CHAPTER 4

Petrus Crinitus and Ancient Latin Poetry

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The late fifteenth and early sixteenth century in Florence, from roughly 1490 to 1510, is a period notable for many reasons. The end of Medici rule, the Savonarolan ascendancy, and the beginning of the Italian wars mark this time as an important period of transition. As to intellectual life, it is noteworthy (among many other developments) that, by the end of the fifteenth century, almost all of the primary textual resources currently available to study the ancient world had been discovered. The time had come to consolidate these gains, to find ways to order them, and to create the resources that would thenceforth be used to address the study of the classical world.

A figure emblematic of this moment is Pietro del Riccio Baldi, more commonly known by his Latinized name, Petrus Crinitus. The fifth of nine children, Crinitus was born in 1474, and he fast became a precocious young scholar, studying with Paolo Sassi da Ronciglione, the (now) controversial teacher of Niccolò Machiavelli. Crinitus also studied with Ugolino Verino (1438–1516), before passing to the circle of Angelo Poliziano (1454–94), before passing to the circle of Angelo Poliziano (1454–94). Crinitus became not

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3 There are letters from Verino to Crinitus in ms Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 2621; and in his De illustracione urbis florentinae libri tres (Paris: Stephanus, 1583), 11, 14. Verino speaks of...
only Poliziano’s main pupil in Florence, but also, effectively, Poliziano’s literary executor. He edited Poliziano’s letters and other work and committed the text, to Aldo Manuzio, that became Poliziano’s still used, un-paginated Complete Works. Crinitus died relatively young, in 1507, at the age of thirty-three. Crinitus’s connection with Poliziano is important for two reasons. First, Crinitus internalized Poliziano’s comprehensive vision of what an authentically engaged scholar should do. Poliziano sketched out, in his Lamia, what he saw as the competency of the grammaticus, “grammarian” or even “philologist.” This term typically designated a teacher of grammar (through the study of poetry), but for Poliziano it represented much more. For Poliziano, the term grammaticus indicated a scholar who was both unafraid to read widely and not imprisoned by traditional disciplinary boundaries. Crinitus inherited this passion to address many traditionally distinct genres of written culture from his beloved mentor, and he had evolved a plan to pursue this aim.

Second, Crinitus represents the next phase in this evolution. Poliziano, Crinitus’s mentor, had written the manifestoes, fought the battles, and encompassed the past century’s struggles. But Crinitus’s oeuvre (both the works he brought to completion and those he intended to write) signals a generational transition. Once this transition is noticed, it seems as clear in its own right as the generational transition that David Quint, in his study of Bruni’s Dialogues, highlighted in the era of Leonardo Bruni. To understand this moment of transition, we need to look at Crinitus’s intended sequence of works, only three of which he was able to complete.

We find the list of these intended works in the letter of presentation attached to Crinitus’s De honesta disciplina, the work for which Crinitus is best known. It represents well the type of literary composition that so intrigued the

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4 Angelo Poliziano, Opera Omnia (Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1498).