FLUMEN SAPIENTIAE

STUDI SUL PENSIERO MEDIEVALE

14

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La *sapientia* medievale, nella sua molteplicità, fluisce in un unico *flumen* ininterrotto dalla tarda Antichità al Rinascimento. Valorizzando la pluralità di temi e di tradizioni del sapere medievale, la collana contribuisce allo sviluppo degli studi di Storia della filosofia medievale, ospitando lavori monografici, collettivi ed edizioni critiche inerenti alla filosofia e alla teologia medievali.

Le pubblicazioni della collana sono sottoposte anonimamente alla valutazione di almeno due specialisti del settore.

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Ad placitum
Pour Irène Rosier-Catach

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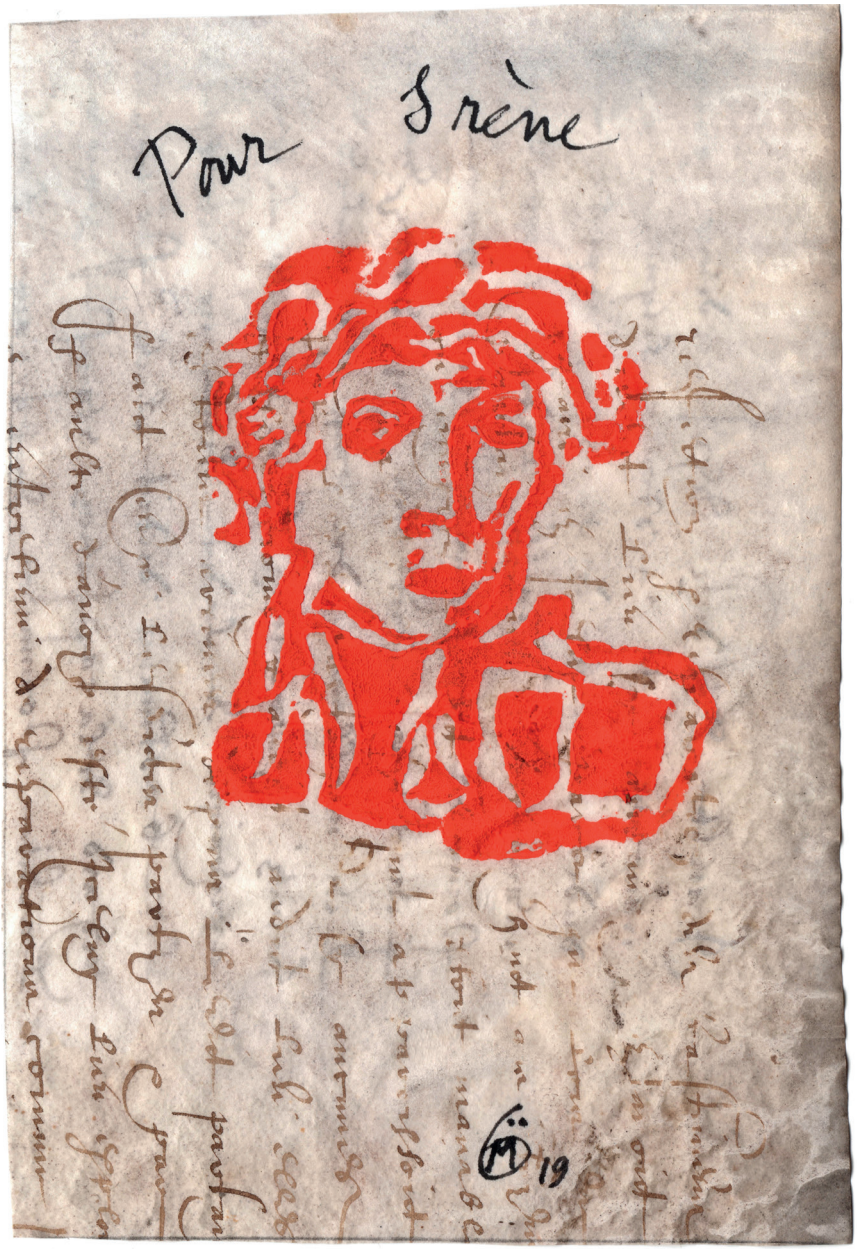

Denis Monfleur, *Pour Irène*
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Très chère Irène,
Ce livre est un bouquet. Ses fleurs des mots, des images, des pensées. Le bon plaisir de chacun a déterminé la constellation des essences, des couleurs et des parfums. Amies et amis, élèves, collègues – toutes et tous nous avons eu (et avons toujours) l'immense privilège de te lire, de te côtoyer, de nous laisser instruire et inspirer par ton œuvre et ta générosité. La *collectio* que nous avons le plaisir de t'offrir aujourd'hui a quelque chose d'atypique, de profondément personnel, et donc d'inclassable. C'est aussi ce qui en fait la richesse et la beauté. Un hommage à l'image de sa destinataire, en somme, un signe pluriel – *ad complexum placitum* – de notre reconnaissance et de notre affection.

