

«Ornarse de laudata peritia»

Epistolary Rhetoric and Socio-Stylistic Networks in Fifteenth-Century Vernacular Italian

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Abstract: The article examines one aspect of the fortune of the *ars dictaminis* in fifteenth-century Italy, focusing on its adaptation within vernacular epistolary writing. Through the case of Bartolomeo Miniatore's *Formulario di esordi ed epistole missive e responsive per Giacomo Bolognini*, it investigates how forms inherited from the medieval dictaminal tradition were transferred into the vernacular and adapted to changing political and social contexts. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between rhetorical training and the written practices of urban and courtly elites, within which personal ties, patronage, recommendation, favour, obligation, and service played a central role. The analysis of three *exordia* shows how such models provided linguistic forms for expressing and regulating these relations. From this perspective, vernacular epistolary rhetoric appears as one of the contexts in which the heritage of the *ars dictaminis* was reworked and adapted to the communicative practices of fifteenth-century society.

Keywords: *Ars Dictaminis*; Vernacular Epistolography; Rhetorical Education; Socio-Stylistic Networks; *Exempla exordiorum*

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The *ars dictaminis* in the fifteenth century: persistence and new functions

“L’*ars dictaminis* nel Quattrocento italiano: eclissi o persistenza?” With this question, more than twenty years ago, Gian Carlo Alessio opened a study aimed at defining fifteenth-century treatise production in historical terms, distancing it both from the image of a merely inertial survival of the medieval tradition and from that of its dissolution into the vast epistolary production of the humanist age.¹ In those pages, Alessio identified some essential interpretative lines for understanding the forms through which the dictaminal discipline continued to operate during the fifteenth century, while redefining its function within coordinates that had by then changed: those provided by the humanist schools, the different organisation and new political centrality of the chancelleries, the renewed prestige of ancient models, and the progressive spread of printing. In order to distinguish this vast production from the earlier tradition of the *ars dictaminis* and to recognise in it a more marked historical and functional autonomy, Alessio went so far as to advance a terminological proposal, designating the fifteenth-century discipline by the term *ars epistolandi*, a formula recurring in the titles of fifteenth-century treatises. The terminological change, which may be interpreted as a sign of an acquired perception of innovation among contemporaries, helped to recognise and define the different historical position of a discipline still rooted in the tradition of the *dictamen* and at the same time characterised by a reformulation of its norms, principally through a closer adherence to the Ciceronian model encouraged by Petrarch’s influence.²

More than twenty years have now passed since the publication of Alessio’s fruitful contribution, yet the invitation issued in those pages by the distinguished scholar to reconsider this body of writing seems not yet to have borne fruit. Fifteenth-century epistolary treatise literature, particularly in the vernacular, indeed remains among the least explored areas in the history of rhetoric. We can certainly draw on valuable tools such as Lawrence D. Green and James J. Murphy’s *Renaissance Rhetoric Short-Title Catalogue* and Emil J. Polak’s *Medieval and Renaissance Letter Treatises and Form Letters*, which provide guidance through printed production and the manuscript tradition; on authoritative digital resources such as the *Incunabula Short Title Catalogue* (ISTC) and

* The quotation that gives the contribution its title is taken from Miniature’s letter to Ercole I d’Este that opens the *Formulario di epistole missive e responsive*, Bologna, Ugo Ruggeri, 20 April 1485, c. a2r; the expression *laudata peritia* refers to proficiency in vernacular epistolary writing that the manual was designed to cultivate.

¹ G.C. Alessio, ‘L’*ars dictaminis* nel Quattrocento italiano: eclissi o persistenza?’, in: *Rhetorica*, 19, 2 (2001), pp. 155-173. Some of the questions developed in this article had already been anticipated by the same scholar through the examination of a specific case, Niccolò Perotti’s epistolary treatise, which already brought to light the persistence, within the new humanist rhetorical culture, of elements inherited from the earlier dictaminal tradition: idem, ‘Il *De componendis epistolis* di Niccolò Perotti e l’epistolografia umanistica’, in: *Res publica litterarum*, 11 (1988), pp. 9-18.

² Alessio, ‘L’*ars dictaminis* nel Quattrocento italiano’, cit., p. 164, where, discussing the transformations of the discipline in the humanist period, he observes that ‘l’umanesimo rinomina, come si sa, *ars epistolandi*’ the earlier tradition, relating the new form assumed by the manuals to the environments in which they were produced and the audiences for whom they were intended.

the *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke* (GW); or, for a broader historical overview, on major studies such as Pedro Martín Baños's *El arte epistolar en el Renacimiento europeo, 1400-1600*, Peter Mack's *A History of Renaissance Rhetoric, 1380-1620*, and Fabio Della Schiava and Fulvio Delle Donne's contribution on Italian Humanism and the *ars dictaminis* in the *Handbuch der mittelalterlichen Briefstillehre*, edited by Florian Hartmann and Benoît Grévin.³ A clear imbalance nevertheless remains between the relative scarcity of critical scholarship and the wide diffusion of the genre during the fifteenth century, of which the repertories of manuscripts and incunabula provide only a partial measure.

The success of this production may be related to the progressive structuring of fifteenth-century chancelleries and to a more precise definition of their functions.⁴ The expansion of the political, diplomatic, and administrative apparatuses of the Italian states generated, over the course of the century, a growing demand for writing. The letter became one of the ordinary instruments through which power communicated, gathered information, administered, and constructed relationships: this was the *mundo de carta* of the chancelleries and courts of the Italian states in the fifteenth century.⁵ The quantitative growth of documentary production thus proceeded together with a progressive diversification of the forms of writing and with the stabilisation of practices intended to accompany the different functions of the organs of government. Letters, drafts, registers, and formularies participated in the concrete organisation of political and administrative activity, while at the same time regulating its languages, hierarchies, and channels of communication.

