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# Teaching Preeminence in Renaissance Florence: Leonardo Bruni's Translation and Dedication of Pseudo-Aristotle's *Economics*

The Pseudo-Aristotelian *Economics,* written in the third century BC by an unknown author, describes the proper way to manage a household or an estate. The treatise is broken down into three books that cover topics from morality in business and in marriage, the role of women and wives, slavery, and the duties of a head of household. In ancient times, the text was rather obscure; it took a back seat to the more famous and highly disseminated works on economics, such as Xenophon's *Economics*. However, the text's obscurity did not stop Renaissance humanists from picking it up and using it to disseminate ancient ideas and even contemporaneous political agendas.

The renowned Florentine humanist Leonardo Bruni, "the father of modern history" and chancellor of Florence from 1410 – 1411 and again from 1427– 1444, dedicated a translation of Pseudo-Aristotle's *Economics* to Cosimo de' Medici in 1420. This translation was by far the most popular and reproduced version of the work. It was widely received and was extremely influential throughout Italy and Europe. Two hundred twenty three copies of the work exist today.[1] To modern scholars, this translation represents the beginning of the Italian humanists' interaction with newly readable Greek sources.[2] The text was among the first Greek documents Westerners embraced, studied, and translated into Latin or the vernacular of Renaissance Italy,

and thus, it played a significant role in the revival of the ancient Greek language amongst humanists, a language that was largely lost since the fall of the Roman Empire.

In addition to the translation's important place in the rediscovery of ancient Greek, this paper argues that the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Economics*, particularly the preface and explanatory notes attached to Book I, also represent the utilization of an important Roman source: Seneca the Younger. Seneca was well known and widely popular in Italian cities throughout the Renaissance; however, Seneca's usage and influence in Florence has thus far gone unnoticed. Modern historians have overlooked his presence in this piece, and elsewhere in Bruni's vast repertoire, because of their tendency to emphasize the significance of the humanist's study of the novel Greek documents and his adoption of Greek philosophies. Nevertheless, Bruni appears to have taken the opportunity to disseminate Senecan ideals when translating the *Economics*, particularly the idea that wealth and magnanimity (meaning here generosity and the greatness of spirit that accompanies it) grant an individual preeminence in society and government.

This paper also argues that the presence of Senecan rhetoric in the translation, coupled with its dedication to Cosimo de' Medici, represents political posturing on the part of Leonardo Bruni. This is because Seneca himself first used these philosophies now present in Bruni's translation to laud the Roman *princeps*, or preeminent one, a term used to identify the emperor, or the first citizen. Seneca also enlisted this type of rhetoric to justify the *princeps'* monarchical position in the Roman republic and it seems to have served a similar purpose in the Florentine republic of the Quattrocento. It served to inform and instruct Florentine citizens and politicians on the ideal qualities of leadership necessarily intertwined with wealth, qualities Cosimo de' Medici represented, as he facilitated Florence's transition from the guild-based medieval commune to Renaissance cultural hub of classical learning. It served to elevate its dedicatee

above the Florentine oligarchy in terms of his virtue. It advertised his preeminence and actually taught him ancient lessons on how to show preeminence in ways that align with the teachings of Seneca the Younger.

**Bruni and Seneca on Magnanimity, Power, and Preeminence**

**A.**

This first becomes apparent in the preface with the recurring Senecan theme of how one in possession of great wealth should exercise magnanimity to the benefit of the state. Bruni writes,

> *"It is the opinion of wise men that such enhancement of fortune is not blameworthy if it does not harm anyone. For riches can serve as an aid to such virtues as magnanimity and liberality, and they are useful to the republic" since "money . . . is necessary to maintain the state and safeguard our social existence."*[3]

These ideas were revolutionary to fifteenth century Italy. They signify the break between earlier fourteenth century thought, dominated by the idea that virtue came from poverty only, and the new thinking of Bruni's day that stressed the validity of the pursuit of wealth. However, their novelty to the Renaissance man does not mean they were wholly new.

This reasoning is almost identical to Seneca's, who says in *De Vita Beata* (*On the Happy Life)*, "What doubt can there be that the wise man has greater scope for displaying his powers if he is rich than if he is poor... wealth allows a spacious field of moderation, generosity, diligence, good organization and magnanimity?"[4] Both Bruni and Seneca consider magnanimity a critical virtue for a wealthy man to possess.

