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The Italian Historiographical Method in Elizabethan England:  
Jacopo Aconcio Translated by Thomas Blundeville

Abstract

Jacopo Aconcio (ca.1500-ca.1567) was an Italian philosopher who acquired some fame in Europe for his views on religious toleration. After embracing the Reformed faith, he sought refuge in England. He soon started working in the service of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who also acted as patron to Thomas Blundeville (ca.1522-ca.1606), a prolific translator of Italian moral and philosophical works. The close intellectual relationship between Aconcio and Blundeville stimulated Blundeville's translation of some of the philosopher's works, including the historiographical treatise *Delle osservazioni et avvertimenti che haver si debbono nel leggere delle historie*. Despite scanty scholarly attention, this text is notable as being one of the few treatises on the subject of historiography in early modern England and the first to offer advice on how to read and interpret history. In this paper I argue that the typical sixteenth-century principle of freedom in the re-elaboration of the source was widely employed by Blundeville in order to provide Leicester with a text purged of Aconcio's rhetorics and where his principles of 'method', 'purpose', and 'public utility' might find their full application.

*1. Jacopo Aconcio's English experience and his writings*

Jacopo Aconcio was born in Ossana, near Trento, around 1520.<sup>1</sup> After his studies in law he was active as a notary for a relatively short time. In 1540 he met the Archduke Maximilian, son of Emperor Ferdinand I, who convinced

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<sup>1</sup> Extensive information on Aconcio's life is found in Aconcio, 1944, 3-26; O'Malley 1955; Giacomelli 2005, 203-32.

him to join the imperial court in Vienna. This marked the beginning of Aconcio's life-long peregrination throughout Europe. After almost five years at Maximilian's court, Aconcio decided to return to Italy and settled in Milan as secretary to Cardinal Cristoforo Madruzzo. It was probably there that Aconcio embraced the Reformation and in 1557 he was forced to seek refuge first in Basel and then in Zurich. Once there, Aconcio joined the circle of the Italian reformers guided by Bernardino Ochino and in Basel he published his first writings. The *De methodo*, the *Dialogo di Giacopo Riccamati* and the *Somma della dottrina Christiana* were all published in 1558. Both the *Dialogo* and the *Somma* convey Aconcio's positions in matter of faith and religious toleration; the *Dialogo* uses the rhetorical device of seemingly confuting Luther's ideas on faith and his criticism against Rome as a means to actually justify and endorse them. The *Somma*, a short treatise supporting the idea of a uniform doctrine far from the theological caveats and the divisions that characterised Christianity at the time, contains the germs of his concept of religious toleration, which won him renown among Reformation intellectuals. This view was loathed by the more radical fellow refugees and caused Aconcio's move to Strasbourg, where he met some English exiles who had escaped queen Mary I's religious persecution. Mary's death in 1559 gave Aconcio hope for a better future in England and shortly after he resolved himself to move there with some of his companions. He arrived in London in September of the same year and he immediately entered the circle of Sir William Cecil, not as a notary or intellectual as one might expect, but as a military engineer. In 1560 he obtained from Queen Elizabeth a royal pension of 60£ as well as English citizenship; his new economic and social stability gave him the opportunity to devote some time and efforts to religious reflections. In this period, he was also involved in disputes such as that between the Dutch church – to which Aconcio adhered – and the bishop of London Edmund Grindal, concerning the acceptance of a group of Anabaptists in the Dutch community. Grindal's hostility towards this act of inclusion was seen by Aconcio as the symptom of a creeping sentiment of intolerance in a country that had embraced the Presbyterian faith. This episode

proved to be fundamental for the production of Aconcio's most popular writing, the *Stratagemata Satanae*, published in Basel in 1565 and dedicated to Queen Elizabeth. Besides attacking the corruption of the Church of Rome and its misalignment with the evangelical message, this treatise is also a strenuous defense of toleration, basing on the ideal of doctrinal freedom postulated by Martin Luther at the very early stages of Reformation, which Aconcio saw as irredeemably lost. The Europe-wide success of the *Stratagemata* is remarkable: the treatise was translated into French, Dutch, German, and English and published in twenty-one editions, which did not save the text from a stark censorship.<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned above, however, the social status of Aconcio and his professional accomplishments in England were not ascribable to his religious reflections, but, rather, to his engineering skills. In 1562 an Act of Parliament granted him half the lands that had been drained from the Thames thanks to his project, and in 1564 he worked on the restauration of the fortifications of Berwick-upon-Tweed, whose governor was Francis Russell, second Earl of Bedford. Aconcio's lost treatise on the art of fortification, which he had probably started when he was still in Italy,<sup>3</sup> was translated into English by his friend Thomas Blundeville.<sup>4</sup> It was probably Blundeville who favoured Aconcio's access to the highest ranks of the court through the patronage of Robert Dudley, to whom the Italian philosopher dedicated his treatise *Delle osservationi et avvertimenti che hauer si debbono nel legger delle historie* in 1564. Ten years later, William Seres published Blundeville's translation, titled *The true order and Methode of writing and reading Hystories*,<sup>5</sup> which is the subject of this article. Aconcio's treatises represent a valuable application of the principle of method, which the Italian philosopher had already developed in his *De methodo*, providing a fundamental

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<sup>2</sup> See Caravale 2015, 204-11.

