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Irony, Historiography, and Political Criticism: Alberti's Porcaria Coniuratio

Leon Battista Alberti's epistle on Stefano Porcari's conspiracy against pope Nicholas V, written soon after the thwarted plot in January 1453, has been recognised by scholars as a complex and ambiguous text, with an elusive stance that is difficult to be placed univocally in favour of, or conversely in opposition to, either the pope or the plotter.¹ The conspiracy, which had been planned to take place on 6 January 1453 during the religious celebration of the Epiphany, was discovered by the pope before the conspirators could carry out the attack and all plotters were captured and executed; nevertheless, despite its failure, this plot was a crucial event in the history of the papal state in the fifteenth century and revealed the actual political instability of Nicholas V's government in Rome.² My study aims to provide a clearer insight into the multifaceted political perspective of Leon Battista's work by examining carefully its intricate structure and the combined employment of different literary genres and classical sources, with specific attention to the creation of effects of mordant irony in particular sections of the text.

The narration of the historical events provided by Alberti is presented from a multiple and elusive standpoint and through a lofty and composite rhetorical architecture, albeit seemingly simple. This intricate construction results in an ambivalent ideological outlook that makes this work more politically independent and less biased than other humanist texts on the topic of conspiracy, which were mainly focused on boosting the political power threatened by the plot (such as Orazio Romano's poem *Porcaria*, on the same episode, or Poliziano's *Coniurationis commentarium*, the

¹ On the date of the epistle and its manuscript tradition see the introduction to the edition LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI, *Porcaria coniuratio*, A cura di Mariangela Regoliosi, in LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI, *Opere latine*, A cura di Roberto Cardini, Roma, Istituto poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 2010, pp. 1265-1281: 1265. See also CECIL GRAYSON, *Leon Battista Alberti*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, A cura di Alberto Maria Ghisalberti e Massimiliano Pavan, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, vol. I, 1960, pp. 702-713, where he states that the epistle is «non priva di simpatia per la generosa ambizione del Porcari». On Alberti's disapproval of Nicholas V and his implied understanding for Porcari see ALBERTO G. CASSANI, «*Libertas, frugalitas, ædificandi libido*». Paradigmi indiziari per Leon Battista Alberti a Roma, in *Le due Rome del Quattrocento: Melozzo, Antoniazio e la cultura artistica del '400 romano: Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi, Università di Roma La Sapienza, Facoltà di lettere e filosofia, Istituto di storia dell'arte, Roma 21-24 febbraio 1996*, A cura di Sergio Rossi e Stefano Valeri, Roma, Lithos, 1997, pp. 296-321; MANFREDO TAFURI, «*Cives non esse licere*»: Niccolò V e Leon Battista Alberti, in ID., *Ricerca del Rinascimento. Principi, città, architetti*, Torino, Einaudi, 1992, pp. 44-45; RICCARDO FUBINI - ANNA MENCİ GALLORINI, *L'autobiografia di Leon Battista Alberti. Studio e edizione*, in «*Rinascimento*», s. II, XII, 1972, pp. 57-58; and now ANNA MODIGLIANI, *Congiurare all'antica. Stefano Porcari, Niccolò V, Roma 1453*, Roma, Roma nel Rinascimento, 2013, p. 68. On the other hand, other scholars do not see in Alberti a sympathy for the conspirator, but a more complex attitude: GIOVANNI PONTE, *Leon Battista Alberti umanista e scrittore* (Genova: Tilgher, 1981), p. 76; ANTHONY GRAFTON, *Leon Battista Alberti. Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance*, London, Allen Lane, chap. IX, p. 311, 2001; FRANCESCO FURLAN, *Leonis Baptistæ Alberti Porcaria coniuratio: Appunti critici e filologici*, in «*Albertiana*», V, 2002, p. 267; STEFANO BORSI, *Introduzione alla Porcaria coniuratio di Leon Battista Alberti*, Foggia, Libria, 2015, pp. 211-212.

² On this historical event see ORESTE TOMMASINI, *Documenti relativi a Stefano Porcari*, in «*Archivio della Società romana di storia patria*», III, 1880, pp. 111-123; LUIGI FUMI, *Nuove rivelazioni sulla congiura di Stefano Porcari (Dal carteggio dell'Archivio di Stato di Milano)*, Roma, Archivio della Società Romana di storia patria, 1910; and now ANTHONY F. D'ELIA, *Stefano Porcari's Conspiracy against Pope Nicholas V in 1453 and Republican Culture in Papal Rome*, «*Journal of the History of Ideas*», LXVIII, 2, 2007, p. 207-231; and A. MODIGLIANI, *Congiurare...*, cit.

very famous pro-Medici account of the Pazzi conspiracy, written in 1478).³ Moreover, although this is the only historical work composed by Alberti, he does not employ a traditional historiographical framework, but shapes his historical account as an epistle. The heterogeneous but harmonious character of this text emerges clearly in this studied combination of different rhetorical genres in one single work; however it goes beyond the more customary conflation of historiography and epistolography and involves multiple literary components, revealing Alberti's avant-garde literary attitude. This sophisticated rhetorical-stylistic construction matches and underpins the evasive but sharp political perspective of the text, especially in its second half, where the author presents different viewpoints on the events. As we shall see, Leon Battista's caustic political criticism is mainly directed against the plotters, but also, more covertly, against the papal Curia. In particular, the disapproval of some dynamics in the curial environment is often conveyed by means of a sarcastic approach and an ironic tone, framed through the recovery of classical satirical *auctoritates*, or through classical references employed with a debunking overtone, or through specific stylistic strategies aimed at producing mocking effects.

The highly rhetorical nature of the *Porcaria coniuratio* is particularly apparent in the combination of different literary constituents. Historiography and epistolography, the main components, are balanced in a perfect harmony in the text. These genres share some distinctive and fundamental features, which Alberti highlights in his work. Firstly, he emphasises the trustworthiness and veracity of the representation of the events, which can be traced back, on the one hand, to the historiographical principle of *veritas*, on the other, to the direct and close kind of communication typical epistolary writing. Moreover, both literary genres are connected by the eye-witness nature of the narrative, which portrays events experienced in the first person by the historian and epistolary correspondent. These tenets of veracity, eye-witness account, and *parresia* are crucial to Alberti's historical reconstruction. He hints implicitly at them in the opening of his epistle, where the humanist's truthful account is placed in contrast with unreliable rumours (*rumores*):

Etsi ad vos que per hos dies hic apud nos gesta sunt, *rumoribus* esse delata non dubitem, tamen (quod in tantis rebus fit) *cupere te arbitror a nobis amicis ea discere, que ab incertis auctoribus perlata vix credibilia esse ob facinoris immanitatem videantur*. Faciam quod amicum decet: tuis enim ultra desideriiis satisfaciam. *Qua in re illud conferet, quod inter pericula constituti historiam, uti gesta sit, melius quam qui istic audiere, teneamus*.⁴

Thus the incipit appears as a programmatic *prohemium*, though framed in the epistolary form, and recovers the pivotal principles of Thucydides's and Sallust's theory of *historia*. This is one of the major strands of classical historiography which had considerable influence on the theory and practice of humanist historical writing, especially on political historiography, and inspired deeply

³ Orazio Romano's text is published in MAXIMILIAN LEHNERDT, *Horatii Romani Porcaria seu de Coniuratione Stephani Porcarii Carmen [...] accedit Petri de Godis Vicentini De coniuratione Porcaria dialogus e codice Vaticano erutus*, Lipsiæ, in ædibus B. G. Teubneri, 1907; a new complete edition of Poliziano's work is ANGELO POLIZIANO, *Coniurationis commentarium*, con introduzione, traduzione e commento, A cura di Marta Celati, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 2015, which also includes a general overview of fifteenth-century literary outputs on the topic of conspiracy, pp. 6-12. On this subject see now the comprehensive study: MARTA CELATI, *The Theme of Conspiracy in Italian Fifteenth-century Humanist Literature*, DPhil Thesis, Oxford, 2017.

