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Introduction

THE NAME OF Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) immediately conjures up in the reader’s mind a number of visual images: his bronze self-portrait (Fig. 1), Matteo de’ Pasti’s medal with Alberti’s portrait on one side (Fig. 2), and on the obverse his logo of the mysterious winged eye with its equally puzzling motto “Quid tum?” (“What then?”) (Fig. 3). In addition, his name evokes a number of beautiful Renaissance buildings he designed in Italian cities such as Rimini, Florence, and Mantua (Figs. 4, 5, and 6). Because of his achievements as an art theorist and architect, and because of Burckhardt’s influential myth of Alberti as a “Renaissance or Universal Man”, it is sometimes forgotten that Alberti was simply one of the most prolific and original writers of the Italian Renaissance: he composed around forty works, in both Latin and the Italian vernacular.

This book focuses on Alberti the author and humanist. He wrote four lengthy philosophical dialogues in his native Tuscan (plus some shorter ones), six humorous works in Latin (including a comedy and a lengthy novel), six treatises on the arts and mathematical subjects, and a dozen or so shorter treatises in Latin dealing with a wide range of subjects from the duties of a bishop to the care of horses, as well as two mock encomia of his dog and a fly and the first early modern autobiography. In his native vernacular he also left us about six brief prose works on questions of love, a small corpus of around twenty poems (sonnets, sestinas, elegies), and a short grammar of the Tuscan language. In this volume I will be talking about one specific aspect of this famously multifaceted personality, namely his literary writings in the two languages: these works are plentiful enough on their own to justify a whole book on them.

Apart from his prolific output of literary works and treatises, he was one of the most avid humanists of his time, reading widely in both canonical and



FIG. 1. Leon Battista Alberti, *Self-portrait*, c. 1435.
Bronze (20,1 × 13,6 cm). Washington, D.C., National
Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection. 1957.14.125.
Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

newly discovered classical texts, which he would then reuse in his own compositions. Alberti had probably read more extensively in the canon of ancient works than any of his predecessors or contemporaries in the humanist movement. So this volume will deal with these two remarkable features of Alberti: the prolific writer and the avant-garde humanist.

One of the aims of this study is to do justice to his significance as a writer, and thus to explore below the tip of the Alberti iceberg. Up until recent times, only one or two of his texts had become famous as objects of serious academic study: his vernacular dialogue *Della famiglia* (*On Family Life*) was often cited by historians for what it says about new Renaissance ideals of education, or the mix of capitalist mentalities and feudal family structures in fifteenth-century Italy; his technical treatises on painting,



FIG. 2. Matteo de' Pasti, *Leo Baptista Albertus*, c. 1446–50. Bronze medal (obverse: Ø 9,34 cm). Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection. 1957.14.648.a. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

sculpture, and architecture were regularly studied by art and architectural historians for what they tell us about the theory and practice of those arts in the mid-Quattrocento. Scholarship on Alberti has privileged these partial perspectives and has ignored the fact that he was both a prolific writer of literary texts and an obsessive consumer of classical texts. The Burckhardtian emphasis on Alberti as a “Renaissance man” has been criticized from many quarters and has certainly produced at least one negative effect, in that it has eclipsed the sophistication and growth of Alberti as a writer of literature, so that many of his literary works remain unread.

In addition to counteracting the partializing image of Alberti that has dominated scholarship, a second aim of this volume is to study what precisely Alberti read and show how this reading was turned into the mosaic (the image is his) of his writing. What the humanist read often explains what he wrote. These two aims are reflected in the title of this book on Alberti the writer and humanist, a title which also echoes that of a seminal



FIG. 3. Matteo de' Pasti, *Leo Baptista Albertus*, c. 1446–50. Bronze medal (reverse: Ø 9,34 cm). Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection. 1957.14.648.b. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Italian work by Giovanni Ponte, one of the pioneers of Alberti studies in the last century.¹