A fundamental function of epistolary treatises may be identified in their use within fifteenth-century schools and, more precisely, at an advanced stage of the course devoted to the learning of Latin. Studies of Italian pre-university education make it possible to place these manuals at the point when, having acquired sufficient familiarity with grammar and the *auctores*, the student was gradually introduced to

³ L.D. Green & J.J. Murphy, *Renaissance Rhetoric Short-Title Catalogue 1460-1700*, 2nd ed., Aldershot-Burlington, Ashgate, 2006; E.J. Polak, *Medieval and Renaissance Letter Treatises and Form Letters*, 3 vols., Leiden, Brill, 1993-2015; *Incunabula Short Title Catalogue* (ISTC), British Library, hosted by CERL; *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke* (GW), Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. For broader historical perspectives, see P. Martín Baños, *El arte epistolar en el Renacimiento europeo, 1400-1600*, Bilbao, Universidad de Deusto, 2005; P. Mack, *A History of Renaissance Rhetoric, 1380-1620*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011; F. Della Schiava & F. Delle Donne, 'Der italienische Humanismus und die *ars dictaminis*', in: F. Hartmann & B. Grévin (eds.), *Ars dictaminis. Handbuch der mittelalterlichen Briefstillehre*, Stuttgart, Anton Hiersemann, 2019, pp. 279-291. With regard to the tradition of vernacular epistolary treatises, further references may be found in the studies and editions by the present author cited in the following pages.

⁴ On the progressive articulation of the documentary apparatus of the territorial states, see I. Lazzarini, 'Lettere, minute, registri: pratiche della scrittura diplomatica nell'Italia tardomedievale fra storia e paleografia', in: *Quaderni storici*, 51, 2 (2016), pp. 449-470; eadem, *L'ordine delle scritture. Il linguaggio documentario del potere nell'Italia tardomedievale*, Roma, Viella, 2021.

⁵ The reference is to F. Senatore, «*Uno mundo de carta*». *Forme e strutture della diplomazia sforzesca*, Napoli, Liguori, 1998, esp. pp. 161-166, a study that has shown particularly effectively the density reached by epistolary exchanges and their integration into the everyday functioning of fifteenth-century diplomatic apparatuses.

independent composition. The documentation significantly preserves terms such as *epistolantes* and expressions such as “fare la epistola”,⁶ while translation exercises and *themata* provided linguistic structures and materials intended to pass into subsequent compositional practice.⁷ The picture is, of course, far less uniform than a rapid reconstruction, imposed by the space available here, might suggest: the surviving sources concern the different local settings unevenly, while *curricula*, teaching tools, and relations with earlier educational traditions could vary considerably from one centre to another. For the purposes of the present study, however, what matters is to observe how, as epistolary practice acquired increasing importance, its teaching in schools contributed to the development of a competence that was becoming increasingly necessary for managing relations in public life.

The letter offered particularly favourable conditions for such training in linguistic composition. Traditionally associated with the *sermo quotidianus*, it lent itself readily to the first exercises in independent composition. Its strong dependence on the circumstances of communication also made it possible to exercise the ability to adapt language and style to the subject matter, the status of the interlocutors, and the nature of the relations that connected them. *Formulae*, *exordia*, *themata*, and model letters could thus provide a repertoire through which the conventions governing written communication might gradually be learned.

Schools and chancelleries, whether public or private, therefore constitute two privileged environments within which to trace the fifteenth-century history of the discipline, two distinct spaces that nevertheless remained in constant communication through the people, texts, and competences that circulated between them. A relationship was established between the practices acquired during school training and those required by political and social life, contributing to the preservation and, at the same time, the transformation of the dictaminal tradition. Epistolary practice thus connected rhetorical training with the uses of writing

⁶ The expression comes from model 52A, according to Bracke's numbering, in the school collection transmitted by MS Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ottob. lat. 1982, f. 44v, where the teacher admonishes his pupils: ‘Hodire solamente le lectione et recitare quelle et fare la epistola secondo ve è data non ve pottà far eruditi’; see W. Bracke, *Fare la epistola nella Roma del Quattrocento*, Roma, Armellini, 1992, p. 105.

⁷ For the general context of education, see P.F. Grendler, *La scuola nel Rinascimento italiano*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1991, pp. 250-253; R. Black, *Humanism and Education in Medieval and Renaissance Italy. Tradition and Innovation in Latin Schools from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001; S. Rizzo, *Ricerche sul latino umanistico*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2002, vol. I, pp. 127-179, esp. p. 138. On epistolary exercises and the relationship between *themata*, composition, and the progressive involvement of the vernacular, see C. Amendola, ‘Tra lettera-trattato e comunicazione erudita in volgare: primi sondaggi sulla trattatistica epistolare quattrocentesca’, in: M. Liguori & E. Olivadese (eds.), *Oltre i «termini» della lettera. Pratiche di dissertazione nelle corrispondenze tra Quattro e Cinquecento*, Sarnico, Edizioni di Archilet, 2021, pp. 21-40; idem, ‘«Tanta suavità et dolceza è quella dele littere». L’epistola in volgare nei trattati del secondo ‘400’, in: E. Bartoli, C. Amendola, V.G. Nitti & M. Pavoni (eds.), *Le nuove frontiere del «dictamen». Studi, edizioni in corso e riflessioni metodologiche sull’epistolografia medievale (secc. XII-XV)*, Firenze, SISMEL-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2023, pp. 101-113.

required by political and social life, preparing the passage from practices learned in the schoolroom to their concrete possibilities of application.