⁴ All passages of the *Porcaria coniuratio* are quoted from L.B. ALBERTI, *Porcaria coniuratio*, A c. di M. Regoliosi, ed. cit., p. 1265 (my emphasis).

Alberti.⁵ In particular, Leon Battista's opening remark connects history with autoptical reports, which must be based on direct experience and careful examinations of sources, a principle that, needless to say, was asserted by Thucydides in the *Peloponnesian war* (I, 22):

In recording the events of the war my principle has been not to rely on casual information or my own suppositions, but to apply the greatest possible rigour in pursuing every detail both of what I saw myself and of what I heard from others.⁶

However, the most prominent model employed by Alberti is predictably Sallust's *De coniuratione Catilinæ*, because of the close thematic link with the humanist's text on the Porcari plot.⁷ This is immediately revealed by the title of the epistle and the *incipit* itself, where the author underlines the extraordinary nature of the historical event he is going to recount, as Sallust did, and consequently the significance of this episode, which deserves an historical narration:

*Facinus profecto, quo a vetere hominum memoria in hanc usque diem neque periculo horribilius, neque audacia detestabilius, neque crudelitate tetrius a quoquam perditissimo uspiam excogitatum sit.*⁸

(Sall. *Cat.* 4, 3-4) Igitur de Catilinæ coniuratione quam verissime potero paucis absolvam; nam id facinus in primis *ego memorabile* existumo sceleris atque *periculi* novitate.

⁵ On humanist historiography and its models see ROBERT BLACK, *The New Laws of History*, in «Renaissance studies», I, 1, 1987, pp. 126-156; MARIANGELA REGOLIOSI, *Riflessioni umanistiche sullo "scrivere storia"*, in «Rinascimento», s. II, XXXI, 1991, pp. 3-37; GABRIELLA ALBANESE, *A redescoberta dos historiadores antigos no Humanismo e o nascimento da historiografia moderna: Valla, Facio e Pontano na corte napolitana dos reis de Aragao*, in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale Antigos e Modernos: diálogos sobre a (escrita da) história (Universidade de Sao Paulo do Brazil, 2-7 settembre 2007)*, Edited by Francisco Murari Pires, São Paulo, Alameda Casa Editorial, 2009, pp. 277-329. In particular, on Thucydides in the Renaissance see MARIANNE PADE, *Thucydides' Renaissance Readers*, in *Brill's companion to Thucydides*, Edited by Antonios Rengakos and Antonis Tsakmakis, Leiden, Brill, 2006, pp. 779-810; EAD., *The Renaissance: Scholarship, Criticism and Education*, in *A handbook to the reception of Thucydides*, Edited by Christine Lee and Neville Morley, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Limited, 2015. Important studies on the reception of Sallust in the Renaissance are ANTONIO LA PENNA, *Il significato di Sallustio nella storiografia e nel pensiero di Leonardo Bruni* and *Brevi note sul tema della congiura nella storiografia moderna*, in ID., *Sallustio e la "rivoluzione" romana*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1968, pp. 409-439; QUENTIN SKINNER, *The Vocabulary of Renaissance Republicanism*, in *Language and Images of Renaissance Italy*, Edited by Alison Brown, Oxford, Clarendon, 1995, pp. 87-110; PATRICIA J. OSMOND, «*Princeps Historiæ Romanæ*»: *Sallust in Renaissance Political Thought*, in «Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome», XL, 1995, pp. 101-143; EAD., *Catiline in Fiesole and Florence: The After-Life of a Roman Conspirator*, in «International Journal of the Classical Tradition», VII, 2000, pp. 3-38.

⁶ THUCYDIDES, *The Peloponnesian War*, a new translation by Martin Hammond, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 12 (all passages are quoted from this edition). A similar statement is in: I, 21 'anyone accepting the broad facts of my account on the arguments I have adduced will not go wrong. [...] He will conclude that my research, using the clearest evidences available, provides a sufficiently accurate account...'

⁷ On the model of Sallust in the *Porcaria coniuratio* see also A. GRAFTON, *Leon Battista Alberti...*, cit., p. 307, and PATRICIA J. OSMOND, *Catiline in Renaissance Conspiracy Histories: Hero or Villain? The case of Stefano Porcari*, in *Congiure e conflitti. L'affermazione della signoria pontificia su Roma nel Rinascimento: politica, economia e cultura*, A cura di Miriam Chiabò et al., Roma, Roma nel Rinascimento, 2014, pp. 209-213. On the use of Sallust in other works by Alberti, in particular in the *Libri della Famiglia* see MARTIN MCLAUGHLIN, *Unità tematica e strutturale nel De Familia*, in ID., *Leon Battista Alberti. La vita, l'umanesimo, le opere*, Firenze, Olschki, 2016, pp. 99-123, and MARIANGELA REGOLIOSI, *Per un catalogo degli auctores latini dell'Alberti*, in *Leon Battista Alberti: La biblioteca di un umanista*, A cura di Roberto Cardini, Firenze, Mandragora, 2005, pp. 105-113: 110-113. Some general considerations on the sources of the *Porcaria coniuratio* in STEFANO BORSI, *Momus, De re ædificatoria, Porcaria coniuratio: considerazioni sull'uso delle fonti in Leon Battista Alberti*, in *Leon Battista Alberti. Teorico delle arti e gli impegni civili del De re ædificatoria*, Firenze, Olschki, 2007, pp. 537-569.

⁸ L.B. ALBERTI, *Porcaria coniuratio*, A c. di M. Regoliosi, ed. cit., p. 1265 (my emphasis).

A similar point is made also by Thucydides in the *Peloponnesian War*,⁹ but Alberti's statement seems to recall more closely Sallust's work, since he emphasizes not only the extraordinariness but also the atrocity and dangerousness of the episode, which is significantly defined as *facinus*. This term is often associated with conspiracies in the classical and, later, humanist literary tradition and it ends up presenting political plots as crimes, rather than political actions, casting a dark moral light on them.¹⁰ However, although the Latin historian is a predictable model, Alberti's imitation of Sallust is extremely personal and original. The humanist recovers for the first time the literary prototype of the monographic work on a contemporary conspiracy, which would enjoy remarkable diffusion in different literary forms throughout the fifteenth century, and he adapts this model to the epistolary frame. Moreover, Alberti does not resort to Sallust's work as a mere source of stylistic and lexical borrowings, but he mainly draws the political and moral interpretative categories through which the events are reconstructed. Sallust is also the model for motifs and *topoi* that build the portrait of the contemporary conspirator as a modern Catiline, the negative exemplary embodiment of the enemy of the state. As we shall see, these elements reveal that the Sallustian lens through which Alberti reads the event betrays the humanist's intention of providing a negative image of the conspirators' actions and aims.

Nevertheless, the sophisticated rhetorical architecture of the text is not limited to the conflation of epistolary and historiographical ingredients, but is also created by literary components drawn from the genres of oratory and dialogue, which contribute towards creating the harmonious polyphony of this work. In particular, the characters' speeches occupy more than half of Alberti's account (more precisely, the text also includes the speeches delivered by groups of characters, as in the case of the clergymen who represent an entire category of religious men in the literary fiction). As is well known, discourses made up by the historian are traditionally used in classical and humanist historiography, but Alberti's hypertrophic use of this practice (which can be traced back, once again, to the Thucydidean and Sallustian model) plays an even more fundamental narrative function in his work, conveying the different standpoints of the actors and witnesses of the events as in a dialogic and theatrical representation similar to a drama. The most emblematic example is Porcari's speech, which is placed at the centre of the text and occupies almost a quarter of it: this is an actual oration that, although formulated as a reported speech, is accurately framed in accordance with Cicero's rhetorical *partitiones*. Besides Porcari's *oratio*, Alberti quotes the speeches of the various members of the Curia, providing their different opinions on the conspiracy in the second half of the epistle. These reflections are presented in an overlapping but orderly juxtaposition of contrasting viewpoints which creates the effect of an actual dialogue bordering on irreconcilable contradiction, where also Alberti's own thought also surfaces, although cautiously dissimulated.

