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Mirrors for secretaries: the tradition of advice literature and the presence of classical political theory in Italian secretarial treatises

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1 The changes and shifts in the roles of political actors in Italy from the late Middle Ages to the end of the Renaissance were reflected in the preoccupations of the authors of advice literature. Initially known as “mirrors for princes”, these works combined guidelines on the dignity and actions of the political figure with information they would require, often drawn from classical exemplars. While the forms, content and intended audience of this literature varied widely, it can be understood as guidance intended for figures of political standing or authority: rulers, civic republicans and, later, political professionals. The second half of the sixteenth century saw a development of this genre, with works emerging which offered a description of the ideal secretary. This position grew in importance as the centralisation of governments resulted in the development of expansive bureaucracy; a secretary essentially, managed the paperwork of statehood.

2 While the composition of this literature was never limited to the Italian peninsula, this essay will examine the rise, development and forms of these works in the context of a long trend of advice literature in Italy. A focus will be the inclusion of classical political theory: while earlier authors had deemed this information vital to a politico, the
alterations and reductions in political autonomy for servants of a prince or state in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century resulted in debates over the science at the root of the courtier’s role, a question reflected in the fluctuating presence of this information.

An early example of political advice literature is Brunetto Latini’s Li Livres dou Tresor. Famous for his appearance in the Commedia as Dante’s teacher Ser Brunetto, Latini (c. 1220–1294) was a notary and a prominent figure in the world of Florentine politics. The Tresor is an encyclopaedic work containing biblical and historical material, ethical teaching and a book on rhetoric and governance aimed at the instruction of the podestà.

Written in French, it was available in Italian almost immediately as the Tesoro volgarizzato. Latini’s conception of politics as expressed in the Tresor and Tesoro volgarizzato is unmistakably influenced by Aristotle, with Ciceronian rhetoric used to fill in the gaps created by the absence, at Latini’s time of writing, of a full translation of Aristotle’s Ethics and of any knowledge of the Politics. Latini’s discussion of tyranny in the third book of the Tesoro volgarizzato is drawn from Cicero, Seneca and Plato, without any mention at all of Aristotle. Yet, the structure of the text follows what Latini knew of Aristotle’s classification of practical philosophy by placing politics (and rhetoric, which, for Latini, was a necessary part of politics), rather than theology, after his discussion of ethics. Indeed, he places politics above all other professions, stating that:

Senza fallo ciò è la più alta iscienza e del più nobile mistiere che sia intra li omni: ch’è insegna a governare la stranie gente d’uno regno e d’una villa, et uno popolo d’uno comune, in tempo di pace e di guerra, secondo ragione e secondo giustizia.

Latini’s work was a text designed for practical use by those in government and, in particular, those governing an Italian city-state. Although composed in French and dedicated to Charles of Anjou, it is a work written with Italy in mind. The chronicler Giovanni Villani credited Latini with introducing the Florentines to truly “political” government on his return from exile: “He was the one who began to teach the Florentines to be less coarse, and to make them skilled in speaking well, and in knowing how to guide and rule our republic secondo la politica”.

Del reggimento de’ principi di Egidio Romano, translated in 1288 from a French version of Giles of Rome’s De regimine principum (1277–1280), is a work of an entirely different cast from Brunetto Latini’s encyclopedia. While Latini’s sources were medieval compendia and paraphrases rather than Aristotelian works themselves and his Tresor incorporated a mixture of Greek and Roman political theory, Giles, an Augustinian friar and teacher at the University of Paris, displays a clear allegiance to Aristotle – whose works were available to him in Latin translations of the Ethics and Politics made from Greek texts and which he was able to read alongside the commentaries of Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great and others.

