Sometime between 1485 and 1491, the humanists Angelo Poliziano (1454–94) and Paolo Cortesi (1465–1510) engaged in an exchange of letters that, among scholars of Neo-Latin, has become well known. Cortesi, in his early twenties, had sent Poliziano (who was a decade older) a book in which he had collected his own letters, which he hoped to publish. In doing so, Cortesi partook of the familiar humanist custom of sending one’s work to a respected colleague to obtain his judgment. It is difficult to forget how Poliziano opened his letter to Cortesi, in which he confessed that Cortesi’s letters were not pleasing to him, redolent as they seemed of too excessive an imitation of Cicero: ‘I am sending back the letters that, in your earnestness, you gathered together. If I may speak freely, I am ashamed to have spent my good time so poorly’. Cortesi’s shortfall? ‘As I have understood you, you are unaccustomed to approve any style of writing that does not portray Cicero’s features’.1

Cortesi replied, beginning his own letter no less memorably: ‘Nothing has ever happened that was so far beyond my imagining than your returning my book of letters’.2

What followed, in Cortesi’s letter, represented the simplest, most realistic, and ultimately the most cogent defense of a flexible Ciceronianism seen in the Renaissance.3 In Italy, this set of ideas signified both the end of the dream of a truly vital, creative Latin prose, and the beginnings of the adoption of classicizing standards in an Italian prose whose essential features were just then beginning to be the objects of sustained study. At stake in this debate were questions that reflected, by then, almost two centuries of striving, research, and exposition about the language question in Italy. What were the key features of this debate? How and among whom were they expressed in the most significant ways? Where were the most important centers of discussion?

Returning to Poliziano and Cortesi, it is useful to highlight their different social circumstances and traditions. Poliziano rose to prominence by his individual skill and talent, gaining a professorship at the Florentine university in 1480. He came from relatively humble circumstances, and for him, the search for academic and social distinction always remained tied to his work. Poliziano’s ethos in that respect was rigorous: both sides of the ancient heritage, the Latin and the Greek, were important. Poliziano represents the Renaissance fulfillment of Leonardo Bruni’s ideal of the perfect translator—who would fully know both languages and all the ‘lines and colors’ of the authors under discussion—even as he anticipates more than any other fifteenth-century figure the theory of comprehensive knowledge of antiquity which animated the pursuits of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philologists, such as

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2 Cortesi, in Garin, (note 1) 904: ‘Nihil unquam mihi tam praeter opinionem meam accidit, quam redditus a te liber epistolarum nostrarum’.