<sup>3</sup> Aconcio, *De methodo*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> The text is edited in Aconcio 2011 (ed. Omar Khalaf).

<sup>5</sup> Blundeville 1574. Edited in Dick 1940, 149-70, and Blundeville 1986.

(albeit generally overlooked) contribution to a widespread debate that animated the entire Renaissance period. Blundeville has the merit of having introduced this matter in sixteenth-century England.

2. *The concepts of ‘method’ and ‘purpose’ in Aconcio and Le osservationi et avvertimenti che haver si debbono nel legger le historie*

Aconcio’s reflections on method are to be inscribed within a larger debate that involved some of the most important intellectual authorities of the Reformation.<sup>6</sup> In continental Europe, the need to establish correct procedure was felt in all human activities, but especially in the fields of rhetoric and dialectics. Reformed thinkers and theologians endeavored to determine a universal criterion applicable to any field of knowledge, with the aim to facilitate a linearity of thought, avoid distractions, and eventually reach the desired intellectual goal.<sup>7</sup> The two most important figures related to the introduction and systematisation of this concept are Philip Melanchton and Johannes Sturm, the founder of the so-called *Academia Argentina* for humanistic studies in Strasbourg and Aconcio’s friend during his stay in that city.

Aconcio’s major contribution in this debate concerns his investigation of method and the value he attributed to the concept of ‘purpose’. In one of his most celebrated writings, titled *De methodo*, he claims not to have based his research exclusively on the study of previous authors but on direct experience. One of the most innovative aspects of Aconcio’s thought, in fact, is that correct method can only be acquired through continuous personal trial – a method he had tested on himself as he reports to Johannes Wolf, a pastor and a friend of his since his years in Zurich: “Equidem quibus constet vera methodus diu ac pertinaci quodam labore conatus sum intelligere, nec tantum libros

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<sup>6</sup> See Ward 1960; Vasoli 1968, 2002 (398-415), and 2005 (37-74).

<sup>7</sup> See Gilbert 1960 and Giacomoni (forthcoming).

volui consulere, sed multo etiam diligentius experientiam”.<sup>8</sup> The concept of method developed by Aconcio in his treatise finds its full application in other works of his – as in the above-mentioned disquisition on the art of fortification (see Giacomelli 2011) and, more significantly, the *Le osservazioni et avvertimenti che haver si debbono nel legger delle historie*.<sup>9</sup>

This very short writing provides instructions regarding the correct way to read histories. It is not a historiographical work, but rather, a theoretical guide on the correct interpretation of history accounts. Dedicated to Robert Dudley, second Earl of Leicester, this text was probably written in or before 1564 – the year of his appointment – as no reference to his earldom appears in the dedication.<sup>10</sup> Although it has been underlined that Aconcio’s intellectual interests were not related primarily to history or to the practice of history accounting,<sup>11</sup> the Italian philosopher exploited this subject as a testing ground for the application of his theoretical principles. Such an application must be guided by a purpose, which Aconcio identifies in public utility. In a typically humanistic perception of the intellectual effort as a fundamental part in the process of construction of the commonweal, this view entails a conception of the benefit of understanding history that is deeply rooted in contemporaneity. As Aconcio declares in a letter to Wolf dated 1562 and titled *Epistola de ratione edendorum librorum*, any intellectual work must be guided by this principle, *hic et nunc*: “Mea quidem haec est sententia, ut, quam in aetatem incideris, videas, et quid suscipias, cuiusque rei gratia, hoc est quantam magna utilitatis spe adductus, expendas

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<sup>8</sup> “I thus made the effort to understand, patiently and resolutely, what the true method consisted of; I did not just want to read books, but also – much more diligently – used experience” (my translation). Aconcio, *De methodo*, 80. This is not the place for a full investigation of the treatise, which has already been the object of thorough analyses. See Vasoli 1968 and 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Henceforth referred to as *Osservazioni*.

<sup>10</sup> The edition used is Aconcio, *De methodo*, 305-13. The dedicatory preface, in fact, begins with “Allo illustrissimo signor suo osservandissimo il signor Roberto Dudleo, cavalier dell’ordine et gran scudiero di S. M[ae]stà Ser[enissi]ma” (305).

<sup>11</sup> See Cotroneo 1971, 438-40.

etiam atque etiam [...]. In occasionibus etiam multum admodum est positum”.<sup>12</sup> According to Aconcio, this principle is not absolute and un-historical; on the contrary, it represents a criterion which, being historically determined, is subject to transformation.

The purpose (“fine”) sought by Aconcio in his *Osservazioni* is threefold: firstly, the role of Divine Providence must be acknowledged in all human actions, and, consequently, in their recording; secondly, Prudence must be recalled as a principle to be observed and taught, drawing teachings from the examples provided by past facts to govern the present; finally, one must act according to said examples, to do good and flee evil. Here, a certain syncretism in Aconcio’s religious views (predestination vs. freedom of choice between good and evil) is obvious. Given that God oversees the past, the present, and the future of human beings, a good reader of histories – i.e., one who has acquired the right method – will be able to learn from historical facts and use them as examples for good and prudent behaviour.<sup>13</sup> The methodological sequence identified by Aconcio is also threefold and each level entails a particular reading strategy. Firstly, an historical event must be read in chronological order and the chain of events that have caused that situation must be understood in order to find its purpose. Secondly, these causes are to be identified reading the account of the event from end to beginning; this is useful for the reader who wants to analyse the reasons for the success or the failure of those involved in the event. Thirdly, after employing the first two methods, one

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<sup>12</sup> “In my opinion it is needful to consider in what age one lives and give careful thought to what one wants to do and for what purpose, which means according to what hope of utility” (my translation). Aconcio, *De methodo*, 332-34.

