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Leonardo Bruni and the Shimmering Facets of Languages in Early Quattrocento Florence

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LEONARDO BRUNI WAS one of the greatest humanists of the early quattrocento. He represents the “new generation’s talent for a more classicizing style and of the new locutionary energy that it provided.”¹ Bruni is recognized as the quintessential humanist of his time: “if Bruni is not a typical Quattrocento humanist, nobody is.”² Bruni set the standard for humanistic prose writing of the early quattrocento, and his legacy goes beyond the confines of the history and politics of Florence. Some of the most copied and studied works by Bruni in fifteenth-century Italy were his translations from Greek to Latin. His Latin versions of Greek histories paved the way for the reception of ancient Greek literature in the

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1. Ronald G. Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden, 2000), 404.

2. James Hankins, “Humanism in the Vernacular: The Case of Leonardo Bruni,” in *Humanism and Creativity in the Renaissance: Essays in Honor of Ronald G. Witt*, ed. Christopher S. Celenza and Kenneth Gouwens (Leiden, 2006), 12.

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Italian vernaculars. Evidence of this are the five different vernacular versions of his *De primo bello punico*—surviving in 120 manuscripts—and thirty manuscript copies of a vernacular version of his *De bello gothico*.³ It is somewhat ironic that Bruni's cultural project to demonstrate the superiority of Latin over Greek—as Cicero did before him—turned into a wide vernacular reception of Greek texts through their Latin versions.

Given the tremendous success of his Latin translations and rewritings of classical texts and the subsequent vernacular versions of his work, Bruni is an excellent figure through which to study the perceived relationship between Latin and vernacular in early quattrocento Italy. This article advances a novel interpretation of Leonardo Bruni's understanding of the link between Latin and vernacular languages of early quattrocento Florence and the cultural and political spaces they occupied. According to this new reading, for Bruni, Latin and the Florentine vernacular occupied specific and yet compatible cultural domains befitting their audiences and users. Both Latin and vernacular served specific functions, and each language was considered capable of compensating for the other's limitations. Bruni's recognition of the strengths and weaknesses in both Latin and the Florentine languages represents a radical departure from the perception of vernacular humanism as a vehicle for the dissemination of neo-Latin texts and ideals. Bruni encouraged the mutual enrichment of two clearly different traditions within public communication in early Renaissance Italy: Latin for supraregional, epideictic, and demonstrative oratory and official written exchange, on the one hand, and the vernacular for localized, deliberative, and forensic exchange, on the other.

As discussed in the opening essay of this journal's issue, the Aretine humanist contributed to a heated debate about the nature of the language used in ancient Rome. The discussion was initiated by Pope Eugene IV in March 1435, while the papal court was taking refuge in Florence. Several humanists participated in this debate: Antonio Loschi, Poggio Bracciolini, Cencio Rustici, Andrea Fiocchi, Biondo Flavio, and Bruni exchanged their views and thoughts. This debate was crucial to humanists, as it weighted the vaunted supremacy and perfection of the Latin language against the instability and corruption of the vernaculars.⁴ In his *De verbis Romanae locutionis* (April 1, 1435), which he addressed to Bruni, Flavio initiated the discussion. He asked whether the populace of ancient Rome spoke the grammatical Latin he and his fellow scholars knew through classical texts or, rather,

3. Ibid., 26. The use of vernacular for the dissemination of Latin humanistic ideas is discussed by Hankins (ibid., 11–29) and Witt, *In the Footsteps*.

