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Reading and writing for success: literacy, knowledge and social mobility

Introduction

In February 1448, the Tuscan-Emilian apothecary Giovanni Antonio da Faie began writing his *ricordo e chronica*. His goals were clear: to remember his whereabouts, and to educate his offspring (Ciappelli 2014; Biagioni 2019; Bordini 2009, 169-204; Sforza 1904; Cavalli 1971).[1] Giovanni had been born on 1st January 1409, about five months after his father died in July 1408. Fatherless and indigent, he had a difficult start in life and was forced to work from a very young age: first as servant, then a cattleboy, then apprenticed to a shoemaker and then a clothmaker. Finally, at the age of 12, Giovanni apprenticed himself to a *speziale* [apothecary]. According to the *ricordo*, this was a very deliberate career switch. Giovanni writes explicitly that he knew working as an apothecary would allow him freedom as well as intellectual development. We can also read this choice in the context of his efforts to attain a satisfactory level of literacy, which Giovanni characterizes as necessary not just to perform his professional activities, but also to develop his «vertù» (Biagioni 2019, 11-12).[2]

Giovanni's detailed description of these efforts, and in particular his stress on the process of acquiring graphic skills, offer a unique vantage point from which to investigate the connections between literacy and text-related activities and social transformations in late medieval Europe. The present study analyses a number of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century primary sources ((auto)biographical texts, manuals for merchants and artisans and manuscripts), and brings them into conversation with

[1] Faie was a small village in the Emilian Appennines, near Berceto. The writings of Giovanni Antonio da Faie have received considerable attention in scholarship; however, their cultural relevance has not yet been fully acknowledged. The text in question is preserved in an autograph manuscript (Massa, Archivio di Stato, ms. 34). It is written on paper in *mercantesca* cursive, bound with a limp parchment cover, and it counts 63 folia: the first 28 contain the autobiography, followed by a chronicle written by Giovanni (35 folia). Giovanni son's Raffaello placed a note on the last folium (63v), referring to his father's death on 6th September 1470. This note confirms that the manuscript, at least during the fifteenth century, was kept within Giovanni's family. Although an accurate codicological and palaeographical description of the manuscript is lacking, an analysis of the digital reproduction on the website of the Archivio di Stato di Massa (https://archiviodistatodimassa.cultura.gov.it/?p=3346) demonstrates that Giovanni's autobiography and chronicle show clear resemblances with the materiality and layout of late medieval Italian administrative sources (e.g. account books).

[2] Massa, Archivio di Stato, ms. 34, fol. 9v.

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current secondary research to demonstrate the role of literate activities (reading, writing, collecting books, and fostering access to knowledge) in processes of identity formation and patterns of representation in (Northern) Italy. These materials are then further contextualised and evaluated in a European perspective, with references in particular to medieval France and Low Countries.

The role of education in social mobility is widely discussed by scholars in early modern history, but that of literacy/literacies in the same during the late medieval period has not yet been systematically approached and evaluated.[3] In order to fill this gap, the present contribution asks how we can relate the performance of reading and writing, as well as engagement in the production, discussion, and distribution of textual knowledge, to personal and societal transformations in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Whereas traditionally a quantitative approach has been employed in the study of social mobility, I here show the value of qualitative methods, concentrating on modes of presentation and self-representation. Late medieval subjects, as we shall see, stressed education, literacy and participation in literate activities as instruments for the creation of new social identities.

Several considerations are crucial to this approach. First, we must take into account broad linguistic transformations, specifically the emancipation of the vernacular and the creation of vernacular linguistic identities. Second, we need to address graphic transformations, e.g. the use of specific graphic, palaeographic and documentary conventions. And third, we must think about the development of literacy on an individual level, and in particular about the acquisition of specific *habitus* in literate practice: the mastery of particular reading and writing techniques, the ability to use documentary models, and familiarity with accounting and registration systems.

The difficult path to literacy

Giovanni da Faie's autobiography offers one of the period's most striking testimonies on the process of literacy acquisition, a path which for him was indeed

[3] Studies on schooling in late medieval Europe (Black 2007; Sheffler 2008; Lynch 2017; Ferrari-Piseri 2013) stress the importance of education in processes of social transformation. Lynch 2017, 128 states for example: «The majority of children who attended schools in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century France came from urban backgrounds. They did not, however, come from the municipal elites of towns and cities alone, but from the mercantile, the artisan, and even from the labouring classes. Education became increasingly essential to these sections of society during this period and carried with it the idea of social and financial advancement. Businesses could be run more efficiently and profitably if owners possessed the ability to read, write, and count. More skilled, and better paid, employment might be gained».