Schools, chancelleries, and vernacular epistolary writing

Within the growing mass of correspondence produced over the course of the fifteenth century, the vernacular gained an increasingly large place both in governmental writing and in a rich production of private and semi-private letters, as we have seen. In the second half of the century in particular, the consolidation of regional states was accompanied by a considerable variety of forms of signorial rule, more or less explicit and differently legitimised, at times superimposed upon communal institutions that formally remained in operation.⁸ Within this framework, the exercise of authority frequently passed through personal relationships, networks of loyalty, clienteles, factional solidarities, and relations of service; a largely relational management of political affairs thus corresponded to a form of writing capable of moving along the shifting boundary between administrative communication and personal negotiation.⁹

An episode indicative of this climate is the Florentine protest of 1454 over the assassins sent by Niccolò Perotti against Poggio Bracciolini.¹⁰ On that occasion, the Florentine Signoria wrote in Latin to the Signoria of Bologna and to Cardinal Bessarion, the papal legate, while addressing Sante Bentivoglio in the vernacular. The distribution of the two linguistic codes is significant: Latin served communication with institutional interlocutors, while the vernacular reached the man who constituted the effective centre of the city's political network. Through him,

⁸ For an overview of the political and institutional transformations of fifteenth-century Italy, see R. Fubini, *Italia quattrocentesca. Politica e diplomazia nell'età di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 1994; I. Lazzarini, *L'Italia degli Stati territoriali. Secoli XIII-XV*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2003; A. Gamberini & I. Lazzarini (eds.), *The Italian Renaissance State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

⁹ On the 'personal' character of fifteenth-century political and diplomatic practices, see I. Lazzarini, *Amicizia e potere. Reti politiche e sociali nell'Italia medievale*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2010, pp. 37-51; eadem, *Communication and Conflict. Italian Diplomacy in the Early Renaissance, 1350-1520*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, esp. pp. 122-145. On the role assumed by the vernacular in fifteenth-century chancery correspondence and the progressive formation of supraregional varieties, see, at least, M. Vitale, *La lingua volgare della cancelleria visconteo-sforzesca nel Quattrocento*, Milano-Varese, Istituto Editoriale Cisalpino, 1953; M. Tavoni, *Il Quattrocento*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1992, pp. 47-55; S. Lubello, 'Cancelleria e burocrazia', in: G. Antonelli, M. Motolese & L. Tomasin (eds.), *Storia dell'italiano scritto, III, Italiano dell'uso*, Roma, Carocci, 2014, pp. 225-259; F. Montuori, 'I carteggi diplomatici nel Quattrocento: riflessioni per la storia della lingua', in: *Filologia e critica*, 42, 2 (2017), pp. 177-204.

¹⁰ Recent scholarship, however, suggests that greater caution is required concerning the historicity of the episode. The accusation of an attempted attack appears in a letter from Poggio to Alberto Parisi dated December 1454; Ludovica Sasso considers it highly probable that the suspicion was constructed and unfounded, relating it to the polemical strategy through which Poggio tended to present himself as the victim of a broader *laurentiana coniuratio*. See L. Sasso, 'Poggio Bracciolini – Lorenzo Valla – Niccolò Perotti. Ein Beispiel für invektive Dynamiken in der Humanistengemeinschaft Italiens (1452-54)', in: U. Israel, M. Kraus & L. Sasso (eds.), *Agonale Invektivität. Konstellationen und Dynamiken der Herabsetzung im italienischen und deutschen Humanismus*, Heidelberg, Heidelberg University Publishing, 2021, pp. 49-79, esp. p. 77.

communication could operate on the more immediate level of the personal-political relationship, entering directly into that system of family, patronage, and factional ties on which a considerable part of the concrete exercise of power rested.¹¹

The progressive extension of such practices inevitably also raised a problem of regulation. The vernacular letter addressed to a socially qualified audience required forms suited to expressing appropriately that world of personal relationships. Through such a repertoire of linguistic gestures, the position of the sender, the rank of the recipient, and the nature of the relationship between them became immediately recognisable: epistolary competence therefore involved the ability to select words, registers, and *formulae* appropriate to the status of the interlocutors and to the effect that the communication was intended to produce. The school itself provided one of the principal settings in which this competence was formed. There, the constant comparison between Latin and the vernacular, practised through exercises in translation and imitation, accustomed the student to moving between different formulations and to choosing, on each occasion, those best suited to the circumstances. Through this practice, forms and models of humanist Latin epistolography progressively entered vernacular writing. Humanist Latin epistolography, nourished largely by the classical tradition and especially by Cicero, certainly accorded, in those circumstances, with the cultural tastes of the elites. Bilingual manuals such as Stefano Fieschi's *Synonyma sententiarum*, Giorgio Valagussa's *Elegantiae ciceronianae*, and the *Exercitatuunculae* attributed to Francesco Filelfo document this process in different forms, contributing to the definition of a more conscious rhetorical and stylistic norm for vernacular epistolography.¹²

Within the perspective outlined so far, the relationship between rhetorical training and the political and social uses of writing finds a privileged vantage point in mid-fifteenth-century Bologna. The city's long local tradition of the *ars dictandi*, the presence of the *Studium*, the vitality of mercantile and chancery activities, and Bologna's position within the political system of the Po Valley favoured frequent movements of people, texts, and competences between school, the professions, and politics. Bologna also stood at the centre of a dense web of relations connecting prominent families, courts, and ruling groups in Ferrara, Faenza, Imola, Cesena, Mantua, Milan, Florence, and Venice. Within this environment, command of