Why write a book on Alberti now? One reason is that the figure and status of Alberti have changed dramatically in recent years. For a long time he was considered in literary terms as a “minor” author, when such adjectives were used in discussing the canon, but he is now recognized as a major protagonist and experimentalist in the literary scene of early Renaissance Italy.² This radical alteration in Alberti’s fortunes began at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, especially after the several exhibitions and many conferences that were held for the sixth centenary of Alberti’s birth, in 2004: a plethora of publications flowed from those celebrations, as we will see later in this introduction. This change of perspective is due partly to the striking relevance of this eclectic writer to our own times, a period when in the humanities the interdisciplinary dimension and the emphasis on originality and creativity have become more and more

pronounced. In addition, his broadly secular outlook and his interest in not just literature but also in mathematics and the arts appeal to the sensibilities of our times. His precociousness in many fields is equally remarkable: he was the first humanist not just to write an architectural treatise but also to become a practising architect; his openness to other disciplines is in evidence in many works, and it is not surprising that he is enthusiastic about the new technology of print, which he expresses at the start of another original work, the treatise on writing in secret codes (*De componendis cyfris*).³ So Alberti is at the start of an epistemological revolution, which is reflected in his then revolutionary decision to commit himself to writing serious works in the vernacular as much as in Latin. Also unusual for the time was his interest in all forms of work: as a recent critic put it, in Alberti's writings "craftsmanship and the mechanical arts emerge in an unusually noble light for the times".⁴ So Alberti is, in these and many other respects, a figure who was decidedly ahead of his time.

The change in his status was also sparked by the remarkable rise in the last quarter century of new editions and translations of his works, which in turn inspired an avalanche of books and articles of secondary criticism, mostly in Italy of course but also in several European countries and in the Anglo-American world. When one considers the large number of all these new editions, translations, and critical works, it is right to say, as Roberto Cardini noted some years ago, that more work has been published on Alberti in the last twenty-five years than in the preceding five centuries.

Naturally most of the indications of the recent growth of interest in Alberti are in evidence in Italy, starting with the first volumes in the major enterprise that is the Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Leon Battista Alberti, which began to appear in 2004, under the general editorship of Roberto Cardini, aided by Mariangela Regoliosi and others.⁵ The centenary celebrations included many conferences which in turn produced several volumes of proceedings.⁶ Another key milestone was the monumental edition, again by Cardini, of nearly all of Alberti's Latin literary compositions in one volume.⁷ Outside these initiatives, a number of recent editions of individual works have been published in Italy.⁸ Furthermore the series of centenary and other exhibitions have produced substantial catalogues, which have thrown up significant discoveries.⁹

Equally important is the huge amount of scholarly interest shown in the author internationally. In this context one should mention: the foundation of an international association, La Société Internationale Leon Battista Alberti (SILBA); the creation of two websites devoted to the writer;¹⁰ the founding of a new journal *Albertiana* (by Francesco Furlan in 1998);¹¹

and the first volumes in the planned publication of all of Alberti's works with French translations by Les Belles Lettres.¹²

It is no accident, then, that the critical bibliography of secondary works on the writer should reflect this change of gear. For a long time, the only Italian monograph on Alberti the writer was the useful but rather brief volume by Giovanni Ponte.¹³ Other such studies were helpful but brief or limited in scope.¹⁴ By contrast, starting in the 1990s, critical analyses of Alberti's literary works began to increase exponentially, with works by Roberto Cardini,¹⁵ Stefano Borsi,¹⁶ Luca Boschetto,¹⁷ Rinaldo Rinaldi,¹⁸ and the late Guglielmo Gorni,¹⁹ as well as an important volume on Alberti's architecture by Francesco Paolo Fiore.²⁰

Again, when one looks at the international situation, the picture is similar. In France we have seen a substantial number of editions and translations of Alberti's works, both literary and technical.²¹ There has also been, from the start of the new century, a corresponding rise in recent critical studies of the writer by scholars based in France such as Nella Bianchi Ben-simon,²² Francesco Furlan,²³ and Michel Paoli.²⁴ In Germany a substantial book on *De re aedificatoria* was published by Hartmut Wulfram, who also edited an important volume on the *Intercenales* and one on the Latin redaction of *De pictura*; and more recently a German translation of the *Profugiorum ab erumna libri* was published, with a substantial commentary.²⁵

