

**VOX POPULI:
VERNACULAR POLITICS IN EARLY MODERN ITALY**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the rise of vernacular literary culture in Italy from the late thirteenth century to the early sixteenth century in light of concurrent political developments and reactions on the Italian peninsula. While the humanist shift from classical Latin to the use of the vernacular is often examined as a literary phenomenon, the timeline and trajectory of vernacular production evidence profound, if subtle, influences from the civic mentality of the intellectual community, particularly in Florence. This study is predominantly a work of cultural history which, in an effort to correct an oversight in the dominant historiography of civic humanism, considers the seminal function of the humanists' engagement with the vernacular. The time period studied extends from the *comuni* of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to the loss of political autonomy on the peninsula following the Italian Wars in the early fifteenth century. In broadening the conventional material and chronological parameters of the “Renaissance” and, more specifically, the *questione della lingua*, I construct a nuanced narrative of the innovations in civic and vernacular humanist thought which led to the ascent and formal codification of the Italian literary language in the early sixteenth century. Each chapter pairs the political lives and selected works of two prominent civic scholars from subsequent periods of Italian humanism, from Dante to Pietro Bembo; considered together, they illustrate and contextualize the critical evolutions in linguistic, political and historical thought which led to the emergence of the vernacular literary

tradition as a necessary element of cultural stability, and therefore a political safeguard – first for Florence and then for the Italian peninsula at large. In exploring the intersections of linguistic issues and the politically oriented world of Italian humanism, this dissertation reassesses the place of civic thought in narratives of the vernacular literary tradition in early modern Italy.

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In loving memory of my contemplative counterpart:

Matthew Thomas Freddo

Brother, engineer, illustrator, adventurer.
Also, he was weirdly good at puzzles.

“Leggimi...e quanto fai, amami.”

– *Leon Battista Alberti*

Proem

Settle in, for I concede
you're in for quite a hefty read
of popes and princes, friends and foes
in highest highs and tragic lows.

As rivals plotted bitterly
for power over Italy,
stability across the land
became the matter first at hand.

For leaders, but for scholars, too,
the chic (and prudent) thing to do
was scour manuscripts of old
for wisdom ancient Rome foretold.

To stifle Lady Fortune's whims
they read their books, they sang their hymns,
and tried to heal society
with virtuous propriety,

and working for the common good
they cleaned up Latin, best they could,
dispelled scholastic mystery,
and reassessed their history,

to bring the classics back to life
and soothe the local civic strife.
Years of careful imitation
then gave way to innovation;

Cicero was not enough,
they had to write their own great stuff.
A native, cultural tradition

became the humanist ambition,

a language which expressed themselves,
and not the ancients on their shelves.
And while they all deserved acclaim
the Italians, too, desired fame.

In the end, their best defense
was wisdom, reason, temperance,
and a language built to last,
to immortalize their storied past.

So find your glasses, make some tea,
I'll show you, if you'll follow me –
the vernacular epiphany
of *Quattrocento* Italy.

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Introduction

Machiavelli once wrote that Lorenzo de' Medici was like two different people, “quasi con impossibile congiunzione congiunte”¹ – an impossible fusion of poet and politician. The humanist scholars of early-modern Italy were often multidisciplinary, but what was so extraordinary about Lorenzo was the way in which he allowed both sides of himself – the poet and the politician – to exist together; he let each side inform the other across his diverse and influential endeavors. As the unofficial lord of Florence, Lorenzo maintained his power through cultural influence as opposed to any hereditary right. He believed that a politically stable, prosperous city was his best guarantee of continued support from the Florentine people, and so, to maintain civic stability as well as his own position, Lorenzo pursued a strategy of cultural diplomacy which sought to elevate Florence as a center of intellectual achievement on the Italian peninsula. This strategy – as well as my idea of “vernacular politics” – are best illustrated in the *Raccolta aragonese*, an anthology of Tuscan vernacular poetry which Lorenzo and his secretary, Angelo Poliziano, compiled in the 1470s. This collection includes the greatest works of the Florentine lyrical tradition, from Dante to the contemporary verses of Lorenzo himself, in a single volume. While the content of the poems is not political, the creation of the *Raccolta* was, in itself, a deliberate and meaningful political act.

In the *Raccolta*, destined for Federico d'Aragona, son of the King of Naples – a most critical ally to Florence – Lorenzo and Poliziano present the Florentine lyrical

¹ Machiavelli, *Istorie fiorentine*, in Niccolò Machiavelli and Mario Martelli, *Tutte le opere* (Florence: Sansoni, 1971), 490.

tradition as an illustrious artifact of their civic achievement. In the opening epistle, Federico is compared to Pisistratus, the ancient Greek king who collected and immortalized the works of Homer. Lorenzo and Poliziano suggest that Federico, in having requested the *Raccolta* and thereby immortalizing all the great Tuscan poets, has accomplished something even greater than Pisistratus: “Questi tutti [poeti], signore, e con essi alcuni della età nostra, vengono a renderti immortal grazia, che della loro vita, della loro immortal luce e forma sie stato autore [artefice della loro salvezza], molto di maggior gloria degno che quello antico ateniese di chi avanti è fatta menzione [Pisistrato]. Perocché lui ad uno, benché sovrano, tu a tutti questi hai renduto la vita.”²

The letter is carefully framed in a way which accomplishes three things: first, in crediting Federico d’Aragona for the idea of the *Raccolta*, Lorenzo and Poliziano pay lavish homage to a powerful ally. Secondly, in narrating the history of Italian vernacular poetry, they put Florence and the Florentine authors at the very center of the tradition. Finally, in placing Dante and Petrarch on the same level as the great poets of antiquity, they elevate the status of their contemporary Florentine civilization to rival that of the ancients. This was the image of Florence which Lorenzo hoped to disseminate, through the *Raccolta*, to Naples and the other political centers of the peninsula. And despite Lorenzo’s tenuous position, his sparse military forces and his ongoing feuds with the Pope, his strategy worked – under his leadership, the cultural capital of Florence grew and, for decades, the city lived in peace.

While the *Raccolta* represents perhaps the most obvious example of vernacular politics, the underlying philosophy which supported Lorenzo’s perceived link between

² Angelo Poliziano, opening epistle to the *Raccolta aragonese*, in Lorenzo de’ Medici and Attilio Simioni, *Opere* (Bari: Laterza, 1939), 8.

language and civic greatness was hardly new. From the very beginning of the vernacular literary tradition in thirteenth-century Florence, there existed a civic mentality which sought to refine their “vulgar” language as a service to the community. Over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Florentine humanists continued to develop this sense of civic obligation in their scholarship. Indeed, while the rise – and practice – of Italian vernacular culture is often examined as a literary phenomenon, the timeline and the trajectory of the vernacular tradition suggest a profound underlying influence from the political consciousness of the intellectual community. In this dissertation, I propose that the literary and civic traditions are inextricably tied, and that we gain a more comprehensive understanding of early-modern vernacular culture through a comparative study of the intersections between civic and literary thought. Arnold Toynbee famously tasked modern scholars with “the problem of broadening our humanistic disciplines”³ and my project will make a necessary interdisciplinary contribution which will correct the overly narrow chronological and material parameters of previous studies of Italian vernacular humanism. With a particular focus on the intersections of civic history and vernacular culture, I venture to illustrate how the Italian literary tradition emerged not only as an art but as a critical instrument of civic and cultural utility against the chaotic political landscape of the early Italian Renaissance.

It is important to note that the distinction between “politics” and “civics” is particularly hard to make in early-modern republican Florence; the government was comprised of citizens who – in theory – felt a shared obligation to provide for the common good and thus their notions of “civic” and “political” responsibility were often

³ Curtius in Ernst Robert Curtius and Willard R. Trask, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 13-14.

intertwined. In the title of this dissertation, I use “politics” as a term which includes matters of governance as well as citizenship but it should be understood that, in the context of Italian civic humanism, the line between the two terms is often fluid, as both civic and political matters were directed by a philosophical commitment to civic order and the wellbeing of others. The term “vernacular politics” is my own; it refers to the ways in which the tradition of vernacular literature in Italy was often theorized and practiced with a deliberately political aim. It is important to consider that the earliest works of Italian literature emerged in an intellectual environment where Latin was the dominant language for writing and thus, they beg the question: what was the motive for this deviation from conventional linguistic methods? As this dissertation will demonstrate, throughout the most important defenses of vernacular literature, there is an underlying current of political thought which regards native literature as a prime cultural good and an instrument of civic stability. The choice of vernacular language, therefore, became a critical element of a larger humanist agenda to bring political stability to the perpetually war-torn Italian peninsula. While the politics of language remain fairly unexplored in the early modern context, a similar approach has emerged in studies of contemporary dynamics in vernacular politics.⁴ Writing this dissertation in the lead up to the violently contentious 2020 U.S. Presidential election, the intersection between civics and rhetoric feels as relevant now as it was to Pietro Bembo five hundred years ago.

⁴ For contemporary perspectives see: Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Also: Gusti Suartika, Ayu Made and Julie Nichols, *Reframing the Vernacular: Politics, Semiotics, and Representation* (Springer, 2020).

Relevance in Scholarship:

The vernacular tradition in Italy has garnered significant attention in critical scholarship – especially during the German surge of critical Renaissance studies in the nineteenth century. The topic of native literature was newly relevant, following the emergence of strong nationalist sentiments in Europe. Many scholars “inherited a belief from the Enlightenment regarding language, to wit, that only a native tongue could truly express the essential genius of a people.”⁵ As a consequence, many of these important investigations, including the monumental contributions of Jacob Burckhardt, Leopold Von Ranke, John Addington Symonds and Freidrich Schlegel, have a tendency to neglect the Latinate course of humanism in the fifteenth century. Christopher Celenza writes: “Nineteenth-century intellectuals, by and large, were convinced that only a native language could be a true vehicle for the expression of real culture. When this idea merged with the rise of nationalist conceptions of history, the systematic large-scale study of Latin was doomed.”⁶ While Burckhardt’s arguments for a native tradition as the truest expression of culture are in line with the beliefs espoused by many of the vernacular humanists themselves, what he and the nineteenth-century scholars fail to adequately address are the significant and necessary ways in which the Latinate humanism of the *Quattrocento* established the framework for the native tradition to come. The humanists’ revival of classical letters and classical philosophy shed light upon all aspects of the great civilization they believed they had lost and hoped to rebuild. From their broad notions of history, morality and philosophy to the minute

⁵ Christopher Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance, Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), xviii.

⁶ Christopher Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance, Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), xiii.

details of their philological method, the vernacular tradition was both motivated and defined by the methods of the Latin humanists. The division itself between Latin and vernacular humanism is an artificial distinction; the most gifted and influential vernacular authors were often talented Latinists and indeed, it was often their classical rigor which made their vernacular contributions so very authoritative and influential.

In the spirit of Hans Baron, who illuminated the “transitional crisis” of the Italian *Quattrocento*, I have chosen to focus my analysis on transitional figures, those whose scholarship perpetuated critical shifts in humanist attitudes towards vernacular literature and thus defined the course of the vernacular tradition. For the purposes of scholarship, transitions are inherently messy; they can seem simultaneously novel and regressive and this lack of consistency becomes problematic. As a result, the contributions of some key transitional figures such as Coluccio Salutati, Flavio Biondo and Angelo Poliziano, have been undervalued in previous studies of civic and vernacular humanism. I propose, however, that it is within the works of these intermediaries that we find the seeds of a burgeoning tradition. If we set aside our preoccupation with ideological purity, there is much to be gained from examining these earliest forays into new traditions of thought. Conventional scholarship has acknowledged that the humanists of Renaissance Italy were uniquely interdisciplinary intellectuals: Jakob Burckhardt famously labeled Leon Battista Alberti as “the Universal Man” and Tiziano Zanato described Lorenzo de' Medici as “dimidiato fra il politico e il poeta.”⁷ Despite this recognition, scholarship has too often essentialized, categorized and investigated the individual works of the humanists within different – and ultimately separate – fields of

⁷ Zanato's introduction in Lorenzo de' Medici and Tiziano Zanato, *Comento De' Mie'i Sonetti* (Florence: Olschki, 1991), viii.

inquiry. It seems constrictive, if not anachronistic, to apply our modern, atomistic divisions of study to a tradition which clearly did not adhere to such rigid specialization. Among the more recent additions to scholarship in early-modern Italian historiography, including monographs from Celenza, Brian Maxson, Timothy Kircher, Patrick Baker, James Hankins, Eugenio Refini, Martin Eisner, Guido Ruggiero and Peter Burke, as well as a joint work by Eva del Soldato and Andrea Rizzi and a critical anthology from Margaret King, there is early evidence of a trend which seeks to refine the isolationist approach of earlier works without discarding the strong, critical foundation established by such nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars as Burckhardt, John Addington Symonds, Hans Baron, Paul Oskar Kristeller and Eugenio Garin. This dissertation builds upon these recent, interdisciplinary explorations of humanism, tracing the rise of vernacular literary culture in light of the civic and political considerations of Italian humanist scholars.

While political considerations are essential to this dissertation, I do not focus on the institutions themselves, but on the ideological responses of the intellectual community to political affairs and the ways in which this ideology informed humanist perspectives on language. Interdisciplinary approaches such as mine have become more prevalent with the rise of "social history", as defined by Peter Stearns, which seeks to bring social context to historical narratives, even those anchored in more conventional focuses of historiography including politics, economics and the military.⁸ The field of social history has often endeavored to draw focus beyond these "elite" topics, though they, too, have profound social implications which remain understudied.

⁸ For Stearn's full conception of "social history" see: Jack R. Censer, "On a Mission: Peter Stearns and the Journal of Social History." (*Journal of Social History*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2017, pp. 444–456).

More than a sterile, theoretical method to conduct scholarship, humanism was a social phenomenon made up of interactions (sometimes contentious interactions) between scholars. As the very means of these interactions, the language they use is a critical factor of their approach, regardless of the topic or the theme they intend to treat. In a community of scholars like the humanists, who were effectively bilingual, there had to be a motive for shifting from one means of expression to another; the primary contention of this dissertation, therefore, is that this transition from Latin to vernacular writing occurred as an intentional cultural response to the instability of the political environment. Baron himself writes: "The method of interpreting great turning points in the history of thought against their social or political background has not yet rendered its full service in the study of the Italian Renaissance."⁹ Despite the many rigorous works on Italian humanism which have emerged in the intervening decades, there remains a great deal of material to explore.

Differently from the prevalent accounts of humanism, this work is focused on the seminal function of the humanists' engagement with the vernacular. In Aristotelian terms of cause – material, formal, efficient and final – this project focuses on the final two: materially, we know what the Italian vernacular is; I would argue that this was determined by Flavio Biondo in the fifteenth century when he correctly associated the Italian vernacular languages with their Latinate origins. The formal cause, in this case the structure of the literary vernacular, has been treated by far more capable philologists than I, beginning with Pietro Bembo in his *Prose della volgar lingua*. Like Dante in his *Convivio*, scooping up the crumbs of this illustrious company, I aim to reassess the

⁹ Hans Barron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance; Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 1.

efficient and final causes of the Italian literary tradition – who was responsible for shaping it, and what was their ultimate purpose? While canonical scholarship has often treated the emergence of the vernacular tradition as a literary phenomenon, this dissertation will demonstrate that the "final cause" of the Italian literary language was not merely artistic, but political.

The Italian vernacular tradition, often characterized as a spontaneous flourishing of native cultural eminence was, more realistically, the culmination of a more than two centuries of scholastic inquiry and debate. During this period, identified by Baron as “the transitional crisis of the early Renaissance”, the intellectual dominance of the Church – along with the dilapidated, scholastic Latin of the Middle Ages – was subsumed by the resurgence of antiquity, beginning with revitalization of classical Latin letters. Philosophers, historians and political leaders alike looked to the classical world as a model of the civilization they hoped to establish and, moving steadily away from the scholastic, communally-minded tradition of the thirteenth century, it is often (albeit contentiously) suggested that scholars became “modern” when they began to conceive of themselves as individuals. Embracing a view previously espoused in the Renaissance chapter of Jules Michelet’s *Histoire de France* (1867), Jacob Burckhardt suggests this modern, “humanist” culture was guided more by this novel “discovery of the world and of man”¹⁰ than by the revival of classical literature. While I would argue that these ideas are sequential rather than oppositional, Burckhardt’s perspective

¹⁰ Burckhardt discusses this definition at length in Jacob Burckhardt and S. G. C. Middlemore, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Penguin, 2004), part iv.

supports the notion that these revolutionary humanists, many of whom pursued classical ideals through varied disciplines, were linked by a philosophical desire for intellectual progress. While the ideal course and methods of humanist scholarship were a subject of perpetual debate, as illustrated by the feisty language debates of the mid-fifteenth century, Burckhardt writes that this humanist desire for progress was manifest across all aspects of existence, starting with the structure of society and the linguistic tradition. In addition to this theme of progress, I would add that humanist scholarship demonstrates a similarly universal underlying theme of stability; the humanists sought rhetorical stability in Latin, civic stability in the institutions of the Roman Empire and cultural stability in reassessing their history and affirming their connection to the classical world. In the fragmented and contentious political landscape of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy, scholars looked to their ancient roots for a better, more stable model of civilization.

Unlike much of medieval Europe, mainland Italy never developed a typical feudal society¹¹. Instead, the majority of the peninsula was populated by a collection of communal cities, which over the course of the fourteenth century, expanded into regional city-states under the rule of a burgeoning aristocracy. Burckhardt identifies these aristocratic Italian city-states as the true source of modernity, a civic reflection of the restored concept of man as an individual, capable of self-actualization and personal greatness. However, in this post-medieval landscape of powerful republics and principalities, individual nation-states like Venice, Florence and Milan were dangerously susceptible to foreign rule, like game pieces to be amassed in the enduring territorial

¹¹ This excludes the *latifondi* of Sicily which did follow many of the conventions of feudal society.

conflict between the Empire and the Papacy. Because threats from without were grave, the power systems within the Italian peninsula intensified. Precariously nestled between these two dominant powers, there existed “a multitude of political units—republics and despots—in part of long standing, in part of recent origin, whose existence was founded simply on their power to maintain it.”¹² This checkered landscape grew intensely vulnerable to the worst instincts of human nature: unmitigated power structures allowed egotism, authoritarianism and oppression to corrupt and weaken these societies from within. The overarching confrontation between the dominions of church and the state elicited significant questions of hierarchical authority and inspired fierce and violent rivalries, even between local political factions. These conditions set the stage for an important shift in the civic attitudes of the intellectual community.