¹¹ B. Migliorini, *Storia della lingua italiana*, Milano, Bompiani, 2019, p. 318; E. Walser, *Poggius Florentinus. Leben und Werke*, Leipzig-Berlin, Teubner, 1914, pp. 389-391. Sante Bentivoglio's relations with Florence were, moreover, deeply rooted in his own personal history: born in Poppi in 1424 and raised there in complete ignorance of his Bentivoglio origins, he was sent to Florence while still young to learn the wool trade from the merchant Nuccio Solosmei. There he came into contact with Neri Capponi, who became his protector, and with Cosimo de' Medici; both subsequently played a role in encouraging his decision to accept the Bentivoglio family's invitation and move to Bologna in 1446. See O. Banti, 'Bentivoglio, Sante', in: *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, VIII, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1966, s.v.

¹² For a more detailed examination of this production, see Amendola, 'Tra lettera-trattato e comunicazione erudita in volgare', cit., esp. pp. 27-36; idem, '«Tanta suavità et dolceza», cit., pp. 101-113.

eloquence acquired a precise social significance. Knowing how to calibrate an *exordium*, modulate a request, declare an obligation, or activate a relation of friendship meant mastering the conventions through which that society represented and regulated its relationships. Epistolary writing thus became part of the body of competences required of those who participated, in different capacities, in the political and social life of the city.

Bartolomeo Miniature and the Bolognese laboratory

Within this trajectory belongs the treatise production of Bartolomeo di Benincà da Ferrara, better known as Bartolomeo Miniature, a schoolmaster, scribe, and illuminator active during the second half of the fifteenth century between Ferrara, Bologna, and Venice. A highly articulated *corpus* of vernacular formularies and collections of model letters, both manuscript and printed, is now attributed to his activity.¹³ His name certainly remains at the margins of the major canon of fifteenth-century Humanism. The very nature of his production, however, makes it possible to observe from a less usual perspective the diffusion of rhetorical culture among a public involved in the political, economic, and administrative life of the cities and, more broadly, of the courts of the Po Valley area. His formularies organise epistolary material according to communicative situations in which the relationship between the interlocutors conditions the choice of expressive forms. In the Bolognese context, marked by competition between families and factions and by political balances in constant redefinition, this dimension acquired particular importance, since writing operated within personal, hierarchical, and service relationships that played a concrete part in political life and in the protection of economic interests.¹⁴

A first field in which to test this function is offered by the *Formulario di esordi ed epistole missive e responsive per Giacomo Bolognini*, the earliest treatise collection by Miniature known today, probably composed in the early 1450s during the first years of the Ferrarese author's residence in Bologna.¹⁵ Giacomo Bolognini belonged to a

¹³ For an overall reconstruction of Bartolomeo's production, see C. Amendola, *Bartolomeo Miniature e l'Umanesimo volgare. Con edizione critica del «Formulario di esordi ed epistole missive e responsive per Giacomo Bolognini»*, Napoli, Federico II University Press, 2022, pp. 73-153; idem, 'Note sui formulari manoscritti e a stampa di Bartolomeo di Benincà da Ferrara', in: *Spolia. Journal of Medieval Studies*, n.s. 8 (2022), pp. 78-103. On questions of attribution and the early reception of the *Formulario*, see also D. Guernelli, 'Qualche nota sulla miniatura bolognese del terzo quarto del Quattrocento. Interazioni tra decorazione libraria, letteratura e stampa', in: *Il Carrobbio*, XXXV (2009), pp. 61-91; P. Procaccioli, 'Bartolomeo Miniature, Cristoforo Landino e la preistoria del "Formulario di lettere". Una traccia vaticana', in: S. Benedetti, F. Lucoli & P.P. Pellegrino (eds.), *Cum fide amicitia. Per Rossana Alhaique Pettinelli*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2015, pp. 437-450.

¹⁴ On the Bolognese political context and the persistent competition between family groups and factions, see A. De Benedictis, 'Lo «stato popolare di libertà»: pratica di governo e cultura di governo (1376-1506)', in: O. Capitani (ed.), *Storia di Bologna. II. Bologna nel Medioevo*, Bologna, Bononia University Press, 2007, pp. 899-950, esp. pp. 906-920.

¹⁵ Amendola, *Bartolomeo Miniature*, cit., pp. 73-121. The collection belongs to the early years of the Ferrarese author's stay in Bologna; the chronology of the materials that entered it is, however, complex, which suggests retaining a dating to the early 1450s rather than assigning it to a single year.

wealthy mercantile family well integrated into civic life; the destination of the manual therefore allows it to be situated within an environment in which epistolary writing could respond to concrete needs in the management of economic and political relations. The collection arranges its models according to a very broad range of communicative circumstances: thanking, recommending, asking a favour, consoling, expressing affection, or offering one's availability. Alongside the construction of the text, its didactic function concerns the ability to recognise the nature of the relationship and to choose the words suited to governing it.