As for the Anglophone world, it too has witnessed a similar increase in the number of studies of the humanist. For almost three decades the only wide-ranging monograph in English was that of the American historian Joan Kelly Gadol in 1969.²⁶ This was followed, twenty years later, by two books on Alberti by architectural historians, one American, one British.²⁷ However, the volume which came closest to replacing Gadol's monograph in its attempt to cover both Alberti's literary and artistic interests was that by Anthony Grafton, which appeared in the millennium year.²⁸ Other American works were devoted to more specific topics, such as the book-length studies of philosophical issues in his works by Timothy Kircher and Charles Carman.²⁹ Further volumes dealt with both Alberti and other humanists, such as David Marsh's timely study of humour and the influence of Lucian on Alberti and others, and a fine volume on the mathematical dimension of our author and other humanists by Arielle Saiber.³⁰ As for British scholarship, there was a helpful republication of nearly thirty essays by Cecil Grayson in one volume in the late 1990s;³¹ in 2016, the present author published a book of essays in Italian, some of which have been translated and updated for this volume;³² and in 2022 Caspar Pearson's excellent biography appeared.³³

There have also been a number of English translations of individual pieces: even before 2000 scholars in the United States had produced versions of major Latin works, such as the *Intercenales*, *De re aedificatoria*, and *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*.³⁴ After 2000 there has been an English edition of Alberti's mathematical works edited by American scholars;³⁵ and in a joint publication between the United States and the UK, a new copiously illustrated translation of the treatise on painting was published by Cambridge University Press.³⁶ Lastly, a considerable contribution has been made by Harvard's prestigious I Tatti Renaissance Library series, each volume with an up-to-date Latin text, English translation, and notes: the series produced first *Momus* in 2003, then an edition of the *Philodoxeos fabula* in 2005.³⁷ More recently the same series has published a selection of five of Alberti's biographical and autobiographical writings, and a new translation of the *Intercenales* is also forthcoming in the United States.³⁸

So the present volume situates itself in this epoch of an unparalleled Alberti revival and I am naturally grateful to the many Alberti experts whose works I mention and which have guided me in writing this study. As the title of the volume suggests, it concentrates on two main elements, Alberti the prolific writer and the extraordinarily widely read humanist. It charts his authorial development from his first Latin work, a rather stiff but still quite humorous version of a Terentian comedy, through the three major philosophical dialogues in the vernacular, then the two main technical treatises on painting and architecture, and finally two major humorous works, the collection of short Latin tales, the *Intercenales*, and the lengthy satirical novel (also in Latin), *Momus*. One of the aspects that impresses the reader of Alberti is the sheer number of works and the vast range of subjects that characterize his output. The other strand in the book, Alberti's humanism, is equally striking: even in his earliest compositions he shows he has read not just the main works in the Latin canon but particularly the new discoveries that humanists eagerly passed to each other, such as Cicero's rhetorical works discovered in 1421, *De oratore*, *Orator*, and *Brutus*, and "new" comic authors such as Plautus and Martial; he also mentions in the early *De commodis* two Greek writers, Isocrates and Plutarch (though he probably did not read them in the original at this stage). These two areas of novelty, humorous works and Greek texts, would remain passions of his throughout his life: it is no surprise that the Greek satirist Lucian becomes a major influence in his later works. And Alberti was surely the first to provide substantial quotations from Herodotus,

Aeschylus, and Euripides in the Italian vernacular. The two strands of the writer and the humanist which the book pursues are of course not separate: the same kind of drive for novelty characterizes both the variety of subjects that Alberti writes on and the unparalleled range of texts that he read in Latin and Greek; and of course the humanist passion for imitation is evident everywhere in Alberti: time and again what Alberti wrote can be explained by what he read.

