

Valorosa vipera gentile: Poesia e letteratura in volgare attorno ai Visconti fra Trecento e primo Quattrocento. Simone Albonico, Marco Limongelli, and Barbara Pagliari, eds.
Studi lombardi 4. Rome: Viella, 2014. 250 pp. €32.

The heroic and noble viper of this book's title evokes the *biscione*, the heraldic snake of the Visconti family, rulers of Milan for much of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. More specifically, the title phrase issues from an anonymous vernacular Trecento ballad dedicated to the illustrious family, and it broadly represents the canon of literature this collection aims to recover and interpret. Poetical writings of Northern Italy of the fourteenth century have not gone ignored. Indeed, they have been well known for several generations, since scholars in the decades around 1900 edited and published a significant corpus of them during a great wave of manuscript study. But the editors of this volume contend that a return to the manuscripts themselves promises to offer fresh perspectives and to open up new interpretive problems where consensus seems instead to have calcified. Moreover, the contributors work to collate sources in, and scholarship on, both Latin and vernacular literature: a laudable commitment to integrate texts often considered in isolation.

In many ways, this collection of essays points to bedeviling absences both historical and current. One of the problems the contributors face is a strange particularity of mid-fourteenth-century Milan: the city apparently lacked any native Latin-literate secular poets, despite the fertility of the Visconti court and the proximity of many similar writers nearby. As a result, most of the authors studied in this book, famous and obscure, were either Tuscan or Tuscanizing (Petrarch, Fazio degli Uberti, Francesco di Vannozzo, Marchionne Arrighi, Braccio Bracci, Pietro Canterini, Giovanni de Bonis, and others). From the perspective of book history, the Visconti city is also unusual. There appear to be no vernacular miscellanies traceable to Milan, in terms of production or content, in the decades around 1400. To make matters worse, some of the manuscripts that early twentieth-century scholars relied upon have now gone missing. Barbara Pagliari works here to overcome a frustrating case of double absence. The *Canzoniere* of Giovanni de Bonis d'Arezzo, once shelfmarked as Biblioteca Trivulziana MS 861, has disappeared in the past century, and the unpublished critical edition that the scholar Ezio Levi (1884–1941) of Wellesley College claimed in 1908 to have completed has also vanished.

The contributors to this volume, then, are engaged in the difficult granular work of updating the state of the field in Visconti literary studies. Some commonplaces of the scholarship are almost a century old, and these researchers now return to the sources to see what conclusions are still valid. Most of the essays reflect the specialist nature of that endeavor in their close attention to linguistic style, regionalisms, scansion, meter, and textual variants; much of the analysis is philological. Some of the efforts are heroic. Pagliari, for example, uses all published quotations from the missing *Canzoniere* to reconstruct it, albeit in fragmentary form. The editors also helpfully provide a guide to

the manuscripts cited in the essays: more than seventy-five of them in twenty-two cities, mostly Northern Italian. Ten additional manuscripts are listed as lost or untraceable.

A few of the essays probe the valuable interpretive avenue of the nature of the relationship between poetry and power at the Trecento Visconti court. Patronage connections once taken for granted seem to rest on little evidence—as Roberta Manetti suggests, the poet Francesco di Vannozzo perhaps did not even belong to the orbit of Giangaleazzo Visconti, despite long-held assumptions that he did. Marco Limongelli proposes that little-studied poetry for Bernabò Visconti (by Arrighi and Bracci) should move us to rethink his reputation as an abuser of political power—a reputation promoted by his nephew Giangaleazzo, by rival writers, and by much of the current historiography. Many of the other essays advance similarly stimulating proposals.

The volume began its life as a conference at the University of Lausanne in 2012, and most of the essays testify, for better and for worse, to this origin. A sense of bullish determination and ambitious revisionism captures the excitement of an intellectual project in blossom, and the chapters offer convincing new interpretations of an understudied corpus. At the same time, the reader may crave still more synthetic analysis that applies the findings of the essays—both singly and as a group—toward a new vision of Visconti culture. Conclusions often remain openended, as is perhaps necessary for research in progress. Part of the volume's objective, after all, is to cast doubt on the scholarly status quo. Yet its focus on poetic detail in itself sometimes obscures an evaluation of cultural significance more broadly. This collection will speak powerfully to specialists; the rest of us will look forward to further briefs from Lausanne.

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