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Silk Road: the journey towards the East conquers the imagination and the fictional dimension- Perception of the self and the other in Italy in the XVII century

Conquering the imagination is the proof of the ultimate success of any human act: what fascinates, stimulates your imagination, makes foresee possible achievements, creates a dream. The work of Poliziano Mancini may be considered one moment of this process of creation of a dream in relation to the journey toward the East, moving from the Mediterranean Sea to the Silk Road.

At the time of the Jesuits' mission to India and China, and the experiences of adaptation to local traditions and habits of Roberto De Nobili from Montepulciano in Madurai e Matteo Ricci from Macerata at the imperial court of Beijing, Poliziano Mancini, born in Montepulciano, writes a fantasy serial with a Portuguese prince as main character: Altomiro of Lusitania, whose purpose is to create a Catholic empire centered on a China converted to Christianity.

The trilogy was written in ten years and printed in Padua from 1641 to 1650:

Il principe Altomiro di Lusitania fortunato (Padova 1644), [the title in the first edition of 1641 was simply *Il principe Altomiro di Lusitania*] ,*Il principe Altomiro di Lusitania travagliato* (ibid. 1644), *Il principe Altomiro di Lusitania regnante* (Roma 1650).

In describing fantastic adventures in faraway lands and countries, Mancini pushes his reader out of the daily local experience, towards new horizons, educating him to perceive himself in relationship with others, and to abandon his limited views and experiences. What he mainly regrets in human being's destiny is the lack of wings, that "imprisons him within the borders of his native land" and "condemns him to suffer injuries, air infections, excessive warmths and colds, rains, winds, thunders, hurricanes. Without wings, he may reach a clear sky only thanks to his desire".

This strange serial novel is inspired by fantasy and desire. However, even if Poliziano Mancini dreams of faraway lands and exotic worlds, he has solid roots in his native town, as we can see with the eulogy of Montepulciano's wine (II composition, *Il principe Altomiro travagliato*, III Book pagg. 254-256):

"The town is located on a pleasant hill, surrounded as a crown by other small hills. The tufaceous soil contains a stratification of shells of oysters and seasnails. All these fossils maybe the result of a great sea flood, and have been accumulated here by the rush of waves, since the Universal Flood. These hills with plenty of marine fossils are

covered by vineyards which produce a wine so delicious and sweet that it is named the nectar of the Province.

Following common opinion “the seminal virtue of that sky, capable of creating the noble substance of pearls in the nacre shells, transmits to the vineyards part of this virtue, so that the wine liquor shares in its sweetness the noble substance of the pearl and rejoices the heart and clears the blood more than any other wine”.

As the pearls are feeded by celestial dew coming from the sky, so the raisins of those hills transmit ethereal spirits to the wine, nurturing the souls and the intelligences of the citizens of the town.

“This is what I heard about the noble town of Montepulciano, in Tuscany, Mother of ethereal geniuses in Letters and Piety, as proved by the two cardinals, both named Roberto, Bellarmino e Nobili, and in the past century the Angel of the geniuses, Angelo Poliziano”.

This passage, in which the native town of the author is described as in a fairy tale and presented as one of the wonders of the world, acquiring an exotic touch, shows Mancini’s narrative capacity and openness. He is able to alternate boring descriptions based on accumulation of bookish notions to bold and surprising openings.

This novel shows us that even in the dark century of the CounterReform and in a country divided and occupied by foreigners, it was possible to fly towards unknown horizons and landscapes, exploring the world with a curiosity nourished by an Encyclopedian culture and stimulated by the geographic discoveries, the exploration of new continents and the news coming from the letters of the Jesuit missionaries, collected and reworked by the great Jesuit scholar Daniello Bartoli in his *History of Asia*.

Poliziano Mancini, who lived between Montepulciano and Padua, in academical and religious environments strongly inspired and engaged in the Catholic Reform, was probably looking for readers among the young students attending the Jesuit’s colleges, one of which had been created in Montepulciano. Many of them aspired to move toward Eastern countries, as missionaries to India or to China, in seek of adventure even at risk of martyrdom (in the Archives of the Company can be found 14 thousands of letters of *indipetae*, young people who asked to be sent to India).

As source of inspiration Mancini had surely the epic poem of Luis de Camoes, *Os Lusíadas* (1572), celebrating the Portuguese conquests in the East. But in Italy there were all the chivalrous poems and novels, the *divertissements* of the different courts of princes, and also the first circulation of scientific works (Galilei’s *Dialogues*).

At a given point of the novel there is even the question of the possible existence of other worlds. Why should the Great Architect of the Universe be happy of creating

just one world: “Who can assure us that all the stars that we see in the sky don’t have inhabitants and forms of life, maybe more happy than ours?”