It has not been possible in this volume to cover the entirety of Alberti's vast and highly varied output of literary works. There is no separate chapter, for instance, on his four brief amatory compositions in the vernacular (*Ecatonfilea*, *Deifira*, *De amore*, and *Sofrona*, all written between 1434 and 1438), nor on his small corpus of about twenty poems in the *volgare*.³⁹ These short prose works all concern the negative effects of being in love and are characterized on the whole by misogynistic attacks on women as lovers. Perhaps the one text that stands out is *Ecatonfilea* (September–December 1438).⁴⁰ It is certainly the longest of these works, and the one that was most popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in terms of printed editions and translations.⁴¹ It is a twenty-page prose monologue in which the eponymous protagonist (her name means the woman of a hundred lovers) advises her younger female audience how to choose the most suitable lover and how to keep his love. The work is a vernacular *Ars amoris*, with some classical allusions and predictable echoes of both Boccaccio and Petrarch, but the most striking moment is when *Ecatonfilea* recalls her first and best lover. Her description of his superlative qualities makes us think not of a classical model but of Alberti's own description of himself in his autobiographical *Vita*. She claims that apart from his good looks and virtues, "he was quiet and modest but also clever with words and playful; outstanding in all his accomplishments, in fencing, riding, throwing the javelin, archery, but also highly skilled in music, literature, painting, sculpture and in every fine and noble art. In these and in many other spheres of excellence, he was in no way inferior to any who excelled in them".⁴² When Alberti is not quoting from classical authors, he is quoting from himself! But the rest of this and the other brief amatory works contain few references to the Latin love poets and are largely indebted to medieval traditions.

As for the author's few vernacular poems, his humanism emerges in the fact that here too, as in other works, he is keen to innovate and to transfer classical genres to the vernacular such as the elegy and the eclogue. The fact that the autobiographical *Vita* mentions explicitly both elegies and eclogues suggests he prized them for their originality.⁴³ As

Gorni observed, Alberti was the founder of the vernacular elegy as a genre in the *volgare*;⁴⁴ and Grayson noted over fifty years ago that Alberti's invention of the vernacular eclogue makes him a forerunner of the later Renaissance enthusiasm for vernacular pastoral and as an example of transferring genres from antiquity to the present, it is consonant with his other original gambits, such as organizing the Certame Coronario, adapting Latin metrical forms to vernacular verse,⁴⁵ and promoting ancient writers who wrote about the countryside, including Hesiod.⁴⁶ However, only two examples of vernacular elegies and one instance of a vernacular eclogue are to be found in his *rime*.

If the amatory works in prose and verse are not covered in this volume largely because of their brevity, the other major absentee is Alberti's substantial late dialogue, *De iciarchia* (1465). This omission is dictated partly by reasons of space, but it is also because in this volume on Alberti the writer and humanist, the classical dimension is almost totally absent from this work. In *De iciarchia* there are very brief mentions of Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great (*OV*, II, 190), the oracle of Apollo (II, 199, 236), the Pythagoreans (II, 242), and Rome's Twelve Tables (II, 262–63). But in a dialogue of one hundred pages (*OV*, II, 187–286) this is a very small percentage of classical allusions compared to the onslaught of ancient references that pepper almost every page of his previous dialogues.

The book covers Alberti's major works. It is structured in four parts, each containing between two and four chapters. The first part, "Alberti's Life and Humanism", contains three chapters: the first on what we know about Alberti's life, the second on Burckhardt's influential myth of him as "Renaissance or Universal Man", and the third on the way Alberti's humanism developed and differed fundamentally from that of Petrarch and his own contemporaries. The second part, "The Early Latin Works", contains two chapters which examine the significance of the first pieces he wrote as he tried to find his voice in a range of genres: the Latin comedy, *Philodoxeos fabula* (1424; 1434–37), his moral treatise on the advantages and disadvantages of literary study (*De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*, 1428–32), and his early biography of St. Potitus (*Vita Sancti Potiti*, 1432–34). The third part, "Elevating the Vernacular", consists of three chapters which analyse three of his major dialogues in the Italian vernacular: *De familia* (1433–43), *Theogenius* (1440), and *Profugiorum ab erumna libri* (1441–47). These three dialogues were all written in the central and most prolific decade in his life (1433–43), and the three chapters underline Alberti's innovative commitment to elevating the status of his own vernacular, by using it to write in a prestige genre, the philosophical dialogue,

and by enhancing the language's standing with an ever-increasing amount of references to classical texts and culture. The "architecture" of this volume thus places his first and longest dialogue, *De familia*, in chapter 6, at the heart of the book. The fourth and final part, "Expanding the Confines of Latin", consists of four chapters that highlight how Alberti innovatively expanded the confines of the Latin language by deploying the twin strategy of writing extensive humorous works in that language, such as the large collection of short stories in the *Intercenales* (1430–43) and the substantial Latin novel *Momus* (1443–55); and of composing technical-artistic works, the most significant of which are the treatises on painting, *De pictura* (vernacular version in 1435–36; and the Latin redaction 1439–41), and the one on architecture, *De re aedificatoria* (1443–72).