Miniature's subsequent treatise production makes it possible to follow the widening of the circuits within which such models could find application. The *Formulario di petitioni, responsioni e repplicationi* intended for Astorre II Manfredi, lord of Faenza, shows how this work of codification also extended to the supplication, an epistolary form of primary importance in the relationship between subjects and lord and in the exercise of grace. With the *Formulario di epistole missive e responsive* dedicated to Ercole I d'Este, whose core probably dates to the pontificate of Pius II (1458-1464), the same normative proposal reached print in Bologna in 1485, extending the circulation of those models well beyond the circuits within which they had been elaborated.¹⁶ The publishing fortune of the work offers an eloquent measure of this expansion. Between 1485 and 1584, more than seventy editions are known, thirty-two of them published by 1500. Venice, Florence, Rome, Milan, and Naples were among the centres of the text's earliest diffusion.¹⁷ Printing therefore helped to expand the circulation of these models on a metaregional scale, although it remains to be established to what extent their publishing success exercised an effective normative function in other chancelleries.

The metaregional diffusion of these models nevertheless makes it possible to hypothesise the existence of socio-stylistic networks, founded upon the sharing of forms of epistolary communication capable of extending beyond the local contexts in which they had been elaborated.¹⁸ This hypothesis can first be specified at the internal

¹⁶ On the *Formulario* for Astorre II Manfredi, see *ivi*, pp. 52-66; for the collection dedicated to Ercole I and the evidence that allows its main nucleus to be dated between 1458 and 1464, see *ivi*, pp. 146-153. The *editio princeps* was published in Bologna by Ugo Ruggeri on 20 April 1485. On the structure of the collections and the relationships between the different nuclei of Miniature's production, see also Amendola, '«Tanta suavità et dolceza»', *cit.*, pp. 101-113.

¹⁷ M.C. Acocella, 'Il "Formulario di epistole missive e responsive" di Bartolomeo Miniature: un secolo di fortuna editoriale', in: *La Bibliofilia*, CXIII, 3 (2011), pp. 257-292, esp. pp. 280-292; A. Quondam, 'Dal "Formulario" al "Formulario": cento anni di "libri di lettere"', in: *idem* (ed.), *«Le carte messaggiero». Retorica e modelli di comunicazione epistolare*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1981, pp. 13-156; Amendola, '«Tanta suavità et dolceza»', *cit.*, pp. 101-102. On the geography of the earliest printed editions, see also Amendola, 'Note sui formulari', *cit.*, pp. 80-83.

¹⁸ The term 'socio-stylistic networks' is used here to refer to relational circuits in which shared practices, affiliations, and social relationships are accompanied by the circulation of recognisable and shared stylistic forms. The notion draws on Benoît Grévin's studies of 'constellations' of letter collections and networks of *dictatores*, through which the diffusion of a *stilus* can be related to the mobility of people, texts, and models: B. Grévin, "«Costellazioni di epistolari e reti di «dictatores»»":

level of the models themselves, by observing how the formulary translates into lexical and rhetorical choices the relationships that constitute their underlying premise. Since the actual reception of these formulae in different environments still remains largely to be reconstructed, the analysis will concentrate here on the ways in which they give linguistic form to particular relationships and orient their development. To this end, three *exempla exordiorum* will be examined, concerning respectively benefit and the obligation deriving from it, recommendation within a relationship of friendship, and the request for grace addressed to a superior.

The benefit and the production of obligation

The first text concerns the expression of thanks for a benefit received without obligation, that is, granted in an apparently disinterested manner. The model sets out the ways in which gratitude is to be expressed and defines the verbal conduct required when a freely granted favour enters the circuit of social relations. Precisely because it is not owed, the benefit becomes the starting point of a stronger bond.

Exordio bellissimo quando se volesse ringratiare uno de un benefitio recevuto senza alcuna obligatione.

Li benefitii debbono continuamente essere accepti et grati apresso ali homini, et specialmente quilli che procedono sença alcuno obligo. Dove, havendome voi solamente per la vostra humanità et non per obligatione alcuna tanto benefitio contribuito, certo ne recevo grandissima consolatione et piacere. Et bemché un tanto obligo altra satisfatione cha de parole rechieda, pure ve ne ringratio infinite volte, et aspettarò che voi me rechediati in qualche cosa, aciò vi possa dimonstrare l'amore et affectione mia verso voi et le cose vostre non essere mancho bendisposto che verso mi medesimo.¹⁹

A very fine exordium for thanking someone for a benefit received without any obligation.

Benefits ought always to be welcome and pleasing to men, and especially those that proceed without any obligation. Wherefore, since you, solely out of your courtesy and not from any

la diffusione dello *stilus altus* "siciliano" nell'Europa della fine del Duecento (1266-1290)', in: F. Delle Donne & F. Santi (eds.), *Dall'«Ars dictaminis» al Preumanesimo? Per un profilo letterario del secolo XIII*, Firenze, SISMEL-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2013, pp. 101-115. A related perspective emerges in the work of F. Delle Donne, 'Le *dictamen* capouan: écoles rhétoriques et conventions historiographiques', in: B. Grévin & A.M. Turcan-Verkerk (eds.), *Le dictamen dans tous ses états. Perspectives de recherches sur la théorie et la pratique de l'ars dictaminis (XIe-XVe siècle)*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2015, pp. 191-207, esp. pp. 205-207, and, with regard to humanist rhetorical culture, in the framework proposed by F. Delle Donne & C. Revest, 'Introduction', in: *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome – Moyen Âge*, 128, 1 (2016), special issue *L'essor de la rhétorique humaniste: réseaux, modèles et vecteurs*, ed. by F. Delle Donne & C. Revest, pp. 5-6. On these premises, the category had already been applied to Miniature's production in Amendola, *Bartolomeo Miniature*, cit., pp. 104-105. In the present study, it refers more specifically to the relationship between membership of a social network and the sharing of a repertoire of epistolary behaviours, examined through the linguistic and rhetorical choices of the individual models.