At the dawn of the fourteenth century, early humanist scholars were divided on their sense of obligation to the civic environment. In the tradition of Petrarch – often regarded as the first humanist – some scholars withdrew to a life of solemn contemplation. Others, like Dante and later Coluccio Salutati, felt compelled, in light of their status and privilege, to contribute to the civic order and the public good. This ethos of civic activity derives predominantly from the works of Aristotle, whom Dante calls simply “the philosopher”, as well as the works of Cicero. Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics* and Cicero's *De officiis* are frequently evident in the moral values of the civic humanists, especially regarding their commitment to utility and the common good. In *Politics*, Aristotle writes that man is an inherently political animal; like a colony of bees or a herd

¹² Jacob Burckhardt and S. G. C. Middlemore, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Penguin, 2004), 4.

of cattle, humans are meant to live in groups. Unlike the other animals, however, humans are graced with *λόγος* – meaning reason, and alternatively, speech. This link between reason, order and language is critical, as it later supports the argument that vernacular language provides a pure, more “natural” means of expression and communication than Latin, which was not native to the early modern Italians, but acquired. This idea that Latin and the vernacular languages were fundamentally different in origin was commonly accepted well into the fifteenth century: the medieval understanding of linguistic diversity, narrated by Dante in a most engaging way in his *De vulgari eloquentia*, assumes that the so-called “natural” vernacular languages were inherently chaotic and ungrammatical. Meanwhile, Latin was viewed as an “artificial” language, created by people to be ordered and immutable for refined scholarly and literary pursuits. The Greek language was effectively lost to Western Europe until the fifteenth century, so in Dante's time, Latin was the unequivocal (and seemingly only) choice for literary and philosophical works – well, almost.

A vernacular lyrical tradition was gaining momentum in Italy, beginning with the *scuola siciliana* at the court of Federico II in the mid-thirteenth century. The highly formulaic verses of the Sicilians, based on the lyrical forms of the Provençal troubadours, made their way to the copyists of Tuscany who, to paraphrase Alessandro Manzoni, “washed them in the Arno”¹³ – meaning that they adapted the language to a more Tuscan form. Dante, an early master of this “sweet new style”¹⁴ of vernacular poetry, made critical strides in expanding the scope of vernacular authorship, later

¹³ I don't recommend this; the Arno is picturesque but notoriously polluted.

¹⁴ Dante coined the Italian term, *dolce stil novo*, in the *Divine Comedy*, Purgatory, XXIV.

adding prose works of theory and philosophy, like the *Convivio*, to his vernacular canon. The beginning of the first chapter focuses on Dante's *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*; the arguments he makes for his choice in employing the vernacular – along with his own model of literary language – set a critical precedent for the future of vernacular production. For the monumental influence he would exert on later vernacular authors, Dante represents the origins of the vernacular thread of Florentine humanism. The second half of the chapter focuses on Coluccio Salutati, a critically influential (yet relatively understudied) politician and diplomat whose works from the late *Trecento* provide invaluable perspective on the origins of civic engagement in Florence. Eventually, these civic and vernacular threads of proto-humanist thought would converge in support of a refined Italian literary tradition.

The *Trecento* vernacular masterpieces of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio were beloved by many in the generations of scholars to follow; in their own literary ambitions, however, these early *Quattrocento* humanists were enraptured by the resurgence of classical antiquity. While this explosion of Latinate scholarship did effectively dampen the elaboration of the vernacular literary tradition, I would be more than remiss not to acknowledge the many benefits which emerged from this rediscovery of Roman antiquity. These earliest humanists “dipped their nets deep in the sea of antiquity”¹⁵ to revive classical standards for Latinate scholarship and bring to light a veritable treasure trove of obscured and forgotten classical texts. As a result, the humanists became experts in the philological methods which would later support the grammatical

¹⁵ Christopher Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance, Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 8.

elaboration of the Italian literary language. In the course of their efforts, they began to uncover a lost connection between the classical individual and themselves. Garin writes: “Si ritrovano l'uomo e la realtà secondo la via degli antichi. Tuttavia, proprio a questo punto, l'antichità, e l'imitazione di essa, vengono a proporsi con valori diversi, e in parte divergenti: da un lato come archetipi da accogliere e riprodurre, dall'altro come stimoli da svolgere attivamente entro un mondo nuovo, con bisogni nuovi.”¹⁶ As a means to address the “bisogni nuovi” of the thriving, mercantile republic of *Quattrocento* Florence, the intellectual commitment to civic life (previously espoused by Brunetto Latini and Dante) became an increasingly prominent notion. In their examinations and reconstructions of the classical Roman world, these civic humanist scholars sought a model for the political and social stability which, in their own environment, was desperately lacking.

By the early *Quattrocento*, civic scholars in Florence had embraced the idea that ancient Rome had flourished as a republic and then fallen to ruin as an imperial monarchy. Surrounded by powerful regimes themselves, the republican Florentines felt a profound obligation “to keep up their lonely resistance”¹⁷ against tyrannical rule on the Italian peninsula. It was a community of free and engaged citizens, whose unique civic mentality infiltrated all aspects of intellectual culture. With increasingly sophisticated examinations of the classical world over the first half of the fifteenth century, humanist historians in Florence came to reassess their Christian, scholastic interpretations of

¹⁶ Eugenio Garin, *La Cultura Del Rinascimento* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2012), 15.

¹⁷ Hans Barron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance; Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 104.

history and embrace a more secular vision of their own cultural past. The beginning of chapter two focuses on an essential contributor to this shift, curial humanist Flavio Biondo, whose revolutionary works of Roman historiography definitively altered two basic perceptions of the classical world. First, in examining Cicero's dialogues, he discovered that the literary and spoken languages of ancient Rome were fundamentally the same, only more or less refined. By disproving the perceived binary of "natural" and "artificial" languages, Biondo presents the contemporary Italian vernaculars as worthy and receptive to a grammatical, literary treatment. Additionally, Biondo proposed that the greatness of the Roman Empire derived not only from their political institutions but from a series of cultural factors, beginning with the Latin language and literary tradition. Just a few years later, fellow humanist Leon Battista Alberti expanded on Biondo's new vision of civic stability as a product of cultural achievement; Alberti presented the refinement of a native literary tradition as a service to the *sommo bene* and thus, a moral imperative. To illustrate this critical shift in the understanding of vernacular language, Alberti and two of his treatises are featured in the second part of chapter two.

Despite the ongoing political troubles in Italy, in the first half of the fifteenth century, Florence began to flourish in several ways. Beyond their growing reputation as a cultural center on the Italian peninsula, their banking trade was making them fabulously rich. From rather humble beginnings, the Medici family rose with the success of their own family bank to become the unofficial leaders of the city. In the second half of the century, Florence and the other political powers on the peninsula finally came to exist in a relative balance and Lorenzo de' Medici, called the Magnificent, presided over a Florentine golden age. Lorenzo and his remarkable circle of humanists made

revolutionary contributions to the arts and together with his secretary, Angelo Poliziano, he made calculated efforts to revive the tradition of Florentine vernacular literature as a marker of Florentine eminence. To provide two diverse yet enmeshed perspectives on this renewed interest in vernacular authorship, Lorenzo and Poliziano are the focus of chapter three. Their attention to the vernacular tradition sparked a trend which, in the peaceful, “courtly” atmosphere of the late *Quattrocento*, produced a new wave of vernacular literature in Italy. By the end the *Quattrocento*, the *questione della lingua* evolved beyond discussions of whether to write in the vernacular; instead scholars began to muse on how to write in the vernacular, and which was the correct vernacular to use. Lorenzo and Poliziano had used the Florentine literature of the *Trecento* as an argument for the preeminence of their own vernacular – not just Florentine but contemporary Florentine as they spoke it in the fifteenth century. While their version of literary language did not establish itself as the definitive model, they reignited the practice of vernacular authorship in Italy after a long, though fruitful, detour into classical antiquity.

The years which followed brought new and significant political challenges to Florence and to the Italian peninsula at large; as the humanist historians would likely remind us, golden ages never last. In the final decade of the glorious *Quattrocento*, the alliances which had kept the peninsula at peace began to break down. The French invaded from the north, on their way to stake a hereditary claim for the Kingdom of Naples. Over the following years, the powers of Italy shuffled and reshuffled their allegiances, alternatively seeking aid or protection from the Spanish, the French and the Holy Roman Empire. As the Italian Wars progressed, the peninsula was subsumed

piece by piece under foreign control. With their loss of political autonomy, the civic-minded intellectual community began to fear an erasure of their cultural identity, and while the powers of the peninsula had never been united, there had long existed an idea of Italy. In the early *Cinquecento*, the descent of foreign powers put these “Italian” commonalities in stark relief, more so than ever before, and vernacular Italian authorship, understood for its cultural value, became more prevalent both in and outside of Florence. In the midst of the Italian Wars, Niccolò Machiavelli composed his most important works of civic philosophy in his native Florentine. Beyond his enduring fame, or better his notoriety, Machiavelli’s practical, straightforward style of prose established a new model for political and scientific vernacular scholarship; for these reasons, Machiavelli is the focus of the beginning of chapter four. In the very same years, outside of Florence, the Venetian curialist Pietro Bembo was elaborating his own approach to “Italian” literature; he and his works are the focus of the end of the fourth and final chapter. A gifted Latinist and philologist, Bembo integrated humanist notions of history, language and civic virtue to argue for the designation of *Trecento* literary Florentine as the authoritative model for the literary tradition of Italy. Bembo’s model of language prevailed, and while political unity was still beyond their grasp, Italian literature – and culture – survived.

Methodology and Structure:

The world of the Italian humanists was rich and vast, populated by a great number of scholars who would have made interesting contributions to my narrative of “vernacular politics”. In order to devote adequate space and attention to my primary

figures, naturally some difficult choices had to be made. First, this is a work on early Italian humanism and I have excluded Petrarch. I will not try to hide it, nor could I. Often regarded as the “father of proto-humanism”¹⁸, Petrarch is a towering and ubiquitous presence in the foundations of humanist thought. For the purposes of this project, however, Petrarch’s humanism is, at least initially, a bit of a hindrance. His legacy of monastic, contemplative scholarship, his focus on strict, classical *imitatio* and his explicit promotion of Latin as inherently superior to vernacular language often presented an ideological challenge to the civic and vernacular threads of humanist scholarship – precisely those I wish to examine. In contrast to the “civic utility” of Brunetto Latini and Dante in the late thirteenth century, Petrarch’s works, namely *De vita solitaria* (c. 1346)¹⁹ promoted a life of intellectual speculation, removed from the squalid and disreputable business of public affairs. Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* represents a most exquisite collection of vernacular lyrical poetry, but in other texts he still maintained the absolute superiority of classical Latin. Alas, in light of Petrarch’s attitudes towards civic life and vernacular scholarship, he is not a direct focus of this project. He is not, however, absent entirely; his legacy left a current of thought which was ever present in the emergence of the humanist tradition. Beyond Petrarch, a number of other notable scholars including Boccaccio, Leonardo Bruni, Lorenzo Valla, Cristoforo Landino, Baldassare Castiglione and Gian Giorgio Trissino made important contributions to the progression of humanist scholarship; ultimately, however, the primary figures and works I have chosen provide more rich and innovative examples of the intersection between

¹⁸ Witt explores the veracity of this title in Ronald Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: the Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Brill Academic Publishers, 2003), 230-291.

¹⁹ On the civic implications of *De vita solitaria*, see James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 175.

civic and vernacular thought, specifically in light of the concurrent political landscape. From a geographical perspective, while I do not intentionally favor Florence and the Florentines, their prominence among the figures of this project is inescapable. In the thirteenth century, Pope Boniface VIII acknowledged the Florentines as the “quinto elemento della terra”; he was wise not to underestimate their influence.²⁰

Finally, I must also note that the absence of women among the primary figures of this dissertation is not a casual oversight but a frustrating reality. As Margaret King writes: “Since women’s roles were defined by sexual and economic relationships to men, society made little place for the woman who was unattached to man or God.”²¹ While early modern Italy was populated by a number of extraordinary women, their influence on civic culture was severely limited by the commonly held conviction that women were both physically and intellectually weaker, and therefore inherently inferior, to men. Consequently, women frequently had less (if any) access to a conventional education and were not permitted to enroll in grammar schools, much less the grand universities which trained their brothers and future husbands in philosophy, rhetoric and matters of law. Even among the highest social classes, women were denied the benefits of citizenship and representation in government.

Despite these disadvantages, some women (including Isabella d’Este, Vittoria Colonna, Isotta Nogarola and Lucrezia Tornabuoni) did establish themselves as prominent social figures and talented authors. It is undeniable, however, that their

²⁰ Cited in Michelangelo Buonarroti and Pietro Fanfani, *Opere Varie in Versi Ed in Prosa* (Florence: Successori Le Monnier, 1894), 355.

²¹ Margaret King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 29.

unique opportunities to engage with literary culture were afforded by their relationships to powerful men. The influence of these women – formidable as they were – amounted to a “soft power” which extended only as far as their personal connections. Active participation in the civic sphere remained the exclusive purview of men, not only throughout the early modern period but for centuries to follow. In light of these ingrained social limitations, women were systematically deprived of the authority which would have allowed them to exert intellectual or political influence on the same scale as the primary (male) figures of this dissertation. The absence of women in my narrative, therefore, is not a conscious choice but an unavoidable consequence of their systematic exclusion from political and intellectual spaces within the strictly patriarchal society of early modern Europe. It must be said, however, that while the literary production of these women was profoundly undervalued in their own time, contemporary scholars such as Virginia Cox, Margaret King, Jane Tylus, Ramie Targoff, and Sara Matthews-Grieco have made critical efforts to shine a long overdue light on the social and intellectual contributions of women in the early modern Italian landscape. I expect (and *mi auguro*) that these fruitful and necessary studies will continue to emerge as the terrain of Italian Studies expands to include more conventionally marginalized voices of history.

Conversations on the material and chronological parameters of the Renaissance are ongoing, likely because there is no singular author or moment which can definitively mark the beginning or end of such a broad cultural movement. Beyond the timeline, some scholars would question my adherence to the term “Renaissance” in the first place. Working within this sphere of scholarship, however, it seems only practical to

adapt to the prevailing lexicon – albeit liberally. The fact remains that many of the greatest nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars of Renaissance history and literature (Jacob Buckhardt, Hans Baron, Paul Oscar Kristeller, Eugenio Garin, et al.) based their arguments on definitions which they elaborate themselves; I will permit myself the same license. For my purposes here, the Renaissance is the era in which Europe started to become “modern” by virtue of changing civic and economic conditions, supported by the humanist culture of the intellectual elite. While earlier scholarship has suggested that the modern tradition began as late as 1500, I find myself in the camp of Ernst Curtius, who quipped: “this is as intelligent as if one were to promise a description of the Rhine, but only provided the section from Mainz to Cologne.”²² Historiographical cheek aside, there exists a decisive break in the intensity with which critical scholarship has examined the cultural, political and literary changes which occurred between the dusk of the Latin Middle Ages and the dawn of the vernacular Renaissance; my project is focused on this period of transition, beginning in the final years of the thirteenth century, to better illuminate the epistemological shifts which allowed such innovative new traditions to emerge. To speak further on the subject of lexicon, like “Renaissance”, use of the term “humanist” can be equally prickly as the early-modern intellectuals in question would not have defined themselves in such a way. The term appeared in the *Cinquecento* as sort of a slang term for teachers of the *studia humanitatis* but has since become a conventional moniker to refer to this community of scholars in light of their multidisciplinary but ultimately shared project of reviving the classical intellectual landscape. Taking a lesson from Pietro Bembo's

²² Ernst Robert Curtius and Willard R. Trask, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 12.

successful appropriation of conventional styles, I adopt this broad, standard use of the terms “humanist” and “humanism”. Finally, in my references to “culture” and “society”, I follow the definitions of social historian Peter Burke: he identifies culture as “attitudes and values and their expressions and embodiments in texts, artifacts and performances”²³ while society refers more broadly to culture as well as economic and political concerns.

In structuring this dissertation, I did as the humanists do and borrowed my methods from illustrious works of the past – some ancient and some far more recent. My overall approach to the transitional humanism of “the long *Quattrocento*” – the juicy center of my timeline – is predominantly inspired by Christopher Celenza's lively and impossibly nuanced brand of intellectual history. Another fundamental source for conceptualizing this project was James Hankins' *Virtue Politics*; his groundbreaking interpretation of Italian humanism “as a movement of moral and political reform”²⁴ has been an important model for treating the civic history of the Italian humanists in an appropriately interdisciplinary way. Traveling backwards in the canon of Renaissance scholars, the chronological parameters of the project are inspired by Hans Baron's idea of the transitional “Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance.” Baron identifies a critical connection between the maturation of the humanist tradition and the uniquely chaotic political atmosphere of early modern Italy. While I enthusiastically maintain the importance of this connection, Baron suggests that these cultural changes began, rather neatly, in the year 1400. In the spirit of truly transitional scholarship, this project softens

²³ Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 2.

²⁴ James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), xv.

the edges of Baron's "Renaissance" to trace the civic and vernacular threads of humanist scholarship from their thirteenth- and fourteenth-century origins in communal Florence and provide a more nuanced narrative of the shift from Latin to vernacular humanism in light of the concurrent developments in political culture. The timeline is divided with respect to the understanding that intellectual movements fade in and out over; the age of refined, authoritative vernacular production emerged slowly, fighting against typically medieval notions of linguistic history as well as the refined Latinate praxis of early humanism. My narrative begins with Dante and his earliest defenses of vernacular literature at the turn of the fourteenth century and concludes with the publication of Pietro Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* in 1525. This is an appropriate point of closure as it represents a definitive turning point in the legitimization of the vernacular tradition and coincides with monumental changes to the political landscape in the aftermath of the Italian Wars.

The composition of the chapters, each of which examines the political life and works of two civic scholars, is inspired by Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (c. 200 AD). In this work, which reached the humanists by way of Byzantine visitors in the fifteenth century, Plutarch pairs biographies of notable Romans and Greeks who shared similar destinies and similar virtues – or vices. Beyond a way to explore the ethics and the personal endeavors of each figure, the pairing serves to provide a more comprehensive view of the civic and cultural environments in which they lived and worked. While it is not generally regarded as the most masterful entry in the collection, I was particularly inspired by Plutarch's pairing of Demosthenes and Cicero, two highly influential statesmen and orators who provide critical insight on political culture in the classical

world – much like the civic humanists in early modern Italy. Cicero is especially relevant to this dissertation as well, as his works exert a most profound influence on the literary methods of humanism. Andrew Lintott explains that Plutarch composed *Lives*, not *Histories* and “this excused [Plutarch] from giving exhaustive narratives of the well-known exploits of his subject; rather, some minor action or remark might be more revealing of character than slaughters on the battlefield or sieges.” In his method, Plutarch compares himself to a sculptor who focuses on the face, and especially the eyes, “because these are the most telling clues to personality.”²⁵ I have tailored my biographies as well in order to situate each figure, in their personal and professional endeavors, within the greater civic landscape of the moment. In pairing scholars from the same civic and cultural era (or nearly, in the case of the first chapter) I aim to provide two different perspectives and reveal two different experiences of each successive phase of humanism, from Dante in the early *Trecento* to Pietro Bembo and the *classicismo volgare* of the *Cinquecento*. For each of the eight featured scholars, there is a political biography followed by analyses of the written works which best illustrate the civic mentality behind their defense or practice of vernacular literature. The biographical sections are intentionally substantial in order to fully contextualize the civic themes in their written works; each section provides necessary support for the other in tracing the concurrent developments in civic and vernacular culture. As Dionisotti writes: “Il guaio è che molto spesso la catena degli eventi storici che, se non è determinante e però condizionante e in ogni casi illuminante, non viene tenuta, benché volgarmente

²⁵ Andrew Lintott’s introduction in Plutarch and A. W. Lintott, *Demosthenes and Cicero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

nota, nel debito conto dagli studiosi della letteratura e della lingua.”²⁶ In examining a transitional period, it is insufficient to observe one side alone, and while there exists a wealth of scholarship detailing the course of humanist thought, the lion’s share has focused on novel aspects of vernacular humanism, isolating the movement from the pre-existing models of scholasticism, from the Latinate origins of humanist methods and from the unique civic environment which supported such revolutionary changes. This dissertation contributes to a restoration of the origins of this transition in order to construct a more comprehensive ideological narrative of the rise of vernacular culture in Italy.