Furthermore, following Seneca's lead, Bruni inserts a lesson on how to be magnanimous, and thus, show preeminence. He actually *teaches* Cosimo the correct ways to do so through

Senecan theory in order to reap the greatest rewards. He writes in the notes attached to chapter six of the treatise,

"*Wealth will lend adornment and honor…if we make our outlays opportunely and gracefully. …[ These] will include…generosity to friends, and patronage of public events, such as circus games, gladiatorial shows, and public banquets, all of which, however, should be in proportion to and in keeping with the man's wealth.*"[5]

This is in line with a tenet of Seneca's political philosophy regarding magnanimity derived from *De Clementia (On Mercy)*, a work designed to advertise the *princeps'* virtues and to justify his rule. Magnanimity, Seneca argues, is a virtue because, in providing for the community, the *princeps*, "deprives himself of what he bestows upon another."[6] The rich and magnanimous man's great generosity enhances the citizens' world and simultaneously brings upon himself a certain honor that makes him *princeps*. In addition, the fact that this bit of information is not contained in the main body of the Bruni's *Economics*, but rather in the notes that accompany the chapter suggests that it was an addition of sorts, or a supplement, to the text he was translating; one that could have come only from his study of Seneca the Younger.

It seems that Bruni is touting this Senecan rhetoric to show Cosimo's ability to become the magnanimous father of the citizens of Florence or "*pater patriae," "*father of the fatherland." This is a title Florentine humanists suggested he receive in 1440, and one that was officially conferred upon him in 1464, the year of his death.[7] With his wealth and power, Bruni is emphasizing that Cosimo's abilities to provide for the people are paramount and they need to be exercised in a Senecan fashion in order achieve a certain "*honor*," a term that could be used here interchangeably with preeminence. Cosimo, the ideal wealthy citizen, had many opportunities to grow in power from these lessons.

**B.**

Another uniquely Senecan idea in the quote above from Bruni's notes on the *Economics* is his emphasis that all spending should be *"in proportion to and in keeping with the man's wealth.*"[8] Seneca, in his *De Beneficiis (On Benefits),* devotes an entire book to this subject. He writes in book two, "Let us never grant benefits which will come back to bring us shame. Since the essence of friendship is to treat your friend equally with yourself, you have to consider both at the same time" (15.1) … "We each must pay attention to our capacities and abilities, to avoid giving either more or less than we are able to give (15.3)."[9] Such a lesson was invaluable to Cosimo de' Medici as he embarked on his patronage and his building of political and economical alliances both in and outside of Florence. Undoubtedly, this was a factor in Bruni's calculated support.

Cosimo cultivated a widespread and diverse list of clients, both political and professional. He regularly had contact with heads of state, the papacy, and other powerful and illustrious figures. This political lifestyle required certain attention to prudence in the art of giving which, if kept in proportion to his wealth, could bring him and the city to great heights. It also suggests that Cosimo, wealthy as he was, should take the opportunity to outshine the rest of Florence's wealthy elite and thus become more magnanimous than the rest in order to rise in the political arena.

**C.**

Pseudo-Aristotle's text, besides Bruni's additions of course, ignores these practical and political values of the virtue-wealth relationship, and they are not found in any ancient texts beside those of Seneca the Younger. In fact, Bruni's usual sources, Cicero and the real Aristotle, both warn against seamlessly lauding the quality of magnanimity. They conclude that the connection between wealth, magnanimity and preeminence is a dangerous one to make. The

historian Peter Stacey points out that Cicero and Aristotle held the quality of magnanimity to be a "deeply ambivalent quality in a citizen," for fear of the moral and political repercussions this may have.[10]

Take for example, Aristotle's treatment of magnanimity in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. While he believes it could be a virtue, there is great danger attached to it as well. He warns about seeking preeminence through wealth, as believing wealth alone compliments magnanimity is erroneous. Too often, the man who seeks to enlarge his reputation with wealth becomes vain and loses his virtue.[11] Bruni appears to be crossing the line of vainness set by Aristotle in his cultivation of the idea of magnanimity. The whole argument in Bruni's *Economics* is based on the idea that wealth brings honor if one is magnanimous. The argument is reliant on excessive worth and the ability to show this. Nevertheless, the Senecan version of magnanimity is necessarily intertwined with what Aristotle considers to border "vainness," but Seneca, and thus Bruni, translates this characteristic into preeminence. Therefore, Bruni's idea of magnanimity as extant in the *Economics,* is Senecan not Aristotelian.

Cicero also discusses the magnanimous man in the first book of his *De Officiis* (*On Duties),* where he makes clear that magnanimity is indeed a dangerous quality. More so than Aristotle, Cicero fears the political ramifications of this quality. He writes,

> "*It is a hateful fact that loftiness and greatness of spirit all too easily give birth to willfulness and an excessive desire for pre-eminence [cupiditas principatus] … the more outstanding an individual is in greatness of spirit, the more he desires complete pre-eminence [princeps], or rather to be the sole ruler. …[S]uch men allow themselves to be defeated neither by argument nor by any public or legal obligation. Only too often do they emerge in public life as bribers and agitators, seeking to acquire as much wealth as possible, preferring violent pre-eminence to equality through justice.*"[12]

The magnanimous man, more often than not, desires recognition for his generosity and greatness, and in fact, this is what Bruni was trying to achieve for Cosimo in the *Economics*. Cicero also

believes that a man attempts to gain this recognition in order to become preeminent, to become *princeps*. This was, in fact, Bruni's goal as well, to make Cosimo preeminent. To meet these goals, Bruni chose to insert Senecan philosophy over the Ciceronian and Aristotelian in the Pseudo-Aristotle's *Economics*. He hoped to see a Medici regime come to fruition in the near future.