4. See the introduction to this cluster by Andrea Rizzi and Eva Del Soldato.

the “vulgato idiomate” spoken by the illiterate people of Flavio’s day. Except for the passages analyzed in this article, the status of the vernacular scarcely figures in the 1435 discussion, and both Bruni and Biondo agree that its role and position is “low” and limited to the illiterate. Given the focus on spoken Latin, Biondo’s essay and Bruni’s response are concerned with orations. Importantly, Biondo follows Cicero’s *Brutus* in considering the Latin language to have three registers (medium, grave, and low), with a correspondent tripartite level of vocabulary (*verba elegantissima, media, and abiecta sive dissipata*).⁵ By contrast, in his 1435 letter to Flavio, Bruni described languages as either grammatical or nongrammatical. He advanced the theory—shared by medieval scholars—that a diglossia existed in ancient Rome, whereby two languages, one grammatical and one nongrammatical, coexisted just as they coexisted in his day. In other words, Biondo believed that ancient Latin had various rhetorical levels and registers, and he imagined a lower style of Latin that had been used and understood by the illiterate of Rome. Instead, Bruni saw a barrier between the Latin that was not understood by illiterate audiences and the vernacular that was, by nature, “low” and unstable. According to Bruni, an ancient Roman senator would address his fellow politicians in the Latin that Bruni and his friends learned from Cicero’s texts. This was distinct from the vernacular spoken by the ancient Roman populace who could, therefore, appreciate a Latin speech or oratorical performance—including theater—only through gestures and other nonverbal elements or, in other words, through the highly ritualized and formulaic features of orality: “De oratoribus haec michi quidem dicta sint. In senatu enim et iudiciis ad scientes litteras loquebantur litterate, in concionibus vero etiam ad scientes. Aderant quoque indocti quidam: hi sic intelligebant oratoris verba ut nunc intelligunt Missarum solemnitas” (In speaking about the orators I would add the following. The orators addressed the learned members of the community in the senate and court in Latin. They would also use Latin when giving speeches to the same audience. The illiterate would also attend, but they understood the words of the orators the same way as today they follow Mass).⁶

On the basis of Biondo’s treatise and Bruni’s reply, two clear differences emerge. For Bruni, in ancient Rome, Latin and vernacular represented two separate trajectories that never met. Latin is artificially constructed and therefore the only language appropriate for oratory, poetry, and literature in general, while the vernacular is confined to the more popular, oral, less formal, unofficial levels of

5. See Mirko Tavoni, *Latino, grammatica, volgare: Storia di una questione umanistica* (Padua, 1984).

6. *Ibid.*, 217.

communication. Both humanists agreed on the superiority of Latin, although Biondo implicitly accepted the possibility that the vernacular would eventually compete with Latin.

When examining Bruni's perceptions of the vernacular and its potential more closely, two distinct views emerge from his *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum* (1406), *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis* (1404), and the letter to Biondo.⁷ On the one hand, Bruni praises Florentine as the perfect language while confining it to a non-grammatical and spoken realm; on the other, he recognizes the inadequacy of spoken Latin as a verbal medium that can only reach the scholarly and international community.

BRUNI AND FLORENTINE VERNACULAR ORATORY

Less than a year after replying to Biondo's essay, Bruni wrote the *Vite di Dante e del Petrarca* (1436). Here we find an encomium of the *tre corone*, or Three Crowns, of Tuscan language and a statement on the dignity of the vernacular, which he says should be seen to be as perfect as Greek and Latin:

Or questa è la verità certa e assoluta del nome e dell'effetto de' poeti. Lo scrivere in istile litterato o volgare non ha a fare al fatto, né altra differenza è se non come scrivere in greco od in latino. Ciascuna lingua ha la sua perfezione e suo suono e suo parlare limato e scientifico; pur, chi mi domandasse, per che cagione Dante piuttosto elesse scrivere in volgare che in latino e litterato stile, risponderei quello, che è la verità, cioè: che Dante conosceva sé medesimo molto più atto a questo stile volgare ed in rima che a quello latino e litterato.⁸

[Writing in literary or vernacular style has nothing to do with the case, any more than the difference between writing in Greek or in Latin. Each language has its own perfection and its own sound, and its polished and learned diction. Yet, if someone should ask me why Dante chose to write in the vernacular rather than in Latin and the literate style, I would reply that

7. Several Renaissance scholars have discussed the dating of *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum*. Stefano Baldassarri's recent suggestion is accepted here (Leonardo Bruni, *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum*, ed. Stefano U. Baldassarri [Florence, 1994], 7–12 and 61–64). See also Riccardo Fubini, *L'umanesimo italiano e i suoi storici: Origini rinascimentali, critica moderna* (Milan, 2001); James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1991), 1:371–78; and David Quint, "Humanism and Modernity: A Reconsideration of Bruni's Dialogues," *Renaissance Quarterly* 38 (1985): 423–45.