Thus, the *Porcaria coniuratio* results in a balanced fusion of different ingredients drawn from the areas of historiography and epistolography, but also from those of oratory and dialogue. In particular, Alberti's choice of the epistle as the main genre for his work can be also explained with his predilection for the literary form of the dialogue: a genre of writing that since antiquity was considered parallel to epistolography and in which the author could discuss an issue from different perspectives, without giving a univocal interpretation, but leaving the debate open to different thoughts. As Poliziano asserts in his commentary on Statius's *Silvæ*, the epistle is like one of the

⁹ THUCYDIDES, *The Peloponnesian War*, ed. cit.: I, 21, 'As for this present war, although men always think that any war they are engaged in is the greatest of all wars, [...] this war will even so prove itself, to those who examine the pure facts, a greater war than any in previous history'.

¹⁰ The world 'conspiracy' itself (*coniuratio*) underwent a semantic evolution, with a shift from the neutral meaning of 'an act of taking an oath' (especially a soldier's oath of allegiance) to the negative significance of political crime, coinciding with subversion and treachery, especially starting from Cicero's denunciation of Catiline onwards. On this evolution see VICTORIA E. PAGAN, *Conspiracy Narratives in Roman History*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2004, p. 7; and DIEGO QUAGLIONI, *La congiura dei canonisti. Coniuratio e conspiratio nel commento al Decretum di Juan de Torquemada (1457)*, in *Congiure e conflitti...*, cit., pp. 21-38, in which the linguistic and ideological overtones of the terminology employed is analysed from a juridical angle.

two sides of a dialogue, a suspended conversation with an absent interlocutor:¹¹ a statement that stresses the link between dialogues and epistles,¹² as the epistle was traditionally seen as having an intermediate formal status between oratory, the loftiest genre, and dialogues, characterised by the least studied style. These theoretical considerations on the flexible nature of epistolography were widely popular in the humanist age and can be perfectly applied also to Alberti's *Porcaria coniuratio*.

Scholars have tried to answer the question whether the *Porcaria coniuratio* is an authentic letter addressed to an actual interlocutor, or a text composed as a mere literary work. A clear answer is not possible thus far, because of the lack of evidence, and, in fact, critics are divided between the two options.¹³ However, it is important to take into account the hybrid nature of the text in order to understand more clearly the reasons for Alberti's choice of this genre. Epistolography has always been regarded as a link between private and public writing: a genre in which private writing could be conceived to be part of the public dialogue in the literary community and, conversely, public issues can be treated from a personal angle.¹⁴ This combination of features may account for Leon Battista's twofold intention. Even if his work was an actual personal epistle, it displays a highly rhetorical nature and should be considered a literary text envisaged to be 'public'; moreover, Alberti's choice of the epistolary genre might be related to the intention of introducing the writer/historian's point of view in the text, assuming a dialogic, questioning and personal perspective, and contrasting different opinions in an unresolved comparison of them, typical of Leon Battista's work. He would not have had such a possibility if writing a proper historiographical work, where the historian is supposed to be more external in analyzing the facts (albeit by electing Sallust as the main model, the *Porcaria coniuratio* is directly associated with a political kind of *historia*). Alberti's complex approach emerges clearly in the final section of the text, where he overtly makes reference to his personal life and private situation, to the point of admitting the uncertainty of his judgment, claiming that he will decide about his future day by day.

¹¹ 'Epistola velut pars altera dialogi...maiore quadam concinnatione epistola indigent quam dialogus...imitator enim hic extemporaliter loquentem...et epistola scribitur'. ANGELO POLIZIANO, *Commento inedito alle Selve di Stazio*, A cura di Lucia Cesarini Martinelli, Firenze, Sansoni, 1978: Poliziano's discussion on the epistolary genre is included in the *præfatio* (pp. 15-50). On Alberti's dialogues and his predilection for this genre see DAVID MARSH, *The Quattrocento Dialogue: Classical Tradition and Humanist Innovation*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980, pp. 78-99; FRANCESCO TATEO, *Le forme dell'argomentazione nella tarda trattatistica albertiana*, in *Leon Battista Alberti: actes du congrès international de Paris (Sorbonne, Institut de France, Institut culturel italien, Collège de France), 10-15 avril 1995*, tenu sous la direction de Francesco Furlan, Pierre Laurens, Sylvain Matton; Edites par Francesco Furlan, Paris, Vrin-Torino, Aragno, 2000, pp. 391-403; in the same volume FRANCESCO FURLAN, *Remarques sur la conception, la genèse et la construction dialogique des livres De familia, ibid.*, pp. 427-441; P. GUERIN, *Préméditation et improvisation: Un modèle anomique de la disputatio, ibid.*, pp. 493-510.

¹² Poliziano was probably referring to Artemon's statement, mentioned by Pseudo-Demetrius in his *De elocutione*. On this claim by Artemon see JUDITH R. HENDERSON, *Humanist Letter Writing: Private Conversation or Public Forum?*, in *Self-presentation and Social Identification: The Rhetoric and Pragmatics of Letter Writing in Early Modern Times*, Edited by Toon Van Houdt *et al.*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2002, pp. 17-38: 22.

¹³ It is claimed that the epistle is merely a literary work in R. FUBINI – A. MENCIGALLORINI, *L'autobiografia...*, cit., p. 57; while Miglio states that the letter could have been written to an actual addressee, in MASSIMO MIGLIO, *Niccolò V, Leon Battista Alberti, Roma*, in *Leon Battista Alberti e il Quattrocento. Studi in onore di Cecil Grayson e Ernst Gombrich*, Edited by Luca Chiavoni, Gianfranco Ferlisi, Maria Vittoria Grassi, Firenze, Olschki, 2001, pp. 47-64: 54.

¹⁴ See in particular J. R. HENDERSON, *Humanist Letter Writing...*, cit., pp. 17-38; and on classical epistolography ALBERTO CAVARZERE, *Caro amico ti scrivo. "Privato" e "Pubblico" nella letteratura epistolare di Roma*, in *Alla lettera. Teorie e pratiche epistolari dai Greci al Novecento*, A cura di Adriana Chemello, Milano, Guerini, 1998, pp. 11-31. More generally, on epistolography in the Renaissance: RONALD G. WITT, *Medieval Ars Dictaminis and the Beginnings of Humanism: a New Construction of the Problem*, in «Renaissance Quarterly», XXXV, 1, 1982, pp. 1-35; GIAN CARLO ALESSIO, *Il De componendis epistolis di Niccolò Perotti e l'epistolografia umanistica*, in «Res Publica Litterarum», XI, 1988, pp. 9-18; CLAUDIO GRIGGIO, *Dalla lettera all'epistolario: aspetti retorico-formali dell'epistolografia umanistica*, in *Alla lettera...*, cit., pp. 83-141; GIDEON BURTON, *From Ars dictaminis to Ars conscribendi epistolis: Renaissance Letter-Writing Manuals in the Context of Humanism*, in *Letter-writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present*, Edited by Carol Poster and Linda C. Mitchell, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2007, pp. 88-101.