Gerardo Bruni has identified, in addition to the 1288 Italian translation made from Henri de Gauchi’s French text, five further medieval versions of De regimine principum in Italian, at least one of which was made from the Latin original. The scope of Giles’ work extended its appeal. It was written with a broad readership in mind – although ostensibly concerned with the conduct of the prince, its Italian readers learnt that “the people can nevertheless take instruction from this book.” The 1288 Italian translation included an addition to Giles’ Latin text designed to give more recognition to the Italian model of government: “We see commonly in the Italian cities that all the people are to summon and elect the lord and to punish him when he does evil; and although they

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summon some lord in order for him to govern them, nevertheless the people are more
the lord than he is, for they elect him, and they punish him when he does evil”.12
Giles’ reliance on classical sources, particularly Aristotle, is marked. Although
undoubtedly in command of a wide variety of texts, both classical and medieval – the
treatise’s final section, on government in times of war, is drawn chiefly from the
Roman strategist Vegetius,13 while his reading of Aristotle is influenced and guided by
the works of Thomas Aquinas – it is the Politics itself which Giles most often indicates as
his source. According to Charles F. Briggs, De regimine principum contains approximately
230 direct references to the Politics.14 This hugely popular work of advice literature
showed Italian citizens that they needed to learn the subtleties of politics, and that this
knowledge should be rooted in classical theory.

The fifteenth century was rich in political literature, including in seigniorial or
monarchical contexts such as Naples and Venice. In republican Florence, humanist
chancellors Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni inspired an image of the ideal
republican man as both learned and active in government. Giovanni Cavalcanti (1381-
c. 1451), a minor Florentine nobleman best known for his Istorie fiorentine,15 also wrote a
political treatise, the Trattato politico-morale (c. 1449), aimed at the education of the
young republican citizen. A work in three books, the first two rely heavily on Aristotle,
while the third focuses on the ideal exercise of virtù through the example of historic
Florentines and of classical figures, for which Cavalcanti’s source was the Factorum et
dictorum memorabilium libri novem of Valerius Maximus.16 Cavalcanti expected the young
citizen to be fully versed in both political theory and political action – attentive to the
political and moral dictums of Aristotle and putting this grasp of theory into practice in
the decision-making undertaken by the republican government of the Italian city-
states.

By the sixteenth century, however, the political realities of the Italian peninsula were
unmistakeably changed, with many of the republican city-states of the fourteenth and
fifteenth centuries replaced by princely rule. Instead of being the deciders of
government, the humanists of the sixteenth century were now often assembled in the
courts of the prince to do his will – they were courtiers, with aspirations and expected
behaviour very different to that of the civic republican.

This change in the role of the humanist citizen did not put an end to the creation of
advice literature to guide their conduct in the new political environments of the
sixteenth century, which instead adapted to cater to the new realities of political
employment. The premier piece of advice literature for the first iteration of these new
professionals was Castiglione’s Il cortegiano, which dwelt on the behaviours required of
the courtier in order to win the favour and mind of the prince. Castiglione’s work
contains significant elements drawn from Greek thought. In an article of 1943, Alfred
Menut set out the use of the Nicomachean Ethics in the Cortegiano, arguing that the
double principle virtues introduced by Aristotle in the Ethics formed the foundation of
Castiglione’s work.17 Beyond this, the value which Castiglione places on Plato and
Aristotle is clear, even holding them up as examples of perfect courtiers.

Castiglione’s understanding of monarchy, or rule of one, as the best form of
government comes from an Aristotelian conception of states: monarchy is the best
because it is the direct opposite of the worst, democracy. In the Politics, it is ambiguous
whether Aristotle’s preferred state is monarchy or a mixed government; while as a
servant of the prince Castiglione is obliged to prefer monarchy, he makes room for
Aristotle’s ideal, stating that the best government is formed of a kind of polity under
the prince. He is dedicated to the idea of the Aristotelian mean, professing that
extremes should be avoided and therefore the greater number of citizens under the
prince should be neither very rich or very poor. In short, just as in the advice literature
of the previous centuries, Castiglione’s understanding of politics is founded on Greek
thought and it is taken for granted that this knowledge is useful both to the political
system he inhabited and to the men operating within it.

In the decades following Castiglione’s treatise, as governmental roles became ever
more clearly delineated, literature emerged aimed at specific types of courtier: men in
the new professions which became required of the educated men of the late
Renaissance. Alongside the increased professionalisation and specification of roles such
as ambassadors and diplomats, the sixteenth century secretary rose to prominence.

