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An Admirer of Beccadelli's *Hermaphroditus*: Antonio da Pescia

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*This paper provides the first edition of a letter of praise to Antonio Beccadelli written by the humanist Antonio da Pescia. The epistle is further testimony to the success of the Hermaphroditus among Beccadelli's contemporaries.**

Though cherishing for a long time the dream of publishing his *epistolarium*, Antonio Beccadelli Il Panormita (1394-1471) never managed to produce a definitive authorial redaction of it. What remains of his efforts is a group of manuscripts comprising five collections of letters pertaining to different stages of his long life and career.¹ Furthermore, a selection of Beccadelli's correspondence dating from his sojourn in Pavia (1429-1434) was collected by a student of his at the time, Enrichetto d'Asti; this collection, too, never resulted in a publication.²

Beccadelli included in his compilations some letters of his correspondents – not all of them, but rather those he judged most fitting to the end of contributing to his self-fashioning as an influential teacher and scholar and a celebrated man of letters.³ This was all the more true of the letters in praise of his scandalous collection of poems, the *Hermaphroditus*, which enjoyed an extraordinary diffusion but at the same time was the object of severe criticism and allegations of excess and immorality.⁴

* I would like to thank the anonymous readers for their suggestions. I am also grateful to Anthony Cummings and W. Scott Blanchard for proofreading my English.

¹ G. Resta, *L'epistolario del Panormita. Studi per una edizione critica* (Messina, 1954). For a profile of Beccadelli see Id., "Beccadelli, Antonio, detto il Panormita", in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 7 (Roma, 1970), 400-406.

² G. Resta, "Un antico progetto editoriale dell'epistolario del Panormita", *Studi umanistici* 1 (1990), 7-67. Further information and a full bibliography on the *epistolarium* are provided by L. Lanza, "Antonius Beccadellus", in *Compendium Auctorum Latinorum Medii Aevi (C.A.L.M.A.)*, vol. 1.3 (Firenze, 2001), 316-337.

³ In the words of Resta 1954 (as in n. 1), 62, "il Panormita [...] dovette tenere in serbo quelle lettere che a suo parere ponevano in luce certi suoi meriti, qualche notevole aspetto della sua attività, le lettere laudatorie, quelle in cui gli si chiedevano servigi di un certo rilievo etc."

⁴ It was not by chance that the text received its first printed edition only after the French Revolution, as observed by D. Coppini (ed.), Antonio Beccadelli, *Hermaphroditus*

I am publishing here for the first time one of these laudatory letters from Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms. Vat. lat. 3372, f. 110v.⁵ This epistle is attributed to a little-known humanist, Antonius Pisciensis or Antonio da Pescia (i.e. from Pescia in Tuscany, between Lucca and Pistoia). He is the author of an unpublished dialogue entitled *Colax*, written during the papacy of Nicholas V (Tommaso Parentucelli) and dedicated to his half-brother, Cardinal Filippo Calandrini (1403-1476), when the latter was bishop of Bologna (that is, between December 1447 and March 1455).⁶ The letter's *subscriptio* does not contain a full date, but only mentions a day, March 29. However, the fact that Antonio tells of having read the *Hermaphroditus*

(Roma, 1990), ccxii. According to an anecdote reported by Vespasiano da Bisticci, Pope Eugenius IV had threatened with excommunication those who read the book: see Coppini, *ibid.*, lxxi; H. Parker (ed., tr.), Antonio Beccadelli, *The Hermaphrodite* (Cambridge, MA – London, 2010), xxxv; on the humanist debate on the *Hermaphroditus*, *ibid.*, x-xi and xiii-xvi; Resta 1954 (as in n. 1), 13-16; D. Orrells, *Sex: Antiquity and its Legacy. Ancients and Moderns* (Oxford – New York, NY, 2015), 21-22, 34-37. Other letters from correspondents of Beccadelli concerning the circulation of the *Hermaphroditus* are found in Enrichetto d'Asti's collection: see Resta 1990 (as in n. 2), 28-29 and n. 1.