¹⁹ B. Miniature, *Formulario di esordi ed epistole missive e responsive per Giacomo Bolognini*, in: Amendola, *Bartolomeo Miniature*, cit., mod. III, p. 226.

obligation, have bestowed so great a benefit upon me, I certainly receive from it the greatest comfort and pleasure. And although so great an obligation calls for recompense other than words, I nevertheless thank you countless times for it, and I shall await the moment when you call upon me in some matter, so that I may show you that, in my love and affection towards you and your affairs, I am no less well disposed than I am towards myself.

The conceptual nucleus of the passage is naturally *beneficio* (“benefit”). Around it is arranged a lexical constellation centred on the terms *accetti* (“welcome”), *grati* (“pleasing”), *umanità* (“courtesy”),²⁰ *obligo* (“obligation”), *satisfactio* (“recompense”), *ringraziamento* (“thanks”), *amore* (“love”), and *affectione* (“affection”). Each term defines a stage in the relationship: the act performed by the benefactor, its recognition by the recipient, the bond generated by the favour, and the future readiness to reciprocate.

The benefit is first defined negatively, as something that does not arise from an obligation: *sença alcuno obligo* (“without any obligation”), *non per obligatione alcuna* (“not from any obligation”). The absence of an initial bond does not, however, entail freedom from the relationship; on the contrary, it establishes a new one. The most binding favour is precisely that which proceeds from the benefactor’s freely exercised *umanità* (“courtesy”). The spontaneity of the gesture increases its value and requires a proportionate response from the recipient.

The word *umanità* (“courtesy”) is of central importance here. Far from indicating a generic moral benevolence, it socially characterises one who knows how to act according to an elevated code of liberality and courtesy. The recipient is represented as someone whose favour proceeds from participation in a higher order of conduct rather than from constraint. His *umanità* (“courtesy”) consists in the capacity to recognise the other and to act for his benefit without any prior obligation requiring it.

Accordingly, the sender too must show himself capable of recognising the quality of the gesture received. Gratitude becomes a proof of belonging to the same code: anyone who benefits from a favour must know how to name it, accept it, register it, and reciprocate it. An inability to express gratitude adequately would exceed the level of an individual failing, since it would violate the rules on which the relationship itself rests.

The lexical sequence thus produces a precise chain: the benefit arises from the recipient’s *umanità* (“courtesy”); it generates an *obligo* (“obligation”) in the sender; this obligation would require a *satisfactio* (“recompense”) beyond words; the letter, while declaring itself insufficient, opens onto a future readiness, expressed through *amore* (“love”) and *affectione* (“affection”). The act of thanks therefore does not close the relationship, but projects it towards a subsequent reciprocity: *aspettarò che voi me rechediati in qualche cosa* (“I shall await the moment when you call upon me in some matter”).

²⁰ The Italian *umanità* is rendered here and throughout as “courtesy”, although no single English equivalent fully reproduces the broad semantic range of the historical term. The *GDLI* records, among its meanings, “gentilezza, cortesia, affabilità; modi benevoli” (*GDLI*, s.v. *umanità*). In the present context, the term further evokes a benevolent and gracious disposition towards others, manifested in the free bestowal of favour.

The declared insufficiency of words does not deprive the letter of its efficacy. On the contrary, it becomes part of the rhetorical strategy: since so great a benefit cannot be repaid through a simple expression of thanks, the sender promises a future concrete demonstration of his disposition. The *formula* thus transforms gratitude into the expectation of an occasion on which the debt may be translated into action.

Particular significance attaches to the expression *verso voi et le cose vostre* (“towards you and your affairs”). *Affectione* (“affection”) is not confined to the person of the recipient, but extends to his sphere of interests, his household, his affairs, and, more broadly, his party. The sender declares himself disposed towards the recipient and towards what belongs to him *non essere mancho [...] che verso mi medesimo* (“no less [...] than towards myself”). The benefit received thus produces a form of adherence that extends beyond the relationship between two individuals and involves the benefactor’s entire relational field.

Ultimately, the model teaches how to transform a favour received into a promise of service. The personal relationship is converted into a broader readiness towards the network of the person who granted the benefit. The movement runs from the initial gratuitousness of the gesture to the constitution of a bond: *umanità* (“courtesy”) produces obligation; obligation generates affection; affection makes the sender ready to answer the recipient’s future needs.

Friendship and the circulation of personal credit

The second text offers a brief model for someone wishing to recommend a friend to a distant recipient. The conceptual nucleus is, in this case, the circulation of personal credit.

Exordio bellissimo quando se volesse aricomandare uno suo amico a un altro che fosse lontano.

Nobilis et egregie vir tanquam frater carissime. Essendo l’amicitia fra noi et l’affection vostra in me appresso ogni huomo divulgata et nota, elgli è necessario che molti desiderano che ve li raccomandandi, como quilli che credono che le mie littere, quantonque io sia abscente, appresso a voi assai li giovarano.²¹

A very fine exordium for when one wished to recommend one’s friend to another person who was far away.

Nobilis et egregie vir tanquam frater carissime. Since the friendship between us and your affection towards me are widely known and recognised by everyone, it necessarily follows that many desire me to recommend them to you, believing that my letters, although I am absent, will be of considerable advantage to them with you.