A specific focus on the *impact* of the acquisition of literacy and elementary education (especially in the vernacular) is however still lacking. Guilbert describes as one of the exceptions discusses schooling as «promotion sociale» and «savonnette sociale» (Guilbert 1981). As far the early modern era is concerned, the connection between university education and social mobility and the evaluation of the impact of the Reformation and intellectual development of larger groups within European society are often subject of study. Although this Protestant Paradigm has repeatedly been challenged, the connection between Reformation, promotion of reading activities, schooling and economic success is still is a strong narrative in premodern studies (Mosher 2016).

paved with challenges. In his first job with the *speziale* Niccolò di Sagremoro in Pontremoli he had no spare time to follow any programmatic schooling. By asking customers to help him, Giovanni was able to learn the «abe» [the abecedarium] and to recognise «tute letere molto bene» [all letters of the alphabet very well], but not to «compedare» [read and write].[4] A second position in Lucca, in Gabriello da Siena's shop, also failed to satisfy his hunger for knowledge. Neither was his third master, Jacopo Calandrini from Sarzana, willing to teach him «de letera, che saperebe lezere e scrivere sua ragione» [literacy, i.e. to independently read and to write], even though it was an essential skill for his professional development.

Giovanni was only able to achieve his dream of literacy while working at the *spezeria* owned by Benedetto Santini in Borgo a Mozzano (about 20 km from Lucca). There he had time after work to study for a couple of hours on his own, motivated by his eagerness to learn how to read and to write [«tanto era lo grande animo ch' io avea de imparare»] (Biagioni 2019, 12-13).[5] This was the starting point of his journey into a satisfactory career, economic success and social prestige, as he carefully recorded in first part of his autobiography.[6] His literate skills are then put to new use in the second part of the manuscript, in which Giovanni compiles a chronicle describing local, national and international events – an achievement made possible by that early dedication and years of hard work (Biagioni 2019, 79-87).

Giovanni da Faie's focus on the literacy as fundamental for success is to a certain degree exceptional, but it is certainly not unique. A description of primary literacy education is often part of autobiographical writing (Guiglielminetti 1977, 246, cited by Balestracci 2004, 46).[7] It is however true that the overall importance, and in particular the social impact, of literacy tends to be stressed in cases in which the process of its acquisition is less obvious or more demanding. We see this for example with the Bolognese stonemason Gaspare Nadi, who recalls at the beginning of his autobiography the challenges of his education. Working as a servant in the house of a lawyer, Gaspare di Guido, he writes that he gained the rudiments of literacy by listening to the lessons given by a master to the lawyer's male children. Over the following years, Gaspare Nadi built upon this basic education, developing the skills that allowed him to keep a diary about both his personal circumstances and political events at local and national level (Balestracci 2004; Bordini 2009, 204-246; Ricci and Bacchi 1886, 5).

Even those operating within the traditionally literate environment of professional commerce might reflect on the difficult path to literacy. One example, from the

[4] Massa, Archivio di Stato, ms. 34, fol. 9v.

[5] Massa, Archivio di Stato, ms. 34, fol. 11v.

[6] It is not a coincidence that the last event narrated in Giovanni's autobiography dates to 1466, when in December he was established as notary by the count of Bagnone (Massa, Archivio di Stato, ms 34, fol. 29v: «L'ano de 1466, del mese de decenre, Antonio conte e vesco de Brugnato m'à fato notaro: à fato la carta messer Lionardo da le Tualie»).

[7] Guiglielminetti refers, in his description of references to education as a topos in humanistic (autio)biographies, to the chronicle by Donato Velluti, who writes «apparai grammatica, e poi logica; e poi nel 1329 n'andai in studio a Bologna». Black 2007 also frequently refers to life-writing sources in his study of education and society in Florentine Tuscany, and on 613-724 (Appendix five) lists references to education in unpublished Florentine *ricordanze* (up to 1507).

Datini archive, is found in a letter written by Piero di ser Lapo Mazzei to Francesco Datini on 4 February 1399. The letter constitutes a sort of medieval 'job application', a very common procedure for joining such a commercial enterprise, as is clear from a series of such letters kept in the same archive (Hayez 2012, note 93).[8] Here Piero, son of Lapo Mazzei, a notary and Datini's business and intellectual associate, expresses his willingness to join the Datini enterprise and stresses his graphic education, detailing the start of his training at the *abaco* school as well as his appropriate and disciplined behaviour. Like those of the other applicants, Piero's letter itself testifies to the graphic abilities of its author.