However, as already mentioned, Alberti's decisive denunciation of the awfulness of the conspiracy informs the whole work. This condemnation is based on the idea that any attempt at overturning established states is a dangerous threat to the civic order validated by tradition and can only bring about a negative degeneration in political and social terms. This pessimistic and disenchanting political view also emerges in the allegorical narrative of some *Intercenales*, such as *Lacus* and *Templum*, where the author's disapproval of the inconsiderate yearning for transforming the *status quo* can be regarded as a declaration of political conservatism.¹⁵ In the *Porcaria coniuratio*, the most dangerous threats are recognized in the classical *cupiditas rerum novarum*, the appetite for political and social changes, and in the easily manipulability of the *insanum vulgus*, the foolish common people who are easily inflamed by thoughtless and ambitious men, often endowed with remarkable rhetorical skills (an idea which, once again, is also put forward in some *Intercenales*, such as *Lacus*, *Bubus*, and *Hostis*).¹⁶ Thus, although the humanist often expresses his sharp criticism of the most negative and despotic sides of political power in his works,¹⁷ he sees any violent overthrowing of political systems, especially a conspiracy, as a dangerous and detrimental action. In this regard, it is significant that the epistle on Porcari's plot displays a close thematic connection with a specific passage of the *Momus*, the sarcastic *fabula de principe* (a link that has never been pointed out so far, though many connections between the two works have been recognised by scholars):¹⁸

...animadvertisse duas ad principatum patere vias [...]: unam quidem, quæ factionibus et conspirationibus muniatur, hanc teneri expilando, vexando, collabefactando, sternendoque quicquid tuis curriculis obiectum ad interpellandum offenderis, alteram vero ad imperium viam bonarum esse artium peritia, bonorumque morum cultu ac virtutum ornamentis deductam atque aptam, qua quidem te ita compares, ita exhibeas hominum generi oportet, ut te gratia et benivolentia dignum deputent, unum te suis adversis rebus adire, tuis potissimum assuescere consiliis et stare sententiis condiscant.¹⁹

In this passage, the conspiracy is openly condemned as the most heinous mean to obtain political supremacy and a violent action of brutal devastation and plundering. In the *Momus*, immediately after this reflection, political power is described as being so negative in any of its aspects that the best human condition becomes that of the vagabond: a statement that discloses one of the most extreme peaks of Alberti's cynic political disengagement.

Nevertheless, if it is true that the most direct target of the humanist's epistle is no doubt the conspirators' attack, some scholars have pointed out that the text reflects a sharp criticism of the Curia and Nicholas V's papacy.²⁰ As is well known, Alberti himself had been part of the curial environment since 1432, when he was appointed as *abbreviatore apostolico*. However, he was not assigned an official leading position under Nicholas V, probably not even in the pope's ambitious

¹⁵ The edition is LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI, *Intercenales*, A cura di Roberto Cardini, traduzione di Maria Letizia Bracciali Magnini, in L.B. ALBERTI, *Opere latine*, ed. cit., pp. 194-818.

¹⁶ For this view on men skilled in oratory in the *Intercenales* see also GIOVANNI ROSSI, *Alberti e la scienza giuridica quattrocentesca: il ripudio di un paradigma culturale*, in *Alberti e la cultura del Quattrocento. Atti del Convegno internazionale del Comitato Nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti. Firenze, 16-17-18 dicembre 2004*, A cura di Roberto Cardini, Mariangela Regoliosi, Firenze, Polistampa, 2007, pp. 59-121: 110-115.

¹⁷ In particular the *Momus*, the earlier work *Theogenius* (1441) and some *Intercenales*; on this element in Alberti's output see IDA MASTROROSA, *Rusticitas e urbanitas in Leon Battista Alberti: la tradizione classica*, in «Albertiana», VIII, 2005, pp. 85-117: 99; RICCARDO FUBINI, *Leon Battista Alberti, Niccolò V e il tema della "infelicità del principe"*, in *La vita e il mondo di Leon Battista Alberti, Atti del Convegno internazionale, Genova (19-21 febbraio 2004)*, Comitato nazionale del VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti, Firenze, Olschki, 2008, vol. II, pp. 441-69.

¹⁸ Some connections between the *Momus* and the epistle in STEFANO BORSI, *Momus e Porcaria coniuratio: Leon Battista Alberti testimone*, in ID. *Niccolò V a Roma. Alberti, Angelico, Manetti e un grande piano urbano*, Polistampa, Firenze, 2009, pp. 521-623; ID., *Momenti di tangenza tra Momus e Porcaria coniuratio*, in «Albertiana», IX, 2006, pp. 68-98.

¹⁹ LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI, *Momus*, A cura di Maria Letizia Bracciali Magnini, in ALBERTI, *Opere latine*, ed. cit., pp. 1039-1279: 1074.

²⁰ See fotenote 1.

architectural plans carried out after 1450 and, furthermore, his works composed in those years have been interpreted as containing several unspoken criticisms of the pope's rule (especially the *Momus* and the *De re ædificatoria*, where a number of reflections can be regarded as an implicit condemnation of Nicholas V's architectural plans and his *libido ædificandi*, as an expression of his despotic politics).²¹ Nevertheless, despite this uneasy relationship between Leon Battista and the pope, no dark shadow is cast directly on Nicholas V in the *Porcaria coniuratio* and, therefore, as we shall see more thoroughly, Alberti's decisive condemnation of the conspiracy cannot be seen as combined with the disapproval of papal government in relation to this specific event, nor can it be turned into an unspoken sympathy with the plotter.

On the other hand, the humanist's bitter criticism is directed against some specific dynamics within the Curia and, in particular, against its foreign members, whose hypocritical behavior is ironically depicted through the famous speech that Alberti puts into their mouth. The words of the French, German and Spanish clergymen, significantly defined as *barbari*, are quoted in a speech that opens the second half of the text, where the humanist presents the different opinions of the various members of the Curia on the conspiracy. This speech occupies the largest part of this imaginary debate and is framed by Alberti through a subtle ironical tone that conveys a sarcastic and mocking portrayal of this group of clergymen. They were favoured by Nicholas V and, in the literary fiction of the epistle, they are represented as celebrating his papacy with excessive adulation, alluding also to the iconic flattering image of the Augustan golden city, the «*urbs facta aurea*», often associated by the pope's propaganda with Rome. Most importantly, they condemn indiscriminately the Roman people for not acknowledging the benefits that the Curia provided to the city and, consequently, blame all citizens for the conspiracy. This conflict between the city and the Curia was exacerbated after the plot and the pope himself tried to contain the explosion of dissent, by promulgating punishing measures against any clergyman who accused any Roman citizen, without a valid reason, for being somehow responsible for the plot.²²

Although Alberti does not introduce any openly polemical comment about these curial members, the rhetorical and stylistic construction of their speech creates an ironic debunking effect which reveals the excessive victim-playing of these prelates and the hyperbolic overtone of their self-celebration, especially in exalting their role in Rome. It is no accident that Alberti chose to frame their words in direct speech, since this rhetorical strategy contributes to amplifying this sarcastic mockery (he did not use this narrative tool in other sections of the text, not even in Porcari's oration, the most crucial speech, which is quoted in indirect speech). Thus, we hear the foreign clergymen's considerations directly from their voice, which sounds affected, excessive and pathetic, disclosing the sardonic character of the whole speech and, consequently, of the portrayal of the people who deliver it. This demystification is produced through the creation of a sarcastic tone, by means of rhetorical amplifications or emphatic terminology, for example the extensive use of superlatives, which are rather frequent in the first section of the speech (also in Alberti's introductory words) and are enlisted to describe the plotters' brutality and, in contrast, the foreign prelates' rectitude:

Pre misericordia interdum lacrimas movent exterarum nationum homines *nobilissimi et ornatissimi*, Galli, Hispani, Germani, dum sic loquuntur: "O nos miseros! Siccine patriam, parentes et dulces necessitudines et

²¹ See ANNA MODIGLIANI, *Per la datazione del De re Ædificatoria*, in «Albertiana», XVI, 2013, pp. 91-110: 101-102; A. G. CASSANI, «*Libertas, frugalitas, ædificandi libido*»..., cit., pp. 302-306. On Alberti and the papal architectural plan: CARROL WILLIAM WESTFALL, *In this Most Perfect Paradise: Alberti, Nicholas V, and the Invention of Conscious Urban Planning in Rome, 1447-55*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974; A. MODIGLIANI, *Congiurare*..., cit., pp. 54-60. Other studies on Nicholas V's plan questioning Alberti's role in it are: M. TAFURI, «*Cives non esse licere*»..., cit., pp. 33-88; CHARLES BURROUGH, *From Signs to Design: Environmental Process and Reform in Early Renaissance Rome*, Cambridge-London, MIT Press, 1990, pp. 62-67; ID., *Alberti e Roma*, in *Leon Battista Alberti*, Edited by Anne Engel, Joseph Rykwert, Centro internazionale d'arte e di cultura di Palazzo Te, Milano, Electa, 1994, pp. 134-157.

