuri is that «a 'mixed' conception occurred, that is, that some exercises aimed at translation from the vernacular to Latin, and others from Latin to the vernacular»<sup>7</sup>, and that there are no doubts about the authorship of both versions, whatever the order of composition. The scholar also hypothesizes that Poliziano suggested to his pupil a passage to be translated (into vernacular or into Latin), assigning him the task of later comparing his version with the one composed by the tutor in an extemporaneous manner, during the lesson.

Thirdly, the wide range of topics<sup>8</sup> seem to indicate that the pedagogical purpose of the work prevails over the didactic one; however, Mercuri argues that these exercises are designed to develop syntactic topics and to provide a rich vocabulary of technical terms (legal, equine, numismatic and philological, *etc.*) to the young Piero, who is required to undertake a rigorous Latin study program. On this regard, two didactic purposes present in the exercises are appropriately identified: the first involves the use of the same verb in all possible meanings within an exercise, with the obvious aim of giving the student a broader knowledge of verbs and verb roots; the second is the presence of a

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<sup>5</sup> The letter was published for the first time by A.M. Bandini, *Ragionamento storico sopra le collazioni delle fiorentine Pandette*, Livorno 1762, LVII-LIX. The letter is testimony to the singular importance of Poliziano's educational approach, as well as an example of 'exercise' itself.

<sup>6</sup> There are different positions of scholars regarding the role of Poliziano as tutor of the brothers: Del Lungo maintains that he was never Giovanni's teacher and that therefore the *Latini* were only intended for his eldest son Piero; Picotti claims that Poliziano was Giovanni's teacher for only a few months; Perosa, on the other hand, thinks that the exercises were intended for both brothers.

<sup>7</sup> A. Poliziano, *Latini*, edited by S. Mercuri, Rome 2007, p. XXXVI.

<sup>8</sup> The themes proposed are many and range, from Greek mythology (*Lat.* XIII), to the misadventures of the preceptor's little dog (*Lat.* XIV), to the events of the Ottoman Empire (*Lat.* II, VIII, XVIII), *etc.*



variety of syntactic constructs and lexicon, to give students the opportunity to consider various solutions in the translation of a single vulgar expression<sup>9</sup>.

Finally, if the vernacular text is presented as an important document of fifteenth-century Florentine, characterized by the combination of courtly and popular elements, the Latin version is valuable as a «living example of the language that Poliziano bent to different uses, in a context of continuous semantic and lexical renewal»<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the tutor draws on the lexicon of all 'Latin literature', recovering words rarely used in humanistic Latin, and paying particular attention to the stylistic and rhetorical elaboration of the exercises, especially those that develop eminently literary themes.

### **Purpose of the research and methodology**

Starting from the relevant and remarkable observations of Simona Mercuri, it is possible to extend the field of research on Poliziano's *Latini* in at least three directions.

First of all, it would be advisable to examine each of the twenty *latini* in order to determine their didactic purpose and in each case the subject on which the tutor intended to work. To do this, it will be necessary to analyze the text in order to identify the Latin constructs proposed and to understand the systematicity and logic of these exercises. It would also be important to study in depth the use of the lexicon that Poliziano recovers from archaic Latin, silver age and christian authors, and to catalog the sources from which he draws.

Furthermore, as Poliziano himself states, his teaching methodology was based on the *veterum consuetudo* and provided for the simultaneous learning of the *canones* of both classical languages, Greek and Latin. However, since the parallel study of languages was no longer widespread and was not even practiced by contemporary masters such as Bernardo Michelozzi, who had briefly replaced him as Piero's tutor, or Battista Guarini, Poliziano was very often criticized. In this context, the second objective of the research would be to analyse the *Latini* taking into account other texts by Poliziano, such as the apologetic letter that he addressed to Lorenzo de' Medici<sup>11</sup>, in which the tutor supports his methodological choices and clarifies the reasons behind his teaching method, but also texts by other contemporary authors that illustrate practices of teaching and learning Greek and Latin in the humanistic school different from those of Poliziano, such as Guarino's *De ordine docendi ac studendi*.

