

***Il tramonto dell'onestade*. Paolo Cherchi.  
Biblioteca italiana testi e studi 6. Rome:  
Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2016. 340  
pp. €28.**

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One of the most noted historians and epistemologists of erudite approaches to knowledge and of pre-Enlightenment encyclopedism, Paolo Cherchi dedicates a substantial monograph to the notion of *onestade* in the age of Petrarch and Boccaccio. The book has a deep taxonomic structure that tracks and conceptualizes the various declensions and diffractions of the dyad *onestade/utile* (useful) and differentiates among literary occurrences. What is *onestade*? Cherchi uses the archaic term to keep its meaning distinct from the current *onesto* and its ethical, legal, and utilitarian implications. *Onestade* is the fusion of the *honestum*, as postulated in Cicero's *De officiis*, and usefulness, a nonegoistic and non-self-interested autotelic virtue. This *onestade* reaches its apogee in courtly societies where what is useful is a celebration of courtesy itself, as in troubadoric poetry when the lover seeks love hoping that it will not be required. In the world of Italian medieval communes, *onestade*, which over time had taken on additional philosophical connotations (*Nicomachean Ethics*), assumes a more bourgeois character typical of the mercantile aristocracy. Boccaccio's *brigata* is *onesto* because it tells stories for the pleasure of narrating and celebrating courtly beauty. With Petrarch, courtly autoreferentiality is eclipsed and the theme of wisdom becomes crucial, whereas with Salutati and the early civic humanists the *honestum* is welded to the idea of *utilitas* as commonwealth. Among Platonists in the second half of the century, the concept will assume contemplative undertones at a moment when the discussion of the prince's responsibility is becoming a fundamental issue. As Cherchi says, "the 1400s put to the test the notion of the *honestum*/useful by turning it into the guiding principle of political and civic life in general" (115, my translation). For the following century, the investigation's scope is broadened to encompass Europe, with the Reformation playing a critical role. Italy is still the cradle of the epistemic revolutions that slowly cause the twilight and then the sunset of *onestade*: there is Machiavelli, of course, with his reinvention of the notion of virtue, and also all the political and cultural factors that made the *Book of the Courtier* splendidly out of its time. There is no room here to do justice in a few words to a monumental work in which Cherchi, through the lens of *onestade*, examines dozens of authors and philosophical discourses, shedding on each a novel light or calling our attention to traditionally overlooked aspects.

At the end of the sixteenth century, and at the beginning of the new one, in the age of prudence, of discretion, and, eventually, of simulation and dissembling, the *honestum*/usefulness dyad separates, and *onestade* survives but becomes sterile. The courtier, says Cherchi, is no longer a paragon of aesthetic honesty but an "employee" who worries about practical and economic concerns at a time when the refeudalization of society is finalized and the states of the ancien régime are being born. The insidious, now ethically unbridled idea of usefulness insinuates the culture of the *grazia*: *onestade* without virtue, usefulness without *honestum*, notwithstanding the distortions and ambiguities of the *specula regis* and of the *ragion di stato*.

The focus is now on behavior: Machiavelli studied it to devise rules for the sake of imitation in a context where ethics is free from metaphysics and human nature is investigated on anthropological rather than ontological bases. The preoccupation with good manners now prevails over the care for *onestade*: “The essence of *onestade* consisted in virtues that metabolize the usefulness eliminating the dross of egoism” (274). The usefulness, however, was resisting an assimilation that, although ennobling, would diminish its strength and weaken its importance. At the same time, virtues were losing the prestige and idealistic aura absorbed from the classics as filtered through humanistic culture and (educational) practice. The final blow would be dealt by the profound epistemic mutations brought by the doctrine of natural law and by Cartesianism, with the triumph of emotions (now recognized in their corporeal nature, and investigated also by philosophers such as Spinoza and Leibniz) over virtues. Utilitarianism and modern codes of laws would further erode and eventually erase the ethical foundations of the notion. Cherchi borrows Baroque cognitive and representational instruments like the telescope and the theater, and turns them into highly efficient heuristic tools that organize and streamline the very substantial material at the heart of this book. Of great importance are Cherchi’s observations on the decay of the dialogic genre and on the eclipse of the epic and chivalric hero (who was dominated or motivated by an “efficient cause” and throughout his/her life tried to reach or regain a state of perfection), gradually supplanted by the novelistic hero, who “must make real his own world of passions and of personal ambitions and potentialities” (303). This excellent, intelligently conceived, and very convincingly argued book should be of great interest to a wide readership of early modernists in various disciplines.

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