To put it most simply, this project is a chronological examination of the cultural, intellectual and political innovations of eight of the most influential civic scholars of the Italian humanist tradition. Their personal values and unique perspectives are keenly reflected in their written works, many of which established important precedents for the successive generation of intellectuals. Each chapter of this project thus represents a distinct phase of Italian humanism which, in my view, evolves in concert with the concurrent and quite dramatic political developments on and around the Italian peninsula. In the sixteenth-century, Machiavelli became convinced that there exist certain immutable characteristics of human nature, and therefore, human society. In my view, one of these enduring characteristics is the trendiness of scholarship. The intellectual community is now, as I surmise it has always been, drawn to the topics and arguments which are most relevant or meaningful to present circumstances:

Boccaccio’s *Decameron* emerged following an epidemic of plague, Ariosto’s *Orlando*

²⁶ Dionisotti in Pietro Bembo and Carlo Dionisotti, *Prose e Rime Di Pietro Bembo* (Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1966) 88.

furioso was written as the threat of the Reformation grew in Europe, Machiavelli's *Arte della guerra* was produced in the course of the Italian Wars. Their works give insight into their lives just as their lives provide important context for their works. As Italy descended into warfare and foreign occupancy became an increasing reality on the peninsula, the idea of an Italian identity, distinct from the French in Northern Italy and the Spanish in the South, became a critical concern for the late civic humanists. In defining a cultural and literary tradition which belonged solely to the Italians, scholars saw a path to preserve their own history and identity, even as their civic autonomy was stripped away. Francis Bacon once declared: "Down with antiquities and citations or supporting testimonies from texts; down with debates and controversies and divergent opinions; down with everything philological."²⁷ To this, I say: long live Cicero and the commentary tradition; long live the *questione della lingua*; long live Leon Battista Alberti and Angelo Poliziano and every self-righteous contrarian whose assiduous hunt for the "illustrious" forged the path to an Italian literary tradition.

²⁷ Cited in Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: the Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 2.

Chapter One – The *Trecento*: Dante Alighieri and Coluccio Salutati

Introduction

Fourteenth-century Italy was a patchwork of competing traditions and local political hostilities. Throughout the diverse centers of power on the peninsula, the intellectual community struggled with its position in this contentious and often retaliatory civic environment. Should a wise and educated man rise above the political fray, or was he obligated to use his talents for the betterment of society? In the first half of the *Trecento*, literary giants Dante (1265 - 1321) and Petrarch (1304-1374) adopted opposing views on this question of civic engagement. Petrarch's works, namely *De vita solitaria* (c. 1346)²⁸, promote a life of intellectual speculation, removed from the squalid and disreputable business of public affairs²⁹. Dante, conversely, was a dedicated political actor. In his scholarship, echoing the positions of his mentor, Brunetto Latini, Dante advocates for the virtues of civic utility. Among these useful pursuits, Dante promotes the establishment of a *volgare illustre* – a refined Italian vernacular language, suitable for literary and professional use – as the most noble work of all.

²⁸ Civic implications of *De vita solitaria* discussed in James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 175; on the solitude of Petrarch more generally, see Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1975), 21-24.

²⁹ On Petrarch's political views, see Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 25-32.

The trend of native vernacular literature had come recently to Tuscany. In the thirteenth century, the Provençal troubadours had made their way into Italy, bringing with them a tradition of vernacular poetry. In several of the northern Italian courts, but especially in the Sicilian court of Federico II, literary scholars began applying their own local vernaculars to the lyrical forms of the troubadours. It was the Sicilian notary Giacomo da Lentini who, in the mid-thirteenth century, added the sonnet to the stylistic repertoire of Italian poetry. At the turn of the fourteenth century, this artistic exercise of vernacular poetry morphed into a literary movement of its own with the advent of the *dolce stil novo* – an introspective, allegorical approach to poetry which shifted focus from the pains of the love-struck to the spiritual virtues of the beloved. This “sweet new style”, first elaborated by the Bolognese poet Guido Guinizelli, had a profound influence on the vernacular poetry of Dante and Petrarch alike. In their vernacular works, they both made monumental contributions to the emerging tradition of Tuscan literature. As Celenza explains, however: “Though Petrarch is known today more for his vernacular love poetry, in his own lifetime he was intent on recapturing a seemingly lost ancient Roman world, doing so first and foremost by the study and use of the Latin language.”

³⁰ This aspect of Petrarch’s scholarship is critical; in pursuing the revival of ancient wisdom, beginning with the resurrection of classical Latin, Petrarch became the “father of humanism”³¹ – the intellectual movement which defined the Italian Renaissance.

While Petrarch is justly credited with initiating the methods of early humanism, it was Dante who established the basis for the two threads of humanist thought which,

³⁰ Christopher Celenza, *Machiavelli: a Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 11.

³¹ This designation is discussed at length in Ronald Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: the Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Brill Academic Publishers, 2003), 231-239.

more than two centuries later, would converge to support the authoritative, grammatical codification of an Italian literary language. First, Dante established a precedent for vernacular prose as well as poetry. In his prose works³², the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia* in particular, he provides the first theoretical defense of vernacular scholarship – a radical position in a time when Latin was regarded as the only suitable language for serious intellectual discourse. Secondly, in his defense of the vernacular, Dante emphasizes the virtues of civic utility and he posits a critical connection between the vernacular literary tradition and the common good. To varying degrees, all of the major defenders of vernacular literature to follow, from Leon Battista Alberti to Cristoforo Landino and Lorenzo de' Medici to Pietro Bembo, would rely on Dante's original arguments, especially relating to civic and cultural value of a native, vernacular tradition.

Ultimately, this project will demonstrate how the ascendancy of the Italian literary language is inextricably tied to the civic mentality which developed among humanist scholars, especially in Florence. Initially, however, these vernacular and civic threads of humanist inquiry emerged separately, in fragments. To explore the *Trecento* origins of these ideas, this chapter first examines Dante and the critical ideological innovations of his minor treatises, *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*, with particular attention to the ways in which Dante's civic and cultural attitudes were expressed through his ennoblement of vernacular literature. Following Latini, Dante recognized an inherent connection between rhetoric and good governance and, therefore, his linguistic considerations are often made in the context of civic virtue, or more generally, the

³² On the classical influences in Dante's prose, 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, 2001), 11-15.

common good. Importantly though, despite Dante's noted appreciation for civic utility, his influence on the successive generations of humanist scholars was predominantly literary, or more generally, linguistic. It was not until the end of the fourteenth century that the virtue of civic activity was established as a critical element of the humanist agenda.

To examine the transitional period between the "three crowns" of the early *Trecento* and the *Quattrocento* humanists, the second half of the chapter will discuss the career and works of Coluccio Salutati (1332-1406), Chancellor of the Florentine Republic, whose influence was responsible for the civic codification of humanism in Florence. Pushing against the Latinate, contemplative influence of Petrarch and the northern Italian proto-humanists³³, Salutati fully elaborated the virtue of civic activity, impressing a distinctly civic mentality upon the successive generation of scholars in Florence. A discussion of Salutati's written works, in the context of his cultural environment, will identify the ways in which humanist scholarship evolved over the course of Salutati's lifetime and how he established such an enduring precedent for active civic engagement. While Salutati generally stuck to Latin in his own scholarship, he was a professed admirer of the *Trecento* vernacular authors. His one (surviving) vernacular poem, a prickly indictment of Giangaleazzo Visconti, shows that he was familiar with the emerging tradition and that he understood the civic value (and accessibility) of native literature. In keeping with the theme of this project, both Dante

³³ On the northern Italian proto-humanists, see Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 81-117; see also Nicholas Mann, "The origins of humanism" in Jill Kraye, *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 6-8.

and Salutati are literary and political figures. Dante's influence, however, was decidedly more literary than political, whereas Salutati's was just the opposite. The ideologies which emerged from their vast written works were profoundly influential for the following generations of scholars, and together, they represent two fundamental points of departure for the future of the humanist tradition.

II. Dante Alighieri

Dante (1265-1321)³⁴, often hailed as the “father” and “supreme poet” of the Italian language, is the best known author of the pre-modern Italian tradition. Just in recent years, his fictional persona has featured in a video game, a mystery novel and a smash hit in young adult fiction. As of the year 2020, March 25 is celebrated in Italy – and by Italianists around the world – as *Dantedì*. Giuseppe Mazzotta writes that it is “the knowledge that he was part of our history and was so much like us, that he was so thoroughly human while at the same time so thoroughly extraordinary as only fictional characters are, that accounts for the persistent fascination he exerts on us.”³⁵ In the realm of Dante studies, there are few stones which have not been expertly and exhaustively unturned in the seven centuries since Dante's death. While this project does not propose any revolutionary discoveries, it aims to revisit several of his minor

³⁴ Dates of Dante's life and works in Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Life of Dante” in Rachel Jacoff, , 1-14; also Robert Hollander, *Dante: a Life in Works* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015).

³⁵ Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Life of Dante” in Rachel Jacoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1.

works within the context of a larger narrative: the civic and intellectual innovations which prompted the emergence of an authoritative literary Italian vernacular.

In the opening tercet of the *Commedia*, Dante declares: “la diritta via era smarrita”.³⁶ When one considers the turbulent and anguished circumstances of Dante’s life – war, political infighting, the untimely death of his muse, Beatrice, and eventually exile – his motivations to examine the tenets of the “right path” become ever more clear. For Dante, this question of how to follow the right path, and live the right life, is not only a matter of faith or morality; his morality is inherent to his discussions of civics, language and the nature of the universe itself. Mazzotta remarks: “Dante’s theoretical attitude, so marked in the final years of his life, never meant that he forgot the world and its cares. To presume this would be to falsify or altogether miss the essence of contemplation which always encompasses and underlies the sphere of moral action.”³⁷ Dante believes that there is a model of divine justice, one which would establish a more peaceful and virtuous society; he also believes that it is the sacred obligation of mankind to seek out this path.

Though the *Commedia* is undeniably Dante’s masterpiece, it would not have been possible without the critical observations on language and the polis which Dante explores in his earlier works. While *De monarchia*, Dante’s only independent political work, would have made an interesting addition as well, Dante’s ideas on language and civics as an interrelated argument are best characterized in the *Convivio* and *De vulgari*

³⁶ Dante, *Divina commedia*, *Inf.* l.

³⁷ Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Life of Dante” in Rachel Jacoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 11.

eloquentia. Relying on these, Dante's "lesser" major works, this section will identify his most innovative contributions to the emerging humanist tradition and examine the ways in which his life and his political sympathies shaped his vision for a refined vernacular literary tradition. Sapegno writes that in these works we find "i germi di una civiltà nuova e più aperta"³⁸; those seeds would eventually bloom into the civic, vernacular traditions of fifteenth and sixteenth century humanism.

i. Dante the Prior

Dante was born in 1265 into the bustling, mercantile atmosphere of communal Florence.³⁹ Politics in the city were dominated by two factions: the Guelphs, loyal to the Papacy, and the Ghibellines, loyal to the Holy Roman Empire. The Guelphs were further divided into the "Black Guelphs" comprised mainly of the wealthy families of high nobility, and the "White Guelphs" who predominantly represented the merchant class and the lower nobles.⁴⁰ Dante was raised in a White Guelph family in a Ghibelline-controlled Florence. It was not until Florence's victory in the campaign of Campaldino in 1289 that the Guelphs gained control of the city. By that time, the trappings of adulthood and professional life had descended swiftly upon Dante. Over the course of the 1280s,

³⁸ Natalino Sapegno, *Compendio Di Storia Della Letteratura Italiana* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1963), 94.

³⁹ On the communal government of the fourteenth century, see Lauro Martines, *Power And Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 45-61.

⁴⁰ On the political factions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see J.K. Hyde, "Contemporary Views on Faction and Civil Strife in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century Italy" in Lauro Martines, *Power And Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 273-308.

his father had died and he had become the head of his family, a household of minor nobility. Soon after, he was married to fellow Florentine Gemma Donati; very little is known about Gemma as Dante never wrote about her. In the years following his marriage, Dante served as a knight in military campaigns against Arezzo and Pisa, neighboring enemies to Florence. These were challenging times, as Dante bore the title, responsibilities and restrictions of nobility while struggling to meet the financial expectations of his status. His efforts as a soldier, for example, were entirely self-funded – as was expected of a man of his position.⁴¹ In such circumstances, Dante could not help but be aware of the social and political climate in Florence; still, his path to a civic career was less than straightforward.

Between 1293 and 1295 Florence enacted the *Ordinamenti di Giustizia*, a series of statutory laws which drastically altered the political landscape in the republic. The orders, which called out many prominent families by name, stated that the aristocracy was barred from holding public office and they could be subject to harsher punishments for certain crimes. While the Alighieri family was not included in the list, rule over the city was firmly in the hands of the merchant class and participation in government was reserved to members of the guilds. As a son of the lower aristocracy, Dante was ineligible for government service until the *Temperamenti* of 1295. These statutes loosened the original *ordinamenti* and allowed for nobles to participate in government as long as they were enrolled in a guild. Dante became a member of *Arte dei Medici e Speziali*, one of the seven major guilds of the city, and began his civic career in

⁴¹ Lino Pertile, “Life” in Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile, *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 463.

November of the same year. While few records from this period remain, part of his work consisted in updating the rules for the election of Priors – the top representatives from each major guild. Dante advanced quickly, holding several positions over the following years. In the second half of 1296, he was part of the *Consiglio dei cento*, the body which managed the appropriation of public funds. He occasionally served in the capacity of an ambassador as well: he was sent to San Gimignano in 1300 to discuss a strategy of resistance against papal expansion into Tuscany, and then to Rome several years later.

Over the course of Dante's tenure in government, tensions rose within the dominant political faction of the city. While Florence was historically Guelph, loyal to the papacy, class struggles within the party led to a contentious divide: the Black Guelphs were high nobility, politically conservative and eager to regain power from the rising merchant classes. The White Guelphs were the lower nobility and the merchants; they supported a moderately popular agenda which sought to mitigate the influence of the aristocracy in public affairs. Robert Hollander writes: "it is probably correct to say that the Whites were more devoted to a republican notion of governance, while the Blacks were more authoritarian in their attitudes."⁴² Dante, as an active member of government and a member of the lower nobility, sided (moderately) with the White Guelphs. There were a number of schemes to establish a bipartisan government, but they were effectively hopeless; Sapegno argues that Dante was one of the few civic servants who was more committed to the welfare of the city than to his own private interests.

⁴² Robert Hollander, *Dante: a Life in Works* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 5.

Dante's political career reached its peak in the summer of 1300, when he was elected as one of the seven priors of the city. During his term, the conflict between the Black Guelphs (led by Corso Donati) and the White Guelphs (led by Vieri de' Cerchi) grew unmanageable. In an attempt to regain order, the priors determined to exile the leaders of each faction, including Dante's friend Cavalcanti who died in exile later that year. The fallout from this judgement was slow to come, but devastating. When Dante's brief term in the priory ended, his successors pardoned the White Guelphs and allowed them to return to the city. Pope Boniface VIII, who was sympathetic to the noble Black Guelphs, denounced this decision as political favoritism – and not on the side he preferred. Angry with the popular Florentine government, Boniface solicited military assistance from Charles of Valois, brother to the King of France. Hoping to dissuade the papal court from allowing the French crown into Italy, Florence sent three emissaries to Rome – Dante among them. In November of 1301, Charles of Valois launched a military intervention against the Florentine government. Corso Donati and the Black Guelphs were returned to power and Dante, still in Rome, was branded an enemy of the state; he faced charges of corruption, extortion, opposition to the pope and complicity in the exile of the Black Guelphs. On his return journey to Florence, in the winter of 1302, Dante learned that he had been exiled from the city.⁴³

He was likely in Siena when he was informed of his sentence. The original decree specified a fine, two years in exile and a permanent ban on public service. However, as Dante was not in Florence to pay the fine or plead his case, a second

⁴³ Lino Pertile, "Life" in Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile, *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 466.

decree warned that he would be burned alive if found in the city. Prudent and circumspect as he was, Dante never again returned to Florence. Initially, he collaborated with other White Guelphs in exile, all hoping to negotiate their return. Their efforts proved frustrating and Dante soon tired of his companions and their “endless, wicked conspiracies of revenge”.⁴⁴ He accepted his exile as permanent, and in the end, his expulsion from Florence became “the providential condition wherein he recognizes the necessity to transcend the particularisms of local history.”⁴⁵

Despite his affiliation with the Guelph party and their historical loyalties to the papacy, Dante was bitterly critical of Pope Boniface VIII. John Scott writes: “A gifted administrator and an expert in canon law, Boniface did all he could to increase the power of the Church – and of his own family.”⁴⁶ Dante viewed him as and an affront to Christian values and an emblem of decadence and moral indulgence in the church. Boniface’s papal bull, *Unam sanctam*, declared that the pope was not only the leader of Christendom, but also took precedence in earthly matters of state, and his policies sought to establish a papal theocracy which would subsume all of Tuscany under its control. Little could Boniface know that, despite his reputation for shrewd efficacy, his most enduring legacy would be as a derogatory reference among the simonists in Dante’s *Inferno*.⁴⁷ In his brief but consequential political career, Dante fought to resist this papal expansion – and he would pay for his position for the rest of his life. In his *Vita di Dante*, Leonardo Bruni refers to a lost epistle in which Dante blames the greatest

⁴⁴ Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Life of Dante” in Rachel Jacoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9.

⁴⁵ Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Life of Dante” in Rachel Jacoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9.

⁴⁶ John Scott, *Dante’s Political Purgatory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 9.