Recommendation rests here upon the public recognition of the relationship between sender and recipient. *Amicitia* (“friendship”), besides being an inner disposition, is a socially recognised relationship: it is, in fact, *appresso ogni huomo divulgata et nota* (“widely known and recognised by everyone”). Its value also depends upon its

²¹ Miniatore, *Formulario per Giacomo Bolognini*, cit., mod. V, pp. 227-228.

visibility. Since everyone knows that a bond exists between the two interlocutors, that bond can be activated on behalf of a third party.

Public knowledge of the friendship constitutes the condition for the effectiveness of the recommendation. It is not enough for the sender to declare himself a friend of the recipient: the relationship must have been made credible by previous conduct and must be recognised within the social environment in which both men move. The formula *divulgata et nota* ("widely known and recognised") thus amounts to a kind of public attestation of the personal credit possessed by the sender.

The model therefore constructs a three-way relationship: the sender, the recipient, and the person being recommended. The first possesses credit with the second; the third wishes to benefit from that credit; the recipient is called upon, through his own conduct, to confirm the strength of the relationship that binds him to the sender. Recommendation thus puts into circulation a relational value already acquired and enables it to produce effects on behalf of another person.

The recipient's *affection* ("affection") is likewise presented as a known fact. Benevolence does not remain confined to a private sphere, but becomes a resource that can be drawn upon within the community. Precisely because it is known, it leads many to wish to be recommended: they believe that the sender's *littere* ("letters") may *assai [...]* *giovare* ("greatly benefit") them with the recipient. The model thus shows how the standing of a relationship also depends upon its capacity to produce concrete advantages.

The *littera* ("letter") is the decisive instrument through which the relationship can operate even in the absence of the person: *quantunque io sia absente* ("although I am absent"). Writing substitutes for physical presence and makes friendship operative at a distance. Through the letter, the sender can intervene with a distant recipient and transfer part of his own credit to a third party. Epistolary communication thus enables a relationship of recommendation to operate at a distance.

Distance, explicitly mentioned in the rubric, does not weaken the bond; on the contrary, it demonstrates its effectiveness. Friendship proves all the stronger insofar as it is capable of producing effects even when the interlocutors do not share the same physical space.

On the lexical level, the concept of recommendation takes shape through the entire sequence: recognised *amicitia* ("friendship"), the recipient's *affection* ("affection"), the public visibility of the relationship, the efficacy of the *littere* ("letters"), and the concrete advantage obtained by the third party. *Racomandare* ("to recommend") means setting a recognised relationship in motion, converting friendship into practical advantage.

By responding favourably to the request, the recipient does more than benefit the person recommended. He also confirms the value of the friendship binding him to the sender and makes his own *affection* ("affection") publicly visible. The requested

favour thus becomes a test of the relationship.²² If the friendship truly corresponds to what everyone knows it to be, it must be capable of translating itself into a benefit for those whom the sender places under his protection.

In the *exordium*, therefore, recommendation functions as a test of the social substance of friendship: the credit accumulated within the relationship between two individuals is transferred to a third party and measured by the effectiveness that the letter is able to produce even at a distance. The granting of the request confirms both the sender's authority and the strength of the bond that unites him to the recipient, extending its effects beyond the relationship between the two interlocutors.

Grace, debt, and service

The third model concerns a request for a service addressed to a lord or to a *gran maestro* ("great personage").²³ Here the relationship assumes an explicitly vertical configuration. The vocabulary makes it possible to observe how dependence is formulated in socially acceptable and honourable terms through the categories of trust, grace, advantage, honour, and debt.

Exordio bellissimo quando se volesse adimandare un servitio a uno signore o ad altro gram maestro dal quale se havesse anche altre obligationi.

Magnifice Domine mi singularissime. Perché credo non mancho voluntieri me exaudireti ale mie dimande che io vi saperò rechedere, et maxime havendo non mancho sempremai procurato ogni mia utilità et honore che io medesimo, per questo prenderò fiducia, considerando la passata experientia dal vostro caldo in mi amore, de rechederve una gratia la qual farà che l'animo mio serà contento, et oltre li grandi legami per li quali ve son obligatissimo me stringerà a tanto debito quanto me vorà adoperare la Signoria vostra, ala quale me racomando.²⁴

A very fine exordium for when one wished to ask a service of a lord or another great personage towards whom one already had other obligations.

Magnifice Domine mi singularissime. Since I believe that you will be no less willing to grant my requests than I shall be to make them, and especially since you have always looked after my advantage and honour no less than I myself have done, I shall therefore take courage,

²² A fuller version of the same model, incorporated into the *Formulario di petitioni, responsioni e repplicationi per Astorre II Manfredi*, makes this mechanism explicit. After reproducing the *exordium* examined here almost verbatim, Miniature recommends that the recipient favour the third party 'in modo ch'el cognosca la opinione che generalmente se ha del'amore et dilection vostra in me essere vera': B. Miniature, *Formulario di petitioni, responsioni e repplicationi per Astorre II Manfredi, signore di Faenza*, critical and digital edition by C. Amendola, Potenza, Basilicata University Press, 2022, mod. LXVII, pp. 176-177.

²³ The expression *gran maestro*, frequently used in the headings of the *Formulario*, designates a person who, by virtue of wealth and political power, occupies a prominent position within the community even in the absence of a formal institutional appointment: see *GDLI*, s.v. *maestro*, § 11; Amendola, *Bartolomeo Miniature*, cit., p. 396.

²⁴ Miniature, *Formulario per Giacomo Bolognini*, cit., mod. XXVII, pp. 246-247.

considering the past experience of your ardent love towards me, to ask you for a grace that will bring contentment to my mind and, beyond the great bonds by which I am already most deeply obliged to you, will bind me in so great a debt that your Lordship may make use of me as much as you wish; to your Lordship I commend myself.