8. Tavoni, *Latino*, grammatica, volgare 30.

the truth is right here, that is to say, that Dante knew himself much better adapted to his vernacular style in rhyme than to that Latin and literate style.]⁹

Bruni is indicating here that the vernacular had rhetorical and stylistic potential, even if it was grammatically unstable. In this passage Bruni recalls Cino Rinuccini's defense of Dante: by paraphrasing *Convivio* I, ix, 4, Rinuccini explains that Dante's use of the vernacular allowed his work to be more useful to his fellow countrymen.¹⁰ Bruni takes a different passage from the *Convivio* (IV, xvi, 4–8)—in which Dante is discussing and quoting from Aristotle's *Physics*—in order to tone down the usefulness of the vernacular while at the same time stressing its potential: “‘Ciascuna cosa è massimamente perfetta quando tocca e aggiugne la sua virtude propria.’ . . . E così manifestamente vedere si può che generalmente questo vocabulo, cioè nobilitade, dice in tutte cose perfezione di loro natura” (“Each thing is most completely perfect when it reaches and attains its own proper virtue.” . . . Thus we may clearly see that in general this word, namely “nobility,” means in all things perfection of their own nature).¹¹

Each language has its own perfection and nature. In other words, every idiom has its own realm and conventions, but only Latin and Greek are grammatical in the sense of a stable and systematic language.¹² Bruni reinforces the statement he had made a year earlier when writing to Flavio: vernacular languages are non-grammatical, but they can encompass all fields of knowledge (another meaning of “scientifico,” as indicated by Angelo Mazzocco).¹³ Mirko Tavoni points out that when Bruni expresses his linguistic views on Latin, he makes a clear distinction between the Latin “lingua” and the vernacular “sermo”—as spoken language.¹⁴ Further, in the same passage of the *Vite*, Bruni refers to the “scrivere in istile litterato o vulgare,” which should be interpreted as *litterate scribere* (writing grammatically) as opposed to writing and speaking nongrammatically. Accord-

9. Simon A. Gilson, *Dante and Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, 2005), 120.

10. See Angelo Mazzocco, *Linguistic Theories in Dante and the Humanists: Studies of Language and Intellectual History in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Italy* (Leiden, 1993), 87–88.

11. Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Convivio (The Banquet)*, trans. Richard Lansing (New York, 1990), bk. 4, 16.4–6.

12. Enea Silvio Piccolomini: “Altre volte ho già pensato che si potesse per il parlar politicamente intender il parlar comune e non scientifico né artificioso, e per il parlar retoricamente, per il contrario, il parlar scientifico o ver artificioso” (taken from Salvatore Battaglia, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* [Turin, 1961], s.v. “scientifico”). Hankins translated Bruni's words “suo parlare limato e scientifico” as “polished and learned diction” (Hankins, *Humanism*, 14).

13. See Mazzocco, *Linguistic Theories*, 216.

14. Tavoni, *Latino*, grammatica, volgare 50.

ingly, Bruni recognizes the stylistic and lexical potential of the Florentine vernacular but rejects the possibility that the *volgare* might become a grammatical language.¹⁵

Bruni's understanding of the lexical and stylistic potentials of the *volgare* points to his recognition of the vernacular tradition of Ciceronian rhetoric going back to the mid-thirteenth century.¹⁶ In particular, the oratorical skills required of the podesta (*ars concionandi*) lost with Brunetto Latini the negative connotations expressed by mid-thirteenth-century grammarians such as Boncompagno da Signa and Thomas of Split.¹⁷ As a result, the civic vernacular speeches intended to sway the population went alongside the more technical and theoretical study of rhetorical discourses. An example of the coexistence of vernacular and Latinate rhetorical practices is offered by the teachings of Bartolinus de Benincasa.¹⁸ In the 1320s, Bartolinus was contracted by the commune of Bologna to provide two courses on rhetoric: the first was on the study of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (in Latin); the second, on the art of writing letters (*ars dictaminis*) and speech making—based on the epistolary style—for a non-Latin-literate audience. Dictaminal studies, which included the art of speaking publicly (*ars concionandi*), accompanied the teaching of classical Latin rhetoric for the purposes of understanding the texts and, from the end of the fourteenth century, emulating their style (*imitatio*). Inevitably, the study of rhetoric in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is not divided between dictaminal and classical learning but between vernacular and Latin and written and spoken (rhetoric and oratory). Where the Latin humanistic culture occupied the space of written and performative oral eloquence (ceremonies and rituals such as funerary speeches, reception of visitors, and prologues), the vernacular occupied the broader space of political debate, deliberations, and everyday communication. If the former practice was clearly in the hands of highly trained scholars, the latter encompassed deliberative oratory, which was practiced mostly in vernacular and by a broader community of politicians and citizens. As

15. It is worth remembering here that the Latin language was often described as *grammatica*, as opposed to the vernacular.