Piero's reflection on those abilities is particularly illuminating. Having only started his graphic education in November 1398, he is aware that his skills are still lacking, but he hopes that within a few months his «lettera […] non paresse d'uno piçicagnolo» [writing will not resemble that of a grocer] (Hayez 2018).[9] He is training his hand by using models and drawing guide lines, which help him avoid making letters that resemble «cichaloni di que' maschi» [male cicades]. Learning to write is a huge, but necessary, undertaking, and the pen is as heavy as a spade.[10] Although, as Hayez (2018) notes, Piero's letter already contains some of the characteristic formal features of the mercantile letter (such as the usual invocation and dating «Al nome di Dio, amen. Dì 4 di febraio 1398»), the presence of those guide lines to demarcate the writing space testifies to an ongoing learning process. This process continued after Piero joined the Datini enterprise; the archives in fact also hold Piero's exercise notebook, in which he practices his writing skills by alternating short sentences and epistolary formulae (Hayez 2012, image nr. 2).[11]

The difficulty of gaining a satisfactory level of literacy is also apparent in the learning process of Francesco Datini's wife, Margherita, whose training ran chronologically parallel to that of Piero Mazzei. Margherita's learning curve has been described accurately and in detail in the last decades, but two specific components in

[8] See https://books.openedition.org/pup/13867. Hayez refers to a number of letters (at least 5) that were explicitly written to display writing abilities. These testimonies are extremely relevant, as in some cases apprentices were not allowed to continue a traineeship due to the lack of graphic expertise.

[9] This reference is particularly interesting, as it reveals an informal ranking of writing abilities based on the social and economic position of the writer. It is clear from Piero's description that the graphic skills of one in a mercantile position were expected to be more advanced than those of *piçicagnoli*.

[10] See https://correspondancesdatini.lamop.fr/fr/lettre-132719/ and https://correspondancesdatini.lamop.fr/fr/la-graphie-comme-sesame-dune-carriere-marchande/. Thanks to Hayez reconstruction, it is possible to assess that this is probably the first letter ever written by the young Piero. The comparison between holding the pen and handling a spade is a common medieval description of the act of writing. The fourteenth-century Antwerp town clerk Jan van Boendale, in his *Der Leken Spiegel* (The Layman's Mirror, 1315), stresses the physical discomfort of writing, which is also described as mentally very demanding (Reynaert 2011, 133-135, with reference to standardized complaints of medieval scribes in manuscript colophons, who often describe the act of writing as an extremely painful exercise).

[11] The letters and the notebook by Piero, composed in the vernacular, illustrate important steps in late medieval graphic education and show notable resemblance to the materials from the Foligno area in the State Archives of Rome discussed by Cherubini (1996). As in the case of Piero, the learners discussed by Cherubini train by writing and rewriting individual letters of the alphabet and short sentences (often religious and moralistic in content) and exercises using basic calculations and measurements, until they reach the desired level of graphic mastery.

her learning process can be further elucidated (Murano 2018, xi-xiii and 44-47; Crabb 2007; James 2008; Hayez 2008; James and Pagliaro 2012). The first we can access through a letter from Domenico di Cambio to Francesco Datini (21 October 1396). Domenico wrote that Margherita had started to learn to read and to write, making clear that she had some basic skills («she is able to read the Hours of Our Lady»), but that she was not yet able to read the letters in *mercantesca*, the script traditionally used by merchants. He declared that he was keen to help Margherita by regularly sending her letters and by paying attention to their «graphic qualities» and readability, which must have helped her better her own skills (Murano 2018, xii).[12] The second is the involvement of Lapo Mazzei and his evaluation of Margherita's progress. In a letter to Francesco Lapo, he states that he is curious about the development of both Margherita's writing abilities and her graphic style. Lapo distinguishes between two scriptural options for Margherita: «dettato di monacha o di romita» [hand of a nun or anchorite] or «di commune donna» [mercantile hand]. This categorization of female writing styles is particularly revealing, as it names the two «realms» of women's literate activities: the world of religion and monasticism and the world of mercantile and artisanal activities. While the «dettato di monacha o di romita» is essentially based on textualis script, the hand of a «commune donna» can be typified as a cursive writing, mostly used in mercantile and artisanal circles by vernacularly literate writers (Murano 2018, xiii).[13]

The connection of different scripts to specific activities during the late Middle Ages is mirrored in advertisement sheets by European writing masters. For example, surviving sheets by Herman Strepel, a writing master from Münster (1477), display samples of several hands, each used to write its proper name (e.g. «fracta», «rotunda» and «modus copiistarum») in golden letters. Different scripts were moreover connected specific types of text, for example prayers, excerpts from the Psalms, letters and charters. The texts in writing specimens also stress the importance of reading and writing: «illa scientia coronata cuius auxilio maiores indigent mediocres et minores» [that crowned science, helping all kind of persons, the highest in rank, the average citizens and the lower classes] to climb the social ladder (Reynaert 2011; Hébrard 1995; Van Dijk 1956; Van der Heijden 2016; Schaap 2005).

In 1399, Margherita and Piero joined forces to govern the alphabet (Miglio 2008). On 19 February 1399, Margherita sent a letter from Florence to Marco Datini, who was at that moment in Prato. She starts the letter by writing that she has a new errand boy, Piero, and she that she has «set him to writing, as he would have to do to work as a secretary». Among a list of things that she asks be sent from Prato to Florence, she mentions the «book on the Passion that is in Monna Margherita's room and has an 'M' at the beginning [and also] that small book on the desk» (James and Pagliaro 2012, 322). Thus after a difficult start and much effort over three years, books have become part of Margherita's life.

