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Review of Angelo Poliziano’s Lamia: Text, Translation, and Introductory Studies

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Virginia H. Aksan's "Ottoman Military Power in the Eighteenth Century" reviews the relatively favorable recent estimates of Ottoman strength in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but goes on to show that by the eve of the disastrous Russian war in 1768 the Ottoman military system was already in serious decay, largely for familiar reasons such as the transformation of the janissaries from effective infantry into a class of unruly and largely unmilitary craftsmen as well as the decentralization of power among local elites. This provides a sharp contrast to the more effective earlier Ottomans described by Palfy.

Overall, the collection gives valuable background in eastern European developments chiefly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially in the campaigns along the Russian and Austrian borders. Many scholars familiar with western European military developments in this period will find evidence in this book that eastern Europe was by no means as backward as some earlier writers supposed.

There is a detailed map of the Habsburg defense system described by Palfy and a very small map illustrating the campaigns of Sahib Geral Khan. A few more maps might have been useful for readers unfamiliar with eastern Europe in this era. There are a number of technical errors and awkward locutions, but the errors are not numerous enough to detract seriously from the quality of this useful book.

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Christopher Celenza's edited volume presents a Latin edition and English facing-page translation of Poliziano's Lamia in addition to four introductory essays. Readers of Celenza's two previous English translations of hard-to-access humanist works—Lapo da Castiglionchio the Younger's De curiae commodis (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999) and Giovanni Nesli's Symbolum nesianum (Leiden: Brill, 2001)—will find here another interesting text from the Lost Italian Renaissance. In this case, some thirty years ago Ari Wesseling published a version of the Lamia (Leiden: Brill, 1986), which Celenza's Latin edition follows with minor changes, while Celenza's lively English translation makes the text accessible to English readers for the first time. The four introductory essays provide a number of interpretations primarily from the tradition of the history of ideas. The book will appeal to scholars of the intellectual and educational history of the Italian Renaissance and the history of philosophy more broadly.

Angelo Poliziano was a leading humanist in Lorenzo de' Medici's Florence. Poliziano was brought into the household of Lorenzo as a secretary and tutor for the Medici children in the early 1470s. Poliziano began teaching at the Florentine university (studio) in 1480 and continued there until his death—possibly caused by arsenic poisoning—in 1494. Each university course began with an opening lecture, called a praelection, which usually introduced students to the author to be discussed. In the early 1480s Poliziano lectured on poetry and oratory—Poliziano's recently published and translated Silvae (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) were the opening remarks for several of these early courses. A decade later Poliziano moved on to the works of Aristotle. After treating Aristotle's Ethics in 1490–91 and several books concerning logic in 1492–93, Poliziano offered a course on Aristotle's Prior Analytics for the 1492–93 academic year. The Lamia was the praelection that began this latter course.
The *Lamia* is framed as a response to Poliziano's critics who had accused him of teaching outside of his academic specialty and falsely claiming to be a philosopher. Poliziano painted his accusers as "lamias," a derogatory word for people concerned about the faults of others while taking no account of their own. The majority of the speech follows three carefully delineated points: what a philosopher is, whether it is good or bad to be a philosopher, and whether Poliziano could claim that title. First, Poliziano defined "philosopher," a discussion that focuses on accounts of the ancient thinker Pythagoras. Philosophers, he concluded, were students of all things; they were, in fact, "lovers of truth (veritatis amatores)" (210–11). Moving on to his second point, Poliziano argued that the study of philosophy was the only road to true happiness. This discussion contained a fascinating description of the contemplative life, in which the philosopher is such a recluse that "he doesn't even know his own neighbor (nec vicinum quidem suum cognoscit)" (230–31). These passages seem particularly powerful given the focus of recent historians of Renaissance Florence on the strengths of neighborhood bonds and civic humanism. The speech concluded with Poliziano's claim to be a "philologist (grammaticum)" rather than a philosopher. In essence, Poliziano argued that he was a commentator on the works of others, in this case the philosopher Aristotle, and that being a commentator on a subject did not make a person a practitioner of that subject.

The four introductory essays approach the text primarily from the point of view of the history of philosophy. Christopher Celenza begins by situating the *Lamia* into Poliziano's biography and the ideas prevalent among Poliziano's contemporaries. Next, Francesco Caruso's contribution places the *Lamia* into the intellectual lineage of John of Salisbury's *Metalogicon* and Petrarch's well-known *On his own ignorance and that of many others*, both invectives within the tradition of the sometimes polemical relationship between scholasticism and humanism. Igor Candido contextualizes the *Lamia* into near-contemporary discussions on language and philosophy as well as the order of disciplines. Finally, Denis J.-J. Robichaud provides a detailed analysis of the conceptions of "philosopher" and "philologist" present in the *Lamia*, concluding that Poliziano's interdisciplinary philology posed a threat—hence the criticisms lodged against him—to the more regimented philosophy of the fifteenth century.

This book opens access to an interesting short text by one of the great humanists of the fifteenth century. The essays make a strong case for the significance of the text for the history of ideas. Moreover, the book opens up new avenues of research on the social and educational context of the *Lamia*. Poliziano appears to have couched previous *praelectiones* into responses to unspecified critics. It might be interesting to look at the political, social, and educational backgrounds of the people employed at the Florentine *studio* in the 1480s and early 1490s to add further layers to Poliziano's polemical work, especially given the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent—Poliziano's primary patron—just months before. Comparative studies of the *Lamia* with other *praelectiones* might also reveal areas where the *Lamia* followed typical generic patterns and where it broke new ground. The text lends itself to all these questions and more; what makes it such an exciting time to be a historian of the Italian Renaissance today is the continuing appearance of interesting, little-known texts, each of which opens innumerable paths for future inquiry from all historical points of view. Thanks to Celenza and the contributors to this volume, all kinds of historians, regardless of their skill in Latin, have a fascinating newly accessible text to use in their studies.