⁴⁷ Dante, *Divina commedia*, *Inf.* XIX.

misfortunes of his life on the actions he took as prior.⁴⁸ The impressions of those experiences were undoubtedly at the front of his mind when writing his later works, all of which have an unmistakably civic thread. While exile may have signaled the end of his bureaucratic career, Dante's commitment to civic action was far from diminished. In this wake of political resentment and personal injustice, themes of morality and civic unity permeated his later works.

ii. Written works

As a young scholar, Dante was influenced by his friends and by the cultural environment of Florence. Important figures include his friend and fellow lyrical poet, Guido Cavalcanti, along with Lapo Gianni and Cino da Pistoia whose lofty connections gave Dante access to the most exclusive social and intellectual circles in northern Italy. Another critical influence was Brunetto Latini, an ambassador of the Florentine republic and noted author of the *Tresor*.⁴⁹ In three books, Latini's encyclopedic work discusses universal history and the arts, ethics, rhetoric and politics. Latini wrote in *lingua d'oil* because, as he explains in the prologue, "la parleure est plus delitable et plus comune a touz languaiges"⁵⁰ – he believed that such a broad compendium of knowledge should be available to as many readers as possible. This sentiment would not be lost on Dante,

⁴⁸ Giuseppe Mazzotta, "Life of Dante" in Rachel Jacoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 8.

⁴⁹ On the political influence of Latini's *Trésor*, see Lauro Martines, *Power And Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 115-123.

⁵⁰ Brunetto Latini and Pietro G. Beltrami, *Tresor* (Torino: Einaudi, 2007), 7.

who later mentions readership among his many arguments for a refined Italian vernacular in both the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*. Latini was a treasured mentor for Dante, and many of his themes in the *Tresor* are later recalled in Dante's works. Latini himself appears as well, as a condemned soul in the *Inferno*. Despite Latini's placement in Hell, Dante recalls his friend fondly and praises his influence:

"[...] e or m'accora,
la cara e buona imagine paterna
di voi quando nel mondo ad ora ad ora
m'insegnavate come l'uom s'eterna"⁵¹

This final verse hints at the civic mindset which Dante inherited from Latini. They believed in the virtue of civic utility and, at different points, they both served the city of Florence in a political capacity. For his time, Latini was a great admirer of Cicero – particularly of his impassioned defense of Rome against the tyrannical Catiline. Following Cicero's example, "Brunetto stressed the essential link that should exist between rhetoric and good government, a view fundamental to the whole movement of civic humanism."⁵² This essential link between language and civic stability would feature, in different ways, in all of the major defenses of vernacular literature to follow.

By the time Dante was in his twenties, he was the most accomplished lyrical poet of the Italian tradition – and his career as a writer had barely begun.⁵³ In various moments, he was a poet, a philosopher, a civic leader and an ambling exile. Pertile

⁵¹ Dante, *Commedia, Inf.*, XV, 82-85.

⁵² John Scott, *Dante's Political Purgatory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 10.

⁵³ On Dante's relationship to the earlier Italian lyrical tradition, see Teodolina Bardi, "Dante and the lyric past" in Rachel Jacoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 14-35.

writes: “despite the many obstacles, Dante was able to write a body of work that placed him permanently at the forefront not only of Italian literature, but also of Italian language and philosophical studies.”⁵⁴ In his written works, Dante makes important strides into the expansion of literary genres and the integration of classical and medieval sources. While still operating within the late-medieval norms of scholasticism and theology, over the course of his lifetime Dante and his contemporary philosophers began to incorporate more universal and rational ideas. Sapegno writes that in Dante “la religiosità medievale e la sapienza teologica s’accordano con la curiosità degli umani contrasti e delle cose naturali.”⁵⁵

Beyond scholastic influence, Dante’s greatest inspiration derived from his childhood encounters with Beatrice Portinari, the woman who would serve as his muse and the object of his devotion even after her untimely death in the summer of 1290.⁵⁶ He was inebriated by the sight of her, and the story of his love is the basis for the *Vita nova*, his first major work, written in the early 1290s. Mazzotta writes: “Beatrice’s enigmatic presence, a sort of dematerialized body which casts her as an extraordinary, unique apparition, sets the lover on a path of self-discovery.”⁵⁷ Beatrice’s death marked a turning point in Dante’s scholarship. He began to frequent the schools of philosophy organized by the Dominicans in Santa Maria Novella and the Franciscans in Santa

⁵⁴ Lino Pertile, “Introduction” in Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile, *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 475.

⁵⁵ Natalino Sapegno, *Compendio Di Storia Della Letteratura Italiana* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1963), 95.

⁵⁶ Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Life of Dante” in Rachel Jacoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 4.

⁵⁷ Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Life of Dante” in Rachel Jacoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.

Croce. There he was exposed to the philosophy of Aristotle, Boethius and St. Thomas Aquinas. Under their influence, Dante moved away from the amorous themes of the *dolce stil nuovo* and began to compose more moral and allegorical poetry.

Along with a vast collection of *rime*, Dante authored several major political and philosophical treatises before finally composing the *Comedia* between 1308 and 1320. Dante's works are "quintessentially autobiographical"⁵⁸ and in evaluating the broad and diverse features of his written collection, Alessandro d'Entrèves encourages scholars "to assess the part which politics played in the formation of his unique personality."⁵⁹ The drastic and intimate effect of political upheaval on Dante's experience cannot be ignored; it would be unnatural to consider such dramatic circumstances apart from the evolving perspectives of the author who lived them. After fighting in two wars, feuding with the pope, being banned from government service (twice) and reconciling himself to a life in exile, it is no curious thing that Dante evolved beyond Florentine factionalism to seek new models for civic stability. His travels encouraged a broadening of his civic philosophy, and eventually, he came to view his exile "as both emblematic and symptomatic of a universal crisis affecting the whole world."⁶⁰

While it would be impossible to summarize all the ways in which Dante's works influenced humanist scholarship – and the western literary canon in general – there are three critical points which underlie the civic and vernacular attitudes of the emerging humanist tradition: first, his striking and innovative contributions to the vernacular

⁵⁸ Lino Pertile, "Life" in Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile, *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 475.

⁵⁹ Alessandro D'Entrèves, *Dante as a Political Thinker* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 2.

⁶⁰ Lino Pertile, "Life" in Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile, *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 478.

literary tradition, especially in poetry and philosophical prose, set a revolutionary precedent for vernacular scholarship; his commentary in *Vita nova* and the *Convivio* established a model for refined vernacular prose where virtually none existed. Second, in a related point, his ideas on the history of language and the social utility of vernacular literature in the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia* provide a critical foundation for the *questione della lingua* – the fifteenth-century debates which refined and legitimized the vernacular tradition. Finally, Dante’s profound considerations of political philosophy support the value of civic utility and further emphasize Latini’s proposed link between rhetoric and good governance. In *De vulgari eloquentia* in particular, Dante “envisions the vitality of the vernacular as the root and bark of the politics, law, poetry and theology of the whole of Italy.”⁶¹ This focus on language as a prime cultural good, one which is inherently tied to the order of society, became a foundational argument and a critical link for the civic and vernacular mentality of fifteenth and sixteenth-century humanists.

Dante’s first major work is the *Vita nova*. Composed in the Tuscan vernacular, it is a collection of thirty-one poems, arranged and glossed to recount the story of his love for Beatrice which Pertile writes: “is not a story of events and characters, but of gazes from afar, desires, imaginings, and dreams.”⁶² This combination of poetry and prose (*prosimetrum*) reflects several influential models, including Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, Latini’s commentaries on Cicero and the manuscripts of the Song of Songs. Dante’s choice to write the commentary in the vernacular was at the urging of

⁶¹ Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Life of Dante” in Rachel Jacoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9.

⁶² Lino Pertile, “Life” in Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile, *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 481.

Cavalcanti; while the vernacular lyrical tradition had been gaining ground for decades, there were few examples of literary vernacular prose. Already in the *Vita nova* Dante begins to elaborate some of the vernacular theory that appears later in the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*.⁶³ The earlier part of the *Vita nova*, up until the critical shift in chapter XIX (marking the death of Beatrice), is a survey of the diverse traditions of love poetry which prevailed in Dante's youth. They reflect the courtly style of the Sicilians and of Guittone d'Arezzo as well as the *dolce stil novo* of Guinizelli and Cavalcanti. To the relief of the reader, however (at least this one), Dante is decidedly less self-pitying and misery-stricken than Cavalcanti in his attitudes towards love and his beloved. In Cavalcanti's rather bleak interpretation of the Occitan and courtly traditions, love is akin to a kind of spiritual torture, and the beloved herself is a "merciless harbinger of death"⁶⁴ Dante's departure from this sorrowful approach is evident in the *Vita nova*. Far from a torture, For Dante, Beatrice is "un angelo, un messo inviato da Dio sulla terra per la salvezza e la purificazione della sua anima."⁶⁵

As the *Vita nova* progresses, Dante uses more and more the language and form of love poetry to explore philosophical themes and to convey his sense of civic justice and morality. Pertile writes: "Dante presents himself as the poet of rectitude, contrasting his own scornful solitude with the disorder, violence, and corruption that prevail in society."⁶⁶ Themes of civic and social justice, not to mention language, became

⁶³ Robert Hollander, *Dante: a Life in Works* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 63.

⁶⁴ Lino Pertile, "Life" in Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile, *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 476.

⁶⁵ Natalino Sapegno, *Compendio Di Storia Della Letteratura Italiana* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1963), 96.

⁶⁶ Lino Pertile, "Life" in Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile, *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 478.

increasingly central in Dante's later works. Scott writes: "Brunetto's example of political commitment helped to make the author of the *Vita nova* aware of the need to bind learning and literature to the outside world."⁶⁷ While Dante once proclaimed that love was the only suitable theme for lyric poetry, just a few years later he turned his focus to questions of philosophy, morality and society. He began to engage in philosophical questions such the true nature of nobility, a particularly relevant topic for the period. Dante expands on several of these themes, especially his philosophies on language and society, in the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*. On a practical level, these works represent Dante's first contributions to the intellectual landscape following his exile; he was establishing a new intellectual legacy, one which he may have hoped would soften Florence's heart and permit his return.

In Dante's *Convivio*⁶⁸, his banquet, readers feast on wisdom. The first book is an introduction featuring a discussion of the virtues and benefits of vernacular scholarship; the three subsequent books contains a *canzone* accompanied by the allegorical interpretation of the poem, written in prose. Each *canzone* serves as the basis for Dante's discussion of a single theme including poetic allegory, moral philosophy and true nobility. It was intended as an encyclopedic bridge between academic and popular culture, and this question of popular accessibility is one of the key factors that inspired Dante to write in the vernacular. He touches on many of the most relevant currents of thought in thirteenth-century Florence, from politics and theology to the order of the cosmos. In relaying these arguments in the vernacular, Dante provides a material

⁶⁷ John Scott, *Dante's Political Purgatory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 10.

⁶⁸ Citations from the *Convivio* are taken from Dante Alighieri, *Opere Minori* (Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1997).

example of the literary potential of the vernacular language for complex intellectual discourse.

In the introduction, Dante explains his philosophy on language as well as his rationale for writing not in Latin but in his own Florentine vernacular. He writes: “lo scusano tre ragioni, che mossero me ad elegere innanzi questo che l’altro: l’una si muove da cautela di disconvenevole ordinazione; l’altra da prontezza di liberalitade; la terza da lo naturale amore a propria loquela.”⁶⁹ On the first concept of obedience and order, Dante explains that the language of the commentary cannot be superior to that of the *canzoni* and that Latin cannot truly know or obey a vernacular text; obedience requires that the language be sweet, completely under command and also measured. In the medieval, scholastic view of language, Latin was inherently more orderly and dignified than the vernacular and therefore, a Latin commentary cannot serve in this secondary capacity to a vernacular *canzone*. As Dante describes it, Latin is more noble “perché lo latino è perpetuo e non corruttibile, e lo volgare è non stabile e corruttibile.”⁷⁰

There is a long history behind the idea that Latin is a stable, immutable language and that the vernacular is, instead, highly corruptible; Dante provides a detailed interpretation of this history in *De vulgari eloquentia*, but already in the *Convivio*, based upon this perceived hierarchy between Latin and the vernacular, Dante is compelled to comment in the vernacular on his vernacular poetry. Furthermore, Dante explains that the distinction between Latin and the vernacular is such that neither can know or express the nature of the other. This compatibility of thought is what binds a language to

⁶⁹ Dante, *Convivio*, I, v, 2; 77.

⁷⁰ Dante, *Convivio*, I, v, 7; 78.

the culture it represents and to the people who speak it from childhood. The idea of a natural relationship between language and its speakers, often portrayed as a familial relationship, becomes a repetitive theme in vernacular defenses, especially in Leon Battista's *Della famiglia* and later, Lorenzo de' Medici's *Comento*. In establishing this innate affinity between language and speaker, vernacular language is depicted as an organic representation of identity. Building on this conceptualization, the refinement of a literary vernacular as an element of cultural pride and prestige becomes another central argument for vernacular scholarship, especially among the civic humanists of *Quattrocento* Florence.

On his second motive for writing in the vernacular – the aspect of *liberalitate*, or generosity of spirit, Dante writes: “La prima è dare a molti; la seconda è dare utili cose; la terza è, senza essere domandato lo dono, dare quello.”⁷¹ As he mentions in the beginning, the text is meant to be accessible to those who are excluded from the exclusivity of Latin. He wants both the *canzoni* and their explications to be read and understood not just by the privileged few, but by many. He writes: “dare a uno e giovare a uno è bene; ma dare a molti e giovare a molti è pronto bene, in quanto prende simiglianza da li benefici di Dio, che è universalissimo benefattore.”⁷² The notion of “giving to many” as a reflection of God’s universal grace speaks to Dante’s calling to civic utility. In curating this knowledge and making it useful for the greatest number of people, Dante generates utility for his community by spreading wisdom and virtue to others. In following a righteous path and pursuing the common good, Dante brings

⁷¹ Dante, *Convivio*, I, viii, 2; 84.

⁷² Dante, *Convivio*, I, viii, 3; 84.

himself closer to God. At the end of the century, Coluccio Salutati would further elaborate on this idea that intellectuals should be actively engaged in public life. His example established an enduring precedent for the Florentine humanists in particular.

Specifically on utility, Dante writes: “I dono conviene essere utile a chi lo riceve, acciò che sia in esso pronta liberalitade.”⁷³ Harking back to his White Guelph sensibilities, Dante writes for the less-than-élite. What sort of gift would his work be to these people if they were unable to understand it? What utility could it possibly bring? To be truly generous, that which Dante contributes must be useful. He writes: “Per che, acciò che nel dono sia la sua virtù, la quale è liberalitade, e che essa sia pronta, conviene essere utile a chi riceve.”⁷⁴ Here again Dante foreshadows the philosophy of the *Quattrocento* humanists, notably Salutati and Leon Battista Alberti, who equate civic activity with virtue and closeness to God. A related point, which again will be further elaborated by Salutati, is Dante’s association of virtue and free will. He writes:

“Ultimamente, però che la virtù dee avere atto libero e non sforzato. Atto libero è quando una persona va volentieri ad alcuna parte, che si mostra nel tener volto lo viso in quella; atto sforzato è quando contra voglia si va, che si mostra in non guardare ne la parte dove si va.”⁷⁵

It is virtuous to give willingly and it is virtuous to work consciously, for the benefit of others. For Salutati, this idea becomes a core argument for civic engagement. In contrast to the contemplative scholars who meditate on nature, a predetermined gift from the heavens, active scholars contribute to the civic order. In doing so, they provide for the well-being of others and they create something which reflects, and therefore

⁷³ Dante, *Convivio*, I, viii, 11; 85.

⁷⁴ Dante, *Convivio*, I, viii, 13; 86.

⁷⁵ Dante, *Convivio*, I, viii, 14; 86.

honors, the divine order and the generosity of God. Concluding his remarks on utility, Dante writes: “Lo dono veramente di questo comento è la sentenza de le canzoni a le quali fatto è, la qual massimamente intende inducere li uomini a scienza e a virtù, sì come si vedrà per lo pelago del loro trattato.”⁷⁶ In their work, active, civic-minded scholars are able to bring wisdom and virtue to others, elevating their society at large. Despite the privileged status of Latin, for Dante's purposes, he found more utility in writing in the vernacular.

In a return to the opening metaphor of knowledge as nourishment, Dante remarks that it is difficult to adjust to a new “bread”, different from that which has historically been served. Where Latin is the bread of tradition, Dante's vernacular prose was rather a punchy seasonal special. Dante's final argument for writing in the vernacular, a concept which Leon Battista Alberti and Pietro Bembo would famously muse upon in the coming centuries, is “lo naturale amore de la propria loquela.”⁷⁷

Dante's natural love for his native tongue moves him in three ways:

“Dico che lo naturale amore principalmente muove l'amatore a tre cose: l'una si è a magnificare l'amato; l'altra è ad esser geloso di quello; l'altra è a difendere lui, sì come ciascuno può vedere continuamente avvenire. E queste tre cose mi fecero prendere lui, cioè lo nostro volgare, lo qual naturalmente e accidentalmente amo e ho amato.”⁷⁸

Because he loves his language, he seeks to actualize its potential and to exalt it through use:

“Onde nulla grandezza puote avere l'uomo maggiore che quella de la virtuosa operazione, che è sua propria bontade; per la quale le grandezze de le vere dignitadi, de li veri onori, de le vere

⁷⁶ Dante, *Convivio*, I, ix, 7; 88.

⁷⁷ Dante, *Convivio*, I, x, 5; 90.

⁷⁸ Dante, *Convivio*, I, x, 8; 90.

potenze, de le vere ricchezze, de li veri amici, de la vera e chiara fama, e acquistate e conservate sono.”⁷⁹

In conducting this virtuous activity in the vernacular, Dante contributes to the common good and he elevates both his language and himself. Dante continues on to describe the virtue of the language itself, in its beauty and natural order:

“Ché per questo comento la gran bontade del volgare di sì [si vedrà]; però che si vedrà la sua virtù, sì com'è per esso altissimi e novissimi concetti convenevolmente, sufficientemente e acconciamente, quasi come per esso latino, manifestare; [la quale non si potea bene manifestare] ne le cose rimate, per le accidentali adornezze che quivi sono connesse, cioè la rima e lo rif[ti]mo e lo numero regolato: sì come non si può bene manifestare la bellezza d'una donna, quando li adornamenti de l'azzimare e de le vestimenta la fanno più ammirare che essa medesima.”⁸⁰

In his commentary, Dante aims to demonstrate how easily the language conveys new and sophisticated arguments, as well as to show the beauty and the order of its rhythm. Dante, of course, feels a natural affinity for his native tongue and is moved to defend it. In a funny little digression, Dante scorns those who reject their own language and blames their attitude on sour grapes: those who are unable to use it well, he explains, are more tempted to dismiss it. Returning to the natural link between language, culture and identity, Dante continues on to describe the “goodness” and “proximity” of the vernaculars.

Dante explains proximity as an inherent closeness and understanding, as a physician with medicine or a musician with music. He writes:

“E così lo volgare è più prossimo quanto è più unito, che uno e solo è prima ne la mente che alcuno altro, e che non solamente per sé è unito, ma per accidente, in quanto è congiunto con le più prossime persone, sì come con li parenti e con li propri cittadini e con la propria gente.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Dante, *Convivio*, I, x, 8; 90.

⁸⁰ Dante, *Convivio*, I, x, 12; 91.

