

JOHN MONFASANI (ed.), *Liber Defensionum contra Obiectiones in Platonem: Cardinal Bessarion's Own Latin Translation of His Greek Defense of Plato against George of Trebizond* (Byzantinisches Archiv – Series Philosophica 6). Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter 2023. 242 pp., 5 colour ill. – ISBN 978-3-11-124635-2.

• MICHAEL MALONE-LEE, independent scholar
(mmalonelee@hotmail.com)

Professor MONFASANI publishes for the first time the full Latin text of Cardinal Bessarion's *Liber Defensionum* (hereafter *LD*). The history of this work is complicated.¹

In 1458 George of Trebizond (Trapezuntius) (1395–1486) produced a virulently anti-Platonic treatise entitled *Comparatio Philosophorum Aristotelis et Platonis* (A Comparison of the Philosophers Aristotle and Plato).² It was a response to *De Differentiis Aristotelis et Platonis*, a defence of Plato against Aristotle that George Gemistos Pletho (c. 1355–1454) had written in 1438–1439 while attending the Council of Florence.³ Pletho's Greek text had provoked a heated and sometimes acrimonious debate among a small group of (mainly émigré) Greek scholars. George of Trebizond, on the other hand, wrote in Latin and addressed Westerners for whom Pletho was hardly a household name and most of whom had no knowledge of Greek. His treatise not only attacked Platonic ideas but also launched a thinly disguised personal attack on Cardinal Bessarion, with whom the author had quarrelled. Trapezuntius called Pletho the apostle of a revived paganism and added somewhat cryptically that, if the spread of Pletho's ideas was not checked, a 'fourth Plato' would overtake all previous ones in propagating the Platonic creed of pleasure. The first three 'Platos' are named as

1. JOHN MONFASANI, A Tale of Two Books: Bessarion's *In Calumniatorem Platonis* and George of Trebizond's *Comparatio Philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis*. *Renaissance Studies* 22 (2008) pp. 1–15.

2. JOHN MONFASANI, *Collectanea Trapezuntiana*. Binghampton 1984, pp. 599–602 lists eleven surviving manuscripts, including Bessarion's own copy (Marc. Lat. VI 76). Trebizond's text did not appear in print until 1523 in Venice in an edition which muddled the pages.

3. Ed. BENEDETTE LAGARDE, Le "De Differentiis" de Pléthon d'après l'autographe de la Marcienne. *Byzantion* 43 (1973) pp. 321–334. English translation in CHRISTOPHER M. WOODHOUSE, *George Gemistos Plethon, the Last of the Hellenes*. Oxford 1986, pp. 192–214.

the Athenian philosopher himself, Mohammed, and Pletho. Trapezuntius never identifies the fourth one. But the fourth Plato is thought to be a covert reference to Bessarion. In a veiled reference to Bessarion, Trapezuntius wrote that those brought up in the Greek East had been seduced by Plato's meretricious speech.⁴

An *open* reply to this attack on Plato and himself took Bessarion ten years to produce: in 1469, Conrad Sweynheym and Arnold Pannartz published in Rome his *In Calumniatorem Platonis* (Against the Calumniator of Plato, hereafter *ICP*).⁵ The printing press ensured that this work was read more widely than George's, which only circulated in manuscript. Bessarion's private reaction, on the other hand, had been rapid. He had the text of Trapezuntius' treatise copied within twenty-four hours as soon as he got hold of it. He was outraged by what he read and dashed off an immediate response, in Greek, as early as 1459. The speed of his first reaction and the language used against his adversary suggest that he was nettled and possibly even intimidated. His initial Greek text, produced in the heat of the moment, underwent several revisions, but he never intended it for circulation: any published version had to be addressed to a Latin readership, since George of Trebizond, whom he did not name but described as *homuncio* ('a little man'), was out to deceive the Latins.⁶ The official response was delayed by six years because Bessarion was occupied as papal legate in two embassies to Germany (1460–1461) and to Venice (1463–1464). At last, in 1465–1466, he personally translated his Greek work into Latin under the title *Liber Defensionum contra Objectiones in Platonem* (A defence of Plato against Objections).⁷

MONFASANI's edition of this text enables us to map the genesis of *ICP*. He gives detailed accounts (illustrated with photographs) of all five extant

4. JOHN MONFASANI, *George of Trebizond: A Biography and Study of His Rhetoric and Logic* (Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 1). Leiden 1976, p. 159.