The model teaches how to formulate a request while avoiding the appearance of a claim. The request is inserted within an already existing history of relations: in the past the recipient has promoted the sender's *utilità* ("advantage") and *honore* ("honour"); the experience of this benevolence now authorises *fiducia* ("trust"); trust in turn makes possible the request for a new *gratia* ("grace").

The request therefore does not derive from an abstract right possessed by the sender, but from the continuity of a relationship. The *passata experientia* ("past experience") constitutes the evidence on which present trust is founded. The recipient has already demonstrated his *caldo [...] amore* ("ardent love"), and the new request is presented as a natural consequence of that disposition. Here too, the force of the argument lies in the capacity to connect the action requested with previous conduct.

The word *gratia* ("grace") assumes a precise political value. It designates personal favour within a hierarchical relationship, as an act through which the superior confirms his capacity for protection and renews the order of the relationship. The person who grants grace manifests his superiority; the person who receives it acknowledges his position of dependence. The request is thus inscribed within the existing hierarchy and contributes to reaffirming it. Dependence is nevertheless ennobled through the vocabulary of *honore* ("honour"). The recipient has secured for the sender a material advantage accompanied by social recognition. The beneficiary therefore presents himself as someone already situated within a regulated relationship of protection, benevolence, and recognition, within which the request assumes a socially codified form. The honour received makes subordination compatible with the dignity of the person making the request.

Here too, the semantics are entirely relational. *Fiducia* ("trust") arises from *passata experientia* ("past experience"); *gratia* ("grace") strengthens the *legami* ("bonds"); the bonds produce *obligatione* ("obligation"); obligation becomes *debito* ("debt"); debt generates a future readiness for service. Each term refers back to the preceding one and prepares the next, reconstructing within the brief space of the *exordium* the entire history of the relationship between the sender and his lord.

Particularly significant is the formula *me stringerà a tanto debito quanto me vorà adoperare la Signoria vostra* ("will bind me in so great a debt that your Lordship may make use of me as much as you wish"). The verb *stringere* ("to bind") names the binding force of the favour. *Debito* ("debt") thus prepares the way for *adoperare* ("to make use of"), that is, for the possibility that the lord may in future make use of the sender and his services. The new grace will increase an already existing obligation to the point of making the beneficiary available in a measure corresponding to the superior's will. The use of the verb *adoperare* ("to make use of") renders the structure of the relationship particularly explicit. Here the promise of gratitude is accompanied

by the concrete availability of the sender's own person. The favour thus becomes the foundation of future service, and dependence is represented as the legitimate outcome of protection previously exercised.

The concluding formula *ala quale me racomando* ("to whom I commend myself") finally places the sender once again under the recipient's authority. The verb *raccomandare* ("to commend"), which in the preceding model indicated intervention on behalf of a third party, here assumes a reflexive value: the sender entrusts himself to the protection of the superior. This variation too shows how the formulary organises the same lexical material according to the different positions occupied by the interlocutors.

The epistolary grammar thus makes visible the very structure of power: concession, debt, and service. The superior grants a *gratia* ("grace"), increasing his own prestige and capacity for protection; the beneficiary receives *utilità* ("advantage") and *honore* ("honour"), acknowledges the bond, and offers his availability in return. The letter does not itself create this relationship, but gives it a shared form through which it can be understood and socially legitimised.

A grammar of social life

Taken together, the three models make it possible to reconstruct, albeit, of course, through a very limited sample, a grammar of verbal behaviours activated within the social and political networks of the milieu to which the manual pertains. Although their conceptual nuclei differ, their functioning is analogous: each word acquires meaning within a relationship and contributes to determining its course.

In the first *exordium*, a freely granted benefit produces an obligation and transforms gratitude into a future readiness to act. In the second, friendship, made publicly recognisable, is activated through the letter and converted into an advantage for a third party. In the third, the grace requested from a superior increases the beneficiary's debt and prepares the way for service. In all three cases, the model gives linguistic form to a relational movement: from benefit to obligation, from friendship to mediation, from grace to service.

The *Formulario* thus teaches how to recognise rank, modulate distance, make proximity effective, convert favour into obligation, and affection into conduct. Mastery of this language marks one as belonging to a community capable of sharing the same signs of distinction and reciprocity. The vernacular letter becomes a space in which the elite recognises itself.

As we have seen, the function of the manual encompasses both the transmission of formal structures and the codification of linguistic conduct appropriate to different situations. The *exordia* teach how to begin a letter and organise its argument, while at the same time providing the words through which the sender can position himself within a hierarchy, declare or reactivate a relationship, and prompt the recipient to act according to shared rules.

The question posed at the outset – eclipse or persistence of the *ars dictaminis* in the fifteenth century? – thus finds an answer in the way the discipline historically redefines its functions. During the fifteenth century, the traditional art of *dictamen* continued to operate within changing contexts, reworking its heritage in response to the requirements of political and social writing.

Within the apparently peripheral field of vernacular treatise production, this transformation can be observed with particular clarity. The *dictamen* enters it as a body of knowledge already embedded in the uses of writing and intended for audiences who employed its forms in the everyday practice of social relations. Its persistence in the fifteenth century thus lies in its capacity to transfer a long-standing heritage into new contexts of use, making it a living part of vernacular culture.²⁵

²⁵ Amendola, *Bartolomeo Miniature*, cit., pp. 104-105; idem, ‘«Tanta suavità et dolceza»’, cit., pp. 101-113.