⁸¹ Dante, *Convivio*, I, xii, 5; 96.

He presents language as a communal good, one which ties people together, defines their society and embodies their culture; people are connected to their language in the same way that they are connected to their families. It is the language which brought his parents together and allowed his very existence. It is the language with which he first accessed knowledge. To conclude his introduction, Dante writes: “Questo sarà luce nuova, sole nuovo, lo quale surgerà là dove l’usato tramonterà, e darà lume a coloro che sono in tenebre e in oscuritade, per lo usato sole a loro non luce.”⁸² To bring light and wisdom where it usually would not reach, Dante is compelled to write in the language of his own community. The linguistic discussion of the *Convivio* ends with the first book, but the primary arguments reappear in Dante’s concurrent work, *De vulgari eloquentia*.

It seems perhaps paradoxical that Dante chose to write *De vulgari eloquentia*, his full treatise on the dignity of vernacular languages not in his own native Florentine, but in Latin. However, this choice only goes to show the gravity he wished to attribute to the argument. For rhetorical impact, in order to present the treatise as a matter for serious intellectual discussion, Dante wrote in Latin. A tradition of vernacular scholarship had yet to be established – and indeed, that is precisely what Dante hoped to address. Dante planned *De vulgari eloquentia* as at least four books, intended to expand upon his theories on the history and origin of vernacular language presented in the *Convivio*. Despite the fact that the work is unfinished, ending abruptly in the second book, it provides important insight into the theory behind Dante’s vernacular contributions and establishes a critical historical foundation for the *questione della lingua* debates of the

⁸² Dante, *Convivio*, I, xii, 12; 97.

fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Burckhardt writes that in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante seeks “an intellectual home in language and culture”⁸³ – one which cannot be taken away.

In rather a contrast to the *Convivio*, in the opening of *De vulgari eloquentia*⁸⁴ Dante declares unreservedly that vernacular languages are superior to Latin. He argues that vernaculars are the first language used by mankind, they are used by the whole world and that they are natural to people, unlike the “artificial”, grammatical languages such as Latin and Greek. The distinction between “natural” and “artificial” languages, to which Dante previously alluded in the *Convivio*, is a defining characteristic of linguistic thought in the fourteenth century. Dante’s theory on the history of language⁸⁵ is based in the Book of Genesis. In the story of the Tower of Babel, the whole world spoke a common language, “the language of Adam”, which was given to Adam by God. The people of Babel conspired to build a tower to the heavens, and as punishment for their pride, God cursed each group of laborers with a different language. According to Dante’s interpretation, the sophistication of each language was inversely proportional to the complexity of the workers’ task. The architects, for example, had the most rudimentary language, insufficiently expressive for the elaboration of their work. Their society disbanded, with each linguistic group venturing off on its own. This, in Dante’s interpretation, is the origin of linguistic diversity and of the contemporary vernacular languages.

⁸³ Jacob Burckhardt and S. G. C. Middlemore, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Penguin, 2004), 67.

⁸⁴ Citations for *De vulgari eloquentia* from Dante Alighieri and Steven Botterill, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁸⁵ Dante elaborates his theory of linguistic history predominantly in *De vulgari eloquentia*, I, vii; 12-13.

This view of linguistic history is of course problematic for the valuation of the vernacular languages, often called “natural”. Vernaculars were cast as the product of sin, inherently chaotic and raw. Conversely, Latin and Greek were considered “artificial” languages, created by man to be ordered and grammatical. In the medieval scholastic tradition, it was understood that Latin, as an artificial language, was immutable and therefore created a standard of expression that would endure through the ages. Later scholars, notably Flavio Biondo, would disprove this “artificial” perception of Latin but until that time, vernacular scholarship was at a considerable, theoretical disadvantage to classical Latin. Pertile writes that in *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante seeks “one integrated solution to two discrete orders of problems – historical and eschatological – concerning the phenomenon of language.”⁸⁶ The historical problem is the natural variability of language across space and time. The eschatological problem is the Babelic notion that vernacular languages are inherently disordered and corrupt. While Dante makes a number of convincing arguments for the elaboration of a literary vernacular, this perception of inherent inferiority would have to be overcome in order to truly legitimize a vernacular tradition of scholarship. Leon Battista Alberti would return to these arguments on the nature of Latin in the following century, building on the work of both Dante and Flavio Biondo.

Dante, to address these problematic characteristics of “native” language, proposes the establishment of an “illustrious vernacular”. The language which he

⁸⁶ Lino Pertile, “Life” in Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile, *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 487.

envisions is not an existing vernacular, but “a transcendent paradigm”⁸⁷ for a literary Italian language. Dante feels that, contrary to Latin, the vernacular is “the only language capable of reflecting the writer’s moral and intellectual personality.”⁸⁸ In this way, Dante presents native speech as a reflection of a person’s individual nature and their culture. He writes: “Si etenim perspicaciter consideramus quid cum loquimur intendamus, patet quod nichil aliud, quam nostre mentis enucleare aliis conceptum.”⁸⁹ Relying on Aristotle, Dante explains that humans were endowed with the gift of speech as means to convey the functions of our intellect. Beasts are without reason and therefore have no use for language. Above humans are the angels, pure reason unencumbered by the weight of materiality, and they do not require speech to communicate. Humans, however, require speech to express their individual perceptions and as such, a means of communication must be fundamentally rational. He examines the diverse vernaculars of Europe to determine which, if any, possess these necessary characteristics.

Dante divides Europe into three not particularly distinct zones: the north, the south and the east, the territory of “the Greeks”, and he groups languages by their term for “yes”. He recognizes the consistency between the southern European languages (essentially the Romance languages), mentioning their common terms for concepts like “God”, “heaven”, “love”, “live” and “earth”. He focuses his analysis on these languages, as he knows them best. To demonstrate their inherent similarities, Dante shares

⁸⁷ Lino Pertile, “Life” in Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile, *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 486.

⁸⁸ Lino Pertile, “Life” in Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile, *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 487.

⁸⁹ Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, I, ii, 3; 5. “Now, if we wish to define with precision what our intention is when we speak, it is clearly nothing other than to expound to others the concepts formed in our minds.”

examples from Guido Guinizelli, Giraut de Borneil and the King of Navarre. In describing how the language group became divided, Dante makes an important acknowledgment of the mutable nature of spoken language. He writes:

“Dicimus ergo quod nullus effectus superat suam causam in quantum effectus est, quia nichil potest efficere quod non est. Cum igitur omnis nostra loquela, preter illam homini primo concreatam a Deo, sit a nostro beneplacito reparata post confusionem illam que nil fuit aliud quam prioris oblivio, et homo sit instabilissimum atque variabilissimum animal, nec durabilis nec continua esse potest; sed sicut alia que nostra sunt, puta mores et habitus, per locorum temporumque distantias variari oportet.”⁹⁰

According to Pertile, in this section, “Dante shows an unprecedented grasp of the historical character of language as a living organism in continuous evolution through time and space.”⁹¹ Dante explains that if citizens of any particular city were to return to their hometown in a different time, they would not recognize the language as their own. These changes are inevitable, yet imperceptible as they occur – like watching a child grow. More than a century later, Lorenzo de' Medici would also describe the Tuscan literary tradition in terms of childhood and growth.

This noted mutability of the vernacular – predominantly spoken – languages is a prominent concern for vernacular authors. A literary tradition will struggle to endure if the language is in a state of perpetual change. Conversely, according to the theory of “artificial” language, Latin was grammatically fixed and therefore stable. Dante writes:

⁹⁰ Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, I, ix, 6; 20. “I say, therefore, that no effect exceeds its cause in so far as it is an effect, because nothing can bring about that which it itself is not. Since, therefore, all our language (except that created by God along with the first man) has been assembled, in haphazard fashion, in the aftermath of the great confusion that brought nothing else than oblivion to whatever language had existed before, and since human beings are highly unstable and variable animals, our language can be neither durable nor consistent with itself; but, like everything else that belongs to us (such as manners and customs), it must vary according to distances of space and time.”

⁹¹ Lino Pertile, “Life” in Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile, *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 486.

“Hinc moti sunt inventores gramatice facultatis; que quidem gramatica nichil aliud est quam quedam inalterabilis locutionis idemptitas diversis temporibus atque locis.”⁹² An authoritative, immutable model of language is what makes texts accessible to readers in different places or even different times. In this way, the wisdom of great authors is preserved. He writes:

“Adinvenerunt ergo illam, ne, propter variationem sermonis arbitrio singularium fluitantis, vel nullo modo, vel saltem imperfecte antiquorum attingeremus auctoritates et gesta, sive illorum quos a nobis locorum diversitas facit esse diversos.”⁹³

With his own life experiences having been so cruelly instructive, it was important to Dante that history not be forgotten.

Having established the use and the value of a refined literary language, Dante stakes an important territorial claim for the dignity of Italian vernaculars: he suggests that the Italian affirmative *sì*, closest of all to the Latin *sic*, confers a preeminence to the Italian vernaculars over those of France and Provence. He divides Italy into distinct linguistic realms, roughly along the line of the Apennines, and he makes individual evaluations of several of the different regions. He declares, among other things, that Roman is the ugliest in Italy and that Sardinians are not Italian at all – their speech mimics Latin in the same way that apes mimic humans. Needless to say, many of the judgements are less than diplomatic; maybe now we have a better idea of why things went so badly for Dante in Rome. Turning to more promising examples, Dante gives a

⁹² Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, I, ix, 11; 20. “This was the point from which the inventors of the art of grammar began; for their gramatica is nothing less than a certain immutable identity of language in different times and places.”

⁹³ Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, I, ix, 11; 20. “So those who devised this language did so lest, through changes in language dependent on the arbitrary judgement of individuals, we should become either unable, or, at best, only partially able, to enter into contact with the deeds and authoritative writings of the ancients, or of those whose difference of location makes them different from us.”

positive appraisal of the language of the Sicilian school, but he specifies that this is a poetic artifact; it does not represent the way Sicilian people actually speak. He is bitterly dismissive of the Tuscans, declaring that the language of Guittone d'Arezzo and the other early Tuscans is better suited to a city council than to poetry. Considering Dante's personal disposition towards Florence and the fact that he himself had refined the Tuscan lyric tradition, this is not surprising. Moving across the Apennines, Dante describes the language of Romagna as "soft" and "womanish" while the languages of Brescia, Verona and Vicenza are brutally harsh. Dante finally concedes that Bolognese, tempered by the influence of surrounding regions, is more beautiful than most. However, he concludes that it is not sufficiently "aulic" or "illustrious" to be the model for a literary language. Dante, like a malcontent Goldilocks, determines that none of the existing vernaculars are "just right".

In order to determine what exactly these vernaculars are missing, Dante sets out to define the four necessary characteristics of a literary language. Several of the aspects he describes become critical points of discussion in future evaluations of the Italian vernacular, especially as they relate to the suitability of the language for a variety of vocational tasks. As Dante describes it, a literary language must be illustrious, cardinal, auric and curial. An illustrious language, like that of Seneca or Numa Pompilius, "enlightens all it falls upon."⁹⁴ It must also be cardinal, from *cardo* –the hinge on the door of Italian languages. It would determine the flow and movement of all the Italian vernaculars. Dante uses "aulic" to describe language appropriate for the environment of a court. In a similar fashion, "curial" language must be suited to use in

⁹⁴ Robert Hollander, *Dante: a Life in Works* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 65.

the tribunals, for the application of law. These categories shed light on the themes which Dante considers inextricably tied to language and communication, grounding them firmly in social and civic concerns. Illustrious language is for philosophy and scholarship in general, cardinal language serves as a linguistic unifier for communities across Italy. Aulic and curial language are explicitly for civic purposes, for statecraft and the just application of laws. This important connection both harks back to Brunetto Latini and looks forwards to the virtue politics of Coluccio Salutati, to be discussed in the following section.

In the conclusion of the first book, Dante writes that the hunt for this illustrious vernacular is among the most noble actions an Italian can pursue:

“Quapropter in actionibus nostris, quantumcunque dividantur in species, hoc signum inveniri oportet quo et ipse mensurentur. Nam, in quantum simpliciter ut homines agimus, virtutem habemus, ut generaliter illam intelligamus; nam secundum ipsam bonum et malum hominem iudicamus; in quantum ut homines cives agimus, habemus legem, secundum quam dicitur civis bonus et malus; in quantum ut homines latini agimus, quedam habemus simplicissima signa, et morum et habituum et locutionis, quibus latine actiones ponderantur et mensurantur.

Que quidem nobilissima sunt earum que Latinorum sunt actiones, hec nullius civitatis Ytalie propria sunt et in omnibus comunia sunt: inter que nunc potest illud discerni vulgare quod superius venabamur, quod in qualibet redolet civitate nec cubat in ulla.”⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, I, xvi, 3-4; 38. “Therefore, when dealing with human actions, in so far as these can be allotted to different categories, we must be able to define a standard against which these too can be measured. Now, in so far as we act simply as human beings, we possess a capacity to act - a 'virtue', if we understand this in a general sense - and according to this we judge people to be good or bad. In so far as we act as human beings who are citizens, we have the law, by whose standards we can describe a citizen as good or bad; in so far as we act as human beings who are Italians, there are certain very simple features, of manners and appearance and speech, by which the actions of the people of Italy can be weighed and measured.

But the most noble actions among those performed by Italians are proper to no one Italian city, but are common to them all; and among these we can now place the use of the vernacular that we were hunting above, which has left its scent in every city but made its home in none.”

It is rather remarkable to see Dante, centuries before the establishment of a unified literary tradition and half a millennium before political unification, refer to Italy as a whole – at least culturally. His experience with local politics and his expulsion from his home city had forced him to broaden his perspective; his desire to define the language and the identity of an Italian civilization is a result of this unique and disillusioned view of his contemporary civic landscape. Dante is well before his time in another way, too: in his discussion of an Italian identity, he shows that he is fully aware of the social value and the utility of vernacular production. He explains that a person's nature is expressed in action, but also in speech. Here, more than anywhere else, Dante makes clear the inextricable connection between language, virtue and civic activity.

In the second book, which outlines Dante's "art of poetry", he makes several important observations on the nature of vernacular language, ideas which will support the structural parallels drawn between Latin and the vernacular by later scholars, especially Biondo and Alberti. As evidence of the beauty of the language as well as its musicality and overall suitability for poetry, Dante seeks to adapt Italian vernacular to classical poetic forms, such as *canzoni* in the "tragic" style. He clarifies, however, that vernacular poetry should only be written by those who have a true affinity for it and he describes the subjects which are worthy for verse. Here Dante relies on Aristotle's notion of the tripartite soul: he argues that for their vegetative qualities, humans wish to be useful; and as sensitive beings, humans seek pleasure. Finally, as rational beings, humans seek good. Poetry – and the illustrious vernacular which Dante envisions – are meant to express these highest and most lofty ideas of the intellect. As he described in the introduction, language is a means to convey virtue and vernacular literature is

therefore a noble and worthy pursuit. He continues on to name the important styles of poetry, as he did with prose, and in doing so he makes yet another critical observation.

In describing the styles of poetry (tragic, comic, elegiac), Dante makes a critical acknowledgement of the different registers of language. He writes:

“Si tragice canenda videntur, tunc adsumendum est vulgare illustre, et per consequens cationem oportet ligare. Si vero comice, tunc quandoque mediocre, quandoque humile vulgare sumatur; et huius discretionem in quarto huius reservamus ostendere. Si autem elegiace, solum humile oportet nos sumere.”⁹⁶

These three levels of vernacular refinement foreshadow the diverse, environmentally driven registers that Dante employs across the three canticles of the *Commedia*.

Additionally, the consideration of register in the analysis of classical Latin texts would form a critical argument for Flavio Biondo in the language debates of the following century.

In the course of the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante sets a lofty agenda for the future of vernacular scholarship: he sets an innovative and refined precedent for vernacular prose, he establishes a model for assessing the qualities of a literary language – a critical basis for the *Quattrocento* debates on the *questione della lingua* – and he draws a number of connections between vernacular rhetoric and civic utility. The connection between native language and cultural expression, or the idea of a native literary language as a unique cultural good, would become particularly relevant to later civic humanists such as Angelo Poliziano and Lorenzo de’ Medici for whom the

⁹⁶ Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, II, iv, 6; 56. “If it seems appropriate to use the tragic style, then the illustrious vernacular must be employed, and so you will need to bind together a canzone. If, on the other hand, the comic style is called for, then sometimes the middle level of the vernacular can be used, and sometimes the lowly; and I shall explain the distinction in Book Four. If, though, you are writing an elegy, you must only use the lowly.”

establishment of a literary vernacular tradition was a critical marker of cultural achievement. In the early *Cinquecento*, Pietro Bembo would go even further, promoting the Florentine literary tradition as a means of defining and preserving Italian identity. While the languages they present are formulaically different from Dante's description, they nevertheless satisfy his requirements for an "illustrious vernacular". Pertile describes Dante's vision as "a literary language free from, and superior to, all provincialisms, and already as fixed as Latin within the ever-changing flux of local idioms: effectively, a new *gramatica*."⁹⁷ A grammatically-fixed language offered not only a certain level of intellectual and cultural prestige, but also preserved the communicability of the language across time and space.

The Latinate humanism of the *Quattrocento* may have put Dante's extraordinary vernacular legacy on hold, but he would eventually be recognized as a model for vernacular scholarship and (arguably) the most important figure in the Italian literary tradition. In the interim, however, his influence was far from lost. His linguistic philosophies and ambitions are firmly situated within the context of civic utility, a critical argument for the political attitudes which emerged among the *quattrocento* humanists. The essential point of intellectual continuity between the *Trecento* tradition and the lively civic humanism of the *Quattrocento* was none other than Florentine Chancellor, Coluccio Salutati.

⁹⁷ Lino Pertile, "Life" in Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile, *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 486.

III. Coluccio Salutati

Florentine chancellor Coluccio Salutati (1332-1406)⁹⁸ was a man “on the threshold of a new era.”⁹⁹ In a career that spanned the later half of the fourteenth century, he became the most renowned chancellor in all of Europe, as well as an early leader of the humanist movement in Florence. Beyond his political activities, Salutati made important strides in promoting classical studies within the intellectual community in Florence. He valued these classical sources not only as a model for literary imitation, but as a way to redefine human values. Contrary to many, Salutati felt that the *studia humanitatis* were beneficial to a Christian education and during his life, he sought to reconcile classical culture with the values of the church. Despite professional tensions with the ecclesiastical establishment, Salutati considered himself devoutly religious; Witt writes that he “endeavored to utilize his rhetorical gifts to make others not simply virtuous but rather virtuous Christians.”¹⁰⁰ Like Dante, Salutati recognized the value of spreading wisdom and virtue to others.

Salutati served as Chancellor of Florence, head magistrate of the city government, from 1375 to 1406. His diplomatic efforts were essential to civic stability in Florence. His greatest challenge (and his greatest success) was the containment of

⁹⁸ Dates for Salutati’s life and works in Frances Muecke’s introduction to Flavio Biondo, et al. *Rome in Triumph* (Cambridge: I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2016), vii-xx; also, Ronald Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads: the Life, Works, and Thought of Coluccio Salutati* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983).