<sup>13</sup> In Aconcio’s words: “Chi saper vuole quelli cose, come, et con che ordine si debbiano nel legger delle historie osservare, egli è necessario di haver l’occhio a que’ fini che a scriverle muover debbono gli sotrici, de’ quali a me certamente paiono i principali esser tre. Il primo: perché possiamo la provvidenza del grande Iddio nel governo di tutte le cose riconoscere. L’altro: perché nelle ationi nostre, et private et pubbliche, così della pace come della guerra, gli essempli di molti prudenti ne rendano. L’ultimo: perché a virtuosamente adoperar ci ‘nfiammino, et dal contrario ci ritraggano”. Aconcio, *De methodo*, 306.

might concentrate on single aspects of the event to attempt more careful analysis, or to better learn from it. By adhering to these criteria, the reader would be able to effectively interpret the facts reported in a historiographical work, turning their reading from a mere pastime into an edifying activity with both private and public utility. One of the most innovative concepts developed by Aconcio is, in fact, a utilitarian vision of learning and teaching as opposed to the vain literary exercises which, according to him, were a common practice among his contemporaries.<sup>14</sup>

However, at least in the case of the *Osservazioni*, Aconcio did not succeed in fully realising his theoretical assumptions. The text is extant in a sole manuscript witness, most probably the presentation copy Aconcio had produced for Leicester,<sup>15</sup> and never circulated except through the translation made by Thomas Blundeville and published in 1574 in a miscellany containing also the English rendering of an earlier treatise on historiography written by Francesco Patrizi. This translation is the object of the present analysis.

### *3. Blundeville's The true Order and Methode of wryting and reading Hystories and Aconcio's source-text. A comparative study*

Blundeville's work, titled *The true order and methode of wryting and reading hystories, according to the precepts of Francisco Patricio, and Accontio Tridentino, two Italian writers, no lesse plainly than briefly, set forth in our vulgar speach, to the great profite and commoditie of all those that delight in hystories* and printed in London by William Seres in 1574, presents the translations of Aconcio's text and of the *Historia diece dialoghi*, another treatise on historiography written by Francesco Patrizi (Venice

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<sup>14</sup> In his letter to Wolf Aconcio praises his friend as in his writing he "non inanis aurae cupidinis, sed publicae utilitatis ac Dei gloriae rationi gubernare veli[t]" ("is not guided by a desire of hollow renown, but by the principle of public utility and God's glory". My translation). Aconcio, *De methodo*, 326.

<sup>15</sup> TNA SP 34/53. The text is edited in Aconcio, *De methodo*, 303-14.

1560). Such a combination is not accidental: in his epistle to Wolf, Aconcio himself expresses admiration for Patrizi, as he considers him one of the most brilliant minds of his time: “Equidem serio dico: ex iis, quae videre licuit, ita coniiicio: effecturum eum, si vixerit aliquandiu [...], ut quod invidet seculum nostrum antiquitati, ingeniorum quidem praestantia, habiturum non sit”.<sup>16</sup> Among the treatises written by Patrizi, Aconcio mentions his “dialogi decem de historia”,<sup>17</sup> which certainly inspired his *Osservationi*, and whose copy he probably passed on to Blundeville. The English translator undoubtedly saw a parallelism in the works of the two Italian philosophers – not only from a thematic point of view, but also in the application of the concept of ‘public utility’ that guided both Patrizi and Aconcio, but that, in the case of the latter, had not found its full accomplishment until Blundeville’s version was published.<sup>18</sup>

Thomas Blundeville (ca. 1522 – ca. 1606) was an eclectic author and translator of texts covering diverse subjects. As Matthew Woodcock states, Blundeville’s writings represent the perfect examples of the most popular works that circulated in Elizabethan England: treatises produced with a practical purpose such as those on horsemanship, along with translations of texts coming from the continent<sup>19</sup> – and his *True order* can be considered as an effective combination of them. As with Patrizi,<sup>20</sup> Blundeville’s re-elaboration of Aconcio’s treatise is aimed at turning a notional text into a more practical set of in-

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<sup>16</sup> “I seriously assume: as far as I can see I conclude that, if he lives long enough - he has just entered manhood - he will do ensure that our century lacks nothing, in comparison with antiquity, as to the excellence of its wits” (my translation). Aconcio, *De Methodo*, 352.

<sup>17</sup> Aconcio, *De Methodo*, 350.

<sup>18</sup> See also Ferrandi 2005.

<sup>19</sup> “The works of Thomas Blundeville [...] represent two of the most popular and frequently reprinted kinds of books to be published during the Elizabethan period: vernacular translations of classical and contemporary European authorities, and practical manuals of instructions” (Woodcock 2012, 79).

<sup>20</sup> See Jacquot 1953, 193: “Blundeville emprunte à Patrizzi tout ce qui possède une utilité pratique, et laisse de côté les hautes speculations”.

structions for the benefit of his readers, a version deprived of the rhetorical framework which characterises the source.