²² On these measures see A. MODIGLIANI, *Congiurare*..., cit., p. 52.

cara omnia relinquimus? Siccine pontificem sequimur, ut preda *consceleratissimorum* latronum simus, ut crudelitati atque furori *immanissimorum* obiiciamur? ... Quid facerent in *sevissimos* hostes?"²³

Moreover, a considerable number of rhetorical questions (10) and exclamations recur in the whole discourse. It is no coincidence that an exclamation of self-pity opens the whole speech («O nos miseros!»), while another exclamation addressed to the gods is placed symmetrically at the beginning of the second paragraph («Proh superi!»).

This parodic effect is produced also by the studied deployment of classical references which amplify ironically the excessive pathos of the speech. The most noteworthy allusion appears in the closing sentence, in a crucial rhetorical position, and it echoes a satirical source. In the immediately preceding sentence, the clergymen describe in a highly dramatic tone the conspirators' violent plan to overthrow the papal government striking at the safety of the entire city. After this emphatic description, the speech ends with a literal quotation from Juvenal's second *Satire*:

*Ultra Sauromatas nimirum hinc fugiendum est; linquendum crudele celum et lares avaros!*²⁴

(Iuv. *Sat.* 2, 1-3) *Ultra Sauromatas fugere hinc libet et glaciale Oceanum, quoties aliquid de moribus audent/ qui Curios simulant et Bacchanalia vivunt.*

The *Sauromatae* were a nomad population, who lived at the extreme confines of the Mediterranean Sea, and embodied the image of the most inhospitable and furthest land from Rome. It is from these lines by Juvenal (which were rather famous in humanist writing) that Alberti draws the metaphorical and hyperbolic image of escaping beyond the Sarmatians' land and, significantly, he adopts the same verbal construction as the classical source. In the satire, Juvenal uses this expression to condemn hypocrisy and emphasises that he wants to run away as far as possible whenever he hears hypocrites talking about moral principles. Alberti's direct quotation, therefore, creates an implicit correlation between the *barbari*'s final words and Juvenal's; nevertheless, if we also consider carefully the sarcastic intonation of the whole speech, this allusion to the classical model reveals a more unspoken and sharp ironic implication. The correlation that Alberti wants to draw does not seem aimed at associating Juvenal's statement with the clergymen's complaint, but rather it seems intended to link obliquely the foreign curial members to the hypocrisy that the classical poet condemns: a hypocrisy which proves to be amplified since these clergymen utter the very same words as the Latin poet. Thus this quotation turns out to be a sophisticated imitative allusion that discloses the sarcastic tone by which the *barbari*'s whole monologue is phrased. The mocking aspect of this echo appears even more clearly if we consider how this reference emphasizes the pathetic overtone of the entire discourse, placed as it is at the very end of the speech and immediately preceding Alberti's following words, «Hec illi. Nos alii...», by which the humanist aims to drastically separate himself from this group of religious men.

Another similar hyperbolic and sardonic accent is placed on a further expression put in the mouth of the foreign clergymen. It is the reference to «ultima Thule», which is probably drawn from Vergil's *Georgics*, I, 30 (although this expression enjoyed widespread diffusion in the literary tradition becoming almost proverbial):

Qui ex ultima - ut sic loquar - Thule, aurum, qui premia laborum omnium totius vite huc conferant, erogent, profundant...²⁵

(Verg. *Gerg.* 1, 29-30) [...] an deus immensi venias maris ac tua nautæ / numina sola colant, tibi serviat ultima Thule [...].

²³ L.B. ALBERTI, *Porcaria coniuratio*, A c. di M. Regoliosi, ed. cit., p. 1268 (my emphasis).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1269 (my emphasis).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1269.

This allusion to «ultima Thule» again renders affected and contrived the arguments by which these clergymen describe the essential contribution they made, coming from very distant lands, to the prosperity of Rome. Consequently, through these unnatural and excessive words they also implicitly defend their privileges, exalting themselves in contrast with the Italians. Thus, once more, this ironic effect debunks the *barbari*'s pathetic and self-pitying attitude.

Another Vergilian reference is placed in the first section of the speech, but is employed with a different ironical purpose. This time Alberti evokes the most famous lines of Anchises's discourse to Æneas in book VI of the *Æneid*:

En priscos Camillos et Coruncanos, qui preter se, quoscumque intueantur, barbaros et cistiferos predicant!
*En cultam moribus et ornatam vite degende rationibus gentem missam celo ad orbis imperium bonis artibus moderandum!*²⁶

(Verg. *Æn.* VI, 851-853) Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento: / hæ tibi erunt artes, pacique imponere morem / parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.

Here the derisive intention underlies the clergymen's own mocking description of the Roman citizens, who are sarcastically described as the descendants of the ancient and glorious Roman people, selected as the world's leaders, in a discordant contrast with the current inhabitants of Rome under Nicholas V. Thus, in the first section of the speech, irony is employed by the foreign prelates themselves to frame their polemical accusation against the Romans, while in the following section of their discourse the sarcastic perspective is turned around and they became the target of the author's irony, which makes their words sound more and more hypocritical.

A sophisticated sardonic effect is conveyed also in a further hint at the illustrious Roman tradition that is put into the mouth of this group of clergymen. In the sentence immediately previous to the allusion to the *Æneid*, they mention the *Camilli* and *Coruncanii*, two distinguished families of ancient Rome, who embody the idea of glorious classical *virtus*. Again, this reference creates a disparaging parallel with contemporary Roman people. Indeed, in these clergymen's eyes, Romans are so arrogant and ungrateful towards all foreigners that they stigmatize contemptuously all strangers as *barbari* and porters. Nevertheless, these words sound again excessive and artificial, and therefore, the ironic effect ends up being overturned and directed against those who pronounce these arguments. It is noteworthy that the recherché term «cistiferos», used by Leon Battista with the meaning of 'porter' (as an extension of the original meaning of 'bearer of a box or a chest') proves to be drawn directly from Martial (5, 17, 4): «Dum te posse negas nisi lato, Gellia, clavo/ Nubere; nupsisti, Gellia, *cistibero*» (this is the only occurrence of this term in the classical tradition, although in the form *cistiber*). Thus it is again a satirical source that inspires the humanist in the choice of this rare word, which reveals Alberti's predilection for sophisticated vocabulary and his challenging approach toward stylistic conformity, displaying what has been fittingly defined as an «eclectic classicism».²⁷ Moreover, the epistle, despite its historical character and its brevity, betrays also Leon Battista's cult of technical terminology, which is recurrent in the humanist's output and reflects his taste for unconventional language and lexical rarities. In particular, in a previous

²⁶ This allusion is mentioned also by Regoliosi: *Ibid.*, p. 1268 (my emphasis).

²⁷ For the definition of «classical eclecticism» see MARTIN MCLAUGHLIN, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: The Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo*, Oxford, Clarendon press, 1995, p. 165, and D. MARSH, *The Quattrocento Dialogue...*, cit., p. 94. In particular, on Alberti's theory and practice of literary imitation and his techniques of composition see at least the fundamental contributions by ROBERTO CARDINI, *Mosaici: il nemico dell'Alberti*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2004; M. MCLAUGHLIN, *Literary Imitation...*, cit., pp. 149-165; and the collection of essays *Alberti e la tradizione: per lo 'smontaggio' dei 'mosaici' albertiani: Atti del Convegno internazionale del Comitato nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti: Arezzo, 23-24-25 settembre 2004*, A cura di Roberto Cardini, Mariangela Regoliosi, Firenze, Polistampa, 2007.

passage in the text, the use of the synonymic pair «fenificeis et stramentariis»²⁸ shows the refined combination of two rare terms derived from the technical language of agriculture. The noun «fenificeis» is connected to the term *fenisex*, *feniseis*, which means ‘the mower/ the person who cuts hay’ and is derived from *fenisicium*, ‘the harvest, the cutting of hay’. This term occurs only in Varro’s *Res rusticae* (1, 49, 2), Columella’s *De re rustica* (2, 18), and Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis historia* (18, 259),²⁹ who can be regarded as Alberti’s sources. The second word «stramentariis» is an adjective that means ‘concerning straw’ and is used by Cato in his *De re rustica* (10),³⁰ from which Alberti draws the term and turns it into a noun, with the meaning of ‘straw-cutter’. This is basically a synonym of the previous noun in the pair, which, therefore, seems to be fashioned to exhibit a profound enthusiasm for rare terms.

