Sperone Speroni and his Legacy (1508-1588). Literature, Philosophy and the Vernacular

Project information

A-SPERONI

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Final Report Summary - A-SPERONI (Sperone Speroni and his Legacy (1508-1588). Literature, Philosophy and the Vernacular)

OBJECTIVES

The project was devoted to the ideas and legacy of the Paduan philosopher and man of letters Sperone Speroni (1500-1588), one of the protagonists of the Renaissance literary scene between Italy and France. He spent his whole long, unsettled life writing especially dialogues and discourses on the most diverse topics, such as language, rhetoric, love, and ethics. Not only did Speroni exercise his remarkable influence in Italy, but also in France, where he was in contact with numerous important cultural figures including Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585) and Joachim Du Bellay (1522-1560). Between orality and literacy, manuscript culture and print, Speroni's activity offers an outstanding case-study on the diffusion of the vernacular in Renaissance Italy.

The ultimate goal of this project was to offer a new study of this distinguished—even if still largely neglected—figure, highlighting both his attitudes toward contemporary institutions and intellectual currents and the significance of his example in Italy and France.

In order to fulfill this goal the project consisted of the following four stages, corresponding to its objectives:

• Reconstruction of Speroni's intellectual biography through a close reading of both Speroni's opera omnia and Bernardino Tomitano's Ragionamenti della lingua toscana (1545). The latter work provides a detailed account of the literary conversations on poetics and rhetoric held at Speroni's house immediately after his election as prince of the Accademia degli Infiammati in 1541.

• Analysis of Speroni's dialogues and discourses in relationship to contemporary academic discussions. This study considered both manuscript and printed materials from the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice, the Biblioteca Capitolare, the Biblioteca Universitaria in Padua, and the British Library in London; a meticulous comparison between several sections of the 1542 and 1590 editions of Speroni's Dialogues was also undertaken.
• Investigation of Speroni's influence in Italy through a comparison between the two dialogues D'amore and Della cura famigliare with Alessandro Piccolomini's Institutione di tutta la vita de l'homo nato nobile e in città libera (1542), whose last two books rephrase and sometimes literary echo these dialogues.

• Examination of Speroni's legacy in Renaissance France, particularly via Speroni's Dialogo delle lingue. This aspect considered Joachim Du Bellay's Defense et illustration de la langue françoyse (1549), which borrows extensively from Speroni's dialogue, and Claude Gruet's French translation (1551) of the Dialogi. Also relevant was a translation of Piccolomini's Institutione by Pierre de Larivey (1541-1619); this work is important in the context of French 'behavioural literature'.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The major results achieved are thus as follows:

• reconstruction and re-evaluation of Speroni's ideas on language and translation and recognition of his important role in the tradition of vernacular Aristotelianism;

• acknowledgment of Speroni's competence both in philosophy and literature, providing him with a thorough knowledge of these two fields and of their inter-connections;

• deeper appreciation of Speroni's original use of the dialogue form;

• understanding of how Speroni turned the vernacular dialogue, an occasional genre, into a tool suitable for celebrating the power of rhetoric;

• an analysis of how the practice of academic discussions from the university context influenced Speroni's masterpiece;

• a trustworthy reconstruction of Speroni's cultural orientation by overcoming the issue of his dialogues' playfulness. The playfulness at the centre of the Dialogi has been challenging to the work's readers, making it hard to identify Speroni's own position within them. This difficulty has been addressed through a twofold strategy: (1) a comparative examination of some overlapping sections both of the Dialogi and the Discorsi; (2) an investigation into how Speroni's ideas were rephrased by his most important disciples, such as Alessandro Piccolomini and Bernardino Tomitano;

• reassessment and correct identification of Speroni's contribution to the sixteenth-century debate on language issues known as the questione della lingua and consequent acknowledgment of his stature as a philosopher in and of the vernacular;

• acknowledgment of Speroni's intellectual stature and of his influence in Renaissance Italy and in France. As for Speroni's influence in Italy (1), a close textual comparison between Speroni's dialogues on love and family and Piccolomini's Institutione has demonstrated how Piccolomini's adaptation—a treatise rather than a dialogue—offers a critical reading, and even a misleading interpretation of the dialogues' message. This comparison has also highlighted the differences in language and style between Speroni and Piccolomini. With regard to France (2), a comparison between Speroni's Dialogo delle lingue and Du Bellay's Defense and a meticulous reconstruction of their literary contexts show how, far from passively adopting Speroni's ideas, Du Bellay redirects them and, as in Piccolomini's case, gives them a new literary form.

Finally, thanks to this project Speroni will be considered a worthy object of study not only for scholars of Italian and French language and literature, but also for the much broader community of the intellectual historians interested in the history of Renaissance philosophy and cultural institutions.

POTENTIAL IMPACT AND TARGET GROUPS

These final results are of crucial relevance to both scholarship and a wider audience. Within academia, the most important outcome will be a reassessment of Speroni's ideas within the frame of Renaissance vernacular Aristotelianism. This outcome will follow the introduction of Speroni as a standard author in both Italian Studies and Renaissance Studies. The project will also have an impact on the fields of Italian and French Studies and of intellectual history, as in some cases
Speroni is likely to be extremely important as a source for figures committed to both philosophy and rhetoric – such as Benedetto Varchi, Torquato Tasso, and Joachim Du Bellay.

As for the level of impact outside academia, Speroni may in the long term be introduced into textbooks and teaching programmes of history of the Italian language and literature outside of Italy; an English translation (like the French one provided by Gérard Genot and Paul Larivalle in 2001) of Speroni's Dialogo delle lingue is highly auspicious.

In as well as outside scholarship, Speroni’s reassessment is in the making.

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