⁹⁹ Ronald Witt, in the introduction to Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), vii.

¹⁰⁰ Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 85.

Visconti ambitions in Milan – Giangaleazzo Visconti himself once wrote that a single letter from Salutati could “cause more damage than a thousand Florentine horsemen.”¹⁰¹ Stefano Baldassarri writes that Salutati’s missives drew attention for their “innovative rhetoric, their display of classical culture, and their ability to shape a new image of the city (largely based on the perceived connection of Florence’s republican present to its ancient Roman heritage) which would prove a sharp, effective and flexible tool of propaganda for decades to come.”¹⁰² In his three decades of leadership, Salutati’s unwavering example of civic service and his commitment to classical scholarship set a defining example for the humanists of the Florentine *Quattrocento*.

Among his many achievements, Salutati is credited with the rediscovery of Cicero’s *Epistole ad familiares* and the invention of the “humanist” style of handwriting. In 1397, he opened the doors to the humanist study of classical Greek when he brought Byzantine scholar Manuel Chrysoloras to Florence.¹⁰³ In his own scholarship, Salutati was a serious collector (and corrector) of classical sources; his extensive personal library shows that he was a methodical philologist, exhaustive in his efforts to rehabilitate corrupted ancient texts. Despite his deferral to Latin¹⁰⁴ in his own writing, he was a great admirer of the authors of the Florentine *Trecento* and his personal library included a significant collection of vernacular lyrical poetry from the thirteenth and

¹⁰¹ Werner Gundersheimer, *The Italian Renaissance* (Upper Sadle River: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 13.

¹⁰² Stefano Baldassarri, Introduction to Coluccio Salutati, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), ix.

¹⁰³ For an overview of the influence of the Byzantine scholars’ arrival in Italy, see Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1975), 81-84.

¹⁰⁴ On Salutati’s Latin style, 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, 2001), 68-72.

fourteenth centuries. He praised Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch alongside classical authors, writing that if only Dante had written in his *Comedia* in Latin, with the same elegance as he had done in Florentine, he would be greater even than Homer and Virgil.

A true link between ages, Salutati had a personal relationship with both Petrarch and Boccaccio: In 1368, Salutati began exchanging letters with Petrarch. Later, in Florence, he became a disciple and personal friend of Boccaccio. Salutati would eventually inherit Boccaccio's place as the leader of the Florentine humanists, presiding over a circle which, at the time, included such figures as Leonardo Bruni and Niccolò Niccoli. Salutati's letters show that he was deeply committed to his role as a mentor and teacher for the rising generation of humanists. Garin writes: "Vita politica e vita di pensiero ci appaiono infatti nel Salutati, come poi nel Bruni, felicemente congiunte; il saggio, il dotto, non è un solitario staccato dalle vicende degli uomini, ma un uomo che risponde alla sua vocazione, che serve il suo Signore celeste fra i tumulti della vita terrena."¹⁰⁵ As Garin notes, Salutati's legacy is particularly evident in the work of Leonardo Bruni, who would succeed him as chancellor of Florence and carry forth the ideals of Florentine *libertas*. Their active commitment to civic affairs and the solemnity with which they regard their political vocation defines the civic mentality of the Florentine humanists and inspires the following generation of scholars to pursue virtue through active service to the community.

¹⁰⁵ Eugenio Garin, *L'umanesimo Italiano: Filosofia e Vita Civile Nel Rinascimento* (Bari: Laterza, 1986), 39-40.

i. Salutati the Chancellor

In the winter of 1332, Lino Coluccio Salutati was born in the hilltop commune of Stignano, perched between the Guelph stronghold of Florence and their Ghibelline neighbors in Lucca. By both parentage and proximity, Salutati was born into the midst of this intense political rivalry – his father Piero, a local leader of the Guelph party, was in exile at the time of his birth. The family was reunited in Bologna, where Salutati was educated in the Latinate, Petrarchan tradition of the early northern Italian humanists. Witt writes that these scholars produced “an intellectual current promising to change the character of Italian intellectual life.”¹⁰⁶ In his personal correspondence, Salutati would reflect fondly on his time as a student; he wrote that his teacher, Piero da Moglio, taught him the “power” of a letter, a skill which would define his professional success and his civic legacy. Salutati’s father died in 1347 but, thanks to the support of his father’s employer, the ruling *Signore* of Bologna, Salutati was able to complete his training as a notary. For nearly twenty years, he lived a quiet life as a civil servant in rural Tuscany, reading, writing and collecting classical manuscripts. He married and had a son, and when his first wife died of illness, he returned home, found a new bride and repeated the process. This relatively peaceful existence came to a definitive end in 1374 when he was called to Florence to serve as notary to the Florentine Office of Elections. In little more than a year, he was named Chancellor, a position he would hold for more than twenty years until his death in 1406.

¹⁰⁶ Ronald Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads: the Life, Works, and Thought of Coluccio Salutati* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 6.

Salutati presided over a turbulent, often violent period in the history of Florence. In the course of his decades-long tenure, the chancellorship became an increasingly weighty and influential position, likely a reflection of his steady and effective leadership. Salutati's stalwart defense of Florentine autonomy and republican *libertas* made Florence a center of political power and cultural influence on the Italian peninsula. He rose to the chancellorship a mere two months before war broke out between Florence and the Church, the "War of the Eight Saints" (1375-78).¹⁰⁷ As the result of a violent conflict between the papacy and the French crown, the seat of the papacy had been in Avignon since 1307. At the moment when Salutati took up his position, Pope Gregory XI was making plans to return to the papacy to Rome and reclaim the full authority of the church in Italy. During this period, often called the *cattività avignonese*, the papal states in central Italy had operated quite independently. By this point, however, both Florence and the Italian papal states began to fear further oppression under the proposed ecclesiastical regime. Relations with the Avignon papacy declined quickly; the city was excommunicated, along with Salutati himself. In the three-year war which ensued, fought mostly through letters, "Salutati's missives were among Florence's most important weapons."¹⁰⁸ The conflict ended suddenly with an internal breakdown in the church, the same events which led to the Great Schism in 1378. Salutati negotiated a peace with the new Roman pope, Urban VI, who in turn absolved both the city and its chancellor.

¹⁰⁷ On the War of the Eight Saints and the Great Schism, see David Chambers, *Popes, Cardinals and War the Military Church in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe* (London: Tauris, 2006), 24-38.

¹⁰⁸ Ronald Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads: the Life, Works, and Thought of Coluccio Salutati* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 125.

Just as Salutati managed to quell this external threat, internal tensions erupted in Florence. Conflict had been growing between the major and minor guilds of the city for some time: representatives of the minor guilds, allied with the merchants, the artisans and the laborers, stood in opposition to the oligarchical rule of the noble families in the *Signoria*, the ruling body of the Florentine government. The war with the papacy had caused an increase in taxes, one which was particularly burdensome to the lower-class workers, and their exclusion from the major guilds meant a lack of representation in the *Signoria*. As a result, the lower classes, led by the *ciompi* (wool laborers), staged a series of revolts against the government over the summer of 1378 and the *Signoria* was temporarily overthrown. As a member of the bureaucracy, Salutati feared retaliation from the mob. At one point, he even fled his house, but he soon discovered that he had nothing to fear. His reputation of fairness preceded him, and his role as chancellor was not diminished under Michele di Lando's *ciompi* government.¹⁰⁹ In di Lando's three-year period of rule, three additional guilds were established and most Florentine men became eligible for participation in government. While the *ciompi* government eventually broke down, many of the economic and political reforms remained in place, including (to a small extent) increased representation of working class interests.

From Salutati's letters, it seems that he had foreseen this conclusion of events. He felt that the *ciompi* lacked the political qualifications to lead the city and he anticipated the imminent return of traditional rule. Even after the fall of the *ciompi* government and the restoration of the *Signoria*, the mood in the city remained

¹⁰⁹ On the lower classes in government, see Gene Brucker, "The Florentine *Popolo Minuto* and its political role, 1340-1450" in Lauro Martines, *Power And Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 155-184.

contentious and the revolt left a lasting impression in the minds of the aristocracy. The ruling establishment was paranoid, and fearing further unrest from the lower classes, they gravitated towards a more authoritative system. Clamoring for power, political adversaries launched charges of treason against one another. Accusations were made against Salutati himself in 1382, but they were dismissed by the *Signoria*. In the end, Salutati emerged with his reputation enhanced: in a period of turmoil, with his “religious commitment to humility and sound political instinct”¹¹⁰ he had proven himself to be a steadfast and trustworthy servant of the city. After the treacherous events of his early years as chancellor, it is perhaps unsurprising that Salutati’s major work from this period, *De seculo et religione*, extolls the virtues of a contemplative, monastic life. He would return to this theme again and again, both in his personal correspondence and his later works. His eventual reassessment of the virtue of active life became a most critical element of his legacy in humanist scholarship.

In 1385, the notoriously bellicose Giangaleazzo Visconti, count of Virtù, came to power in Milan and reconsolidated a previously fractured regime. To achieve this glorious unification, he faked a religious conversion, ambushed his own uncle and had him imprisoned, where he soon died. In the years which followed, Visconti waged a ferocious campaign against the neighboring states, intent on uniting the northern and central Italian territories under his control. As cities like Verona and Padua began falling to Visconti rule, the threat of attack loomed large over Tuscany. In 1389, the lord of Pisa, Pietro Gambacorta, called for a general league to keep the peace. A series of

¹¹⁰ Ronald Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads: the Life, Works, and Thought of Coluccio Salutati* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 154.

agreements were made between Milan, Florence, Bologna and Siena but they only managed to delay hostilities. Only a few weeks later, Visconti claimed that there had been an attempt on his life and expelled all Bolognese and Florentine citizens from Milan.

Salutati responded to Visconti's allegation with one of his better-known missives, *The Romans*, which declared that Rome would not have resorted to such a base tactic, and as their civic and intellectual heirs, neither would the Florentines. While the argument itself is vulnerable, on the whole, it provides an important example of certain other innovative qualities which made Salutati's missives so powerful. Witt writes that this power "derived from the fact that they reflected enough echoes of ancient rhetoric to excite a generation already stirred by the writings of Petrarch while basically remaining within the limits set for such correspondence by international chancery protocol."¹¹¹ This compelling and effective balance between stylistic formality and rhetorical innovation is a defining characteristic of Salutati's writing, one which set an important precedent for politicians and humanist scholars in the years to come.

In composing his state missives, Salutati relied upon the *stilus rhetoricus* previously employed by Brunetto Latini – adapted for his own purposes. Witt writes: "Good humanist that he was, Salutati also structured his propaganda themes against a background of Roman and medieval history lacking in earlier writings of this style."¹¹² This historical angle is plainly evident in the *The Romans* and Salutati would continue to

¹¹¹ Ronald Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads: the Life, Works, and Thought of Coluccio Salutati* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 125.

¹¹² Ronald Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads: the Life, Works, and Thought of Coluccio Salutati* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 125.

elaborate these arguments on the classical origins of Florence in a rather fiery debate with his former pupil, Antonio Loschi, in 1402. These two works, *The Romans* and his invective against Loschi, appeared at the beginning and the end of Salutati's long power struggle with Visconti. In his tyrannical campaign to unite the Italian territories, Visconti became Salutati's greatest adversary, as well as a sort of perverse muse. Much of Salutati's scholarship from this later period of his career examined the threat of tyranny and the critical role of Florence in defending the ideals of liberty on the Italian peninsula. This obligation that Salutati felt, on behalf of the Florentines, to defend and promote liberty was not merely theoretical. For Salutati, it was a personal obligation, one which fell to him through divine ordination. In a letter to Peregrino Zembeccari (1398) Salutati writes: "As long as you are serving, as long as you are striving for your family, children, relatives, friends and for the fatherland which comprises them all, you cannot help lifting your heart heavenwards and thus please God."¹¹³ In fulfilling this work, for the benefit of the common good, he believed he could find true happiness – the happiness which derives from closeness to God – as well as a path to eternal salvation. These sentiments on the virtue of civic service echo Dante, and Latini as well. In serving others, they bring virtue upon themselves.

Salutati's diplomatic campaign against Visconti ramped up once more when war officially broke out between Milan and Florence in 1390. Milan, allied with Siena, the Gonzaga, the Este and the Savoy stood against Florence and Bologna, mostly on their

¹¹³ Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 110.

own.¹¹⁴ Salutati's missives in this period grew more structured and concise; he built a campaign of propaganda, not only with letters but with poetry as well. The first poem is in Latin, dedicated to an agent of the Count of Pisa. The second poem is one of his only (surviving) compositions in the Italian vernacular. This bizarre little poem, titled "O scacciato dal ciel da Micael", is violent and erudite in equal measure:

O scacciato dal cielo da Micael,
ruina della sede d'Aquilon
o venenoso serpent Fiton,
o mal commettitore Architofel,
o successor d'incanti d'Eriton,
maladìcati l'alto Iddio, Sion,
che benedisce i figli d'Israel.
Contro ti sia la fede d'Abraam,
e l'orazion che fe' Merchisedech,
e l'angel che diè storpio a Balaam;
nascere possa per te nuovo Lamech,
che 'l sangue vendico' del fi' d'Adam,
tal sia tuo fin qual fu d'Abimelech.
Contro ti sia la grazia di Jacob,
poi che procacci crescer pene a Job.¹¹⁵

Stylistically, it leaves something (or perhaps much) to be desired. The stressed consonant at the end of each line is jarring, making the flow more akin to a string of

¹¹⁴ Ronald Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads: the Life, Works, and Thought of Coluccio Salutati* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 158.

¹¹⁵ Sonnet is reproduced in Rinaldina Russell, *Sonnet: the Very Rich and Varied World of the Italian Sonnet* (Archway Publishing, 2017), 150.

hurled insults than any traditional poetic form. The content, however, is rich – brimming with references from both the Christian and classical traditions. Playing on the serpent in the Visconti family coat of arms, *Salutati* depicted Giangaleazzo as an evil, cunning, tyrannical, damned snake (literally damned), intent to consume the entire Italian peninsula. While no other verse survives to validate *Salutati*'s stylistic control, the pounding, onslaught-like rhythm made for good entertainment and highly effective propaganda.

In January 1392, the Treaty of Genoa put a temporary stay on hostilities and *Salutati* wasted no time in laying blame for the conflict on his enemies. For Florence, he argued, it was a just war and the attacks against them had been entirely unprovoked. In the tenuous peace that followed, Milan and Florence continued their respective campaigns to recruit allies and bolster their forces. In 1395, Visconti, then Duke of Milan, was allied with Pisa and Siena. He then signed a treaty with Genoa, directly opposing a claim by the French crown. In response, the French allied with the Florentines and the League of Bologna (Florence, Bologna, Carrara, the Gonzaga of Mantua and the Este) with the hopes of dismantling Visconti's growing dominion. By February 1397, they were once again at war.

Perhaps even more than between armies, this became a battle between chancelleries. *Salutati*'s counterpart in Milan was his former pupil, Antonio Loschi, with whom he maintained a cordial, professional relationship throughout the war. In this, the final great conflict of his life, *Salutati*'s rhetorical strategy took on a new form. Abandoning the classical themes of his earlier missives, he reframed their struggle against Milan in more “medieval” terms, as a continuation of the Guelph - Ghibelline

rivalry. Witt writes: “The Milanese tyrants, therefore, became enemies both of the church and of the freedom of Italy.”¹¹⁶ In light of this new approach, Salutati replaced classical references with allusions to medieval history. By calling emphasis to the Guelph heritage of both Florence and France, he further condemned Milan and made the Franco-Florentine cause sympathetic to the church.

The Florentines again found temporary reprieve after the Truce of Venice in May 1398. By the spring of 1400, however, Visconti’s forces were as large as ever and open warfare resumed. By 1402, he controlled most of Lombardy along with Pisa, Siena, Perugia, Assisi, Spoleto and Nocera. The situation was bleak, and Florence was the primary obstacle to Visconti’s expansion into central Italy. Through a long and desperate summer, Florence anxiously awaited an attack that never came: the Milanese armies retreated when Visconti suddenly died. While the greater political landscape remained perilous, this final-hour salvation from Milan “produced a swell of patriotic feeling in Florence,”¹¹⁷ one which came to define the scholarship of Salutati’s successor, Leonardo Bruni, and inspire his iconic *Laudatio urbis florentinae* (1403-1404)¹¹⁸. It was during this final decade of Salutati’s life that he composed most of his major works. In contrast to his earlier missives, these moral and political treatises reflect the values of Coluccio “the elder statesman” who was crafting a legacy not only for his political successors but for a rising generation of humanist scholars.

¹¹⁶ Ronald Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads: the Life, Works, and Thought of Coluccio Salutati* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 163.

¹¹⁷ Ronald Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads: the Life, Works, and Thought of Coluccio Salutati* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 166.

¹¹⁸ Benjamin Kohl’s English translation of Bruni’s *Laudatio* can be found in Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 135-175.

ii. Written works

Stefano Baldassarri describes Salutati as “a Janus-like figure, a man at a crossroads, an author on the threshold of a new era...”¹¹⁹ In his professional life and in his scholarship, he became a bridge between the dwindling medieval scholasticism of *Trecento* Florence and the civic, humanist mentality which emerged in the *Quattrocento*. In his writing, Salutati promoted a new interpretation of humanist ideology in which virtue and civic responsibility were inextricably connected. The legacy of his prolific career would influence public life in Florence for generations. Historically, Salutati has been characterized as a “puzzling and contradictory figure torn between two different ages”¹²⁰ Witt goes so far as to warn prospective readers that, in light of Salutati’s shining professional reputation, they may feel disappointed by his written works.¹²¹ The most recent scholarship, however, including that of Baldassarri and Laurent Baggioni, has gently pushed back on this appraisal. While Salutati’s writings do indicate that some of his positions or judgements evolved over time, he is consistent in his search for those “natural, and as much, divinely ordained values that, in his eyes, should underlie both the active and the contemplative life of all Christians.”¹²² The brilliance of Salutati, therefore, lies beyond the allure of his prose; while he expresses admiration for the rhetorical elegance of others, he is decidedly a “substance over style” type of author.

¹¹⁹ Stefano Baldassarri, Introduction to Coluccio Salutati, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), vii.

¹²⁰ Stefano Baldassarri in review of *La forteresse de la raison: Lectures de l’humanisme politique florentin d’après l’oeuvre de Coluccio Salutati*, by Laurent Baggioni, 238.

¹²¹ Stefano Baldassarri, Introduction to Coluccio Salutati, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), vii.

¹²² Stefano Baldassarri in review of *La forteresse de la raison: Lectures de l’humanisme politique florentin d’après l’oeuvre de Coluccio Salutati*, by Laurent Baggioni, 239.