⁵ Resta 1954 (as in n. 1), 229, no. 501* (“inedita”). The letter is preceded by a letter of Enea Silvio Piccolomini (no. 498* Resta), inc. f. 109v “Eneas episcopus Senensis Antonio Panormitae salutem plurimam dicit. Paulum Vergerium qui Arrianum transtulit”, expl. f. 110v “ex Nova Civitate, die XXVIII Iunii 1444 [Resta: 1453]”; and followed by a letter of Bartolomeo Roverella, archbishop of Ravenna (from 1445 onwards; no. 537* Resta), inc. f. 111r “Bartholomeus archiepiscopus Ravennas maximi pontificis legatus”, expl. f. 111v “spe urbis potiundae. Vale. Beneventi, XXIII Iulii MCCCCLXI.” For a description of the Vatican manuscript (possibly dating to the 1460s or 1470s), a collection of letters addressed to Panormita, see *ibid.*, 61-63. Resta rejects the opinion of Pierre De Nolhac, who suggested that the manuscript is an autograph. It belonged to the private library of Fulvio Orsini, which upon his death (in 1600) was bequeathed to the Vatican Library. An apograph is found in tomus no. 29 of the composite codex Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, ms. 2948. Its assembler, Monsignor Tioli (1712-1796), scriptor at the Vatican Library, collected therein an anthology of letters to Panormita, which he had transcribed “ex codice papyraceo Fulvii Ursini”, thus, undoubtedly, from Vat. lat. 3372. See Resta, *ibid.*; F. Cancellieri, *Notizie della vita e delle miscellanee di Monsignor Pietro Antonio Tioli* (Pesaro, 1826), 134; M. Bandini, “Lo Ierone di Senofonte nel Quattrocento. Leonardo Bruni e Antonio da Pescia”, *Res publica litterarum* 28 (2005), 108-123 (at 118 and n. 45). As of June 2018, the Vatican manuscript was not available for direct consultation. I have transcribed the text from the digitized microfilm reproduction.

⁶ See Bandini 2005 (as in n. 5), 116-118 and 120-123; *Id.*, “Il *Tyrannus* di Leonardo Bruni. Note su tradizione e fortuna”, in M. Cortesi (ed.), *Tradurre dal greco in età umanistica. Metodi e strumenti* (Firenze, 2007), 35-44 (at 42-43, where Bandini offers a transcription of a passage of our epistle). According to Bandini, the *Colax* is likely to be a juvenile work inspired by Xenophon's *Hiero* (and influenced by Bruni's translation thereof), and reminiscent of classical authors such as Terence, Horace and Cicero, as well as of some contemporaries such as Bruni and Poggio.

during Holy Week allows one to limit the possibilities to the following years, in which Easter, according to the Julian calendar, preceded that day: 1429 (March 27), 1434 (March 28), 1440 (March 27), 1445 (March 28), 1448 (March 24), 1456 (March 28), 1459 (March 25), 1467 (March 28). The first two dates can almost certainly be ruled out, for Antonio refers to the *Hermaphroditus*, which was published not later than January 1426,⁷ as an old book (*res vetus*). Furthermore, Antonio was writing from Capua. This might provide a clue for a dating after 1442, when Beccadelli first assumed a prominent role at the court of Alfonso V, and was assigned several administrative duties; it might well be that Antonio, besides wanting to enjoy recognition from his literary idol, was in search of a patron in the Kingdom of Naples. Finally, Michele Bandini has suggested that this letter might have been written around the same time as the *Colax*.⁸ If so, the most probable date would be 1445 or 1448.

Although very brief, this epistle offers a glimpse into what might have been the reception by common readers of Beccadelli's controversial and purposely obscene collection of epigrams: a book "designed to stimulate and repel,"⁹ which received "praise [...] and condemnation [...], at times from the same people."¹⁰ On the one hand, Antonio's naive confession of getting erotically excited because of the *enargeia* of Beccadelli's verses ("legens non minus excitabar quam si coram prospectassem quae legebam") makes us perceive his – and many of his contemporaries' – fascination for Panormita's explicit and voyeuristic poetry (which, as is well known, included vivid descriptions of male and female *pudenda*, crude references to their odors, scenes of intercourse, etc. – all the sorts of pornographic imagery that scandalized moralists such as Bernardino da Siena, who burned Panormita's book in public). On the other hand, Antonio's concern at having read such a book during

⁷ Remigio Sabbadini suggested a publication date between late 1425 and early 1426: this chronology is most probably correct, as demonstrated with fuller evidence by Coppini 1990 (as in n. 4), lxxiii-lxxxvi.

⁸ Bandini 2005 (as in n. 5), 118 n. 45; I agree with Bandini 2007 (as in n. 6), 43 that "il tono sembra [...] quello di un giovane umanista desideroso di allacciare rapporti con un letterato ormai celebre."

⁹ Orrells 2015 (as in n. 4), 36.

¹⁰ P. Findlen, "Humanism, Politics and Pornography in Renaissance Italy", in L. Hunt (ed.), *The Invention of Pornography. Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800* (New York, NY, 1993), 49-108 (at 85); the chapter provides an overview on the reception of pornographic literature in Italy; see at 74-76 the interesting remark on Pietro Aretino's expectation that his ideal reader will find his realistic scenes erotically stimulating.