[12] Murano includes in her discussion a transcription of Domenico's letter, in which he states that he is willing to adjust his writing style in order to facilitate Margherita's access to the written text.

[13] Lapo Mazzei also helped Margherita by buying at least six manuscripts for her, in order to develop her reading abilities and provide good writing samples. Female literacy and writing activities have recentely been at the center of research activities (Miglio 2008; Graziani 2019; Gavinelli 2019).

The cases of Piero and Margherita underscore the importance of the construction of and the belonging to graphic communities and communities of practice (Long, Snijders, and Vanderputten 2019) in the process of literacy acquisition. Graphic abilities become a key to access these communities, and to fully participate in their social and economic networks. Learning to write, whether through formal schooling, a self-devised practice plan, training on the job, and/or lessons from a writing master is a crucial step in processes of personal growth and transformation.[14]

The attainment of expertise

An essential concept for framing the described experiences of acquiring skills in reading and writing is «expertise». As reconstructed by Denjean 2021 in the volume *Expertise et valeur des choses au Moyen Âge*, the terms «expert» and «expertise» in this age were tightly linked to «l'action qui transforme l'homme et manifeste une qualité» (Denjean 2021).[15] Thanks to this action,

> la connaissance pratique qui fait le 'bon homme, voire la 'bonne' femme, vaste et de bon aloi […] peut, in fine, par la qualité de cette connaissance, conférer un pouvoir décisionnaire légalement reconnu. Il est ainsi apte à donner un conseil avisé, respectueux de la norme sociale dont il mesure la profondeur chronologique, à proposer une solution socialement acceptable (Denjean 2021, 7).[16]

Two elements are connected in this reflection on the meaning and value of expertise: the visibility of the gaining of expertise through the performance of «expert activities», and the personal qualities of the expert («bon homme» or «bonne femme»), which transform mastery through morality, ethics and social status.

These ideas are stressed in Benedetto Cotrugli's *Book of the Art of Trade*, probably the most extensive reflection on the formation, duties, and social status of the merchant. Written in 1458, the manual discusses of the principles of trade, the civic life and economic virtues of the merchant, and the role of religion in the merchant's daily life (Cotrugli 2017).

For Cotrugli, «a merchant must be open-minded and ready to learn himself before instructing others, because 'he who knows himself, knows everything'». The best way to attain wisdom is by reading widely, and the author encourages his fellow

[14] The term «graphic communities» was introduced in Bertrand 2015, and it combines Brian Stock's concept of «textual community» and Roger Chartier's notion of «graphic culture». For Bertrand graphic communities were defined by shared writing tools and graphic attributes devised to facilitate administration and foster communication.

[15] "The action which transforms the person and manifests a skill"

[16] "The practical knowledge, which 'makes' the 'good man' or the 'good woman', broad and of genuine quality, has the power *in fine* (thanks to the quality of this knowledge) to confer legally recognized decisional power. It is also suitable to give an informed advice, respecting social norms evaluated in their chronological framework and to propose socially acceptable solutions".

merchants «whenever [they] have a spare moment, to read». One should also find a dedicated space to perform reading activities. In fact,

> those who delight in literature should not have to keep their books in the common writing areas, but should have a little desk of their own either in their bedroom or at least nearby, where they can study when they have spare time, which is a most honourable activity and worthy of glorification (Cotrugli 2017, fol. 63v and 79v).

This linking of mercantile activities with reading is more than a *desideratum*.[17] Research into book ownership among both mercantile and artisanal groups in late medieval Europe has demonstrated that books were a constant presence in the household and the workshop. A case in point are the inventories of the Florentine *Magistrato dei pupilli*, which served to protect the interests of dependent minors whose family members had died intestate (Bec 1984; Verde 1987; Fiesole and Somigli 2009; Corbellini and Hoogvliet 2013).

These inventories reveal the frequent presence of manuscripts and early printed texts in the domestic environment. The quantities and physical descriptions of their books vary, ranging from one single book in a home, for example a Book of Hours with silverwork and a silk binding that was in the possession of the butcher (*beccaio*) Antonio di Luca d'Antonio di Domenico (1485), to midsized and larger collections, some of twenty books or more (Verde 1987, 110; Fiesole and Somigli 2009, 127; Corbellini and Hoogvliet 2013). The doublet maker (*farsettaio*) Chimenti d'Andrea Chimenti had in his house on the Via Larga a manuscript containing the lives of the Church Fathers, a book with the Epistles and the Gospels, five account books and three unidentified volumes. His inventory also references three «reading books» kept in the «bottegha» (Verde 1987 112; Corbellini and Hoogvliet 2013). Though the contents of these books are unspecified, their location in the *bottega* intriguingly suggests that the doublet maker's reading naturally fit into his commercial life.