What is most remarkable is that the intertextual mosaic in the *Porcaria coniuratio* is extremely eclectic and the breadth of sources range from the political denunciation grounded on the model of Sallust to the indignant satire against part of the curial environment inspired by satirical *auctoritates*, sometimes adopted only as lexical sources, such as Martial. In particular, as far as Sallust’s work is concerned, the centrality of this model in the *Porcaria coniuratio* emerges in the connections between the political representations of Porcari’s and Catiline’s conspiracies. Both Alberti and Sallust point out the duplicity and ambivalence of the conspirator’s figure, who is depicted as stained by numerous vices – ambition, yearning for violent political change (the classical *cupiditas rerum novarum*), immoderate and reckless attitudes – but also gifted at eloquence:

[...] homo animi utinam tam moderati, quam erat ingenio peditus docili et lingua ad dicendum paratus.³¹

(Sall. *Cat.* 5, 3-4) Animus audax, subdolus, varius...ardens in cupiditatibus; satis eloquentiae, sapientiae parum.

In Leon Battista’s view, the plotter’s oratory skills are a dangerous tool that allows unscrupulous men to inflame the *insanum vulgus*, the easily manipulable common people often described as volatile and fickle in Alberti’s works, as well as in Sallust’s political analysis:

[...] presto affuit Porcarius vultu, gestu, manu, verbis, clamore omnia temptans, quibus *insanum vulgus ad odium eorum*, qui rebus preessent, *incenderet atque ad arma concitaret*.³²

(Sall. *Jug.* 66, 2) Vulgus, uti plerumque solet, ingenio mobili, seditiosum atque discordiosum, erat cupidum rerum novarum, quieti et otio advorsum.

(Sall. *Jug.* 30, 2) [...] prorsus intentus omni modo plebis animum incendebat.

Moreover, the rhetorical architecture and the thematic framework of Porcari’s and Catiline’s orations are rather similar. In particular, Alberti models the opening of the *oratio* on the first section of Catiline’s speech, which can be regarded as a *captatio benevolentiae* or a *laudatio*. Here the conspirator urges his accomplices to seize the day and undertake a noble endeavour, reminding

²⁸ «Per Epiphaniam solemnī die, cum pontifex et collegia atque pretor et minores pontifices sacrum pro more facerent in basilica, ex complicitibus, cui negotium mandarāt, fenificeis et stramentariis ad pontificia stabula basilice finitima iniecturus erat ignem...»: L.B. ALBERTI, *Porcaria coniuratio*, A c. di M. Regoliosi, ed. cit., p. 1267.

²⁹ Varro, *Res. rust.* 1, 49, 2 «sicilienda prata, id est falcibus consecranda quae *fenisices* praeterierunt»; Colum. 2, 18, 4 «Sed iam *fenisicia* insequitur cura messis»; Plin. *Nat.* 3, 18, 259 «hoc est quae *feniseces* praeterierunt secari».

³⁰ Cato *De re rust.* 10 «Falces fenariae tres, stramentariae sex». More in general, for Alberti’s use of this kind of authors see F. SBERLATI, *Rerum rusticarum scriptores in Alberti*, in *Alberti e la tradizione...*, cit., pp. 153-175.

³¹ L.B. ALBERTI, *Porcaria coniuratio*, A c. di M. Regoliosi, ed. cit., p. 1265 (my emphasis).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 1265.

them they are valorous and «*viros fortes*», a definition that occurs in both works and is frequently stressed by Catiline, who underlines the condition of his fellow-citizens as strong men:

Neque dubitare quidem se omnes eos qui adessent, quos esse *viros fortes* meminisset, digna fortibus optasse persepe atque cogitasse, sed aliis occasionem defuisse, aliis alia impedimento fuisse, cur privatis rebus magis quam publicis intenti essent. Nunc pro certo habere, intellectis que pararent rebus, fore neminem, neque ex his qui adsunt, neque ex his ad quos preclarissima sua consilia perventura sint, modo *se aut Romanos cives, aut saltem homines meminerint*, quin de tota causa eadem sentiat.³³

(Sall. *Cat.* 20, 2-3) Sed quia multis et magnis tempestatibus vos cognovi fortis fidosque mihi...

(*Cat.* 20, 9) Quæ quousque tandem patiemini, o fortissimi viri?

(*Cat.* 20, 11) Etenim quis mortalium, cui virile ingenium est, tolerare potest illis divitias superare...?

However, the most evident link appears in the thematic motifs that both conspirators' leaders mention to encourage their fellow citizens to rise up against unfair domination and that call on them to denounce the oppressive policies of the governments they want to overthrow. Porcari and Catiline make reference to ancient Rome's *libertas* and glory as leading principles of their plans:

Homo impatiens sui...deberi ab se fortune sue et animi generositati putabat, ut quocumque daretur pacto, vel etiam interitu, sin aliter nequiret, *libertatem redimeret*.³⁴

(Sall. *Cat.* 20, 6) Ceterum mihi in dies magis animus accenditur, cum considero, quæ condicio vitæ futura sit, nisi nosmet ipsi vindicamus in libertatem.

They also promise easy success and wealth to their fellow citizens:

Opus esse animo parato...ea exequenda que necessaria utiliaque sint et cum eterna laudis et glorie celebritate coniuncta. [...] Sustineant sua gaudia atque se ad cumulatissimas *divitias* capescendas parent. Decies centena millium nummorum aureorum noctem proximam allaturam.³⁵

(Sall. *Cat.* 20, 14) En illa, illa, quam sæpe optastis, libertas, præterea divitiæ, decus, gloria in oculis sita sunt.

(*Cat.* 58, 8) [...] memineritis vos divitias, decus, gloriam, præterea libertatem atque patriam in dextris vestris portare.

Moreover, the seditious plan is depicted as supported by God, also because of the plotters' virtues, which contrast with the rulers' vices:

Superos favere, populum congratulaturum, orbem terrarum admiraturum virtutem, nullam posteritatem suas laudes obliteraturam. Hostes contra, superis atque hominibus invisos, inter se dissidere, inermes, ociosos, luxu perditos, incautos.³⁶

(Sall. *Cat.* 20, 10) Verum enim vero, pro deum atque hominum fidem, victoria in manu nobis est: viget ætas, animus valet; contra illis annis atque divitiis omnia consenuerunt.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 1266 (my emphasis).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1266 (my emphasis).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1266 (my emphasis).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1267.

Finally, the most striking parallel comes to light in the emphatic depiction of the unfair condition of oppression and subjugation, bordering on slavery, that citizens have to suffer:

Egestatem, servitutem, contumelias, iniurias et eiusmodi iam tum peculiare malum et tolerabile factum esse assuetudine... Sed novum genus crudelitatis ab his, qui se piissimos dici velint, repertum esse: cives esse non licere, templa et aras maiorum intueri non habendum, licere, proscribi, relegari, necari insontes, totam Italiam refertam esse proscriptorum multitudine, Urbem civibus factam vacuum; nullos videri per Urbem, nisi barbaros; ad flagitium ascribi, qui amantissimum patrie profiteri se ausus sit. [...] cum cives ipsi meliori fortuna digni precario viverent. [...] Oportere quidem olim meminisse, quid possit virtus; quanti sit non servum esse.³⁷

(Sall. *Cat.* 20, 6-8) Illos binas aut amplius domos continuare, nobis larem familiarem nusquam ullam esse? Cum tabulas, signa, toreumata emunt, nova diruunt, alia ædificant, postremo omnibus modis pecuniam trahunt, vexant, tamen summa lubidine divitias suas vincere nequeunt. At nobis est domi inopia, foris æs alienum, mala res, spes multo asperior: denique quid reliqui habemus præter miseram animam? Quin igitur expergiscimini?

