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Classical Sources and a New Theory of the State in the Renaissance: A Neapolitan Mirror for Princes

Abstract: This article focuses on an important, although still neglected, political treatise: Giuniano Maio's *De maiestate* (1492), composed by a prominent intellectual of the Neapolitan Renaissance. This work, one of the first pre-Machiavellian mirrors for princes written in Italian, is a particularly significant case study, since it theorizes a new model of state, framing it through the extensive recovery and translation of several classical sources (both Latin and Greek). This contribution examines the approaches, aims, and results that characterize Maio's work of translation and re-elaboration of classical texts into the developing Italian language of the fifteenth century. The complex process of translation carried out by Maio provides the conceptual foundations for his political discourse. At the same time, he also reworks his models with the purpose of creating an innovative theory of princely power based on the actual practical needs of the Kingdom of Naples under the Aragonese monarchy.

Key Words: Italian Renaissance; Fifteenth-century Humanism; Political theory; Mirror for Princes; Giuniano Maio; Vernacular translations; *Volgarizzamenti*; Classical legacy; Kingdom of Naples; Majesty.

Introduction: Translation, Imitation, and the Language of Politics

In fifteenth-century Italy the considerable development of political treatises in the literary form of mirrors for princes can be placed at the intersection of the trajectories of two pivotal, and more general, cultural and historical phenomena: on the one hand, the revival and re-appropriation of the classical tradition; on the other, the emergence of new political ideologies that would have a notable influence also on the more mature political thought of the following centuries.¹ The multifaceted political theories conceived in this period are based on the recovery and re-elaboration of classical tenets, but they reframe and adapt these foundational values to the contemporary historical scenario. Thus the fifteenth century appears as a fundamental age for the evolution of political thought; however, the substantial contribution made by political works written in this epoch (in manifold and hybrid literary forms, such as treatises, orations, histories, and even poetry) to the affirmation of a new model of political system has yet to

¹ On the literary "genre" of the *specula principum*, which dates back to the classical and medieval tradition (with works by Xenophon, Isocrates, Seneca, Thomas Aquinas, Giles of Rome, etc., just to mention some of the most influential models) the bibliography is huge; in particular on the production of mirrors for princes in the Italian Renaissance see Gilbert 91-114; Skinner, *Foundations* 1.113-38; Baker-Ronny-Maike-Johannes; Canfora; Geri; Stacey; Ferrà, "Introduzione," 5-33; and Hankins, *Virtue Politics*. More specifically on political treatises written in the Kingdom of Naples in the fifteenth century, see Cappelli, *Maiestas*; and Albanese.