Some contemporary inventories indicate even more clearly the locations of different types of books within the home. In the case of the goldbeater (*battiloro*) Romolo d'Andrea di Nofri (1473), the inventory differentiates between the books found in an unspecified place in his house (a Book of Hours and a book of Psalms) and those found in a room described as his *iscrittoio*, the place where writing activities took place. There Romolo kept a small personal library of vernacular translations of classical authors, juridical books, and grammar texts (Verde 1987, 59; Corbellini and Hoogvliet 2013). Similar patterns have been uncovered for late medieval France and the medieval Low Countries (Zwart 2021; Uphoff 2021). In fact, research conducted on wills, probate inventories and book catalogues reveals that books were ubiquitous in the medieval household (Hoogvliet 2019). As Hoogvliet (2019, 278) has stated, late medieval artisans and merchants were «avid readers and consumers» of texts, and medieval domestic spaces often transformed into «hubs» of textual learning (Hoogvliet 2019, 278; Hoogvliet 2020; Corbellini and Hoogvliet 2023).

[17] Mercantile is in this contribution used in the broadest possible sense and includes all those participating in commercial activities.

According to Cotrugli, it was crucial not just to be able to read, but also to master writing, as «the pen is so noble and excellent an instrument that it is extremely necessary not only to merchants but to all of the arts, liberal and mechanical». He continues:

> And you can readily see how a merchant whose pen weighs heavily, that is, one who is indisposed to put it to paper, can hardly be said to be a merchant. And he must not only have skill in writing, but must know how to organise his writings […] A merchant should not […] conduct his business by memory alone, unless he be Cyrus the Great. […] And given the impossibility of [working only by memory], we must move on to the practicalities of mercantile writing, which serves not only to preserve and make accessible to the memory all the matters negotiated and brought to a conclusion, but also to avoid problems, quarrels and disputes (Cotrugli 2017, fol. 32v).

That the pen is at the very core of mercantile «expertise» was also expressed by the Tuscan merchant Paolo da Certaldo in his *Libro di buoni costumi,* who stresses the importance of recording every transaction in order to build up a personal archive. Leon Battista Alberti, in his *Libri della famiglia*, is particularly clear in his instructions on this matter. He exclaims that «dimostrava essere officio del mercante e d'ogni mestiere, quale abbia a tramare con più persone, sempre scrivere ogni cosa» [it seemed to be the task of the merchant and of everybody involved in transactions with others to write down everything] (Balestracci 2004, 42). It is indeed well established in the scholarship that merchants and artisans were particularly keen to document their daily activities, and to thereby protect themselves from fraud, preclude disagreements, and fulfil their role as *experti* (Ciappelli 2014; Tognetti 2012; Ricci 2014; Fresu 2014; Goldthwaite 2015). As Balestracci 1999 and 2004 has demonstrated, these practices characterized the practice of trade not only in urban environments but also in the (Tuscan) countryside.

To be fully understood within the framework of this contribution, the concept of *expertise* needs to be combined with the notion of *discipline*, as it applies both to the sometimes complicated performance of the act of writing, and to the acquisition of specific conventions for different types of texts, such as family books, diaries and *livres de raison*. As Mouysset (2007) affirms, «l'art de bien écrire consiste à savoir choisir sa plume mais aussi à discipliner son corps et se résoudre à ce geste douloureux qui donne tout son sens à l'expression 'être rompu à l'écriture'». Following Chartier, Mouysset states that learning to write in premodern times is seen as a harsh physical discipline (Chartier 1996, cited in Mouysset 2007, 134). The empty page is a space, and it needs to be conquered, appropriated and organised through the design of its topography, which involves decisions around layout, pagination or foliation, and organisation through the use of paratexual elements. It is a matter of «discipline scripturaire» [writing discipline], which needs to be assimilated and then put into practice (Mouysset 2007, 137). As the act of writing is intimately connected, both intellectually and physically, to the performing person, the composition of

egodocuments can be seen as testaments to the «logique de la representation et de la conscience de soi» [logic of representation and self-awareness] as well as building blocks of «un honneur organisé sur les bases techniques de la professionalité» [an honour organised on the base of their professional skills] (Claustre 2021, 165).