The increasingly precise nature and growing significance of the secretary is attested to
by the proliferation of advice literature dedicated to the role which emerged in the
later sixteenth century. The first to bear a title specifically related to the secretary was
Francesco Sansovino’s Del secretario, first published in Venice in 1564 and repeatedly
reprinted. Sansovino was a poligrafo, making his living in the printing hub of Venice by
writing, and sometimes borrowing, commercially for the press; Salvatore Nigro has
demonstrated that this work on the secretary was largely lifted from an earlier work of
advice literature, Il principe by Giovano Battista Nicolucci, who was known as Il Pigna and
was the secretary to Duke Alfonso II d’Este. The work did mutate, though, from Il
Pigna’s work to Sansovino’s: Nigro writes that “Sansovino transformed that discursive
work on the training of a prince into a treatise on correspondence that instructed
secretaries (directly or by example) on means and rules for epistolary correspondence.”

The influence of Sansovino’s work can be told in its status as a model for some
expressions of the genre, with an initial section discussing the position of the secretary
followed by more practical advice – here numerous epistolary exemplars. The very
fact of Sansovino’s attention to the topic of the secretary indicates an anticipation that
the subject would prove popular, an expectation borne out by the number of editions of
this work (including printings at Sansovino’s own press) and the many similar
compositions which followed it.

The 1580s saw a flurry of further interest in advice literature for the secretary.
Sansovino’s treatise was reprinted four times and was joined by texts such as Torquato
Tasso (Il segretario, first published 1587), Andrea Nati (Trattato del segretario, 1588), and
Giulio Cesare Capaccio (Il segretario, 1589). Tasso’s work is a short treatise in two parts
on the role of the secretary and the necessary skill of letter-writing; initially printed
alongside some of Tasso’s rime, it was later accompanied by his lettere familiari, in an
echo of the structure of Sansovino’s work. Nati’s work follows Tasso’s, with frequent
acknowledgements of the author’s debt to his predecessor. By contrast, Capaccio
defines his Il segretario as a challenge to and replacement for Sansovino’s, declaring on
the title page that “con modi diversi da quei ch’insegnò il Sansovino, si scuopre il vero modo di
scrivere lettere familiari correnti nelle Corti”.

This suggests that Sansovino’s work, now more than two decades old and written by a
figure operating at a distance from the courts, was considered unrealistic; Capaccio was
undoubtedly familiar with the court environment and indeed became secretary to the
city of Naples in 1607. In his address to readers, Capaccio laid this out more clearly,
pointing out the passage of time and the changes it had wrought from Sansovino’s work to his own:

_Hà mandato alla stampe il suo Secretario, Francesco Sansovino, huomo di buona dottrina, ma non hà egli voluto attendere a quel che più importa al modo dello scrivere quanto all’ecoluzione. E se bene hà voluto dar gli essempi delle lettere; pur vi accorgerete che non giunse allo stile che brama l’ordine comune. Et io c’ho pur letto tante qualità de l’ettere e tutte nobili certo, et honoratissime, pur considerando che l’età hà mutate moltissime cose successivamente, da scrittori in scrittori di lettere, parendomi hora ridotte hora le cose al colmo, hò voluto anch’io uscir all’arena, non per lottar co’gli altri, ma per giovare a quei che sono Bramosi di haver il modo cortegiano delle lettere; Onde hò voluto far un’imagine del Secretario, così mal lineata col mio impolito pennello, et indrizzarlo col precetto, e dargli animo con l’essempio. Imperfetta sarà l’opra, pur il vostro giudicio potrà colorire i difetti; e se mi avvederò che l’aggradirete, crescerò il volume e di lettere, e di precetti._

17 Writing on Capaccio for the _Dizionario biografico degli italiani_, Salvatore Nigro posits that the key point is the ever-growing distance between the late sixteenth-century court professional and the intellectual agency of the courtier found in Castiglione’s _Il cortegiano_ and still, if a little faded, in Sansovino’s _Il secretario_; this certainly seems evident in Capaccio’s wistful “da scrittori in scrittori di lettere”._