Hoc est liber tuus

A. A. F. L. L.

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Walking with Words

Gadi Algazi*

It is a common scholarly practice, as we develop concepts, to delve into layers of meaning sedimented in words, common or rare – a true act of *inventio* in which discovering and inventing cannot quite be distinguished. It is usually taken for granted, however, at least in the study of European history, that some languages are especially good to think with: Greek and Latin, of course, but certainly the great national languages and their literatures. We are thus happy to find that past meanings can serve as reliable guides to long-term and hardly documented historical processes. For instance, as Norbert Elias pointed out long ago in the *Process of Civilization*, the origins of "courtoisie" and "courtliness" (the word and perhaps the phenomenon) can be found at the court, *cour*, *curtis*, and even their sister (or aunt), German "Höflichkeit", can be traced back to the *Hof*. The result – courtliness as an analytic concept, delimiting a field of historical inquiry – would then be a hybrid product, at once *objet trouvé* and self-forged tool.

This use of etymology is in many ways a form of genealogy: It is selective, shaped by the retrospective search for memorable, honourable ancestors. It hence tends to ignore marginal kin, non-marrying sisters, and, more fundamentally, layers of social relationships between historical actors not captured by a neat and reductive genealogical diagram. Some significant practices do not have special terms to designate them. Some ubiquitous social contexts have left few written traces. We may miss them altogether when we trust some words to guide us. What would happen, for instance, if

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rules of politeness and forms of self-discipline, as Stephen Jaeger argued, could be traced back to medieval "courtly bishops" with their monastic and classical traditions of regulating behaviour, rather than to worldly princely courts? The historical process through which courtliness was shaped would be messier. A clear ancestry, safely tracked through a prominent word, would have to make place for real family histories – quarrelsome, knotty, unwieldy.

What would happen if we would seriously take into consideration the heterogeneity of medieval cultures, for instance, if when reconstructing the emergence of binding rules of social interaction in face-to-face societies combining reciprocal control and interdependence – rather than confine ourselves to aristocratic courts, we would think about similar constraints governing life in villages? Would we still be able to claim with confidence that rules of politeness and the minute regulation of social interactions emerged from no other social site than court societies? That might lead us to rethink our assumptions about the vectors of cultural change, but also the uncritical identification of the regulation of behaviour with the formulation of codified rules. That would also mean resisting the temptation to follow the too visible, linguistically encoded (and socially privileged) trace.

But even with the words of the past to guide us, we might take another path and rather than confine ourselves to hegemonic repertoires, consider a broader range of medieval languages and registers. What would happen, for example, if we would look into terms for courtly, polite behaviour in medieval Arabic or Hebrew – would they suggest alternative hypotheses, contexts, connotations? We could take our lead from Arabic *adab* – not just polite behaviour but the whole set of competences worthy of a civilized person – embedded in a far more literate medieval culture. In late antique and medieval Hebrew, we would first encounter a loan word: *nimus*, derived from Greek *nomos*. It denotes laws and rules considered binding without being religiously sanctioned, and sometimes associated with princely behaviour. In its vicinity lies *ginunim*, used since Talmudic times especially for kingly rites and observances (my historical dictionary does not say where the word came from).

They still do not get us very far, pointing to binding rules of behaviour associated with the company of the powerful.

But there are two terms we might want to look into: *halikhot* – "manners, the proper way to behave", but literally "walking, the way to walk", a way of moving about, as "walking" stands metonymically for a whole way of behaviour ("walk before God", "to walk in God's way"). The other expression, the nearest equivalent to courtly, proper behaviour is a composite referring to the way itself: *derekh eretz*, "the way of the land", the way people ought to conduct themselves considering the place, the time and their social position, their particular walk of life.

We thus end up with two expressions, the way and the walk, far closer to *conduct* and *conduit* than to courtliness, both connoting movement within a varied social landscape, but not courtly contexts. Which way would they lead us?