The importance of gaining not just pragmatic skills but real expertise in writing is reflected in the high number of manuscripts copied by merchants and artisans, like saddle makers, barbers, wool makers and wine sellers, for personal use or for circulation within informal networks (e.g. family, guilds and confraternities).[18] An interesting peculiarity of such manuscripts is the explicit mention of these (non-professional scribe) copyists' actual occupations. For example, on 21 February 1445, the saddle maker Jacopo di Lione recorded his completion of a copy of *Homilies on the Gospels* by Gregory the Great («Qui finiscono l'omelie di santo Gregorio a dì 21 di febraio mille quatro cento quaranta quatro, la seconda domenica di quaresima. Prigo in carità chi ll'à, che gliele deba rendere per l'amore di dDio. Deo gratias amen»).[19] A few days later, on 7 March, the shoemaker Giovanni di Zanobi Amadori 'signed' his religious miscellany by adding a colophon with his name («Giovanny di Çanobi Amadory»), his profession («chalçaiuolo») and a restatement of his authorship and ownership («questo libro di è di […]" and «el quale scrisse di sua mano e chompiessi di scrivere»).[20] A few years later, the *lanaiuolo* Nicola di ser Dino di Nicola was even more explicit in asserting his involvement in the copying of a manuscript containing a commentary on Dante's *Comedia*. He states that he worked on the manuscript from 14 March to 19 October 1458 («Finito et chompiuto per me Nichola di ser Dino di Nichola dell'Arte della Lana questo dì XVIIIo d'otobre a ore quatro di note») at the request of «Lazero di Michele di Piero da Varna del Popolo di San Piero Ghattolino».[21] The addition of the statement «di sua propria mano» [written in his own hand] is particularly relevant: these non-professional scribes are claiming a scribal role, proclaiming their literacy, and stressing their ability to write both for themselves and kindred spirits.[22] They thus present themselves with a kind of double identity, as both professional merchant or artisan and expert involved in the production or reproduction of knowledge.

In his study of English medieval manuscripts with ownership notes and colophons, Wakelin (2016) states that records of scribal performances «have the effect of characterizing that person's life as a narrative of bookish activities» (Wakelin 2016, 28). Evaluated as micro-autobiographies registering the interconnections

[18] This point emerges clearly from the analysis of catalogues of dated and datable manuscripts also mentioning the name of scribes. See for example *Manoscritti datati d'Italia* https://www.manoscrittidatati.it/mdi/, Mattiazzo 2015; Giovè 2008; Caldelli 2010).

[19] Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana 1275, fol. 111r [Here finish St Gregory's sermons on 21 February 1444 (Florentine dating), the second Sunday in the Lent. I sincerely hope that the one who has it will take it back for God's love. Deo gratias amen].

[20] Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana 1361, fol. 109v.

[21] Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana 1028, fol. 241r.

[22] Through the study of German sources, Neuber (2011) developed the concept of *excribo ergo sum*, which is very much in line with the results of the research conducted on Italian, French and Dutch materials. See Hoogvliet and Corbellini 2021 and the results of the research project "Cities of Readers", conducted at the University of Groningen (https://www.openedition.org/18611?lang=en).

between users of the manuscript book, colophons and ownership notes become testimonies to a learned life meant to be shared with other readers (Wakelin 2016, 32).

The colophons in the manuscripts copied by the *pizzicaiuolo* [seller of wax, paper and colours] Nicolò di Giovanni da Siena show an awareness of the performance of exceptional writing activities. Nicolò skilfully wrote and illustrated two manuscripts, both now kept at the Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati in Siena: ms. I.VII.12, a copy of Filippo Ceffi's Italian translation of Guido delle Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae* (dated 1403), and ms. A.IV.5, which contains a very famous narrative of the Montaperti battle in 1260 (dated 1443; Cavinato 2010). Nicolò adds to the original texts long colophons in which he explains why he undertook these two manuscript projects. The subscription to the *Historia Troiae* is particularly revealing:

> Udite udite state a udire al nome di Dio amen. Io Nicolò di Giovani da Siena facitore di questo pretioso libro nostante ch'io avessi alcuno disagio, com'è a la fragielità humana, ond'io fusse ritratto dell'opera e no·llo avessi tratto a fine, ma io tanto mi studiai favoregiando la gratia de lo Spirito Santo che infra VI mesi, ciò fu a dì primo di settenbre perfinono uttimo di feraio prossimo seguete nel MCCCCIII [...] Anco vi prego signori in cortesia che preghiate e·crucifisso Idio, che per riconpraci sostenne passione, che perdoni a lo scrittore, se ofeso l'avessi per scrivare questo libro; poniamo ch'elli non à saputo meglio fare, per questa volta volio che mi perdoniate se male scritto fusse questo libro. In buona verità signori intendete che poi ch'a scrivare comincia', ma delle cose grosse asai e male scritte ci sono, e io vi ringratio poi che di tanto udire m'avete fatto dono, per ifinita asacula aseculorum amen (Cavinato 2010, 233-235).[23]

Nicolò demands the readers of the manuscript to pay attention to his colophon and to 'listen' to his self-presentation («udite, udite, state ad udire»). He portrays himself as the maker of a «precious» book, which has been completed with great effort over six long months (from 1st September 1403 to the end of February 1404). He also asks readers to pray for him, and in a clear process of *captatio benevolentiae*, to forgive his limited writing skills («se male scritto fusse questo libro»). His satisfaction with the completion of his copying shines through his own awareness of his 'amateurship'. Nicolò is also particularly clear in his desire that his book be used