18 Later still, the genre was diversified by Battista Guarini’s 1594 _Il segretario, dialogo_, the author of the _Pastor fido_’s summation of the limits of the secretary’s role (to be discussed below) offering a sharp contrast to the idealism of Castiglione’s advice literature even as it recalled it through the use of the dialogue form. Angelo Ingegneri’s _Il buon segretario_ also holds up Tasso’s work as a model, with the second part of the text made up, like Tasso’s, of a discussion of the requirements of letter-writing rather than a series of exemplars. Bartolomeo Zucchi, whose _L’idea del segretario_ was first published in Venice in 1600, was secretary to the cardinal of Mondovì. His work comprises four sections, three collections of letters preceded by a treatise on imitation “con alcuni avvertimenti per la professione del Segretario”. Other works published in the first half of the seventeenth century include those of Bonifacio Vannozzi ( _Della suppellettile_, Bologna, 1609), Panfilo Persico ( _Del segretario_, published in Venice in 1643) and Benedetto Pucci ( _Nuova idea di lettere usate nella segretaria de’ principi, e signori_, Viterbo, 1619).

19 The overwhelming theme of the contents of these works also clearly displays the primary function of the secretary: to write letters. _“Egli non hà dubbio alcuno, che sicome de la professione, et ufficio del Segretario l’anima è lo scriver lettere”,_ wrote Bartolomeo Zucchi, or _“l’ufficio del Segretario principalmente sia di scriver lettere”,_ as Tasso put it._ “Questa professione di scriver lettere”_ is how Capaccio described the role in his address to his readers._

20 The secretary’s position as a keeper of secrets is also emphasised. It is “una tacita persuasione”, writes Tasso; Sansovino states that the secretary must have eyes and ears, but no tongue, while Nati counsels that it is always better for the secretary to keep silent than speak up. With the possession of secrets also comes trust, and the authors dwell on the closeness the secretary had to the centre of the actions of the state, and the potential rewards of this trust. Angelo Ingegneri wrote that:

_L’ufficio del Segretario è stato sempre, et appo tutti i Principi d’ogni natione, principalissimo; et di maniera, che, chi l’ hà bene, et fedelmente essercitato, et a gusto del suo Signore, non pure s’è acquistato il colmo del credito, et dell’autorità press’allui; ma il più delle volte hà_

21 The metaphor of the secretary as an angel, the mediator between a ruler and his subjects, was made in Il principe by Il Pigna, was copied by Sansovino and appears in a number of the later treatises.  

22 The analogy serves to illustrate both the fundamental tension in the role (charged to both keep the lord’s counsel, and to reveal it) and the distance which had grown between republican concepts of authority and the situation in late Renaissance Italian courts, in which the ruler had ascended to a remote and godlike presence.  

23 The silence of the secretary placed the role in the heart of the discussions concerning the autonomy of political actors – whether courtiers had lost all of the capacity to influence matters of state enjoyed by their republican ancestors and become mere functionaries enacting another’s will.  

24 In her examination of Tasso’s treatise on the court, the “Malpiglio”, Virginia Cox considers the reduction in the political – and moral – autonomy of the courtier (which, of course, the secretary is) since his already idealised portrait in Castiglione’s Cortegiano. In comparison to the figure Castiglione describes, and even more when considered against the active citizens of civic republics, Tasso’s courtier is little more than a functionary. When discussing the specific role of the secretary, Cox draws particular attention to Battista Guarini’s Il segretario, dialogo.  