Apparently, Blundeville's approach coincides with Peter Burke's description of early modern translation as "characterized by great freedom" and "allowing plenty of scope for reworking" as they were "not infrequently considered capable of improvement by their translators" (Burke 2007, 30). Massimo Morini sees the sixteenth century as a period of transition between the medieval practice of translation, which involves a "radical departure from the original" in the case of secular texts, and the humanistic one, "which requires of the translator a subtler manipulation of the rhetorical organization of the source text" (Morini 2006, x). Critics lament the fact that, unlike other European cultural realities – Italy with Leonardo Bruni and France with Etienne Dolet – England lacked a unified theory of translation provided by a universally recognised authority. However, the prologues to numerous contemporary translations contain rather extensive information on the translator's approach to the source. They demonstrate a precise and straightforward translational attitude, which is tailored on the readership they were produced for.<sup>21</sup> The reasons for this approach are made clear by Thomas Drant in the prologue to his translation of Horace, where he informs the readers that he

Englished thinges not accordyng to the vain of the Latin proprietie, but of our own vulgar tongue. I haue interfarced (to remoue his obscuritie, and sometymes to better his matter) much of myne owne deuysinge. I haue peeced his reason, eekede, and mended his similitudes, mollyfied his hardnes, prolonged his cortall kynd of speches, changed & mucche altered his wordes, but not his sentence: or at leaste (I dare say) *not his purpose* (my emphasis). (Drant 1566)

Despite the different texts and the different languages involved, what joins Drant and Blundeville is the freedom they advocate to re-elaborate, reduce,

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<sup>21</sup> Meaningful examples can be found in Braden 2010, 89-100 and Rhodes 2013, 1-68.

and expand their sources to make the contents more comprehensible to their readers. This is the methodological framework within which both translators operate, and which, in the case of Blundeville, can be paralleled with the concept of ‘purpose’ as made explicit by Aconcio. In fact, comparison of the *Osservationi* and *The true order* shows a careful work of restructuring of the source by Blundeville, who was more interested in the substance of Aconcio’s method than in the way the Italian author had decided to present it. Method is one of the elements that Blundeville drew more largely from the *Osservationi* and (perhaps to a greater extent) the *De methodo*,<sup>22</sup> and in *The true order* this concept seems to acquire even greater importance than in the Italian treatise. For the sake of method, the English translator disassembles and rebuilds the source with the purpose of creating a terser text, liberated from Aconcio’s rhetorical digressions and characterised by the clarity and conciseness typical of a methodological work. This approach is clear from the very first lines of the translation. After the dedicatory preface to Dudley, Aconcio introduces one of the pivotal elements related to the public utility of any methodological work – its purpose. The passage reads:

Chi saper vuole quali cose, come, et con che ordine si debbiano nel legger delle historie osservare, egli è necessario di haver l’occhio a que’ fini che a scriverle muover debbono gli storici, de’ quali a me certamente paiono i principali esser tre. Il primo: perché possiamo la provvidenza del grande Iddio nel governo di tutte le cose riconoscere. L’altro: perché nelle attioni nostre, et private et pubbliche, così della pace come della guerra, gli essempli di molti prudenti ne rendano. L’ultimo: perché a virtuosamente adoperar ci ‘nfiammino, et dal contrario ci ritraggano. Scrivonsi poi etiandio le historie perché o leggendole, o sentendole raccontare, habbiano gli otiosi onde passare con alcun honesto diletto il tempo. Per lo qual rispetto di alcuna osservatione gran bisogno non è. Conciocosaché il diletto che ne porgono, ancora industriosamente non cercato per sé stesso in gran parte si presenta avanti, et sentir si fa. Lascerò anco a parte quel fine privato che avanti si propone, chi a scrivere si mette, di

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<sup>22</sup> The words “order” and “method” are often found in Blundeville’s pedagogical works. In particular, these two concepts are pivotal in his *Art of Logyke*, a treatise he published in 1599. On the influence of the *De methodo* on Blundeville’s work see Jacquot 1952, 333-54.

acquistare a sé immortalità di fama et di nome; il quale fine è quello stesso, che è in ciascuno artefice lo intento del conseguire delle sue fatiche il premio.<sup>23</sup>

Here, Aconcio identifies three main reasons why historiographies are useful to the reader: firstly, to recognise Divine Providence in human history; secondly, to take past situations as examples guiding current actions; thirdly, to help people act virtuously and avoid mischief. The second paragraph includes two other possible reasons guiding the writing of such works, such as entertainment or the pursuit of personal glory; Aconcio declares that both are of minor pragmatic importance, but this does not prevent him from describing them at length, without skimping on rhetorical devices. In his translation, Blundeville reorganises and epitomises Aconcio's ideas as follows:

Who so is desirous to know howe histories are to bee readde, had neede first to knowe the endes and purposes for which they are written. Whereof though there be diuers as some to winne fame to the writer and some to delighte the readers eares that reade only to passe away the time and such like: yet in my opinion there are but three chiefe & principall. First that we may learne thereby to acknowledge the prouidence of God, whereby all things are gouerned and directed. Secondly, that by the examples of the wise, we maye learne wisdomes wisely to behaue our selues in all our actions, as well priuate as publique, both in time of peace and warre. Thirdly, that we maye be stirred by example of the good to followe the good, and by example of the euill to flee the euill.<sup>24</sup>

Blundeville's version is visibly shorter than the source text. The contents of Aconcio's second paragraph have been summarised and moved to the very beginning of the list of purposes the production of a historiography should aim for. In doing so, Blundeville shifts the focus of the passage to the three

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<sup>23</sup> Aconcio, *De Methodo*, 306.