[23] Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, I.VII.12, fol. 2r: "Listen in the name of God, amen. I, Nicolò di Giovani da Siena, maker of this precious book in spite of my disabilities and my human frailty, which could have led me to stop this work. But I was able to succeed thanks the grace of the Holy Spirit and complete this work in six months' time, from the first of September to the end of February in the year 1403 [...] And I beg you sirs to pray to the crucified Jesus, who suffered the Passion to rescue us, that he may forgive the scribe if I have offended him by writing this book; just consider that you could not do any better and please forgive me if I have badly written this book. Please believe me that after I had started writing I realized that there are some unpleasant and badly written parts and I thank you for listening to me for such a long time for ever and ever amen".

within private or family circles: «Iste liber fecit Nicholaus Iohannes Francise Venture de Senis anni. Domini M CCCC IIII el quale à·ffatto per non prestare» (Cavinato 2010, 230) [This book was made by Nicolò di Giovanni da Siena in the year Our Lord 1403; it should not be lent out].

The choice to create a literate identity through the composition of extended colophons confirms the high value placed on writing and reading in late medieval European societies. As the sociologist Bourdieu and the book historian Chartier affirm, «reading [and writing are] not universally done or valued; [they] only thrive when cultures have systems and ideologies for encouraging, valuing, and justifying [them]» (Bourdieu and Chartier 1985, 226 cited by Wakelin 2016, 32).

Sharing books and creating networks

While Nicolò is keen to keep his manuscripts within the family, many amateur-scribes and book owners zealously participated in book exchange, fostering networks that could help them improve their social positions.[24] Traces of such efforts towards 'cultural brokerage' (Gantner and Rychterová 2024) can be detected in the same types of egodocuments and account books discussed above.[25] Illustrative are the family books and notebooks written by Francesco di Matteo Castellani, who was described by Ciappelli (2014) as «not in the strict sense an intellectual or a man professionally involved in culture, even though he was in contact with similar figures» (Ciappelli 2014, 36), not only avidly acquired manuscripts from bookshops and fellow citizens, but also engaged in a very lively exchange of books. Francesco notes, for example, in his *Quaternuccio e giornale B* on October 1459, that he has loaned to his brother-in-law his «*Corbaccio*, a folio volume, written in italic script on paper with wooden covers, and also *La buca* and *Gli studianti d'Atene*, by Za *buffone*, on paper, and *Dell'invidia* by *messer* Antonio degl'Agli, in quarto» (Ciappelli 2014, 41-42). A few months later, on 4th January 1460, he loaned his *Chronicle* by Giovanni Villani to his father-in-law, Boccaccino Alamanni. Boccaccino sent back the manuscript some days later and borrowed the «vernacular *Old Testament* in *bambagina* paper with wooden covers» (Ciappelli 2014, 42).[26] These details show that books circulated within a trust network of relatives, friends and neighbours, who were in turn bound together by a shared use of manuscripts and texts.

The book lending system created in fifteenth-century Lucca by Michele di Giovanni Guinigi probably constitutes the culmination of a project to employ literate activities in the creation of an extended social network (Polica and Martini 2024).[27]

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[24] In a discussion of this practice in Italy, France and in the Low Countries, Corbellini and Hoogvliet 2020 have evidenced similarities in the social value connected to book ownership.

[25] The link between cultural brokerage and social prestige is theorised by Reimitz 2015 (cited by Gantner and Rychterová 2024), who defines the act of brokerage as a «creative performance in social contexts, that are characterized by a complicated interplay between different social groups and identities that fuel the broker's actions and form the basis of their social prestige».

[26] Ciappelli pleads for the use of narrative sources, such as family books, diaries and notebooks, for the reconstruction of book ownership and reading activities in mercantile and artisanal circles.

[27] The contribution is an extended version of Polica 1988.

Michele left six registers, three of which (covering the period 1432-1453, with a hiatus for the years 1434-1442 and 1446) concern the manuscript collection. Some of the roughly one hundred entries in the *notitiae librorum* contain invaluable information about the acquisition and selling of books, but most refer to their lending to a large number (141) of Lucca citizens. As Polica and Martini (2024) state, the Guinigi book collection functioned as a 'public library', with borrowers from every stratum of Lucca's urban society. Merchants, members of the clergy, schoolmasters, women (lay and religious) and poorer city dwellers were all involved in this vernacular book network. The diversity of these readers is further reflected in the language of the texts. All of the manuscripts mentioned in the registers have been identified with vernacular titles; they include translations of classical texts (Ovidius, Titus Livius, and Cicero), Italian literature (Dante, Boccaccio and the *Novellino*), religious literature (Life of Christ, psalters, and Cassianus) and prophetical texts (Polica and Martini 2024, 85-86).

The presence of borrowers from lower social groups is particularly interesting for our purposes. One such individual was Pietro da Matraia, from the eponymous small hamlet in Lucca countryside. The fact that he paid one of his debts to Michele with three pounds of olive oil implies that he was involved in rural agriculture (Polica and Martini 2024, 75). Pietro borrowed a psalter and a *Donatus*, two texts that were often used by learners grappling with the rudiments of literacy. As the creator of this lending library, Michele was thus actively creating possibilities for those in his community who wanted to attain literacy but faced challenges in accessing texts and other learning instruments.