16. See Virginia Cox and John O. Ward, *The Rhetoric of Cicero in Its Medieval and Early Renaissance Commentary Tradition* (Leiden, 2006).

17. On the development and perceptions of the *ars concionandi* in communal Italy, see Enrico Artifoni, "Gli uomini dell'assemblea: L'oratoria civile, i concionatori e i predicatori nella società comunale," in *La predicazione dei frati dalla metà del '200 alla fine del '300: Atti del XXII Convegno internazionale, Assisi, 13–15 ottobre 1994* (Spoleto, 1995), 143–88.

18. See Sandra Karaus Wertis, "The Commentary of Bartolinus de Benincasa de Canulo on the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 10 (1979): 283–310; and Cox and Ward, *Rhetoric*, 122–30.

demonstrated by Stephen Milner, Virginia Cox, and John O. Ward, among others, the coexistence of these practices was very strong throughout communal and late medieval Italy.¹⁹

Bruni's assessment of Dante's defective knowledge and use of Latin is a criticism of the scholastic tradition of Latin teaching and learning, as evidenced in the following passage:

ma in versi latini o in prosa [Dante] non aggiugne appena a quelli che mezzanamente hanno scritto. La cagione di questo è che il secolo suo era dato a dire in rima; e di gentilezza di dire in prosa o in versi latini niente intesero gli uomini di quel secolo, ma furono rozzi e grossi e senza perizia di lettere, dotti, niente di meno, in queste discipline al modo fratesco scolastico.²⁰

[but in Latin verse, or in prose, he barely comes up to the average. The reason for this is that his century was given to rhymed speaking; the men of that time understood nothing of speaking in prose, or in Latin verse, for they were coarse and heavy and unskilled in letters, even if nonetheless learned in these disciplines according to the monkish scholastic manner.]²¹

Indeed, such an attack on the low Latin proficiency of medieval scholars and authors was a standard topos used by fifteenth-century humanists. However, the alleged lack of competence in Latin shown by medieval writers does not preclude a perfect knowledge of the vernacular, for according to Bruni, the two languages and cultures are unrelated. Given the superiority of the Latin language over the vernacular, where can the latter excel? Bruni makes a subtle point about the domain in which Dante's vernacular excelled and proved to be useful in his *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum*. In the first dialogue, Niccolò Niccoli criticizes the Three Crowns—Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.²² As expected, the most vehement attack is directed toward Dante's inadequate knowledge of Latin: "De his

19. Stephen J. Milner, "Communication, Consensus and Conflict: Rhetorical Precepts, the 'Ars Concionandi,' and Social Ordering in Late Medieval Italy," in Cox and Ward, *Rhetoric*, 365–408.

20. Leonardo Bruni, *Le vite di Dante e del Petrarca*, ed. Antonio Lanza (Rome, 1987), 49–50.

21. Gilson, *Dante*, 120–21.

22. There is an extensive debate on Niccoli's attack and defense of the Three Crowns in the two books of the *Dialogues*. See Bruni, *Dialogi*; and Quint, *Humanism*, for a summary of this debate. The view taken in this article is that, even if Niccoli's discussion is clearly a rhetorical exercise, some of Bruni's opinions on vernacular and Latin percolate through the text and are, to some extent, reliable.

loquamur que ad studia nostra pertinent: que quidem ab isto ita plerumque ignorata video. . . . Denique, ut alia omnia sibi affluisent, certe latinitas defuit” (Let us talk now about the topics closest to our studies. I see that these have been largely ignored by Dante. . . . Finally, even if Dante possessed every other skill, he certainly did not have a good knowledge of Latin).²³