<sup>24</sup> Sig. [F2]<sup>v</sup>-[F3]<sup>r</sup>. My investigation of the text has been carried out from the reproduction of the witness held in San Marino, Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery found in the Early English Book Online repository (EEBO), <https://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>, accessed May 13, 2019.

main objectives, which are central in the development of the methodological discourse and which the translator wants to make the core of the whole treatise. In fact, Blundeville's rendering of Aconcio's "fini" with the couplet "endes and purposes" seems to suggest a particular concern on the part of the translator for this concept, which represents an effective application of the theory of public utility so important in the works of Aconcio. Paradoxically, such an intent would find its full application not in the *Osservationi*, which is extant in one manuscript witness, but in Blundeville's translation, which had a fairly wider circulation in printed form. Of the three purposes devised by Aconcio, Blundeville seems to focus especially on the second, which regards the ability of the reader to profit from the examples of the past. The reader should learn knowledge and good sense ("wisdom") from old sages ("wise"), in order to behave prudently ("wisely") in any situation. The recurrence of these co-radical forms is indicative of the approach Blundeville wants to propose to readers, both in the choice of examples and in the way they should be imitated.

Albeit more schematic than Aconcio, Blundeville does not hesitate to implement his translation with elements he considers useful for a better comprehension of the method. Aconcio reflects on the necessity of considering both the goodness of a desired thing and its real cost; what seems good at first sight might turn out to be a cause of danger or stimulate excessive pride in its owner.<sup>25</sup> As Aconcio considers three cases – wealth, social advancement and honour – Blundeville focuses on the former, introducing arguments that are not present in the source:

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<sup>25</sup> Aconcio's text reads: "Percioché bene spesso le cose che a gli huomini paiono molto buone, truovanosi essere state di molti mali et grandi occasione, sì come le ricchezze, le dignità et le grandezze; et per lo contrario le cose che communalmente vista hanno di cattive, a molti di grandissimi beni cagione sono state; i quali essempli accortamente osservati daranno facilmente ad intendere non pure se buona sia ciascuna cosa o cattiva, ma etiandio in quanta stima ella meriti di essere havuta." Aconcio, *De Methodo*, 307.

For manye tymes those things which seeme good, haue bene cause of great euill, as riches, honour, and greatnesse, which euill proceedeth either of the nature of the things themselues, or by euill using the same, as for example, by theyr owne nature, honour, and gretnesse, causeth enuie. And riches sometyme causeth both enuie, murder and robbrie. Agayne, riches by euill using them, doe cause the owner manye times to be disdaynfull, prowde, arrogant, & to leade a dissolute lyfe, hating all virtuous exercises. Contrarywise, those thinges that seeme euill are manie tymes causes of great good, partly by their owne nature, and partly for being well employed, and turned to good use. As pouertie of hir owne nature maketh a man industrious. Agayne, if a man bee defamed or slaundered by hys foes, hee taketh occasion thereby, to correct his owne faulte, and so turneth theyr slaunder to his great gayne and commoditie.<sup>26</sup>

Blundeville's insistence on poverty has been identified by Hugh G. Dick as an autobiographical element introduced by the translator here as well as in his *Three morall Treatises*, published in 1561.<sup>27</sup> This point was so important for Blundeville that he employed it to replace Aconcio's long passage concerning the risk of not being able to discern good from evil or of using good improperly.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Sig. [F4]<sup>r</sup>-[F4]<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> "Elsewhere, as in the dedicatory poems prefixed to 'The fruytes of foes', sig. [A2]<sup>v</sup> and 'The porte of reste', sig. [A3]<sup>r</sup>, collected in *Three morall Treatises* (1561), Blundeville alludes to a period of his own life when he himself had been miserably poor" (Dick, 1940, 166, n. 43).

<sup>28</sup> Aconcio dedicates a good deal of thought on this subject: "Ma intorno acciò per non si 'ngannare, egli conviene molto avvertire al buono o malo uso delle cose, impercioché come che alcune ve n'habbia, le quali altro che o sempre buone o sempre ree esser non possano, sì come la virtù e 'l vitio, sì ve n'ha egli etiandio moltissime, le quali tanto solamente sono buone, quanto sono male usate; percioché chi direbbe giamai le ricchezze, la nobiltà, le grandezze esser buone in colui che, divenutone superbo, arrogante ed insolente, si desse a voler opprimer questi e quell'altro, non tenesse conto di niuno, et si tirasse addosso l'odio di quanti il conoscessero? Allo 'ncontro, chi le medesime cose sommamente buone non chiamerebbero in colui che anzi se ne servisse come per istromenti et mezzi da mettere in luce la mansuetudine, la gentilezza, la liberalità, et la generosità del suo bell'animo; sì che da tutti amare, riverire et predicare si facesse? Quivi adunque è diligentemente da notare come, usandosi, ciascuna cosa venisse ad esser buona et come cattiva et a che grado, conditione et qualità di persone, et quando et dove. E anco non men sovente che, quantunque lo intento

