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Secretum Secretorum:
an intercultural alchemical salt of Medieval Ages

(Pseudo-Aristotel, *Secretul secretelor [Secret of Secrets]*, Iași: Editura Polirom, 2017)

Presented in the Medieval Library Collection of Polirom Publishing House, the volume *Secret of Secrets* includes a diversity of texts exposed in the manner of a fictional epistolary exchange between Aristotel and Alexander of Macedon. Claimed, not without cause, by the literary genre of the “mirror of principles”, the text emphasises its didascallic character and manifests in the same time a strong tendency for initiation in the art of governance, as well as in disciplines like medicine, astronomy, alchemy or physiognomy. This bookish collection of an inestimable value that bespeaks features of hermetical writing, such as the aproach of themes from occult sciences or the miscellaneous dialectics of chapters, is still proven to be, from the discursive point of view, pleasant, intriguing, precise and surprisingly accesible.

The praiseworthy intention of traducer Luciana Cioca (she is also the one that signed the introductive study, but also the final comment) to popularize this Medieval treaty with a anonymus author, is in the most happiest way concordant with the possibility of the receiver to approach the bookish material in a comparative way. The Latin-Romanian bilingual edition exploits, therefor, mainly the educational content of The Secret of Secrets, without neglecting its controversial cultural itinerary. The exegetic emphasis insists, especially, on the relevance this enciclopedic manual has among the scholar traditions that which we call medieval.

Significant cultural matrices espouse, filtrate and value this pseudo-aristotelic discourse initially edited in Greek, most probably before the VIIIth century A.D., therefore idioms like the ones in Arabic, Hebrew or Latin will cooperate to develop the precious sincretic material which reached modernity. In the Latin Medieval Age, the treaty was multiplied in approximate five hundred copyies. The assiduous popularization campaign attracted to it also some adverse consequences, notoriety and the multiply contributing involuntary to the corruption of the originality of the character. We can speak therefore about occultation in two manners: a subjective one, intended and confesed by the author, and the other – objective, that imposed through force of circumstances in the given context.

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The treaty is structured in four parts as we are already told from the prologue by Philip from Tripoli: the first part is about the variety of kings, their behaviour and about their way of government. The second part is about the regime of health. The third is about the amazing utilities of nature, arts and craftsmanship. The fourth part is about the admirable choice of friends and the king's ministers through the natural proprieties of bodies; and this science is called "physionomy" (p. 19).

The first part (pp. 43-103), which manifests strong influences of the Evangelic education precepts, urge the king to abstain from the pleasures of the flesh, to be generous towards the poor or the crippled, to manifest an authentic respect towards the Divinity. For example, there are brought into discussion certain aspects which concern the moral character of the king, as well as the vestimentation or his physical aspect. There are certain features that fall into one's attention regarding distinctive resemblances with Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*. The most significant is the following example: "Therefore, the greatest caution is also a praisable providence so that the respect towards yourself may live longer than love among the hearts of the subjects" (p. 83). "Reverentia" is translated here in an euphemistic way through "respect", but it also has the meaning of "fear" (Gaffiot, 2016), which clearly reveals the analogy with Machiavelli's text: "At this point a question arises: is it better to be loved than feared, or to be feared than loved? The answer is that a prince would like to be both. But since it is difficult to reconcile this two, it is much safer to be feared than loved-if the one must cede for the other." (Machiavelli, 2008)

The second part of the treaty (pp. 105-195) offers the king many advices concerning in the quality and moderation of his food regime, of the rest corroborated with the physical effort, of the interpretation over the body's temperature and the influences exercised upon the human organism by the changing of the seasons. A great deal of these matters have been debated by reporting to the teachings of Hippocrates. Relevant in this sequence of the text and of great complexity is a recipe given to the king, recipe that "reveals" the preparation of what the anonymous author names *gloria inestimabilis* or *thesaurus philosophorum*. This alchemic mixture represents, according to Alexander's counselor, the synthesis of all the cures, being also the purpose of any medical intention.

The third part of the treaty (pp. 197-189), although begins through debates that are also by the alchemic literature gender representing somehow a fallback of the previous parts, does not forget the issues regarding diplomatic relations between the king and his ministers. Firstly, there are brought into discussion matters such as "the animal stone, both vegetal and mineral, which is not a stone, nor has a stone nature" (p. 199), that *secretum secretorum*, popular named the "philosopher's egg", also and important passages, which are said to be of Hermes Trismegistus, according to the

explications given by Luciana Cioca in the study at the end of the treaty, being considered as a primary reference in the whole alchemical literature.

Through an analogical reportation to the relation between the sensory data and the intelligence, the author reveals in this part also the fact that the ministers under the king had to be all that the five senses are for the intellect. The judgement will be, therefore, the king, and his ministers the eyes, nose, ears, tongue and hand, intermediates through which he would take contact with the surrounding world and which have to offer him all that is necessary, especially, help, protection and safety.

Finally, the fourth and last part of the treaty (pp. 291-309), containing the most reduced quantity of information related to the others, highlights curious idioms that are now designed as "physiognomy". One must mention from the first lines the name of Marcus Antonius Polemon, considered by the anonymous author to be "the greatest doctor and professor" in this science (p. 293), afterwards following to be debated the etiological nature between the features of the human face and the human behaviour. The advantages would consist for the king in the fact that using this technique of facial semiotics, he could discover the important features of one's personality towards the people with whom he interacts, protecting himself from contingent bad intentions that people have.

With strong resorts in the oeuvres of the antique philosophers, such as the example from the philosophical treatise *De clementia* by Seneca, reaching the peak point with Machiaveli's *The Prince*, a work with unmeasurable cultural impact, the type of literature called "the mirror of princes" does not seem to have neglected nor the vernacular area, even if on the territory of today's Romania it will make its presence felt a bit later, as in the XVIth century. The *Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to his Son Teodosie*, oeuvre that for the Romanian culture represents a highly relevant work, marks yet another check point in the path of this fertile way of writing.

Preferring to translate the complete version of the treaty, that known under the name of *The Secret of Secrets* and accomplished in the XIIIth century by Roger Bacon by collating four-five manuscripts and followed by annotations, among other things, Luciana Cioca sets herself to present as thoroughly as she can the cultural trajectory of the treaty, the relevance of the influence that Aristotle and Alexander Macedon had on the Medieval imaginary.

The introductory study, the constant justified translation by arguments and explicative notes, as well as the intricate explanatory comment placed at the end of the book, followed by a short abstract of the speech, guarantees the text a well and blissful reception in the Romanian culture.

References

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