In the closing remarks of his invective, Niccoli describes Dante as a poet who “talked” (*locutus est*) in a way that made him seem familiar to wool makers, bakers, and other members of the artisanal class.²⁴ When, in the second book of the *Dialogi*, Niccoli is asked to defend the same Florentine authors he criticized in the first book, he praises Dante’s imagination, knowledge, and elegance of speech (“*oris elegantiam*”). Does “*oris*” refer to the oral realm of communication? If so, why is Dante referred to in this context? The expression “*oris elegantiam*” echoes Quintilian’s “*sermonis elegantia*.” There is, however, a stronger connection with a passage in Macrobius’s *Saturnalia* (fifth century CE), in which the author apologizes to his readers because “[his] discourse lacks the native elegance of the Roman tongue (ie. elegance of speech)”:²⁵ “*Quod ab his, si tamen quibusdam forte nonnumquam tempus voluntasque erit ista cognoscere, petitum impetratumque volumus ut aequi bonique consulant, si in nostro sermone nativa Romani oris elegantia desideretur*” (And if others chance at some point to have the time and desire to make this work’s acquaintance, I hope that they will, as I request, be fair and righteous judges, should my discourse lack the native elegance of the Roman tongue).²⁶

The *Saturnalia* take the form of a dialogue. Therefore, when Macrobius apologizes for his use of the language, he is transposing the fictional oral context onto written Latin. Macrobius asks to be excused for his alleged poor writing, not for the spoken language. Equally, from the point of view of Bruni, Dante’s vernacular mirrored the spoken Florentine of his time, and it is his writing that it subjected to criticism, not his fundamental contribution to the rhetorical power and

23. Leonardo Bruni, *Opere letterarie e politiche di Leonardo Bruni*, ed. Paolo Viti (Turin, 1996), 110.

24. “*Sic enim locutus est ut videatur voluisse huic generi hominum esse familiaris [lanariis, pistoriibus atque eiusmodi turbe]*” (*ibid.*, 112). Compare this sentence with what Bruni writes in the letter to Biondo: “*Itaque non ad pistores tantum et lanistas, sed multo magis ad eos qui in reipublicae gubernatione versabantur . . . orator loquebat*” (*ibid.*, 128).

25. Compare Guarino Guarino’s quote from Quintilian: “*Tanta in eo vis est [Caesar], id acumen, ea concitatio, ut illum eodem animo dixisse quo bellavit appareat. Exornat tamen haec omnia mira sermonis, cuius proprie studiosus fuit, elegantia*” (from *Prosatori Latini del Quattrocento*, ed. Eugenio Garin [Milan, 1952], 345).

26. Ambrosius Aurelius Macrobius, *The Saturnalia*, ed. Percival Vaughan Davies (New York, 1969), 9.

effectiveness of the spoken Florentine. Through Niccoli's praise of Dante's vernacular, Bruni implies that the *volgare* used by the Three Crowns is nongrammatical and is therefore essentially oral. Such a view was not new: a hundred years before Bruni, Boncompagno da Signa remarked that the *ars concionandi* had little structure, method, and learning.²⁷ In sum, Bruni indicates, in this passage of the *Dialogi*, that Dante's vernacular is expressive and efficacious for the civic oratory of his time but does not have the grammaticality and stability needed by a written language. This point echoes the differentiation Bruni makes in the 1435 letter to Biondo that the vernacular is *sermo*, not *lingua*. In this light, the passage from the life of Dante in which Bruni asserts the perfection of the vernacular for its own style is further explained by the passage already quoted above: "Dante conosceva sé medesimo molto più atto a questo stile volgare ed in rima che a quello latino e litterato."²⁸

This sentence leaves no doubt that the humanist is making a clear distinction between the nongrammatical "stile volgare," in "rima" on the one hand and written, grammatical Latin on the other. In the words of Niccoli/Bruni, Dante's vernacular has an elegance of speech that makes it perfect in its own realm, even if it does not have the status of language (with a clearly defined syntactical structure). In the second dialogue, Niccoli goes on to say that Dante's "facundia" and rhetorical skills delight ("delectet") Florence as a whole ("universam civitatem").²⁹

Further evidence that Bruni is focusing on the oral aspects of Dante's vernacular can be seen in his *Laudatio Florentinae urbis*: "Nam quid ego de orationis suavitate et verborum elegantia loquar? In qua idem re sine controversia superat. Sola enim hec in tota Italia civitas purissimo ac nitidissimo sermone uti existimatur. Itaque omnes qui bene atque emendate loqui volunt ex hac una urbe sumunt exemplum" (What will I say about the sweetness and suaveness of the spoken [Florentine] and its elegant and polished expressions? In this I believe without doubt that Florentine excels over all other vernaculars, for Florence is the Italian city reputed to have the purest and most polished speech). Similarly, in his 1435 response to Biondo, Bruni wrote that the Roman women of his time "elegantissime loquuntur, et purius certe quam viri. Et quanquam non litteratus

27. On Boncompagno da Signa and his views on the *ars concionandi*, see Artifoni, "Gli uomini," 150–53.

28. "Stilo vulgari" is how Petrarch describes the *volgare*. See Silvia Rizzo, *Ricerche sul latino umanistico* (Rome, 2002), 62.