5. The same volume includes also Bessarion's treatise *On Art and Nature* and his critique of George of Trebizond's translation of Plato's *Laws*. The text of *ICP* was edited by LUDWIG MOHLER, *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann*. Bd. 2 (Quellen und Forschungen aus dem Gebiet der Geschichte 20). Paderborn 1923. My references follow MOHLER's numbering. A recent commentary and translation has been published by SERGEI MARIEV – MONICA MARCHETTO – KATHARINA LUCHNER, *Bessarion, Über Natur und Kunst: griechisch-lateinisch-deutsch*. Neu ediert, übersetzt und mit einer Einleitung und Kommentar herausgegeben. Hamburg 2015.

6. 3.1.13 in *LD* and *ICP* 4.1.13.

7. The change of title between this text and the canonical *ICP* suggests that by 1469 Bessarion's intentions had become more polemical.

manuscripts of *LD*. Four of these were in Bessarion's own library and are now in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana.⁸ They are working documents. The fifth manuscript is a sumptuous codex, now in Berlin,⁹ which Bessarion originally presented to Francisco Foscari (1373–1457), Doge of Venice. MONFASANI compares all five, tracing progressive alterations in their text. The evidence suggests that Bessarion's *familiares* Giovanni Andrea Bussi (1417–1475) and Theodore Gaza (c. 1400–c. 1475) helped in revising the work. Even though the Berlin codex was presumably made as a final authorised copy, Bessarion did not publish *ICP* until some three years later, in 1469. By that time he had added a whole new book to it.¹⁰ With the help of Niccolò Perotti (1429–1480), the Latin of *LD* was also polished in *ICP* so as to conform to the standards of humanist Latin.¹¹ It is uncertain why Bessarion changed his mind about publishing *LD*, but one possible reason is that he was persuaded by his friends, especially the learned Dominican friar Giovanni Gatti O.P. (c. 1420–1484), that his original Greek response needed to be more detailed: it lacked the type of argument customary for Latin readers educated in the scholastic tradition. The added section is much closer to the style of a scholastic *quaestio*, which would have been more familiar to Westerners. Gatti supplied Bessarion with arguments and references from Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Duns Scotus, Averroes, and others.¹²

8. Marc. Lat. 226, Marc. Lat. 227, Marc. Lat. 230, Marc. Lat. VI 60.

9. Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Hamilton 76. This manuscript passed through the library of Apostolo Zeno (1668–1750), a Venetian poet and man of letters, then found its way into that of Alexander Douglas (1767–1852), tenth Duke of Hamilton, and finally went for sale in 1882.

10. The original Book Three of the *LD* became Book Four, and a new Book Three was added as a supplement to Book Two. Drawing mainly on scholastic Latin sources, it challenges George of Trebizond's case that Aristotle rather than Plato anticipated Christianity.

11. For example, *LD* 3.7.3 page 175 lines 16–19 read: *quod tam Plato quam Aristoteles trigesimumquintum initio procreandi tribuit et seniorum procreationem non probat. Quid erret Plato si temporis quo procreari commode possit annis decem aut quindecim descripserit, quod ab adversario reprehenditur?* In *ICP* the equivalent lines (*ICP* 4.7.3 lines 19–23) read: *Cum igitur tam Plato quam Aristoteles annum quintum et trigesimum initio procreandi tribuant neuterque eorum seniorum procreationem probet, cur errare dicendus est Plato, si temporis spatium quo procreari commode possit, decem aut quindecim annis descripsit, quod ab adversario reprehenditur?* These differences are stylistic, but there is a more significant difference between the Greek texts of *ICP* and of *LD* and *ICP*. In the Greek text of *ICP* 4.7.3 lines 30–32 in MOHLER II page 540 Bessarion includes a biographical detail, recording that his parents had fifteen children of whom he was the only one to have survived. This detail is omitted in both *LD* and *ICP*.