In his personal writing, Salutati presented himself as a new personification of Ciceronian ideals – a fierce supporter of the republic with a profound sense of obligation to the public good. Over the course of his career, he became a revered point of reference for fellow scholars. Much of his work arose in response to the proposals or questions of others. Many successive humanists, including some of the most important defenders of vernacular literature, including Flavio Biondo, Poggio Bracciolini and Leon Battista Alberti, make reference to Salutati and his writings. He confronts arguments from all perspectives, placing ancient and contemporary views side by side.

Along with a staggering collection of letters, both personal and professional, Salutati produced six “major” works in his lifetime: the first four are philosophical treatises, beginning with *De seculo et religione*, written between 1381 and 1382. Between 1396 and 1397 he wrote *De fato et fortuna*, followed by *De nobilitate legum et medicine* in 1399. The fourth, *De laboribus herculis*, was his most ambitious project; it remained unfinished despite more than two decades of effort. His final two works are explicitly political; *De tyranno* was written in 1400, at the height of his conflict with Milan. The *Invectiva* to Antonio Loschi was written after Visconti's death, between 1403 and 1404.

Salutati wrote almost exclusively in Latin. He is a towering figure of what Celenza termed the “lost Italian Renaissance” – before the golden age of the Medici and the emergence of vernacular scholarship – where the revival of classical Latin and the rediscovery of seminal works of classical literature laid a critical foundation for the transitions to come. As is evident in his personal letters, Salutati felt a deep moral obligation to his role as teacher and mentor to a rising generation of scholars. He was

highly interested in education, specifically in the incorporation of “pagan classics”. He argued that the moral, natural and even theological allegories of classical poetry were beneficial to a Christian education.¹²³ As a philologist, Salutati wrote an extensive (albeit clunky) treatment on the spelling of words. He described a method for the proper reading and interpretation of classical texts and he was the first to identify successive periods in classical Latin literature. Witt claims: “this awareness grew out of his discovery that ancient Latin was not, as scholars in the Middle Ages believed, an immutable language, but rather, like modern languages, it too had experienced significant change.”¹²⁴ This is critical observation, as it marks the beginning of the end of the traditional “medieval” view of Latin as an artificial – and therefore inherently superior – language.

Salutati’s most significant contributions to the evolution of humanist inquiry are threefold: first, as an effective and highly influential chancellor, he protected Florence and solidified its cultural status as a center for humanist study. Second, over the course of his long career, he moved away from the Petrarchan model of the contemplative scholar and came to promote the virtues of active civic engagement. Finally, near the end of his life, he wrote his *Invectiva*, “a veritable and exhaustive panegyric of Florence”¹²⁵ which provides a convincing reconstruction of the Roman, republican origins of the city and supports its claim to the intellectual legacy of classical Rome. Furthermore, his periodization of Latin literary styles allowed him to cast doubt on the

¹²³ Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 85.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 84.

¹²⁵ Ronald Witt, introduction to Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), xxiv.

“medieval” conceptualization of Latin as an artificial language. To illustrate these critical aspects of Salutati’s legacy, I will focus on my analysis on his philosophical treatise *De nobilitate legum et medicine* and his *Invectiva* against Antonio Loschi, formally titled *Contra maledicum et obiurgatorem qui multa pungenter adversus inclitam civitatem florentinae scripsit*.

In his earliest treatise, *De seculo et religione* (1381), Salutati wrote to a friend who was joining a monastic order. He supports his friend, echoing Petrarch in his conclusion that a life of withdrawn contemplation was morally preferable to life in the active world. In time, however, Salutati came to re-evaluate these sentiments. In a letter from 1391, Salutati tries to dissuade a troubled friend from taking monastic vows. He argues that the contemplative life benefits only the intellectual himself, while in active living, one shares his knowledge to the benefit of society. He concludes, therefore, that a contemplative life offers no greater a chance of salvation than a life of civic service. Some scholars, namely Witt and Baron, have presented this shift in Salutati’s ideology as a tepid intellectual revision as opposed to full-blown epiphany. By the balanced tone of his arguments, it seems that Salutati did indeed have some reservations in determining the “right” path for scholars; while he pursued an active life, he recognized the benefits of both active and contemplative living. In terms of cultural impact, however, Salutati’s theoretical reversal on the *vita activa*, along with his remarkable example of civic service laid the groundwork for a new era of humanist activity, one which was passionately engaged in civic and political life.

Salutati elaborates a more complete defense of the *vita activa* in *De nobilitate legum et medicine* (1399) where he discusses the merits of medicine and law as

respective examples of contemplative and active pursuits: while the physician dedicates his life to intellect and the study of natural philosophy, “detached from the duties and satisfactions of being a participant in the human community,”¹²⁶ the lawyer is actively engaged in civic life. Salutati composed *De nobilitate legum et medicine* between 1398 and 1399 – an interlude in his ongoing power struggle with Milan. The treatise was written in response to a work by the Florentine physician Bernardo de ser Pistorio, *Que scienciarium vel artium nobilitate prefulgeat, an medicine an legis*, in which Bernardo maintains the absolute superiority of the natural sciences over any kind of civic or human activity, as well as the superiority of the intellect over the will. A clear point of contention between Bernardo and Salutati was Petrarch’s *Invective contra medicum* (1352-1355) which had firmly denounced the value of medicine, arguing that it was not a science at all but a vile and lowly art. Salutati expands on some of Petrarch’s convictions, incorporating arguments from Cicero, Aristotle, Aquinas and St. Augustine.

Salutati’s response to Bernardo is a unique and relatively concise work which at first glance could appear to be little more than an invective against physicians. The broader argument, however, extends far beyond any individual vocation; Salutati uses medicine and law as examples of a more universal theme: the relative virtues of active and contemplative life. The specific choice of professions is representational; Salutati chooses medicine as a direct call to Bernardo and his exaltation of contemplation and the natural sciences. Law, conversely, represents Salutati himself and the virtues of civic activity. In his methodical dissent from Bernardo, Salutati puts forward three

¹²⁶ Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 87.

fundamental arguments: first, human laws are a reflection of divine law; they find their origins in the will of God. By studying and enacting the law, one brings himself closer to divine wisdom. The natural sciences, however, are an examination of material reality – far removed from the divine realm. Secondly, Salutati argues that laws are a prescriptive guide to virtue and righteousness; the law seeks to identify a universal morality, one which contributes to the well-being of the individual and of society at large. Medicine, he argues, prioritizes the physical well-being of the individual over the spiritual well-being of the community. Finally, the law can be reduced to a few simple, universal principles¹²⁷, whereas nature and medicine are subject to an infinite number of rules and exceptions, without any underlying principle of reason.

Most essentially, Salutati argues that law, on the basis of its underlying rationality, is a natural faculty of human will.¹²⁸ An active, civic life is therefore a fulfillment of our moral obligation to human society. In contrast, natural speculation is a faculty of the intellect; it serves the individual and does nothing to bring the community closer to God. Garin writes: “On every single page written by Salutati we find this demand for a philosophy which is a school of life, a serious and deep meditation upon the problems of life.”¹²⁹ Here we see that, beyond any professional dichotomy, Salutati is making an argument for the very meaning of life. This most central reflection on this theme arrives in chapter XXIII, in which he writes: “Quod voluntas est nobilior intellectu

¹²⁷ Based upon the writings of the Roman jurist Ulpian.

¹²⁸ For Salutati’s conception of human will, see Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1975) 29-33.

¹²⁹ Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1975), 29.

et activa vita sit speculative preferenda.”¹³⁰ He affirms the value of the will over the intellect and the value of active over contemplative living.

To introduce his comparison between these two competing approaches to scholarship, Salutati asks: which is more valuable, a knowledge of nature or a knowledge of human things? In his arguments, medicine represents the sciences, the intellect, and a contemplative life in search of natural truth. Law, on the other hand, represents the best of human activity. It is a product not of the intellect, but of our own free will. Salutati’s philosophy is “a reflection on earthly activity, a quickening of the consciousness of community tasks, of the human condition and of human fate.”¹³¹ This commitment to community welfare derives from Salutati’s view that the establishment of a just and moral society is a reflection of God’s will on earth. He argues that the purpose of jurisprudence is the regulation of human activity for the well being of all: “Obiectum autem est bonum, nec solummodo bonum simpliciter, sed, quod longe divinius est, commune bonum.”¹³² By Salutati’s reasoning, therefore, service to the law provides a more precious good to human society than the study and contemplation of natural truth: “Non bonum quo bonum aliquod sumus, sed bonum quo boni efficimur atque sumus.”¹³³

¹³⁰ “That the will is more noble than the intellect, and that the active life is preferable to the contemplative.” In Salutati, *De nobilitate*, chapter xxiii, reproduced in Coluccio Salutati and Eugenio Garin, *De Nobilitate Legum Et Medicinae. De Verecundia* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1947), 182.

¹³¹ Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1975), 28.

¹³² “This well-being is not any arbitrary kind of well-being; but the truly divine well-being of a human community.” Salutati in Coluccio Salutati and Eugenio Garin, *De Nobilitate Legum Et Medicinae. De Verecundia* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1947), 32.

¹³³ “The common good aimed at by law is not the sort of good that happens to make us naturally good: but it is the sort of good which persuades us to become good” Salutati in Coluccio Salutati and Eugenio Garin, *De Nobilitate Legum Et Medicinae. De Verecundia* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1947), 32.

In living an active life, guided by morality and law, man can achieve his ultimate destiny: eternity in the divine contemplation of God.

Far from the Ciceronian dialogues which would return to fashion in the coming years, *De nobilitate legum et medicine* is formatted in the more “medieval” style of a scholastic *quaestio*. The views he expresses, however, particularly on the virtues of civic life, are decidedly modern; the civic direction of humanist inquiry would be of fundamental importance to the *Quattrocento* humanists. Of all of Salutati’s major works, *De nobilitate legum et medicine* enjoyed the greatest success in its time, evidenced by the fact that it is the only one destined to be printed as an independent volume (1542).

Salutati’s final major work, his *Invectiva* to Antonio Loschi, (occasionally referred to as *Contra maledicum and obiurgatorem*) was written only four years later (1403-1404), but the circumstances of his position were greatly changed; Giangaleazzo Visconti was dead, the war was over and the Milanese campaign for dominion in central Italy, Salutati’s main preoccupation for over a decade, had come to a fortuitous end – though not for Milan. It seems therefore that Salutati was writing not for political influence, but as a defense and elaboration of his own personal philosophy. He was writing in response to Loschi, who had become Chancellor of Milan in the later years of Visconti’s rule. Their professional correspondence always remained affable, even in times of war, but their in their personal correspondence they did not shy from spirited debate. In 1397, Loschi circulated his *Invectiva in florentinos*¹³⁴, a brief work in which he rejects the ideals of Florentine *libertas* as set forward by Salutati. While Florence is

¹³⁴ Reproduced with translation in Coluccio Salutati and Stefano Baldassarri, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 144-168. Translations by Rolf Bagemihl.

allied with tyrants and foreigners, Loschi argues, they will never be the harbingers of liberty that Salutati claims. Salutati's response¹³⁵, "driven by indignation or by pain"¹³⁶, is considerably longer. It is not only his final work, but his final word on the conflict which dominated the later part of his professional life. He reprises several important themes from an earlier missive, *Letter to the Italians* (1390) as well as the political treatise, *De tyranno* (1400). The central arguments, those which would prove most influential to the successive generations of scholars, explore the Roman origins of Florentine *libertas* as well as the role of Florence in defending all Italy from tyranny and oppression.

In the beginning, Salutati explains that, at seventy-three years old, having spent the majority of his life in service of Florence, he is uniquely qualified to address these arguments, and it is right that he should do so:

"Scripsi praesentis orationis fronte me rogatem obnixius quod in patriae decus deberem ad singula respondere, ut tam iusta rogantibus honestum non fuerit morem non gerere. Sed vehementius tamen urget – tacens licet – patria, cui non praestare nullo modo possumus quod debemus, ut armis meis ipsam protegam nec in tam acerbae sugillationis iniuria derelinquam ipsam, tot diffamatam mendaciis, indefensam; ut sicut hactenus commissa sequens dominorum meorum, publicae scriptionis officio causas incidentes, etiam cum hostium diffamationibus, ut iubebar, defendere sum conatus, ita nunc, cum privata laceratur lingua, privatim tuear et defendam."¹³⁷

With citations from Loschi's original text, Salutati refutes the charges against Florence one by one. For several pages, he attacks the reasoning (and sanity) of the "raging

¹³⁵ The following citations (and translations) are from the reproduction of Salutati's *Contra maledicum et obiurgatorem qui multa pungenter adversus inclitam civitatem florentinae scripsit* in Coluccio Salutati and Stefano Baldassarri, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 175-395.

¹³⁶ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 1; 177.

¹³⁷ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 8; 183-184. "I said at the start that my obligation to respond to every charge against my country's honor had been pressed upon me, and it would have been disgraceful not to comply with so just a request...Therefore, just as hitherto I have tried to defend her, carrying out the charges given to me by my lord priors, and undertaking cases as I was bidden in my office of chancellor, including cases of defamation by enemies, so now, since she has been abused by the tongue of a private citizen, I shall protect and defend her as a private citizen."

animal” who would wage such slander against the Florentines: “Since you are attacking a free city and a champion of liberty on behalf of your lord and (it would be God’s truth to say) on behalf of a tyrant, I don’t see what end of political happiness you are aiming at with your insults.”¹³⁸ Here again, as in *De nobilitate*, Salutati equates virtuous civic service with divine happiness and a path to God.

Throughout the treatise, Salutati emphasizes the importance of evidence and truth. Indeed, who better than Salutati to speak to the power of rhetoric, or to identify the difference between what is convincing and what is true? Salutati was the most masterful propagandist of his time; he was unlikely to be drawn in by the crafty appeals of his foe. He writes:

“Non stat dicendi virtus in eo quod solam dicitur vel ipsius dictionis ornatu, sed si probis, si persuadeas sique fidem facias et irrefragabiliter dicas...Nec sufficit ad fidem ornatus, qui quidem falsis et veris possit aequaliter adhiberi.”¹³⁹

In support of his own arguments, Salutati offers selections of literature, architecture, civics and economics from both classical and more contemporary sources. To fully elaborate his case, he refers to both the Guelph and Roman traditions of Florence; he depicts them as complementary elements of a continuous history, one driven by the principles of liberty. On his fellow Florentine citizens, he writes:

“...immo videras, vides atque videbis plus quam Romanam fortitudinem atque constantiam populi Florentini in defendenda dulcissima libertate, ‘quod caeleste bonum,’ ut ille dixit, ‘praeterit orbits opes,’ quam mens est omnibus Florentinis ut vitam, immo supra vitam, opibus ferroque

¹³⁸ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 6; 181.

¹³⁹ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 3; 176. “The force of an argument lies not only in what is said and how prettily, but in whether you prove it, whether you persuade, whether you give incontrovertible evidence of what you say...Moreover, neither is elegance of style enough to produce belief, since it can be applied equally to things true and false.”

defendere nostrisque posteris hanc hereditatem optimam, quam a maioribus nostris accepimus, relinquere – Deo favente – solidam et immaculatam.”¹⁴⁰

He argues that they are the natural leaders and defenders of the cause of liberty on the Italian peninsula, beloved by their allies and those people who are oppressed by their enemies:

“Scio quod Guelforum, quos habet Italia, multitudo populum Florentinum, huius sanctissimae conglutinationis caput, columnen atque principem, et hi vehementius quos Gebellinae factionis crudelitas premit, quales infiniti sunt, qui tuo domino subiacent, non solum gratulanter Florentinum nomen audiunt, sed adorant, sed victoriam et felicitatem eius cupiunt; nec solum cupiunt, sed expectant. Gebellini vero, nisi desipiant, qui tyrannico iugo subiacent, Gebellino quidem favore mallent, sed si non detur, etiam Guelforum manibus eligerent liberari.”¹⁴¹

In the first half of the treatise, Salutati speaks on the Roman origins of the city as well as the reasons for the name “Florence.” He argues that Florence, like Rome, has little concrete knowledge of its origins and this in itself an indication of antiquity. He describes the customary Roman planning of the city: a capitol, a forum, an amphitheater and baths. Leading into the city, there are remains of aqueducts. Who else but the Romans could have founded such a city, styled in such a way? He refers to accounts of Sallust and Cicero which tell of the foundation of Florence by the Roman general Sallus and his army as an act of resistance to Fiesole. On the character of Florentines, he refutes allegations that they are sinful and proud; had they behaved in a way which

¹⁴⁰ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 19; 196. “...you have seen, you do see and you shall see the more than Roman constancy and tenacity of the Florentines in defending sweet liberty, the “celestial good exceeding all the wealth in the world, as [Aesop] says. It is the resolve of all Florentines to defend liberty with their sword and substance as they defend their own lives, and to leave this finest inheritance to their posterity, and inheritance we have received from our ancestors – through God’s favor – undiminished and unstained.”

¹⁴¹ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 35; 216. “It is certain that the numerous Guelphs of Italy, especially those oppressed by the cruelty of the Ghibelline party (too numerous to count) and those subject to your lord, are happy to heed the name of the Florentine people as to the brains, support, and leader of that most holy alliance. Not only do they heed it, they adore it; they desire its victory and felicity; and not only do they desire it, they look longingly for its coming. As for Ghibellines under a tyrant’s yoke, only the fools among them would not prefer a Ghibelline tyrant or, failing that, to be feed even by Guelph hands.”

offended God, Salutati explains, they would have been punished. He argues instead that they are the blessed defenders of liberty – the “highest gift of divinity.” Snidely, Salutati remarks that Milan and her subjects are unaccustomed to liberty and therefore they do not value it properly:

“Sed ex te video mihi que firmiter persuasi vos adeo servitute delectari, quod non possetis sine domino vivere nec sciretis in libertatis licentiosa dulcedine permanere. Legibus obsequi, quae cunctos aequalitatis iustissima ratione respiciunt, grave vobis iugum et horrenda servitus est; oboedire vero tyranno, qui cuncta pro suae voluntatis moderatur arbitrio, summa vobis est libertas et inextimabilis dignitas.”¹⁴²

For Visconti and his ruthless armies, “Anything was licit as long as it held out a glimmer of getting more power;”¹⁴³ his tyrannical reign is the place where “violence and injustice meet and kiss.”¹⁴⁴ In contrast, Salutati writes that Florence “is not ruled by nobles, prey to congenital ambitions, but governed by honest merchants.”¹⁴⁵ These free citizens of Florence, by their very nature, are destined to fight oppression. Salutati writes that they possess “a strong spirit, an upright spirit, a free spirit, a spirit ready to sustain all that God may demand, a certain and fearless spirit, and a spirit that will never bewail not having done everything possible for the cause of liberty.”¹⁴⁶ Here again Salutati affirms the virtue of civic service; in the defense of a free and just society, they honor God’s divine laws on earth.

¹⁴² Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 45; 230-232. “But thanks to you I see and am firmly persuaded that you delight so much in servitude that you can only live in submission to an overlord, and you don’t understand how to abide within the sweet license of liberty. To obey the laws, which treat everyone with the most rightful principle of equality, for you is a heavy yoke and a revolting servitude, but to obey a tyrant, who controls everything arbitrarily by his will, is for you the highest liberty and honor beyond price.”