29. Bruni, *Opere*, 130; "volgare" and "rima" recall Petrarch's use of *rhythmus* and *vulgaris* to describe the vernacular poetry of ancient Rome. Petrarch affirmed the existence of this poetry (in *Familiares* 1,1), in order to present his *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* and *Triumphus* as a legacy from ancient literature. See Rizzo, *Ricerche*, 54–57.

sit earum sermo, potest tamen figura ipsa dicendi nitorque verborum eloquentiam adiuuare” (speak very eloquently and more purely than men. Even if their spoken language is not grammatical, nevertheless the figures of speech and elegance of words enhance its eloquence).³⁰

These last two passages corroborate Bruni’s belief that the spoken vernaculars can be eloquent, even if they are not grammatical, as well as his notion that the Florentine vernacular is the most eloquent of the Italian *sermones*. Yet if Florentine oratory is praiseworthy, prose in the vernacular is not. In the *Lives of Dante and Petrarch*, for instance, Bruni voices his misgivings about using Florentine to write about poetics:

Et perché della qualità de’ poeti abbiam detto, diremo ora del nome, per lo quale ancora si comprenderà la sustanzia: con tutto che queste sono cose che mal si possono dire in vulgare idioma, pure m’ingegnerò darle ad intendere, perché, al parer mio, questi nostri moderni poeti non hanno bene intese; né è maraviglia, essendo ignari della lingua greca.³¹

[Since we have spoken of the qualities of poets, now we shall speak of the name, by which one will also understand the substance; even though these things can only be said poorly in the vulgar tongue, yet I shall exert myself to offer them to be understood, because in my opinion these modern poets of ours have not understood it well—but that is not surprising since they are ignorant of Greek.]³²

Clearly, Bruni’s subtle acceptance of the importance and usefulness of Dante’s vernacular within a verbal context can be considered a realistic acceptance of the difficulty Latin humanists faced when applying their rhetorical skills to effective secular public speaking. Bruni had already recognized this difficulty thirty years before the *Lives*. In the second book of the *Dialogi*, Bruni voices his concerns about the effectiveness of Latin in public speaking through the words of Niccoli: “In summo poeta tria esse oportere: fingendi artem, oris elegantiam, multarumque rerum scientiam” (I believe that an eloquent poet should have the following skills: art of imagination, elegance of expression, and wide-ranging knowledge).³³

30. Bruni, *Opere*, 644; Tavoni, *Latino*, grammatica, volgare 221.

31. Bruni, *Opere*, 549.

32. Gordon Griffiths, James Hankins, and David Thompson, eds., *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni: Selected Texts* (Binghamton, NY, 1987), 92.

33. *Ibid.*, 128–29.

These oratorical skills are somewhat close to those that the early thirteenth-century *Oculus Pastoralis* requires of a good podesta. A specific connection is made in this text between the oratorical skills needed by a vernacular public speaker and the ones seen as paramount for a Latin orator: “Oratorem itaque oportet esse intendentem, ingeniosum et gratiosum” (It therefore behoves the orator to be purposeful, inventive, and graceful).³⁴ Although it is unlikely that Bruni knew this medieval treatise, such a similar description shows the premium that Bruni placed on vernacular oratory in the early fifteenth century. As Milner has remarked, “public oratory become a key component in the educational programme for young Florentine males” in the early quattrocento, just as “demonstrative oratory [became] a key part of the ritual of republican government.”³⁵