(*Cat.* 58, 13-14) [...] nos pro patria, pro libertate, pro vita certamus, illis supervacaneum est pugnare pro potentia paucorum. Quo audacius aggredimini memores pristinae virtutis! Licuit vobis cum summa turpitudine in exsilio ætatem agere, potuistis nonnulli Romæ amissis bonis alienas opes exspectare: quia illa fœda atque intoleranda viris videbantur, hæc sequi decrevistis.

These multiple references to Sallust's work in the *Porcaria coniuratio* go with the more general recovery of the Sallustian structural prototype of the monograph on a contemporary conspiracy. Thus this multi-level revival of Sallust as source affects different aspects of the text and contributes towards its anti-conspiracy perspective, revealing the aim of condemning the plot. In this respect, Alberti's criticism of the curial environment (and, in particular, of some of its members and the hypocritical dynamics of social and political relationships) does not imply a tacit sympathy with the plotter and his intentions. If it is true that a slight understanding could be perceived in the vivid portrayal of the unjust conditions that Roman people suffer, which is put in the mouth of Porcari, nevertheless it is important to take into account that the very same descriptive elements also appear in Catiline's oration in Sallust's work, as we have seen. Moreover, it is not unusual for Alberti to frame his characters' speeches with considerations that are in clear opposition with his own standpoint. A significant example can be found in the *Vita Sancti Potiti*, the hagiographical work written in 1432-1434, where the humanist constructed a speech similar to Porcari's in so far as he made the emperor Antoninus Pius pronounce a clear denunciation of the immoral customs and idleness of the Christians.³⁸

Furthermore, the ideological perspective of the *Porcaria coniuratio* is totally secular, despite the text being devoted to an attack against the pope, and the epistle appears to be informed by a centralized idea of power, something that imbues most fifteenth-century works on conspiracies.³⁹ In particular Nicholas V is depicted as a *princeps*, or more precisely a papal-prince,⁴⁰ and is portrayed as displaying all the main virtues traditionally associated with princely rulers in classical and

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1266-1267.

³⁸ This text was supposed to be the first of a series of hagiographical narrations which were never produced. On this work see TIMOTHY KIRCHER, *Living Well in Renaissance Italy. The Virtues of Humanism and the Irony of Leon Battista Alberti*, Tempe, AZ, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2012, pp. 24-34; ELENA GIANNARELLI, *Alberti, i padri della chiesa e la letteratura cristiana antica: linee di un problema*, in *Alberti e la tradizione...*, cit., pp. 425-447. On the emperor's speech in opposition with Alberti's view see ANTHONY GRAFTON, *Historia and Istoria: Alberti's Terminology in Context*, «I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance», VIII, 1999, pp. 37-68: 52.

³⁹ On this issue see MARTA CELATI, *Introduzione*, in A. POLIZIANO, *Coniurationis commentarium*, ed. cit., pp. 6-12; and EAD., *The theme of conspiracy*, cit.

⁴⁰ I have adopted this definition on the basis of Paolo Prodi's compelling study on the figure of the pope in the Renaissance: PAOLO PRODI, *Il Sovrano Pontefice. Un corpo e due anime: la monarchia papale nella prima età moderna*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1982.

humanist literature, such as wisdom, majesty and clemency. Alberti's eulogistic remarks on the pope's rule may seem to clash with his negative view on Nicholas V's politics concealed in other works and with the disapproving mockery through which he disparages the foreign clergymen's speech; however, considering Leon Battista's decisive disapproval of conspiracies and subversions conveyed in this epistle and other texts, it appears highly implausible that he would side against the pope, even implicitly, in a work completely devoted to an attack on a political system. Rather, he maintains an analytical and non-adulatory approach, without drastically deploring papal government, but introducing unspoken and sardonic critical elements in his depiction of the Roman political situation, such as in his sarcastic framing of the *barbari*'s speech.

It has been pointed out that Alberti's disapproval of Nicholas V emerges also in his final eulogy of the pope's peaceful policy, which is to be read as merely ironical.⁴¹ However, these words may be seen also from a different and, in this case, not ironical perspective. They can be regarded as an invitation to the pope to put into practice the virtues that the humanist mentioned, suggesting that he should adopt moderate and merciful behaviour. The emphasis on virtues, in particular *clementia*, is characteristic of fifteenth-century texts on the theme of conspiracy (especially texts on Porcari's plot),⁴² but also, more generally, of humanist treatises *de principe*. In both these literary "genres", which are linked in several aspects,⁴³ the actual ruler is encouraged to imitate the model proposed, but he is also a reflection of that ideal image, according to the eulogistic approach predominant in this strand of literature. In particular, in monographs on conspiracies it is the ruler in power who defeats the plot and therefore he stands out implicitly as the positive hero of the historical episode. Hence Alberti's depiction of the pope should not be regarded merely as a conventional accolade, nor as an ironic statement, but as an implied invitation to follow the ideal image of the ruler portrayed by the author. This approach matches also the humanist idea of political power conceived as influenced by intellectuals, in a broader pedagogic view based on the principles of humanist education. This political perspective in the text reinforces the secular dimension that surrounds Alberti's reading of the attack against the pope. A similar secular standpoint applied to the treatment of religious issues had already come to light in Alberti's *Pontifex* (1437), the dialogue on the ideal traits and behaviour of the figure of the *episcopus*, who is regarded as a prince who governs his state and civic community as a *pater familias* or a *dux*.⁴⁴

Another of Alberti's texts concerning religious issues and displaying a connection with the *Porcaria coniuratio* is the *Vita Sancti Potiti*, not only in the apparently detached and ambiguous political approach in presenting characters' opinions opposed to the author's (as already mentioned), but also in the theoretical principles applied to the historical narrative. Thus, this intertextual link can allow us to gain a better understanding of Alberti's views on history and historical writing. In particular, in the hagiographical work's prefatory letter to Leonardo Dati, Alberti includes a significant reflection on his activity as a historian, which can be perfectly applied to the epistle on the conspiracy. He confesses his concerns about matching the historiographical theoretical tenets shared by coeval intellectuals, the most important of which is the trustworthiness of the narrative, based on truthfulness of evidence and sources (a principle that was being established in those years as the keystone of historical writing in the lively humanist debate on the *ars historica*):

⁴¹ «Sed alia ex parte versatur ante oculos pontificis maiestas. Numquam ferme inventum a veterum memoria, ut qui pontifex arma odisset, in arma incideret. Hunc pacis esse studiosum, in principes plus satis facilem, ut extrinsecos impulsores non multum verear, et perinde intestina quidem malorum contagia non multum momenti habitura censeam»: L.B. ALBERTI, *Porcaria coniuratio*, A c. di M. Regoliosi, ed. cit., pp. 1269-1270. For such remarks on this passage see A. MODIGLIANI, *Congiurare...*, cit., p. 167.

⁴² From a historical point of view, in the case of Porcari's plot the pope had to limit his revenge in order not to exacerbate the internal conflicts in Rome: cfr. A. MODIGLIANI, *Congiurare...*, cit., p. 52.

⁴³ See M. CELATI, *Introduzione*, in A. POLIZIANO, *Coniurationis commentarium*, ed. cit., p. 9-12.