In fact the whole volume may in a sense resemble one of Alberti's own church facades, such as that of Santa Maria Novella: the first three chapters on his life and humanism form the base (a bit like the lowest Gothic arches in the famous Dominican church in Florence); the next two chapters, on the early works, could be seen as the tall, rounded arches above the base; the three central chapters (6–8) on the vernacular dialogues are analogous to the central band of square patterns that stand above these lower orders; and the four final chapters, on the humorous and technical works in Latin, can be likened to the four pilasters just below the pediment.

Note

Six of the chapters that follow have appeared in print before, but all have been substantially revised, expanded, and updated:

Chapter 2 originally appeared as "Alberti and Burckhardt: The Construction of a Myth", *Albertiana*, n.s. 2, 20, no. 1 (2017): 145–63.

Chapter 3 as "Alberti and the Redirection of Renaissance Humanism", *Proceedings of the British Academy: 2009 Lectures* 167 (2010): 25–59.

Chapter 6 as "Unité thématique et structurelle dans le *De familia* d'Alberti", in "*Les Livres de la famille*" d'Alberti: *Sources, sens et influence*, ed. Michel Paoli et al. (Paris: Garnier, 2013), 177–203.

Chapter 7 as "Pessimismo stoico e cultura classica nel *Theogenius* dell'Alberti", in *Leon Battista Alberti: Actes du Congrès international "Gli Este e l'Alberti: Tempo e misura,"* Ferrara, 29. xi–3. xii. 2004, ed. Francesco Furlan and Gianni Venturi, 2 vols., special issue of *Schifanoia* 30–31 (Pisa-Rome: Serra, 2010), 1:131–43.

Chapter 9 as “Bilinguismo e strategie retoriche nel *De Pictura* dell’Alberti”, in *Leon Battista Alberti teorico delle arti e gli impegni civili del “De re ædificatoria”, Atti dei Convegni internazionali del Comitato Nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti, Mantova, 17–19 ottobre 2002/Mantova, 23–25 ottobre 2003*, 2 vols., ed. Arturo Calzona, Francesco Paolo Fiore, Alberto Tenenti, and Cesare Vasoli (Florence: Olschki, 2007), 1:203–23.

Chapter 12 as “Tradizione letteraria e originalità del pensiero nel *De Re Aedificatoria* dell’Alberti”, in *Leon Battista Alberti teorico delle arti e gli impegni civili del “De re ædificatoria”, Atti dei Convegni internazionali del Comitato Nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti, Mantova, 17–19 ottobre 2002/Mantova, 23–25 ottobre 2003*, 2 vols., ed. Arturo Calzona, Francesco Paolo Fiore, Alberto Tenenti, and Cesare Vasoli (Florence: Olschki, 2007), 1:451–69. A slightly modified version of the chapter has recently appeared in *Brill’s Companion to Vitruvius*, ed. Ingrid D. Rowland and Sinclair W. Bell (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 163–83.

Chapters 3, 6, 7, and 12 also appeared in a collection of essays in Italian: Martin McLaughlin, *Leon Battista Alberti: La vita, l’umanesimo, le opere letterarie* (Florence: Olschki, 2016).

Translations

In what follows, all English translations from Alberti’s Latin and vernacular works are my own, except where otherwise indicated. English translations from the *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*, *Vita S. Potiti*, and *Vita* in this volume are taken from the recently published book: Leon Battista Alberti, *Biographical and Autobiographical Writings*, ed. and trans. Martin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023). All English translations from classical texts are from the Loeb Classical Library, with references supplied in the notes.

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