12. Gatti was a Thomist, and the Greek-educated Bessarion owed much of his knowl-

Bessarion's criticism of his unnamed adversary is sharp. He terms him 'a new Timon, a second Momus',¹³ and sophisticated Renaissance humanists would have appreciated the offensive comparisons: Timon was a grumpy Athenian misanthrope and Momus was expelled from Olympus by the other gods for being an inveterate fault-finder. He also describes how on first reading the *Comparatio* his expectations had been bitterly disappointed: instead of a treasure trove of learning, he found nothing but 'lumps of coal'; instead of a comparison between the two philosophers, he found nothing but abuse of Plato (*LD* and *ICP* 1.1.3). MONFASANI shows that such abuse has been toned down in successive drafts of *LD*. The earliest one (Marc. Lat. 230) contains insults such as *potius simius quam homo*, *turpis homuncio*, and *ludi magister iste cuculus ...rudissimus hic grammatista*. These disappear from later versions, where George of Trebizond becomes an anonymous *adversarius*, *objurgator*, or *vituperator*. One can only speculate why Bessarion modified his wording, but one must remember he had himself rebuked his friend Michael Apostolis (c. 1420–c. 1480) for using intemperate language in a polemic against Theodore Gaza.¹⁴

MONFASANI's edition is based primarily on the Berlin codex, registering in its critical apparatus variants from the other four witnesses. The apparatus also contains annotations from the manuscripts' page margins, illuminating the process through which the text evolved. (For instance, there is at *LD* 2.8.6. page 75 line 28 a gloss by Theodore Gaza from Marc. Lat. 230, which comments on the distinction between priority in time and priority in nature as applied to the soul.) For purposes of cross-reference, the book helpfully includes the chapter headings used in *ICP*, as well as MOHLER's numbering system. MONFASANI also remarks where the readings in *LD* and of the Greek text differ from *ICP*.¹⁵ His *index fontium* vindicates Bessarion's claim that he held Plato and Aristotle in equal honour, as well as demonstrating the extent to which Bessarion drew on Simplicius for his understanding of Plato. Regrettably, the editor was not able to print the texts of

edge of Western scholasticism to him.

13. *ICP* 1.1.3. Momus is not named in IL (1.1.3 page 3 line 20) but was added in *ICP*. The language is also sharper in *ICP*. *LD* reads: *quid, quaeso, plus adversus omnes haberet quod diceret hic adversaries et alter Timon*. The equivalent passage in *ICP* reads: *quid obsecro te plus haberet, quod adversus omnes evomeret hic calumniator et hostis hominum et novus Timon atque alter Momus*.

14. Letter 49 in MOHLER III 511–513.

15. *LD* 1.1.4 page 3 lines 22–23 read: *qui aliquando mecum iunctus consuetudine fuerat litterarumque professor habebatur*, which renders the Greek text λόγων ὄντος τροφίμου but *litterarumque professor* is omitted in *ICP* (at *ICP* 1.2.4 lines 20–21).

LD, of *ICP*, and of the Greek version side by side, in parallel columns. (A sample of such a synoptic edition is found in the appendices to a recent article of his.)¹⁶ This makes comparisons of the kind illustrated in note 11 here (above) difficult.

In sum, Professor MONFASANI has produced a valuable piece of detailed scholarship that will be of great use for the further study of the engagement of Italian humanism with Plato. It throws fresh light on the evolution of Bessarion's thought as he worked towards his final draft of *ICP*.

Keywords

Bessarion, Liber defensionum contra obiectiones in Platonem; edition

16. JOHN MONFASANI, Niccolò Perotti and Bessarion's *In Calumniatorem Platonis*. *Renæssanceforum* 7 (2011) pp. 181–216.