**Conclusions**

Although the text is a primary example of humanist interaction with the Greek language, these lessons given to Cosimo de' Medici reveal the presence of a Roman source that was immensely popular throughout Italy. However, scholars, until now, have largely ignored the usage of Seneca in Florence, a city that has been deemed the territory of Cicero and Aristotle. I have shown Bruni worked to cultivate and display the text's dedicatee's political preeminence by his usage of Senecan theory. He instructed Cosimo on the utility of magnanimity and wealth, a lesson that is appropriate for one who is *princeps*. Cosimo was, after all, the vessel that made possible Florence's mission to mold itself in the image and likeness of ancient Rome through architecture and literature, and eventually, through government. It is not surprising, then, to see Bruni vying for the rule of a Florentine *princeps* in the person of Cosimo "*Pater Patriae*."[13]

Bruni's support is present despite the existence of an "unwritten rule" among the Florentine oligarchs that no one family in the "inner circle" should be preeminent and exercise more power over the others.[14] However, it appears that Cosimo had an undeniable advantage over the others thanks to his money and his rewarding relationship with the humanists, especially Leonardo Bruni. But as we have seen, no Greek text by itself could be used to cultivate and sell the preeminent qualities of Cosimo, "*Pater Patriae*," qualities which were intertwined with the pro-wealth philosophies of the pecunious stoic Seneca the Younger. It was only because Bruni

supplemented his translation of Pseudo-Aristotle's *Economics* with this Roman source that Cosimo had, according to one contemporary, "…a reputation such as probably no private citizen has ever enjoyed…[since]…the Fall of Rome…."[15] It also seems to have purveyed Cosimo's princely qualities fourteen years before he became "…king [of Florence] in everything but name" in 1434.[16]

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# Notes

[1]Xenophon. *Oeconomics*. Trans. Sarah B. Pomeroy. Clarendon Press, Oxford. 1994., 74.
[2] Manuel Chrysolaras came to Florence in 1397 and taught Greek. Bruni was among the first of his pupils.
[3] Hans Baron, *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism.* Vol. 1.Princeton University Press, 1988. 231.
[4] Seneca, Lucius Annaeus. *Dialogues and Essays*. Trans. John Davie. Oxford University Press, 2007. On Dialogues and Essays, *On the Happy Life* (*De vita beata*) 103
[5] Leonardo Bruni, *Economics*, in *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni: Selected Texts*, eds., Gordon Griffiths, James Hankins and David Thompson. Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1987. 317.
[6] See Seneca's *De Clementia* (*On Mercy*) in *Dialogues and Essays* Trans. John Davie, 2007. 208.
[7] See the humanist Bartolommeo Scala's "Letter of Consolation." In *Scala: Essays and Dialogues*. Ed. James Hankins. Trans. Renee Neu Watkins. I Tatti Renaissance Library. Harvard University Press, 2008. P. 190. Scala wrote a funeral oration for the death of Cosimo's brother Lorenzo, in which Lorenzo is called "*pater patriae*." I argue that one can deduce the humanist saw the whole Medici family, especially Cosimo, in a similar light at the time. This line of thought is similar to that of Marianne Pade's in *The Reception of Plutarch's Lives in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, Vol. 1. Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen. 267-68. Pade concludes that the humanist Antonio Pacini's translation and dedication of the *Life of Camillus* to Lorenzo was meant for Cosimo as well.
[8] Bruni, *Economics*, in Hankins, Griffiths, Thompson 317.
[9] Seneca. *On benefits*, Trans. Miriam Griffith and Brad Inwood, University of Chicago Press, 2011. 42
[10] Peter Stacey. *Roman Monarchy and the Renaissance Prince*. Cambridge University Press, 2012. 27.
[11] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV. Ch. 3. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.4.iv.html>
[12] Peter Stacey, *Roman Monarchy and the Renaissance Prince*, 27.
[13] "The coup of 1434," Cosimo becomes the sole ruler of Florence. See Hibbert, Christopher. *The Rise and Fall of the House of the Medici*. 1974. Allen Lane/Penguin, p, 63. Aeneas Silvius Piccolominisaid this.
[14] John Najemy. *A History of Florence 1200 - 1575*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006., 186.
[15] Francesco Guiccidardini said this. See Hibbert, 63.
[16] "The coup of 1434," Cosimo becomes the sole ruler of Florence. See Hibbert, 63. Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini said this.