The exchanges registered in Michele's registers are very much in line with Petrucci's (1983) statement that

> the circulation of books [during the late Middle Ages, SC] ignited by the exchange between private persons, for reading and copying, was not an exclusive practice of humanistic circles; witnesses of the circulation through interpersonal loans of vernacular books testify of the efforts of urban readers to compensate for the absence of public institutions for the study and the reading in the vernacular (Petrucci 1983, 546, cited by Polica and Martini 2024, 66).[28]

Thanks to a new scholarly interest in medieval private book collections and libraries, we now know that interpersonal lending systems like that revealed in Michele Guinigi's records were also developed in other Italian urban centres (Corbellini and Hoogvliet 2020). At least three examples are now known for Venice, including that of Venetian citizen Lorenzo Sanudo, whose account book contains the rubric «Libri e cose imprestad ad altri», dated 1455. Moreover, in 1451-58, the patrician Girolamo da Molin kept a register titled *Alphabetum librorum mutuatorum Hieronymi De Molino Veneti D.M. Patricii (Quaternus librorum quos prestiti vel accomodavi*

[28] This point is fundamental for understanding the impact of book circulation in late medieval Europe. As a matter of fact, book ownership is not a necessary prerequisite for book readership.

amicis), describing a book exchange network. Among its participants Girolamo mentions an artisan, the glass blower Angelo Barovier, who has lent a *tabulam super libro moralum beati gregorii* and used it in his private home in Murano (Fremmer 2001; Nebbiai 1991).

Along similar lines, new studies of French book collections have revealed «hubs for reading in French» (Hoogvliet 2020). One important source is the impressive booklist (267 items), of manuscripts kept «in Tours in front of the hôtel [townhouse] of monseigneur de Dunois» and possibly listing titles available «pour des copies à la demande» (Hoogvliet 2020, 136; Hasenohr 2017, 132). Another interesting parallel is found in the records of the public scribe and bookseller Jan de Clerc, active in Ghent at the beginning of the fifteenth century. As Brinkman (1998) has reconstructed, Jan acquired in 1402 a collection of about 30 books from a hospital sister in Ypres. Archival research has revealed that these manuscripts, containing literary and religious texts, were rented by Jan on a daily basis («diemen daghelix verhuert») to Ghent citizens, in order to be copied or read. City residents had another possibility for accessing texts: Everaert Taybaert, municipal poet, had rented a room opposite the bookshop of Jan de Clerc, «where he read texts aloud for an audience and where texts could be read by his clients» (Hoogvliet 2020; Brinkman 1998).

The creation of these personal libraries and lending systems not only facilitated the circulation of vernacular literature, but was also pivotal in creating networks of enduring relationships. When the enterprise is looked at from this angle, the ethical, moral, social and religious dimensions of transmitting knowledge and literate values in late medieval Europe become apparent (Corbellini and Hoogvliet 2020). Providing access to vernacular literature (in the form of edifying texts) was synonymous with providing access to religious and moral education. This point was stressed in a famous letter from Marco Datini to his friend and confidant Lapo Mazzei (3 June 1395):

> [I] buy many books in the vernacular, to read when I renounce mercantile activities and to do what I owe God. These are all books that tell of virtuous things. As a matter of fact, they are all Gospels, Epistles, Sayings and Lives of Saints and many other good things.

Marco's decision to accumulate books in this way formed the starting point for a complex network of transactions, which included the further acquisition, the use, the lending and the borrowing of books, as has been reconstructed by Brambilla (2007).

Conclusions

The analysis of the selected sources, as well as the historical and theoretical exploration of the concepts of *expertise* and *discipline*, has here demonstrated the importance of the performance of literate activities in the medieval construction of social identities and creation of networks of knowledge exchange. Social positions were reinforced, and prestige was gained, through reading, writing, copying,

borrowing and lending books. These actions were a form of 'cultural brokerage', a means to affirm identity and increase one's social status, and via robust moral and ethical components connected individuals with their communities and social groups in which they wished to participate.

The methods and findings presented here offer a fresh perspective on social mobility in this period, which includes the tension between tradition and innovation, openness and closure, individuality and sense of belonging, and the negotiation and the formation of new social identities. They further show just how essential it is to combine individual case studies, and in particular autobiographical sources, with the reconstruction of larger patterns among groups. The importance of the creation of «communities of practice» and «graphic communities», within which members supported each other in gaining skills while implementing processes of selection, inclusion, and exclusion, is paramount: they are indeed at the very core of social and societal transformations. The choice for a focus on Italian sources in dialogue and comparison with European source materials revealed moreover the existence of shared patterns and attitudes and a widespread attention and engagement for literacy acquistion and development, as well as a pervasive awareness the social relevance of literacy and literate practices in medieval society at large.

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