⁴⁴ See the introduction to L.B. ALBERTI, *Pontifex*, A cura di Andrea Piccardi, in L.B. ALBERTI, *Opere latine*, ed. cit., p. 921, and in general the edition *Leonis Battistae Albertis Pontifex*, A cura di Andrea Piccardi, Firenze, Polistampa, 2007.

Eram timida quidem in sententia, dum tecum verebar nequid eruditi viri subdubitarent hanc nostram Potiti istoriam esse fictam aliquam et puerilem fabulam. Memineram enim quam multa in istoria queritent viri non indocti, quamve plene rerum causam, rem gestam, loca, tempora atque personarum dignitatem describi optent. Et videbam quoque apostolorum actus, pontificum martirumque reliquorum vitam dilucide atque plenississime a maioribus descriptam; hanc autem Potiti istoriam videbam ita negligenter traditam, ut facile illam arbitrari potuerim esse ab imperitis, non ab illis diligentissimis viris editam.⁴⁵

Here Leon Battista mentions all the essential components of a work of history, which he would introduce into the *Porcaria coniuratio* almost twenty years later: precise references to the historical context («rerum causam, rem gestam, loca, tempora») and to the quality of the actors («personarum dignitatem»). It is noteworthy that the ideals to which Alberti openly subscribed in his early statement are drawn directly from Cicero's famous theorization of the historiographical genre in the *De oratore* (II, 63), a fundamental model, more generally, also for humanist historiography:

Rerum ratio ordinem temporum desiderat, regionum descriptionem; vult etiam, quoniam in rebus magnis memoriaque dignis consilia primum, deinde acta, postea eventus exspectentur, et de consiliis significari quid scriptor probet et in rebus gestis declarari non solum quid actum aut dictum sit, sed etiam quomodo, et cum de eventu dicatur, ut causæ explicentur omnes vel casus vel sapientiæ vel temeritatis hominumque ipsorum non solum res gestæ, sed etiam, qui fama ac nomine excellant, de cuiusque vita atque natura.

Cicero's tenets, as is well known, also had a pivotal influence in establishing and framing the rhetorical nature of humanist historiography. The principle that defines history as belonging to the realm of rhetoric is stated in the famous description of *historia* as «opus oratorium maxime» in the *De legibus* (I, 5), and is followed and put into practice also by Alberti in his historical epistle. It is not irrelevant that Leon Battista possessed his own copy of the *De legibus* (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence, Conventi Soppressi, I 9 3), where the passage containing Cicero's definition of history has been underlined by Alberti, who extensively used this classical source in his works.⁴⁶ As we have seen, the highly rhetorical development of arguments in the *Porcaria coniuratio* plays a multifunctional role, producing different but convergent effects that create the overall texture of the text. This rhetorical dimension marks multiple aspects of the work: the complex construction of the epistle, with its internal conflation of different literary genres; the employment of the technique of *disputatio in utramque partem* to present different opinions;⁴⁷ and mainly its ironical and sarcastic overtone produced through studied stylistic tools. This all-embracing rhetorical framework suits and supports the political perspective in the text, which is aimed at portraying the complexity of the historical reality and the variety of the points of views on the events, rather than giving comforting and univocal answers.

⁴⁵ LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI, *Vita Sancti Potiti*, A cura di Elena Giannarelli, in L.B. ALBERTI, *Opere latine*, ed. cit., p. 161; see also the edition *Opuscoli inediti di Leon Battista Alberti. 'Musca', 'Vita S. Potiti'*, A cura di Cecil Grayson, Firenze, Olschki, 1954, pp. 86-87 (an English translation in A. GRAFTON, *Historia and Istoria: Alberti's Terminology...*, cit., p. 51).

⁴⁶ On Alberti's copy of the *De legibus* see *Leon Battista Alberti: La biblioteca...*, cit., Scheda n. 60, A cura di Maria Luisa Tanganelli, p. 396; and ROBERTO CARDINI, *Biografia, leggi e astrologia in un nuovo reperto albertiano*, in *Leon Battista Alberti umanista e scrittore. Filologia, esegesi, tradizione. Atti dei Convegni internazionali del Comitato Nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti (Arezzo, 24-25-26 giugno 2004)*, A cura di Roberto Cardini, Mariangela Regoliosi, Firenze, Polistampa, 2007, pp. 21-189: 46. On Alberti's extensive employment of Cicero's rhetorical works in his oeuvre see MARTIN MCLAUGHLIN, *Alberti e le opere retoriche di Cicerone*, in *Alberti e la tradizione...*, cit., pp. 177-206.

⁴⁷ The employment of this technique in the *Porcaria coniuratio* has been acknowledged by F. FURLAN, *Leonis Baptistæ Alberti Porcaria coniuratio...*, cit., p. 267; A. GRAFTON, *Leon Battista Alberti...*, p. 311; I. MASTROROSA, *Rusticitas e urbanitas in Leon Battista Alberti...*, cit., p. 113.

This intricate, vivid and lively portrait of reality seems to correspond with Alberti's own idea of *historia*, as is also proved by his *De Pictura* (1435), where he describes the ideal visual representation as a balanced but multifaceted combination of different *membra* and components, and he defines this perfect artistic work with this beautiful and meaningful definition of *historia*.⁴⁸

Est autem compositio ea pingendi ratio qua partes in opus picture componuntur. Amplissimum pictoris opus non colossus, sed historia. Maior enim est ingenii laus in historia quam in colosso. Historiæ partes corpora, corporis pars membrum est. Membri pars est superficies. Primæ igitur operis partes superficies, quod ex his membra, ex membra corpora, ex illis historia.⁴⁹

The distinction between the *colossus* and the *historia* that Alberti sets out in the *De pictura* can be regarded as an implicit reference to Pliny, who considered ancient statues of colossuses an emblematic example of the artist's *audacia* (Plin. *Nat.* 34, 38-39). Pliny's *Naturalis historia* is a pivotal model for Alberti, yet, the humanist reveals his aim of establishing a divide between his innovative treatise and the classical precedent. Moreover, the specific reference to all members in the work of art may have been influenced by Quintilian's description of the rhetorical construction of *historia*, a passage where the rhetorician illustrates the fluid interrelation of each component in a wide cohesive composition: Quint. *Inst.* 9, 4, 129 «Historia non tam finitos numeros quam orbem quendam contextumque desiderat. Namque omnia eius membra conexa sunt, [et quoniam lubrica est ac fluit] ut homines, qui manibus invicem adprehensis gradum firmant, continent et continentur».

In conclusion, what is most significant is that Leon Battista's statement on art reflects some distinctive traits of his historical work. In his view, both literary and artistic *historiæ* do not represent in a linear manner the development and unfolding of facts, episode by episode, but, conversely, they depict the intricate totality of the historical event, by means of the studied balance of various rhetorical components, in a homogenous conflation inspired by the tenets of *varietas* and rhetoric, and by the search for truth. In the complex historical representation provided by the *Porcaria coniuratio*, as we have seen, irony also plays a pivotal role as a sophisticated rhetorical, stylistic and thematic tool, which contributes to shaping the text's multifaceted ideological perspective. Thus, this intricate and elusive portrayal of Porcari's conspiracy conveys the humanist's unresolved view on the complex Roman political background and, more generally, his problematizing attitude towards issues concerning political power, revealing also his well-known avant-garde literary approach, which stands out even more remarkably when it is applied to burning historical issues.

⁴⁸ He employs the same word, *istoria*, in his vernacular version of the text translated in 1436: cfr. A. GRAFTON, *Historia and Istoria: Alberti's Terminology...*, cit., p. 65; Grafton also highlights relevant rhetorical implications in the selection of the term *historia* by Alberti. See also I. MASTROROSA, *Rusticitas e urbanitas in Leon Battista Alberti...*, cit., p. 113.

⁴⁹ LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI, *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin texts of De Pictura and De Statua*, with translations, introduction and notes by Cecil Grayson, London, Phaidon, 1972, p. 70. In general on this text see again A. GRAFTON, *Historia and Istoria: Alberti's Terminology...*, cit., pp. 37-68.