25 Guarini described the tasks of the secretary – through one of his interlocutors – by highlighting the role’s differences from that of the counsellor. A significant part of the treatise is dedicated to the question of the basis of the role, whether in politics or in rhetoric. The interlocutors do conclude that the secretary, who deals only in rhetoric, has no need for political competence beyond what is needed to persuade. The significance accorded to the resolution of this debate does raise the question of the purpose of its inclusion – does Guarini believe this to be a question which truly requires settling, or as an established step in discussions on the secretary, does it offer the opportunity to display rhetorical skill in resolving a debate – or perhaps both, with the role, or conceptions of the role, still fluid at the end of the century. Nevertheless, Guarini makes it clear that politics was not part of the secretary’s remit and that he had no need of it beyond what was necessary to persuade:  

O quando il Segretario havrà di scrivere di materia politica, come potrà egli servirsi de’ luoghi propri, se non gli sà, et se gli sà come non sarà egli al pari d’ogni politico intelligente?  
Hà egli dunque in quanto Segretario à saperli, o pur à non saperli?
CONT. Hagli a saper come li sà il Retorico, et non come il Politico. essendo gran differenza à saperli per li principi loro, et per l'operazione, ch'è propria del politico, à saperli per prattica; et per valersene alla persuasione, ch'è propria del Segretario.36

26 Maurizio Viroli, in his monograph From Politics to Reason of State, concurs. Discussing the question of who, indeed, could be considered “political” in an age of absolutism, he also refers to Guarini as evidence that the secretary is not political, but merely a practitioner of rhetoric.37

27 However, Douglas Biow’s work Doctors, Ambassadors, Secretaries: The Professions in Renaissance Italy, which provides a valuable overview of the treatises on secretaries composed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, offers a more qualified assessment. While acknowledging that, certainly, some authors spoke of the essentially servile role of the secretary, Biow points to others who extolled the potential influence of the profession – Bonifatia Vannozzi, for instance, who suggested that a secretary of the highest grade was, also, a counsellor:

Un Segretario, che non arrivi à esser Consiglier del suo Prencipe, non arriverà ancora al grado della sommità, et della vera preminenza, del segretario: Egli è d'honore al segretario esser'insieme del consiglio, et Al Prencipe è cosa utilissima haver un tale, non solo per semplice ministro, et per puro esecutore; ma haverlo ancora per consigliere, et per consultor suo.38

28 Angelo Ingegneri, in his 1595 Del buon segretario, also allows the possibility of this, concluding that while the office of the counsellor is separate from that of the secretary, the roles do at some points blend into each other.39 Discussing the “true office of the Secretary”, in his Il segretario, Giulio Capaccio writes that “his proper authority is in counsel and with the knowledge used in negotiation, and in the schemes of his lord”, although he laments that the role of the secretary has diminished from the high status and political influence it enjoyed in the ancient past.40

29 Contemporary assertions from some quarters that the secretary’s role had little to do with politics, and the many practical aspects of the treatises which attempted to teach the niceties and minutiae of letter-writing, might seem to position secretarial treatises apart from previous advice literature, which was straightforward in its attempts to instruct republicans or rulers how to behave. Despite the changing status of the courtier, though, the role was still based on an education with many similarities to that experienced by the secretary’s more politically active forebears and which was rooted in the same texts used to teach political action – including classical Greek political theory. To write of politics required knowledge of politics. And if the secretary did have a place to demonstrate political acumen, then this knowledge was even more vital.

30 In considering the skills required to write state letters, the authors of course envisioned that the ideal secretary would possess an education in line with the standards of Renaissance humanism – one which demanded a command of classical languages. As Sansovino wrote:

Quanto alla letteratura non è dubbio alcuno che non può esser sufficiente per il suo carico, se non è conoscitor delle dottrine et delle lingue piu usate, et nelle quali si scrive comunemente. Dell’usate, diciamo che la greca, la latina, et la volgare hanno il primo luogo. Sappia adunque ottimamente la greca, la latina, et la volgare, come principali, accioché dovendo o scrivere, o rispondere, o leggere, lo possa fare acciconiamente et con sodisfattione del Signore, che quando ne fosse ignorante, a che servirebbe la sua fatica? et non havendo le lingue, come potrebbe dettar leggi, compor privilegi, distendere editti, et scriver cotal altri atti, che occorrano alla giornata?41
For Sansovino, writing with a level of optimism on the scope of the secretary’s role not shared by later authors, the purpose of this education is clear – how could a courtier possibly offer good counsel to his lord without knowledge of ancient forms of government, laws, and political history?