Blundeville's epitomising approach is visible in other parts of the translation, and it even involves key points of Aconcio's discussion of the utility of a method in reading histories. As the correct reading of historical facts should stir the readers to prudence, the Italian philosopher maintains that knowledge of past events is useful to predict future situations. In particular, Aconcio insists on the fact that peace always alternates with war, and that it is the duty of a Prince to be alert, forecast changes, and avoid dangers.<sup>29</sup> Although lengthy and verbose, this passage would surely have attracted Leicester's attention in his quality as Privy Councillor to the Queen. Nevertheless, Blundeville decided to omit it and continue his translation with the following paragraph, which Aconcio intended as a sort of summary of the previous section and where the

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nostro conseguiamo, pure tanto per conseguirlo vi si metta, che alla fine meglio sarebbe di giuni esserne stati." Aconcio, *De Methodo*, 307.

<sup>29</sup> "Et accioché meglio questa parte si 'ntenda; è commune usanza de gli huomini, degna veramente d'ogni biasimo, di havere solamente l'occhio al presente stato delle cose et non pensare al tempo da venire, né prepararsi per aspettare i casi che avenir possano. Sarà per esempio un Prencipe che si goderà una buona pace. Et certo è che, sì come doppo 'l sereno sopravvengono i nubilosì tempi et doppo la state il verno, così doppo la pace venir sogliono le turbulenze delle guerre; ma nondimeno, come se alcuna certa sicurezza havesse di non mai dovere haver guerra, così se ne passerà egli la vita, senza mai pensare a cosa che, occorrendogli pure per caso di haverla, di alcun giovamento essere gli possa. Donde sono poi quei sospiri: o se io havessi pensato! O perché non feci io questo! Et perché non feci quell'altro! Aviene medesimamente tutto di che nel conversare con altrui poco avvertimento habbiamo, quali attioni, quali parole, quai portamenti, et quali maniere di procedere degli amici acquistar ci possano, et quali de' nemici; anzi poca differenza etiandio facciamo, in alcuna prosperità vedendoci, che questi o quegli amico ci sia, o nemico. Parendoci che né bisogno di alcuno siamo per haver giamai, né alcuno sia per poterci nuocere; et nondimeno quanti si veggono essempli di coloro che di sì fatte trascuraggini grandemente pentiti si trovano! Appartiene adunque a questa parte tutto ciò che di bene troveremo nelle historie esser avvenuto ad alcuno, di avvertire non pure per che mezzi procacciato se l'habbia, ma etiandio con che providenza, et in che tempo si destasse il suo animo a pensare intorno acciò. Et nelle adversità che vedremo esser intervenute a molti, considereremo quando fusse il tempo di doverle antivederle per ischifarle, cercando poi nelle attioni nostre di imitar quelli e non questi." Aconcio, *De Methodo*, 310-1.

exemplary function of historiographies and their utility for the development of the reader's moral rectitude is discussed at length. Blundeville's version reads:

And as the examples of prosperous successes, which God hath gyuen as iuste rewardes to those that worke according to vertue: the great good will and and loue that all men haue towardes them: their fame, glorie, & praise, sounding in all mens mouthes, and finally their immortalitie in being chronycled for their noble actes, do chiefly serue, to stirre us, to veruous, honest, and commendable doings. Euen so, nothing is more meete to drawe us from uice, and dishonest dealing, than the examples of euil successes, which God hath gyuen to the wicked, as punishments for theyr euill deserts; their shame & infamie; the hatred & enmitie that they procure to themselues, not onelye whilest they lyue, but also after their death; the infamie which they leaue to their familye, posteritie, & countrie, whose secrete wycked deeds, are layde open to the world by written hystorie, in such sort, as men will not for shame once name those persons, whiche in their life time woulde be honored as gods.<sup>30</sup>

Directing the reader's attention to the moral function of history reading, Blundeville neglects all the other – more worldly – purposes that are expressed in Aconcio. In his *Osservazioni*, the Italian philosopher explains that each type of historiographical work appeals to a different readership: Julius Caesar should be read by a general; Plutarch by a man of government; Titus Livius by both. This passage was omitted by Blundeville, who seems to insist on the fact that histories are useful to the reader as a means of moral edification and as a source of examples of great utility for a good advisor. In fact, historical exam-

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<sup>30</sup> Sig. [H2]<sup>f</sup>-[H2]<sup>v</sup>. Aconcio's text reads: "Per esser incitati alle opere honeste et lodevoli seruonci gli essempli de' prosperi auenimenti, che ha Iddio dati a coloro che secondo la virtù adoperavano, dell'amore che ne hanno appresso a tutti acquistato, della lode et gloria, che ne è loro seguita, della immortal vita et quella così celebre et illustre che hanno loro gli storici stessi partorita. Et per ritrarne dalle opere malvagie seruonci per lo contrario gli essempli de' castigamenti che troviamo haver dato Iddio agli huomini scelerati, la vergogna che ne è loro seguita, gli odi, le nemistà che ne sono incorsi non pure in vita, ma etiandio doppo la morte, lo haverne lasciate infami le loro famiglie e patrie et il vedere negli scritti de gli storici fatte palesi a tutto il mondo e per sempre sceleraggini da lor commesse non pur ne gli occhi de gli huomini, ma in segreto altresì." Aconcio, *De Methodo*, 311.