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<sup>9</sup> In this respect, it is interesting to remember that we do not know what kind of Latin manual the tutor used in teaching; the only case in which he makes a mention of it seems to be found in a letter to Francesco Gaddi, in which the tutor affirms his desire to use a manual of Latin grammar by Perotti, abandoning the use of traditional grammars.

<sup>10</sup> A. Poliziano, *Latini*, edited by S. Mercuri, Rome 2007, p. XLII.

<sup>11</sup> Of interest to us, in addition to the apologetic letter (V), are other letters in Latin (I and III) that Poliziano sent to the Magnificent, published for the first time by L. D'Amore, *Epistole inedite di Angelo Poliziano*, Naples 1909; and more recently in Picotti, *Ricerche*, Florence 1955, pp. 69-86.



The third objective, although ambitious, would be to study another example of *themata* contained in the Riccardiano manuscript 2621<sup>12</sup>, which lies unpublished in the Riccardiana Library in Florence. This manuscript, which belonged to Pietro Crinito, who was also a pupil of Poliziano, contains one hundred and eighty-seven compositions in vernacular and a conspicuous number of vulgarisations of the letters of Ugolino and Michele Verino. These same letters were also transcribed into Latin by Crinito and are found in the Riccardiano manuscript 915<sup>13</sup>. The texts of the Crinito are divided into different grammatical categories (*de verbis neutris, de comunis, de deponentis, de verbis impersonalibus, etc.*) and document the progress of the student during the exercises, first shorter and then longer and syntactically less elementary, until they are no longer bound to a specific grammatical category. Together with the *Latini*, these writings are a valuable document of teaching practice in the humanist period, and they are also a clear example of the transition to a later stage in the learning of the Latin language by Crinito who, under Verino's guidance, translated entire epistles and composed them independently.

All these aspects, together with the desire to bring scientific research closer to contemporary teaching practice, offer the opportunity to reflect on the development of possible teaching proposals that can be used in school courses involving the teaching/learning of classical subjects.

In continuity with the work of critical and philological analysis already carried out by Simona Mercuri, the research aims to conduct a more systematic investigation of the didactic and pedagogical implications of Poliziano's work, starting from different points of view: that of the author himself, also in consideration of his other writings which, although they were not composed for merely didactic purposes, offer valuable and specific suggestions on his approach to teaching; that of contemporary authors and other possible examples of 'exercises', which are still little studied, in order to better understand the rules that characterized the educational process in the humanist age and to grasp the features of continuity and discontinuity with Poliziano's "method"; and that of the teaching activity of classical languages, which is currently undergoing a process of downsizing and requires continuous changes and adaptations, also in view of the constant changes taking place in society.

## Objectives

The proposed methodology provides for a rigorous and comparative analysis of the texts examined, in the expectation of restoring meaning to the genre of the *themata* and drawing out suggestions that can be used, as far as possible, in contemporary teaching practice. In addition, it is hoped that a comprehensive study will be drawn up that will shed light on Poliziano's activity as

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<sup>12</sup> The ms. is described by P.O. Kristeller, *Iter Italicum*, I-VI, London – Leiden 1963-1961, vol. I, p. 221.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.





an admirable teacher and tutor of Piero, who already at the age of about seven could boast of both having read Livio and having learned many verses of Virgil<sup>14</sup>.

With a view to a research that aims in a broad sense to promote the study of Latin in school *curricula*, and aware of the fact that there is still much to say and to study in the field of classical language teaching studies, the cornerstone of this research is to restore a *socially critical* and *constructive* role to teaching and to promote holistic approaches in teaching/learning pathways that can further motivate the choice of studying these languages.

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<sup>14</sup> As Piero himself states in a letter sent to his father in 1478, informing him that he had «already apparatused many verses of Virgil», in I. Del Lungo, *Letterine*, Florence 1887, p. 8.