However, Sansovino is not alone in this assessment. Like Sansovino, Tasso was not a secretary, and took as a model the undoubtedly influential figure of his father, Bernardo, a secretary from a previous time. Nevertheless, his assessment of the knowledge and experience required of the role marks a striking contrast to the words of authors like Guarini: Tasso states in *Il secretario* that the secretary of a great prince should be a “polittico”, able to counsel, and he pairs actual experience of “le cose di stato” with an understanding of civil philosophy for the good accomplishment of this task.

Giulio Cesare Capaccio went further than Tasso in directing his readers to specific works, linking knowledge of the political texts of Seneca, Plutarch, Plato and Aristotle to the ability to compose on topics such as moral philosophy and, crucially, on the management of states.

That Capaccio based his understanding of politics and political structures on Greek thought is borne out elsewhere in his treatise. In the work’s second section, made up of his letters, the reader can find an outline of the Aristotelian model of forms of government in a missive to Giovan Battista Crispo:

By including a description of these Aristotelian forms of government, Capaccio brings secretarial literature in line with a long tradition of specifically political advice
literature, reaching back to Giles of Rome and Brunetto Latini: works which took for
granted the necessity of this information to their politically active readers.

Panfilo Persico’s 1620 work on the secretary goes further still. Rather than pointing the
conceptual secretary in the direction of political literature, this is a work from which
actual knowledge of political theory can be gained – displaying both Persico’s (who was
himself a secretary) familiarity with the works and taking as read the relevance of this
knowledge to his audience. There are marginal references throughout the text to
political theorists, including Aristotle, Plato and Polybius. At one point Persico offers
readers a slightly idiosyncratic summary of Aristotelian political organisation:

*Imperoche, come ci dimostra il filosofo, ogni forma di governo hà la sua forma di giustizia
differente secondo il suo fine; come nel governo del popolo il fine è la libertà che stà in viver
tutti del pari, e poter ciascuno, quando gli tocca, commandar, et ubbidire; in quel di pochi la
ricchezza, e potenza d’aluni solamente, che voglion haver tutti gli altri soggetti. Dall’uno, e
dall’altro di questi tali s’alcu no trattasse di trasferir il governo nei buoni, e virtuosi
solamente pecca contra lo stato, e si fà reo di maestà contra il Principato del popolo, ò de’
pochi, non ostante che generalmente voglia la ragion, e la giustizia, che i migliori siano nel
governo agli altri preferiti.*

Furthermore, Persico addresses the question which lingered at the heart of the debate
over the secretary’s political role, or whether his role was based in rhetoric or politics:
a lack of political autonomy, becoming the functionary of a ruler, robbed the courtier
of moral agency. Aristotle’s Politics forms a cornerstone of this discussion on whether
it was possible to retain moral autonomy in the service of an absolute ruler: an idea also
raised in Tasso’s Messaggi ero and, earlier in the sixteenth century as the courtier’s role
was defined, in Castiglione’s *Il cortegiano*. Once again, Persico brings secretarial advice
literature into line with a wider, more theoretical aspect of debate.

In Book Three of the Politics, Aristotle demonstrates that the goodness, or the particular
excellence, of the good man differs from the goodness of the good citizen. Among other
proofs, he explains that while the goodness required of a citizen will vary according to
the constitution in which he operates, the goodness of a good man is of a single kind:
“Hence it is manifestly possible to be a good citizen without possessing the goodness
that constitutes a good man.” This is referenced explicitly in Persico’s treatise on the
secretary, in which he refers to Aristotle when offering an assessment of Machiavelli as
secretary, with a reference to Aristotle in the margin (here given in square brackets):

[Nicolò Machia. buon Segretario. ma non huomo buono.] Porremo essempio Nicolò
Macchiavello in diversi tempi nell’uno e nell’altro di questi stati, e con questa disciplina male
poté esser huomo buono; ma niuno dirà però, che per lo’ngengò, et habilità sue non fosse
buon Segretario; comeche possa esser ancora, che di sua natura fosse huomo di mala mente,
e non si sappia bene, s’egli facesse tristo il Duca, o’l Duca lui. Onde come il cittadino,
quantunque sia buon cittadino, non può esser huomo buono. se non è buona la forma della
sua Republica, [Polit. I. 3. c. 3] così il Segretario, se non è tale il Signore, à la Republica,
ch’egli serve.*

