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Leopardi as a Byzantine Scholar, Translator of George Gemistos Plethon

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This paper focuses on Giacomo Leopardi as a translator of George Gemistos Plethon (1355–1452), whom Silvia Ronchey refers to as the “first true Italian Byzantine scholar.” Plethon, described by Woodhouse as “the last of the Greeks”, was a Byzantine Neoplatonic philosopher and the founder of the Academy of Mistra in the Peloponnese. His intellectual legacy inspired Cosimo de’ Medici to establish the Florentine Platonic Academy. A prominent figure of his time, Plethon was not only a refined writer but also a scholar in grammar, mathematics, astronomy, theology, jurisprudence, and history. His work exemplifies one of the most compelling representations of late Byzantine humanistic thought. Following the fall of Constantinople, Plethon played a pivotal role in revitalizing Humanist and Renaissance thought in Europe, particularly in Italy.

The scholarly relationship between Leopardi and Byzantine civilization remains, however, largely underexplored. This paper aims to address this gap by offering an analysis of several key passages in Leopardi’s work, with a focus on the remarkable endurance of the Greek language through the centuries. This longevity was largely due to the preservation and transmission of Greek language and culture by Byzantine scholars and philologists, who brought the intellectual legacy of Byzantium into the Renaissance and Humanism.

A central concern of this paper is the exploration of the stylistic motivations behind Leopardi’s decision to translate Plethon’s *Ἐπιτάφιος ἐπὶ Βασιλίσσῃ Ἑλένῃ Παλαιολογίνῃ* (*Orazione in morte della imperatrice Elena Paleologina*), preceded by his significant *Discorso in proposito di una orazione greca*, written between November 1826 and early January 1827 in Recanati. Leopardi was drawn to Plethon by the latter’s elegant style and his complex, archaizing syntactic structures. This paper will examine the distinctive features of Leopardi’s translation, identifying both affinities and divergences between the original text and its Italian rendering. A detailed analysis will be provided based on linguistic, textual, and stylistic annotations, comparing Plethon’s *Ἐπιτάφιος* and Leopardi’s translation (as found in the manuscript *Discorso in proposito d’un’orazione di Giorgio Gemisto Pletone e Volgarizzamento della medesima*, Paolina Leopardi’s autograph with Giacomo’s corrections, Biblioteca Nazionale di Napoli, Carte Leopardi, C.L. X.5.2p). Plethon emerged for Leopardi as a model of “solemn simplicity,” an ideal of prose style where modernity and antiquity converge—an aesthetic which Leopardi himself aspired to emulate.

Short Biography

BA in Classical Studies, University of Turin, 2015. Thesis title: “Un Epitteto a mio modo”. Il Manuale di Epitteto e la traduzione di Giacomo Leopardi, supervisor: Prof. E.V. Maltese, grade: 110/110 with honors.

MA in Philology, Literature, and History of Antiquity, University of Turin, 2018. Thesis title: Francesco Patrizi da Cherso. La cultura delle Corti nel secondo Cinquecento. La traduzione italiana dello Stephanites kai Ichneutes nel ms. greco Y.-III.-6 della Biblioteca dell’Escorial, supervisor: Prof. E.V. Maltese, grade: 110/110 with honors.

PhD in Historical Sciences, University of San Marino, School of Advanced Historical Studies (Prof. L. Canfora), 2022. Thesis title: Storia, tradizione e ricezione del Barlaam e Ioasaf in Italia tra fine Quattrocento e Cinquecento, supervisor: Prof. S. Ronchey, grade: 60/60 with distinction for publication.

Currently a post-doctoral fellow at the Italian Institute for Historical Studies (Naples, supervisor: Prof. R. Librandi), working on a project in collaboration with the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

(Department of Italian Language and Literature, Prof. G. Zoras) on Giacomo Leopardi as a translator from Greek. The project focuses specifically on two texts that were part of Leopardi's initiative to rediscover and promote Greek and Byzantine prose of a moral and historical-moral nature: the Manual of Epictetus and the Oration on the Death of Empress Helena Palaeologina by George Gemistos Plethon.

In addition to several reviews and the editing of some dictionary entries ("TLIO", Accademia della Crusca), the following articles are noteworthy:

- «Un Epitteto a mio modo». Giacomo Leopardi e la traduzione del Manuale di Epitteto, «Lettere Italiane» [forthcoming]
- I testi a stampa del Barlaam e Ioasaf: fortuna e popolarità, «Rivista di letteratura comparata italiana, bizantina e neoellenica», 7, 2023, pp. 49-65
- Il Barlaam sulle scene: la Sacra Rappresentazione di Bernardo Pulci, «Critica letteraria», 196, 2022, pp. 634-652
- La biblioteca greca di Francesco Patrizi e le fonti di Del governo de' regni, «Studi e problemi di critica testuale», 100, 2020, pp. 103-141.

Keywords

Giacomo Leopardi, Gemistos Plethon, translation, Byzantium, Renaissance, Byzantine civilization, Italian literature

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