Bruni’s high estimation of the Florentine spoken *volgare* is couched in a tradition that developed in the early trecento and became an essential part of civic life. Bruni’s discussion of the elegance and perfection of the spoken vernacular perfected by Dante in his poem shows that he was well aware of how powerful the vernacular was in the hands of civic orators. In other words, Bruni stresses Dante’s fundamental contribution to vernacular oratory and the influence the language shaped by the poet had on public speaking. The literate and illiterate communities of Florence enjoyed Dante’s poem more through public reading and performances than through private and silent reading.³⁶ In the *Dialogi*, Bruni upholds the commonly held critical reception of Dante’s poem among Latin literati: the written vernacular is suitable to the lower classes and cannot belong to the loftier world of Latin poetry. Here Bruni echoes Petrarch’s comment that Dante’s poetry was acclaimed by “dyers, drapers, shopkeepers, thugs and their ilk,” by making Niccolò Niccoli say that he would take Dante out of “the ranks of learned and leave him with the fullers and millers.”³⁷ This criticism goes back to Dante’s lifetime; around 1318–19 Bolognese professor Giovanni del Virgilio reproached Dante for not writing the *Commedia* in Latin.³⁸ As we have seen, thirty years after the *Dialogi*, and following the 1435 language debate and Matteo Palmieri’s and Francesco Filelfo’s interpretations of the life and works of Dante, Bruni qual-

34. Milner, “Communication,” 379.

35. *Ibid.*, 398.

36. See John Ahern, “Singing the Book: Orality in the Reception of Dante’s Comedy,” in *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Amilcare A. Iannucci (Toronto, 1997), 214–39, 215.

37. Petrarch, *Familiars*, XXI.15; and Bruni, *Dialogi*, 255–56. The English translation of these passages is taken from Ahern, “Singing,” 215; cf. also Gilson, *Dante*, 83–88. This coincidence was noted by Giuliano Tantarli, “Il disprezzo per Dante dal Petrarca al Bruni,” *Rinascimento* 1985 (25): 199–219. I wish to thank the first reviewer for alerting me to Tantarli’s article.

38. Gilson, *Dante*, 5.

ifies his view on Dante's vernacular by accepting that Florentine, in its own oral realm, is perfect.³⁹

The passages discussed above show that Bruni recognized the power and importance of the Florentine vernacular in the political and cultural practices of everyday Florence. What about spoken Latin? In his *Dialogi*, through the characters of Salutati (who represents the old school of Latin scholars) and Niccoli (the new generation of humanists), Bruni expresses the inefficacy of Latin for public oratory. After the dedication to Pietro Paolo Vergerio, Bruni describes his meeting with Coluccio Salutati and Rossi. There is a brief exchange of greetings and then silence descends since no one knows what to say or discuss. This prompts Salutati to reproach his younger friends for not practicing the art of disputation and discussion:

quod disputandi usum exercitationemque negligitis: qua ego quidem re nescio an quicquam ad studia vestra reperiatur utilius. . . . Etenim absurdum est intra parietes atque in solitudine secum loqui, multaue agitare, in oculis autem hominum atque in coetu veluti nihil sapias obmutescere.⁴⁰

[you neglect the active use and practice of disputation. I doubt that anything could be discovered more useful to your studies. . . . In fact, it is absurd to talk to yourself and deliberate upon many things when you are alone shut up in your study, but to be dumb, as if you knew nothing, in the presence of others and in society.]⁴¹

O'Rourke and Holcroft have interpreted this passage as Salutati criticizing his younger friends for being "unable to speak Latin fluently." Yet that is unlikely since disputations and discussions in Latin were the everyday staples of humanistic pedagogy. Rather, Bruni is concerned to point out a lack of confidence among scholars of his generation. In another passage, Niccoli blames the times in which they live and singles out the philosophers: "O preclaros nostri temporis philosophos . . . cum litteras ignorent; nam plures solecismos quam verba faciunt cum loquuntur: itaque illos stertentes quam loquentes audire mallet" (Oh unwise philosophers of our time . . . for they ignore the language; when they speak they utter

39. *Ibid.*, 97–123, 120.

40. Bruni, *Opere*, 84–86.

41. Siobhan O'Rourke and Alison Holcroft, "Latin and the Vernacular: The Silence at the Beginning of Bruni's 'Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histurum,'" in *Latinity and Alterity in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Yasmin Haskell and Juanita Feros Ruys (Tempe, AZ, 2010), 35–51, 39.

more grammatical mistakes than words: I would rather listen to them while they snore than speak).⁴²

Bruni's criticism of the philosophers and, more generally, his peers, evokes the crisis he perceived in Latin-speaking culture, a crisis that undermined the ability of humanists to adapt Latin to the political and cultural life of the city. This was not because the humanists' Latin was inadequate but because there was a more accessible and effective language available to them: the Florentine vernacular.