ples should be used not only to “make our selues more wise, aswell to direct our owne actions, but also to counsel others, to sturre them to vertue and to withdrawe them from vice”; references to the past also have an aesthetic relevance in one’s oratory practice, as it “beautyfie[s] our owne speache with graue examples when we discourse of anye matters that thereby it may haue the more authoritie, waight, and credite”.<sup>31</sup>

It is Blundeville’s view, however, that the task of a good counsellor is not only to draw abstract historical examples that might be exploited for mere rhetorical purposes; on the contrary, the observation of current events should be guided by a continuous reading of the past, in a perpetual search for parallelisms that might favour a correct understanding of the present by both the reader/counsellor and the counselled. Blundeville’s passage, which constitutes an addition to Aconcio’s text, reads as follows:

Neyther is it sufficient in this behalfe to haue onely common places of vertues and vices, or of thinges commendable and not commendable, but other places also besides them, meete to be applied to euerye one of those partes of obseruacion, whiche we seeke, which places are to founde, ordered and disposed, not before wee begin to reade, but whylest wee continue in reading and obseruing all kynde of matter euery day with better iudgement than other.<sup>32</sup>

All these modifications clearly show how Blundeville’s re-elaboration of the source answers a pragmatic purpose: to provide his readers – Leicester in the first place, but all those interested in the matter of counselling, who might have access to this work in its printed form – with a concrete guide on how to turn the reading of historiographical works into a useful and purposeful activi-

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<sup>31</sup> Sig. [H2]<sup>v</sup>-[H3]<sup>r</sup>. Blundeville’s is an almost *literatim* translation from the following passage of Aconcio: “Et conciosaché noi cerchiamo di farci per le storie prudenti, non pure per usar noi la prudenza nelle attioni nostre, ma etiandio per potere nel consigliare altrui dare con essempli alle parole nostre autorità et peso”. Aconcio, *De Methodo*, 312.

<sup>32</sup> Sig. [H3]<sup>v</sup>-[H4]<sup>r</sup>.

ty. In this way, the concept of ‘public utility’ so dear to Aconcio might find its full and most effective application. Nevertheless, the nature of the text itself did not favour its massive dissemination within the Elizabethan readership. Although no information is yet available on the circulation of Blundeville’s work, the scanty number of extant copies indicated in the *Short Title Catalogue* (four in total)<sup>33</sup> suggests that the interest for this type of texts remained limited to a restricted circle of readers, most of whom probably members of Leicester’s *entourage*.

#### 4. *Blundeville’s translation in context: Leicester’s patronage and historical writing in Elizabethan England*

Is the application of the concept of public utility consistent with Leicester’s patronage of letters? Scholars agree on the fact that matters of political authority rather than a genuine interest in the works dedicated to him seem to be the spring of Leicester’s patronage of intellectuals. He certainly considered this activity as a social obligation, a matter of *noblesse oblige* due to his privileged position at Queen Elizabeth’s court but, on the other hand, it also attracted numerous writers who, hoping for economic support, identified him as the ideal dedicatee of their works. The case of the *Osservationi* is paradigmatic, as it was dedicated to Leicester both in its original form and in its English translation. In fact, the cursory reference to Aconcio’s dedication to Leicester that Blundeville made in his prologue seems to cast some doubts on the fact that the Earl was aware of the existence of that “little written Treatyse, which myne ol-

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<sup>33</sup> The full record is available at <https://ustc.ac.uk/index.php/record/507773>, accessed May 13, 2019.

de friende of good memorie, Accontio did not many yeares since present to your Honor in the Italian tongue”.<sup>34</sup>

Blundeville’s adaptation of the source, which, as seen, presents a simplified and schematic translation of the text purged of all the digressions used by Aconcio, was addressed to their mutual master as well as a larger readership, who was probably not interested in rhetorical preciosities, but, rather, in the usefulness and the concrete effects of Aconcio’s method. This new product, which is identifiable with André Lefevere’s concept of “refracted text” – i.e., a text that has been processed and re-elaborated for an audience that is different from the original one (Lefevere 1984, 217-37) – shows the difference in tastes and perspectives of Aconcio’s and Blundeville’s implicit readers. As seen, the concept of “purpose” as introduced by Aconcio plays an even more remarkable role in Blundeville’s translation. His goal was to make the historical method and its applications available to Leicester, and, in a wider perspective, to the English readership of that time, even at the cost of putting literal faithfulness to his source at stake. The transformation of Aconcio’s text on the whole, the abridgement of certain parts and the implementation of others, corresponds to what Morini calls “exegesis” (2006, 23): Blundeville’s careful selection of the textual parts to be translated, their re-organisation and the explanation or clarification of some of them is aimed at providing his patron with a clear, plain, and effective manual on the historiographical method. This closely recalls the method codified by the first English theorist of translation, Laurence Humphrey, who, in his *Interpretatio linguarum* – published in Basel in 1559 and considered the first theoretical discussion on the practice of translation ever realised by an English although it was written in Latin – claims to prefer the term *interpretatio* over *translatio* as it entails a process of interpretation and explanation of the source (Rhodes 2013, 38). This approach, which finds its full application in Blundeville’s treatment of the *Osservationi*, is also fully consistent with Eleanor

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<sup>34</sup> Sig. [A2]<sup>r</sup>. In this regard, some scholars doubt that Leicester knew Italian. See, among others, Rosenberg 1955.

