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Dictionnaire Montesquieu

Venuti, Filippo

Pierre Musitelli

Bibliographical reference

Musitelli Pierre, « Venuti, Filippo », translated by Philip Stewart, dans *Dictionnaire Montesquieu* [online], directed by Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, ENS Lyon, September 2013. URL : <https://dictionnaire-montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/fr/article/dem-1376427555-en/en>

A scholar born in Cortona in 1706 (and who died there in 1768), trained at the university of Pisa, founder with his brothers Marcello and Ridolfino of the Etruscan Academy of Cortona with which Montesquieu was associated in 1729, Filippo Venuti was destined for an ecclesiastical career. In 1738, failing to obtain a benefice at the pontifical court, he was named by the chapter of Saint Jean de Latran as administrator of the abbey of Clairac, on the banks of the Lot, a rich Vatican property in protestant territory. He thus found himself in a region dear to Montesquieu since the Secondats had acquired much land there and Jeanne de Lartigue was born in the domain of Petit-Vivens, very close to Clairac.

Venuti quickly came into contact with the writer, who was happy to press his election to the flourishing Bordeaux Academy: “you deserve, if the door is closed, for us to make a breach to let you in”, he announced to him on 17 March 1739 (*OC*, t. XIX, letter 492). No sooner was he associated with it than the abbé multiplied his papers on the antiquities of Guyenne. In 1741, he won the prize of the Academy of Inscriptions and Letters, a distinction that led to his being elected its honorary foreign correspondent two years later. But with the financial situation of the abbey of Clairac deteriorating and its influence in a region greatly marked by protestantism being judged too feeble, he was removed from his function in 1742. Montesquieu took it to heart to help his unfortunate protégé. He explained to his colleague the Président Barbor, on 9 July: “They made it a crime, I think, for him to be so loved in the region by people who do not love his master. This man loves France, he breathes learning, he is a nobleman known throughout Europe, young and capable of anything. Let us make him our librarian; what do you think?” (“[...] on lui a fait un crime, je crois, de ce qu’il était trop aimé dans le pays par des gens qui n’aiment pas son maître. Cet homme aime la France, il ne respire que l’étude, c’est un homme de condition connu dans toute l’Europe, jeune et capable de tout. Faisons[-en] notre bibliothécaire; qu’en pensez-vous?”, letter 525). On 9 September 1742, Venuti assumed his fonctions as librarian of the Bordeaux Academy. Dividing his time between academic labors and mundane occupations, he could frequent at leisure the cenacle of the Chevalier de Vivens at the château de Barry and the literary evenings organized by the Comtesse de Pontac-Belhade, a friend and correspondent of Montesquieu in her residence at

Sauviac, near Montauban. With this contact with these clever minds, the abbé entered fully into this refined provincial milieu and could satisfy his natural penchant for literature.

In 1746, he translated into Italian Lefranc de Pompignan's tragedy *Dido* before taking on *The Temple of Gnidus*, published in 1749. In 1750 he published his *Trionfo letterario della Francia*, an apology in verse for the French literary genius inspired by Petrarch's *Triumphs*. But Venuti's ambition was to settle in Paris and play there a role as emissary of the learned world within the clergy. In 1748, in order to win the esteem of the bishop de Mirepoix, former preceptor to the Dauphin, he translated into Italian Louis Racine's poem *Religion*. The enterprise proved an embarrassing failure. It so wounded his vanity that he seems to have precipitated his departure for Bordeaux, which Montesquieu regretted in a letter of 18 May 1750: "I am very sorry, my dear abbé, that you are leaving for Italy, and even more that you are not happy with us. I see however, from what news reached me, that there was no intention to fail in the consideration that is so rightly due you. I certainly hope that you are satisfied with your journey to Italy and I would be most pleased if, after this time of pilgrimage, you could pass a happier transmigration, and such as your personal merit requires" ("Je suis bien fâché, mon cher abbé, que vous partiez pour l'Italie, et encore plus que vous ne soyez pas content de nous. Je vois pourtant sur ce qui m'est revenu qu'on n'a pas pensé à manquer à la considération qui vous est due si légitimement [...] je souhaite bien que vous ayez satisfaction dans votre voyage d'Italie. Je souhaiterais bien, qu'après ce temps de pèlerinage, vous passassiez dans une plus heureuse transmigration, et telle que votre mérite personnel le demande").

Named provost of Livorno by the Grand Duke François II of Lorraine upon his return to Tuscany, Venuti took it upon himself to animate the literary life of that port city which was an active center of exchanges and circulation of ideas. From 1754 to 1757, he directed a new monthly, the *Magazzino toscano d'istruzione e di piacere*, which illustrates the progressive passage from traditional erudition, turned toward the study of the past, to an approach engaging questions of the present, the life of the city, the public good, the diffusion of knowledge. With this success, he went on to participate from 1756 to 1759 in the republication of the *Encyclopédie* in Lucca, in French, with the addition of original notes. Curious about everything and constantly critical with respect to a type of retrograde, elitist education, he is representative of that class of scholars that constituted the intellectual foundation of the philosophy of the Enlightenment and allowed new ideas to reach aspiring men of letters.

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