Lent seems sincere, and so, too, does his fear of becoming impure and more lustful by continuing to read it.¹¹

I have regularized spelling and punctuation, and made a few minor corrections (writing *Pisciensis* for *Pisciens*, *Hermaphroditus* for *Hermafronditus* etc.). The scribe is generally accurate and rectifies his mistakes: for instance, *excitabar* is corrected *supra lineam* from *excitabat*.

Antonius Pisciensis Panhormitae poetae salutem dicit.

Incidit mihi nuper in manus ille libellus tuus *Hermaphroditus*, quem annum iam concupieram, neque qui mihi dedere¹² vellet inveneram. Eum etsi temporis obstabat observantia, tamen avidissime legi, factusque sum eius lectione petulantior quam ista tempestate decet. Qua in re epigrammatum, ne iis subabsurdis rebus commoverer, tamen deflexerunt e curriculo,¹³ ut ille inquit, licentiosemque fecerunt. Ita legens non minus excitabar quam si coram prospectassem quae legebam. Rursus libellum lectitare institueram, ut vim poesis enervarem. Sed omnino sum veritus ne fiam petulantior. Quare ad dies profanos alteram lectionem produco. Te autem rogo ad me aliquid scribas, qui sum omnino tuae factionis¹⁴ imitator. Nam neque haec tam ad te scripsi quo tibi gratularer, praesertim de re vetere cuiusve gratulationes a summis viris accepisti, quam eliciendae epistolae tuae gratia.

Vale. Capuae, IIII Kalendas Aprilis.

¹¹ To read a book stimulating the readers' sexual fantasies and banned for its obscenity by the Church, *a fortiori* during the period of Lent, when abstinence from any sexual activity was commonly required – see G. Ciappelli, *Carnevale e quaresima. Comportamenti sociali e cultura a Firenze nel Rinascimento* (Roma, 1997), 81-99 – would be equivalent to committing a despicable sin.

¹² *Dedere* is here used as a synonym of *dare*. This use is attested in archaic Latin (see Plautus, *Bacch.* 93) and admitted by medieval lexicographers: see e.g. E. Cecchini, G. Arbuzoni (ed.), Ugucione da Pisa, *Derivationes* (Firenze, 2004), 340, l. 33.

¹³ As suggested by Bandini 2005 (as in n. 5), 120 n. 56, this is possibly an allusion to Cicero, *Lael.* 40: “Deflexit [...] de spatio curriculoque consueto maiorum.” Another *locus similis* is found in a 1408 letter of condolence of Leonardo Bruni to Bonifacio Salutati, son of Coluccio, on the occasion of the latter's death. Bruni evokes the late Coluccio containing his own juvenile desires: “Ille in hac ipsa aetate frena mei suscipiens numquam e curriculo deflectere passus est, sed monendo, castigando, incendiando ad virtutem praestantiamque direxit”, *Epist.* 2.11 Mehus, quoted according to the edition in F. Novati (ed.), Coluccio Salutati, *Epistolario*, vol. 4.2 (Roma, 1911), 516; see the brief commentary by L. Schucan, *Das Nachleben von Basilius Magnus Ad adolescentes. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des christlichen Humanismus* (Genève, 1973), 61-62.

¹⁴ In its meaning of “creation”, “work”, *factio* is unknown to classical Latin, but common in medieval Latin; for instance, *factio mundi* is attested in G. Sajó (ed.), Boetius de Dacia, *Tractatus de aeternitate mundi*, editio altera (Berlin, 1964), 45, l. 459; and in J.C. Wey (ed.), Guillelmus de Ockam, *Quodlibeta septem* (St Bonaventure, NY, 1980), *quod.* 7, *quaest.* 18, 778, l. 94.

Translation

Antonio da Pescia greets the poet Panormita.

Recently I came across that well-known little book of yours, the *Hermaphroditus*, after having longed for it for an entire year, without finding anyone willing to loan it to me. And notwithstanding the fact that in the present season of the year one should be strictly observant, I read it voraciously, and by reading it I became more wanton than is appropriate for this time of year. And if it is true that I was not shaken by those rather bizarre epigrams, they diverted me, however, from the right path, as someone happened to say, and made me more inclined to licentiousness. While reading them I got excited as if those things described therein were happening right before me. I decided to read the booklet attentively once more, in order to extract its poetic vein. Then I became afraid that I might become excessively lascivious, and for this reason I leave the second reading for after Easter. I ask you to write back to me, as I am truly an admirer of your work. In fact, I have not written this message to you in order to congratulate you, all the more for something that is not recent and for which you have already received praise from the most illustrious men. I have done so merely in the hope of receiving a letter from you.

Stay well. Capua, 29 March.

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