Rosenberg's assumption that "[Leicester] seems to have employed Blundeville [...] for the special function of interpreting and epitomizing such works" (Rosenberg 1955, 56). The role of Blundeville in Leicester's circle was to filter all the useful information in the works of the authors gravitating around the Earl and systematise them in a way that might be more acceptable not only to him, but also to a general audience. In particular, *The true order* incorporates and abridges two fundamental concepts in Elizabethan England: history and method. Apart from providing exemplary materials useful for a good interpretation of current situations and a possible forecasting of future events, a retrieval of the past was fundamental for the affirmation of an English national identity that was still uncertain after the tragic experience of the War of the Roses and the rise of the Tudors, who found in their claimed descent from king Arthur the ideal argument against the reputation of Welsh upstarts that circulated among their opponents.<sup>35</sup> In his position as protégé of the Queen, Leicester inevitably represented a pole of attraction for historians, whose task was to provide the Earl with chronicles and accounts from which he could draw inspiration for his activity of counsellor as well as find concrete bases to justify the instances of the Reformation in general, and of the Anglican church in particular. In fact, in Elizabethan England history became the ground in which both Catholics and Reformers tried to root their doctrines. If the former had in Thomas Stapleton their most important representative with his translation of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (1565) the latter could count on the work of figures such as the Archbishop of Canterbury Matthew Parker, the author of *A Testimonie of Antiquite* (1566),<sup>36</sup> and John Foxe, who published his *Acts and Monuments* in 1563 and a translation of the Old English gospels in 1571. The retrieval of past religious practices and theological positions by historians was of primary importance to lay the foundations of the

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<sup>35</sup> See among others Anglo 1961-2, 17-48, and Griffith and Thomas 1985.

<sup>36</sup> A useful investigation of Parker's translations and the value of retrieval of history in Elizabethan England also beyond the religious aspect is offered in Levy 2004, 79-123.

doctrinal superiority of the reformed Church of England over what it considered as the centralism of papal authority and the depletion of the evangelical message perpetrated by the Church of Rome over the centuries. A historical retrieval of past practices helped the Reformers find parallels between their faith and the originary Church. As brilliantly argued by F.J. Levy, “the era before the Conquest was important in English church history for three reasons: the doctrine of transubstantiation had not yet been established, the clergy was not yet celibate, and the Scriptures and services were in the vernacular.”<sup>37</sup>

Such religious discourse seems to play a role in Leicester’s patronage, as many intellectuals of his circle were dissenters. Aconcio himself was part of the Italian group of exiles that gravitated around him.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, both Aconcio and Blundeville had worked for the Earl of Bedford, a Marian exile who boasted family connections with Leicester and to whom Blundeville dedicated his translation of Aconcio’s treatise on fortifications.<sup>39</sup>

However, the novelty introduced by Aconcio and furthered by Blundeville was that of providing the reader with a methodological framework for reading histories. As Eugene R. Kintgen argues in his *Reading in Tudor England*, the idea of method in reading was prevalent in all aspects of Tudor education: from grammar schools, more structured and institutionalised, to the church, less formal but more pervasive at the same time. Apart from devoting particular attention to *The true Order*, Kintgen (1994)<sup>40</sup> considers other contemporary works

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<sup>37</sup> Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought*, 117.

<sup>38</sup> See Wyatt 2005, where Aconcio’s *Osservationi* is only cursorily cited on p. 315.

<sup>39</sup> See Rosenberg 1955, 54. Simon Adams sees in Leicester’s patronage a preference for intellectuals with more drastic reformed views: “the area where Leicester’s patronage become increasingly prominent, and in some circles notorious, was his continued protection for protestant nonconformity” (*The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-8160?rskey=GF02uf&result=2>, accessed May 13, 2019). On the presence of Italian dissenters in England in that period see Pirillo 2010 and 2013, 121-40.

<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the author treats the text as if it was Blundeville’s own production, and not a translation from Patrizi and Aconcio.

that treat this argument – albeit not as explicitly as Blundeville – such as George Gascoigne’s *Certayne Notes of Instruction Concerning the Making of Verse or Rhyme in English* (1575) and George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), two guides for a correct reading of poetry whose primary purpose was to let “the ear and mind be educated in judgment” (Ibid.: 170). Another notable example is Angel Day’s *The English Secretary* (1586), a manual of letter writing containing a full discussion of the most frequently used rhetorical figures, where the methodological discourse is applied to the procedure employed to identify and evaluate their use (Ibid.: 172-80).

As the treatment of Aconcio’s text in his *True order* and the publication of the *Arte of Logyke* show, Blundeville did not content himself with introducing the concept and the application of method in England he had discovered from his “olde friende of good memorie”. On the contrary, he successfully attempted to give his own contribution to a debate that was lively at that time – a debate which was not merely theoretical, but, according to the precepts of the Italian philosopher, had to be contextualised within the cultural, social, and political contingencies of that time.

What had initially been meant to be a private work produced for the benefit of the Earl of Leicester was then transformed into an instrument of learning for a wider readership. This is Blundeville’s major accomplishment in his role as translator of Aconcio: exploiting the renown of his patron, Blundeville became one of the first ambassadors and, perhaps, one of the most effective sponsors of Aconcio’s humanistic ideal of public utility.

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