Persico’s discussion of Machiavelli is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, that
he mentions Machiavelli at all – although a key example of an efficient and lauded
secretary, he is notably absent from many of the other treatises on secretaries. Persico
suggests that Machiavelli was “di mala mente”, but there is also the implication that his
inability to be a good man was directly linked to the figure or state he served. In terms
of the moral standing of the secretary, Persico aligns it with Aristotle’s understanding
of political goodness. Like Aristotle’s citizen, who may be a good member of the “res
publica” but not a good man, the good secretary’s individual goodness depends on the
political system in which he operates – whether a civic republic or a state. Persico’s secretary is versed in political theory, but his moral autonomy is tied to his effectiveness as a servant of the state.

A more pessimistic take on this Aristotelian theory is found in Tasso’s dialogue “Il messaggiero”. In this work, which culminates in a discussion of the ideal ambassador, Tasso confronts the moral pitfalls inherent in the service of an absolute ruler, especially that the ambassador might be compelled to act in a way which contradicts his own morality. The interlocutors – Tasso and an angelic being – discuss the conundrum faced by the good ambassador. In obeying an evil command from his prince, the ambassador can be a good executor of orders, but not a good man. And if he tries rigidly to be a good man, like Cato in Rome, and ignores the will of the prince, he is not a good citizen. The interlocutors conclude that this is the case for anyone involved in public affairs – no one can be a good man unless they live under the perfect prince or in the perfect city, and anyone wishing to be perfectly good should withdraw into solitude. Finally, with a nod to Plato’s Republic, Tasso decides that the perfect prince will only be found when philosophers rule or princes philosophize. Tasso seems to accept the perfect ambassador as a logical impossibility: his “perfect” courtier is entirely the creature of the prince, serving him perfectly with no personal autonomy, and thus requires the prince to be perfect to achieve his own perfection. While Aristotle had merely stated that the good man and the good citizen were not necessarily one and the same, Tasso goes so far as to posit that to be a truly good man is completely incompatible with the realities of serving in a political community.

The impossibility of remaining completely virtuous in an imperfect state – essentially the removal of moral responsibility from the courtier – is raised in Giovan Battista Guarini’s treatise on the secretary, when, conducting a Socratic dialogue to instruct his companions on the topic, the interlocutor Contarini explains that what might be considered vice in the Ethics could be virtue for a rhetorician. Here, the possibility of the good man and the good citizen being one and the same is discounted as attainable only in an unrealistic ideal Republic; in existing and therefore imperfect cities, a rhetorician must essentially work with what he has and so abandon virtue:

VEN. Mi piace d’haver inteso questo bellissimo avvertimento. ma io vorrei sapere, perché s’indusse à cosi far il Filosofo. Non dovrebbe egli esser un solo honesto del retore, e del politico? una vertù medesima appresso tutti?

CONT. Dovreb’esser nella perfetta repubblica, là dove la vertù dell’huom dabbene, et quella del buon Cittadino è la medesima cosa. Ma perciòché questa forma tanto squisita, et secondo la filosofica eccellenza non può trovarsi, et tutta volta bisogna nelle Repubbliche imperfette accusare et difendere, consultare, et lodare uffici della Retorica, i quali se noi volessimo aspettare che la Repubblica fosse perfetta, non si farebbono mai, giudicando perciò Aristotile necessario di provvedere, che anche nella imperfetta forma le suddette operazioni s’escercitino.

Guarini’s conclusion here is in line with his consideration of the basis of the role of the secretary – without moral and political autonomy, it would be disingenuous to argue that the basis of the secretary’s role is in politics. But Guarini proves his point with the use of Aristotelian political theory, proving that the discussion of political themes, and the use of classical sources to do so, was alive and well in secretarial treatises, just as it was in the advice literature read by Italian citizens of previous centuries.
NOTES

1. This article draws on research conducted as an AHRC-funded PhD student at the Warburg Institute, University of London, and as a Research Associate at the John Rylands Research Institute, University of Manchester.