Bruni's anxiety concerning the inadequacy of Latin when it came to public oratory (*arringa*) can thus be appreciated only by taking into account the strong tradition of Ciceronian oratory in the vernacular and the growing prestige and effectiveness of the spoken vernacular in the political arena. In his *Dialogi*, Bruni exposes a critical issue within the *studia humanitatis*: the knowledge of Latin culture and literature is confined to the realm of the written word and cannot reach the increasingly educated community of non-Latin readers and listeners. In the eyes of Bruni, the vernacular in early fifteenth-century Florence was an unavoidable tool for communication and persuasion.⁴³

Bruni recognized the effectiveness of the vernacular oratorical tradition and the narrowing space for spoken Latin in the civic Florentine space. At the same time, those passages by Bruni that have been considered in this essay highlight the porousness of the written and oral dimensions of languages. Indeed, the boundary between oral and written communication had been blurred for centuries.⁴⁴ In the fourteenth century, public speaking entailed public reading of letters or documents that often needed translating from Latin into the vernacular.⁴⁵ Arguably, Bruni's work represents the earliest acknowledgment among quattrocento humanists that communication in Latin was mostly written; only in some cases was the written material conveyed by way of public addresses. Public speaking in the vernacular took precedence over Latin oratory, to the extent that Latin eloquence existed almost exclusively in written form.

42. Bruni, *Opere*, 94.

43. See Francesco Tateo, "Francesco Filelfo tra latino e volgare," in *Francesco Filelfo nel quinto centenario della morte: Atti del XVII convegno di studi maceratesi (Tolentino 27-30 settembre 1981)* (Padua, 1986), 61-87, 77. As with Bruni, Filelfo "credeva alla funzione, sia pure circoscritta, della lingua volgare, ma soprattutto credeva alla forza di persuasione, in senso didattico non eloquente, e nella efficacia della lingua materna."

44. In his *De Institutione Oratoria* (ca. 95 CE), Quintilian makes it clear that speaking, writing, and reading are all intimately connected and necessary to gain oratorical power (James Jerome Murphy, *Latin Rhetoric and Education in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* [Aldershot, 2005], 164). Clearly, writing was integral to the learning and practice of public speaking in Latin.

45. See Stephen J. Milner, "Citing the *Ringhiera*: The Politics of Place and Public Address in Trecento Florence," *Italian Studies* 55 (2000): 53-82, and "Communication."

This acceptance of vernacular oratory as the most effective means for public communication became even stronger toward the end of Bruni's life. If the *Dialogi* reflect on the relationship between the ancients and the moderns and demonstrate the superiority of the former and the weaknesses of the latter, his *Lives of Dante and Petrarch* abandons the *comparatio* in order to look closely at the merits of the Three Crowns and their legacy in quattrocento Florence.⁴⁶ In this work, Bruni demonstrates the potential of the vernacular prose by using a clear and effective *volgare*: Bruni provides a "practical demonstration of how such difficulties [of writing in the vernacular] can be overcome" and recognizes the power of the vernacular in the prose realm.⁴⁷ This experiment confirms Bruni's appreciation of the importance of the Florentine vernacular in the political and cultural practices of everyday Florence. It is no coincidence that Bruni wrote his *Lives* during the tumultuous years in which Cosimo de' Medici was banished for a year while several of Bruni's close friends were banished for good. Bruni scrutinizes and demystifies the lives of Dante and Petrarch by making them relevant to current affairs, which were mostly discussed and resolved in the *volgare*. In *Lives*, lessons are drawn from the recent past of Dante and Petrarch, in order to learn and teach a broader and non-Latinate audience how to survive the troubled times Bruni and his fellow Florentines were experiencing. As *Lives* has no dedicatee and is written in the vernacular, Bruni clearly aimed to speak about a past that felt dramatically close to his present. Even if the cultural space given by Bruni to the written vernacular remains limited and tentative, the Florentine tongue is seen in Bruni's own writing and thinking as a ubiquitous means for communication and persuasion stretching beyond the written world of literature and into the realm of orality.

46. Gary Ianziti, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy: Leonardo Bruni and the Uses of the Past* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), 41.

47. *Ibid.*, 176.



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