6. B. Latini, Del tesoro volgarizzato di Brunetto Latini... libro primo, ed. R. de Visiani, Bologna, Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1968, p. 47: “Without doubt it is the highest science and the most noble profession that there is among men; it teaches us to govern other people in a kingdom and in a city, and the populace of a commune, in times of peace and of war, and according to reason and justice.”


8. The manuscript bearing the date 1288 is Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, MS Magliab. cl. XXX – segn. att. II, IV, 129. It has been edited: Giles of Rome, Del reggimento de’ principi... volgarizzamento trascritto nel MCCLXXXVIII [1288], ed. F. Corazzini, Florence, Le Monnier, 1858. A new edition of an Italian vernacularization of Giles’ work has recently been prepared: Giles of Rome, Il «Livro del governamento dei re e dei principi» secondo il codice BNCF II.IV.129, 2 vols., ed. F. Papi, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2016.


11. Giles of Rome, Del reggimento de principi, ed. F. Corazzini, Florence, Le Monnier, 1858, I.I.1, p. 4: “Nientemeno il popolo può essere insegnato per questo libro.”


19. *Ibid.*., p. 84.

20. The role of the secretary as a writer of letters also recalls the medieval *ars dictaminis* as a language of politics: see, for example, the critical works of Enrico Artifoni and Benoît Grévin.


ABSTRACTS

The late Renaissance Italian secretary was a figure of importance at the very heart of the state, but the particulars of what the role entailed provoked debate in the proliferation of advice literature which emerged to guide this political profession. This article draws parallels between works aimed at the instruction of the secretary in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and the many iterations of Italian political advice literature which preceded it, as well as investigating the presence and use of classical political theory in Italian secretarial literature, in particular Aristotle’s *Politics*. It delves into the question of whether the secretary’s role was based in rhetoric, the composition of letters, or if the secretary could aspire to some kind of political involvement – perhaps even advising a prince – and therefore required knowledge of politics and political philosophy.

Le secrétaire italien de la fin de la Renaissance était une figure d’importance au cœur de l’État, mais la définition de ce que ce rôle impliquait dans le détail provoqua des débats dans la *trattatistica*, qui proliférait alors et qui se posait en guide de cette profession politique. Cet article établit un parallèle entre les œuvres qui visaient à instruire le secrétaire au XVIᵉ et au début du XVIIᵉ siècle et les nombreux exemples de traités politiques italiens qui les précédèrent. Il s’agit aussi d’analyser la présence et l’utilisation de la théorie politique classique – en particulier la *Politique* d’Aristote – dans la production italienne destinée aux secrétaires. La question du rôle du secrétaire y est abordée : situé entre des fonctions ancrées dans la rhétorique et la composition
de lettres et l’aspiration à une certaine implication politique – éventuellement comme conseiller auprès du prince –, ce rôle supposait une connaissance de la politique et de la philosophie politique.

Il segretario italiano alla fine del Rinascimento era una figura di rilievo al cuore dello stato, ma la definizione dei dettagli di questo ruolo provocarono dibattiti nella trattatistica allora proliferante allo scopo di fornire una guida a questa professione politica. Il presente articolo stabilisce un parallelo tra le opere che intenevano istruire il segretario nel Cinquecento e all’inizio del Seicento ed i numerosi esempi di trattatistica politica italiana che le precedettero. Nel presente articolo, vengono altresì esaminati la presenza e l’uso della letteratura politica classica – in particolare modo, la Politica di Aristotele – nella produzione italiana destinata ai segretari. Vi viene affrontata la questione del ruolo del segretario: una funzione prettamente retorica, destinata alla composizione di lettere, oppure un segretario che poteva ammirare ad un coinvolgimento politico di qualche tipo – forse anche di consiglio del principe – e che perciò richiedeva una conoscenza della politica e della filosofia politica?

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Parole chiave: trattatistica, politica, Aristotele, autonomia, retorica
Mots-clés: traités sur les secrétaires, politique, Aristote, autonomie, rhétorique
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