¹⁴³ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 172; 381.

¹⁴⁴ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 148; 351.

¹⁴⁵ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 168; 375.

¹⁴⁶ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 92; 285.

In the second half of the treatise, Salutati speaks more on the Florentine allegiance to French crown, their common Guelph ancestry and their loyalty to the church. Opening his rebuttal to Loschi's defamation of the French, he writes: "Your invective has finally arrived at the very essence of stupidity..."¹⁴⁷ Salutati graciously defends the French, calling them "our fathers", as he had done in earlier communications with the French crown. United, Salutati argues, they stood against not only Visconti, but against the tyranny of the German emperors and all of their Ghibelline allies on the Italian peninsula. On French people themselves he writes: "They are, I admit, a delightful and happy people that dislikes tight spending or having regard for the future."¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, he emphasizes their virtue, their piety and their loyalty to the Florentine cause.

As Salutati transitions from his discussion of Florentine origins to more contemporary arguments, he focuses less on their classical Roman legacy and more on their identity as Guelphs. His evidence, too, becomes very modern:

"Ubi mercatura maior, varietate rerum copiosior ingeniisque subtilioribus exercitatio? Ubinam viri clariores? Et – ut infinitos omittam quos recensere taedium foret rebus gestis insignes, armis strenuos, potentes iustis dominationibus et famosos – ubi Dantes? Ubi Petrarca? Ubi Boccaccius?"¹⁴⁹

His love for Florence is evident, as are his intimate ties to the mercantile and intellectual elite of the city. For Salutati, these people are the greatest examples of those who work

¹⁴⁷ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 109; 303.

¹⁴⁸ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 113; 307.

¹⁴⁹ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 116; 310. "What city has a commerce more prosperous, boasting a greater variety of goods, and practiced by more subtle minds? And where have there been more illustrious men? To pass over the infinite number – it would be tedious to list them singly – who have made a name for their actions, who have shown valor in war, who have become powerful and famous in just lordships, where will you find another Dante, another Petrarch, another Boccaccio?"

to strengthen and glorify their society – whether by civic service, artistic or intellectual achievement. We know from his previous writings that Salutati valued free will as the greatest human faculty, that which drives people to pursue good works, and in doing so, honor God. When he writes “Without liberty there would only be necessity, not free will”¹⁵⁰, he is saying that their greatness is a product of their liberty – and their liberty, as we know, is the “highest gift of divinity”.¹⁵¹ It therefore falls to the Florentines, as a divine obligation, to defend the ideals of liberty across the Italian peninsula. He writes: “It’s clear that if we had given in, everyone would have ended up giving in, and, as I said, Italy would have been reduced, without blood or sweat, to the most loathsome slavery.”¹⁵² As the defenders of liberty in Italy, they are duty-bound protect Florence not only from their Ghibelline enemies, but from all future threats to their autonomy and their way of life.

In this final *invectiva*, Salutati recalls themes from his earlier works to establish several key aspects of the emerging civic humanist tradition: first, with his seamless transition from classic to medieval to contemporary examples, Salutati brings continuity to a previously fractured conceptualization of Florentine history and he sets a demanding precedent for what it means to be part of that honored tradition; upholding Florence’s legacy became both a privilege and an immense responsibility. Secondly, he provides a convincing reconstruction of the Roman, republican origins of Florence; this brings a newfound legitimacy to the notion of Florence as a rightful descendent of the classical intellectual tradition. Finally, and most crucially of all, he once again affirms the

¹⁵⁰ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 118; 313.

¹⁵¹ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 19; 197.

¹⁵² Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 175; 383-385.

virtue of political life, setting the course for the civic humanists of the fifteenth century. For someone who so adamantly explains himself, it seems only proper that I let Salutati conclude on his own behalf: “let us stop here; there are many things which I have set aside for our second encounter... As the old proverb has it, naked and empty-handed is he who spends all that he has and says all that he knows.”¹⁵³

IV. Conclusion

The advent of both the civic and vernacular threads of humanism has often been studied as a later phenomenon, emerging as definitive scholarly trends over the course of the fifteenth century. However, common adherence to these trends would never have emerged without the novel influences of earlier scholars, those who first brought the ideas to light within the context of humanist inquiry. As their works demonstrate, Dante Alighieri and Coluccio Salutati represent two of the most critical innovators of early humanism. While, over the course their long and tumultuous careers, they both made diverse contributions to scholarship, their respective influences on the successive generations of humanists were more essentialized: Dante, in his prolific and varied vernacular works, set a critical precedent for both the practice and theory of vernacular literature. At the end of the century, Salutati made necessary strides in affirming the value (and the virtue) of civic engagement.

¹⁵³ Coluccio Salutati, *Contra maledicum*, 183; 395.

Both of these attitudes stood in opposition to the contemplative, Latinate praxis of Petrarch and other fourteenth century proto-humanists such as Leonardo Bruni and Zanobi da Strada; as discussed in the main introduction, they were on a different, though still highly valuable, intellectual mission. While certain aspects of their scholarship – namely, their preference for Latin and their distaste for civic life – slowly fell out of fashion, their rediscovery of so many critical classical texts and their focus on classical *imitatio* brought about a number of important contributions for later humanists, including, but certainly not limited to, a refinement of the philological methods which would eventually support the grammatical elaboration of a literary Italian language. In the generation of scholars which followed Salutati, the novel glimmers of historiography, vernacular literature and civic activity which appeared in the *Trecento* would be further elaborated by a number of important early fifteenth-century intellectuals – notably Flavio Biondo and Leon Battista Alberti.

Chapter Two – The early *Quattrocento*: Flavio Biondo and Leon Battista Alberti

Introduction

The first half of the fifteenth century is aptly described by Hans Baron as “the transitional crisis of the early Renaissance”¹⁵⁴ – a period when the civic, religious and cultural institutions of Italy were all under threat. The papacy languished in disarray, divided since the Great Schism of 1378, the Wars in Lombardy raged on between Venice, Milan and their allies for the second quarter of the century and recurrent epidemics of plague menaced each and every endeavor. In a time when civic and cultural stability seemed so very elusive, early humanist scholars took a particular interest in the notion of *Fortuna*, which Aby Warburg describes as “la formulazione figurativa del compromesso fra la ‘medievale’ fiducia in Dio e la fiducia in se stesso dell’uomo rinascimentale”¹⁵⁵ In this fraught environment, it comes as no surprise that intellectuals such as Flavio Biondo and Leon Battista Alberti grew so wary of fortune; for them, it was the fickle, irrational force of nature to which they attributed both their personal travails and the unstable environment. In response to this “transitional crisis”, Biondo and Alberti developed an overwhelming conviction that this wanton instability could be tamed by work and virtuous living. Garin identifies the saying “*virtù vince*

¹⁵⁴ Baron coins this term in *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance; Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

¹⁵⁵ Aby Warburg, et al., *Arte Del Ritratto e Borghesia Fiorentina: Seguito Da Le Ultime Volontà Di Francesco Sassetti* (Milan: Abscondita, 2015), 238.

*fortuna*¹⁵⁶ as a “typical motif of the Renaissance”¹⁵⁷ – one which encourages active service in both the public and private sphere as a safeguard against social upheaval. Order and stability became pervasive concerns for Biondo and Alberti, in their careers as civic servants, in their innovative approach to classical historiography – a sort of “applied history” which is meant to be used as opposed to just learned – and in their attempts to refine and legitimize the vernacular language. These three critical aspects of their scholarship – their promotion of civic engagement, their secular revision of history and their efforts to legitimize vernacular literature – considered together, signal an important step in the advance of civic humanism, one which goes beyond imitation to make practical use of their celebrated Roman legacy. Through their conscientious examinations of the classical environment, Biondo and Alberti seek to identify the civic, linguistic and cultural forms of ancient Rome and transmit them as guiding principles for a more stable and unified social atmosphere.

While both Biondo and Alberti were members of the papal curia, and Alberti took holy orders in 1432, neither focused his scholarship on spiritual matters. They were more concerned with history, and thus began viewing classical sources not only as a model for writing well, but for living well in terms of civic and cultural achievement. (For Alberti, of course, this list goes on and on: how to paint well, how to build well, how to be a good father, how to do math, etcetera.) While Petrarch and the first generation¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Brendecke and Vogt propose that the topos of “virtù vince fortuna” derives from the Ciceronian argument that “Fortuna could be set on a favorable course through *fortitudo*.” in Arndt Brendecke and Peter Vogt, *The End of Fortuna and the Rise of Modernity* (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2017), 2.

¹⁵⁷ Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1975), 61.

¹⁵⁸ On the short-term changes between “generations” of humanists, see Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 229-236.

of humanists occupied themselves mainly with the revival of classical literacy, these more universally minded scholars of the mid-fifteenth century expanded the scope of humanist thought by putting classical wisdom to work. As discussed in the previous chapter, Coluccio Salutati made important first steps outside the bounds of imitation and antiquarianism with his express desire to create something new from their classical legacy. Building on Salutati's ideas, scholars such as Biondo and Alberti, along with Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini and Lorenzo Valla continued to redefine the role of intellectuals in civic society.

The ambitions and obligations of humanist scholars began to shift along with an enhanced notion of "virtue". As the Renaissance saying suggests, the perils of *Fortuna* could be tempered by *Virtù* – an even more ubiquitous theme in humanist thought. While considerations of virtue are consistent throughout fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the notion and the scope of the term evolve along with the civic and cultural necessities of the moment. For Machiavelli especially, at the end of the century, the idea of what constitutes "virtue" takes on a life of its own. Garin suggests a definition which remains true throughout the Renaissance when he describes virtue as "the good and sacred discipline of life."¹⁵⁹ For Biondo and Alberti, this discipline of living well called for their active engagement in family and civic concerns, as well as a commitment to bringing peace and stability to their communities. Parallel to their shared attention to virtue in the civic world, both Biondo and Alberti identify a profound, reciprocal connection between the social and linguistic stability of a civilization, as evidenced by

¹⁵⁹ Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1975), 62.

the Latin tradition in ancient Rome. The establishment of this link between language and civic identity brought new urgency to the question of the vernacular for fifteenth-century scholars; they sought to determine whether their “native” languages were fundamentally worthy of regulation. Biondo affirms this notion using concrete historical examples to illustrate the commonalities between Latin and the Italian vernaculars. His significant revelations on the state of Latin in the classical world cast the contemporary vernaculars in a new light; by giving proof of the Latinate origins of their language, Biondo creates new opportunities for the regulation and refinement of a vernacular literary tradition. Alberti later expands on Biondo’s ideas and puts them into practice, both in his frequent use of the written vernacular in scholarly contexts and in his proposed standardization of the contemporary Florentine language.

II. Flavio Biondo

Notary, scholar and apostolic secretary Flavio Biondo, a native of Forlì, in Romagna, was “the most notable historian and antiquarian of the fifteenth century.”¹⁶⁰ Beyond his bureaucratic career, Biondo wrote prolifically on the history of Italy and classical Rome, and using his knowledge of the classical world, made significant ideological contributions to the advancement of vernacular scholarship. Carlo Dionisotti and others have lamented the fact that, within Renaissance scholarship, Biondo often does not receive the same attention and consideration accorded to many of his fellow

¹⁶⁰ Gaetana Marrone, *Encyclopedia of Italian Literary Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 234.

humanists, particularly in light of the ample studies dedicated to such figures as Leonardi Bruni, Lorenzo Valla and Leon Battista Alberti. Benedetto Nogara suggests that Biondo, when compared to many other humanists of his quite early generation, held a more “passionate” and “intelligent” admiration for classical scholarship, one which was far more sensitive to the full value and utility of classical wisdom: “...l’amore ch’egli mostrava per autori antichi non va confuso con quello che animava i più degli umanisti contemporanei e posteriori di lui. Per la maggior parte di questi la bella forma dei classici è tutto, e tutto i loro sforzi si concentrano nel tentar di riprodurne gl’ineestimabili pregi.”¹⁶¹ While Nogara’s appraisal of these “ciechi adoratori che...non sanno e non osano di penetrare nell’interno”¹⁶² overlooks many important aspects of early Latinate humanism, he still draws a clear distinction between the “conventional” scholarship of the time and Biondo’s rather groundbreaking approach to topics in history, geography, archaeology and vernacular language. By interpreting history in a more secular way, Biondo illustrates the civic and linguistic continuities between classical Rome and his contemporary society and is thus an indispensable figure in the history of vernacular legitimacy. Through his revisions of Roman history, he makes classical examples of family and civic life, as well as language, newly relevant to the modern world.

After more than a decade of notarial work in Venice, Ferrara and Imola, Biondo moved to Rome to join the curia as notary of the papal treasury. Two years later, in 1434, he was named apostolic secretary to Pope Eugenius IV. In the decade which followed, Biondo oversaw all diplomatic efforts between Rome and the northern Italian

¹⁶¹ In Nogara’s introduction to Flavio Biondo and Bartolomeo Nogara, *Scritti Inediti e Rari Di Flavio Biondo* (Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1927), xxix.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, xxx.

states. His appointment coincided with the tenure of the Council of Florence (1438-1445) and his time there allowed him to form relationships with many of the great Florentine humanists of the early *Quattrocento*, most notably, Florentine chancellor Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444)¹⁶³. Bruni, a preeminent civic humanist and a remarkable historiographer in his own right, had a critical influence on Biondo and the evolution of his scholarship. He features as a main interlocutor in one of Biondo's most influential works, *De verbis Romanae locutionis*, a dialogic treatise from 1435. In this work, undoubtedly one of the most important contributions to the humanist understanding of the history of the Latin language, Biondo relies on his exhaustive studies of classical sources to rebuke Bruni's notion of "native bilingualism". While Bruni's considerations of Latin and the vernacular align more with those espoused by Dante in *De vulgari eloquentia*, Biondo makes the bold claim that Latin is not separate, or even very different, from the Italian vernaculars. In dispelling the notion that natural languages are inherently a-grammatical, Biondo clears the way for the elaboration of a new (and more intellectually legitimate) vernacular literary tradition. Just a few years later, fellow scholar and curia member Leon Battista Alberti would rely heavily on Biondo's arguments in his own promotion of vernacular production.

Above all else, Biondo was a remarkable figure for his innovative perspectives on history. Gaetana Marrone writes: "Biondo liberated the study of history from all the philosophical, moralistic, rhetorical, and ultimately subjective contaminations to which it was liable in the works of the early Humanists."¹⁶⁴ Biondo's synoptic approach

¹⁶³ For Bruni's professional biography, see Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 121-131.

¹⁶⁴ Gaetana Marrone, *Encyclopedia of Italian Literary Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 235.

reevaluated notions of cultural decline and rebirth in a way which illuminated the connection between Roman antiquity and his contemporary world, and in the elaboration of his tripartite vision of history, he helped to establish new and vastly influential methodologies for the study and interpretation of history. As his works demonstrate, Biondo's remarkably detailed study of classical sources along with novel perspectives on history were both critical components for his revolutionary arguments on the nature of language. From the example of Latin in ancient Rome, Biondo called attention to the power and the cultural stability which a regulated linguistic tradition affords to society, and over the course of the following century, a number of influential humanists including Leon Battista Alberti, Cristoforo Landino, Giovanni Fortunio, Niccolò Machiavelli and Pietro Bembo would borrow and build upon his remarkable legacy of scholarship.

i. Biondo the Secretary

Flavio Biondo is one of the few early contributors to the *questione della lingua* who did not originate, at least ancestrally, from Florence. He was born in Forlì, in Romagna, in 1392¹⁶⁵ and both the trajectory of his career and his political sensibilities were defined by the political tensions which enveloped his native city. Forlì was relatively small, but it boasted a proud medieval tradition as an independent state and Ghibelline stronghold,

¹⁶⁵ Dates for Flavio Biondo's life and works in Benedetto Nogara's preface to Flavio Biondo and Bartolomeo Nogara, *Scritti Inediti e Rari Di Flavio Biondo* (Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1927), i-clxxxiii.

conquered by the Ordelaffi family in the thirteenth century with the aid of Federico II himself. For several centuries to follow, the modest northern city would be subject to a relentless tug-of-war between the noble Ordelaffis and the papacy, further complicated by the Great Schism of 1378 and the ruthless political ambitions of the Visconti family in the neighboring Duchy of Milan. This lack of continuity in government left the region politically vulnerable and, in 1423, the Duke of Milan, Filippo Maria Visconti, saw an opportunity to expand his territory into Romagna; while he made some headway into the conquest, he was forced to abandon the city when Venetian forces set siege to his home Duchy of Milan. Perhaps in a conscious effort to avoid the trouble, Biondo, newly qualified as a notary, spent the early 1420s in a series of secretarial positions outside of Forli.

In this first sojourn away from home, spent predominantly in Vicenza and Brescia, Biondo made connections with several important northern Italian scholars including Candido Decembrio (1392-1477) and Guarino Veronese (1374-1460). It was Guarino, a leading scholar and translator who had studied for five years with Manuel Chrysoloras in Greece, who introduced Biondo to the humanist movement. In 1421, it was Guarino who gave Biondo a copy of Cicero's *Brutus*, a text which would prove highly influential in his later works, particularly regarding his novel claims on the history of the Latin language. In these early travels between the great seats of power in northern Italy, Biondo gained insight and perspective on these larger civic rivalries which had tormented his native city throughout his childhood. These experiences would be

especially useful later in his career, when he would be called to oversee all diplomatic relations between northern Italy and the papal court of Eugenius IV.¹⁶⁶

When Biondo made his way home in 1426, Forlì was once again under the control of the papacy, governed by appointed vicars. Their first appointee, Cardinal Domenico Capranica, was a capable and well-regarded statesman. For his secretary, Capranica chose a celebrated scholar and native son of the city – Flavio Biondo. This marked a welcome moment of tranquility and stability for both Biondo and the city itself. Capranica, however, was replaced in 1432 and his successor quickly proved a disappointment, if not an utter disaster. The impulsive and paranoid new vicar, Tommaso Paruta, began rounding up and torturing citizens of Forlì on the slightest suspicion of dissent against his rule. Unsurprisingly, this conduct was not an effective way to inspire the confidence and loyalty of the people. In a particularly violent and dramatic episode in the winter of 1434, the communal palace was sacked and burned and Paruta was deposed. Unable to sustain another war, Pope Eugenius IV determined not pursue any military response, effectively allowing the Ordelaffi family to assume power once more. While their new leader, Antonio Ordelaffi, had been championed as an alternative to Paruta’s oppressive regime and celebrated as a symbol of Forlivese liberation, he proved considerably less effective as an actual leader. Opposition grew against his feckless government – led by Bishop Caffarelli and Biondo himself.

¹⁶⁶ On the diplomacy of the early *Quattrocento* humanists, see Brian Maxson, *The Humanist World of Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 129-152; also, Riccardo Fubini, *Politica e pensiero politico nell’Italia del Rinascimento: Dallo state territorial a Machiavelli* (Florence: Edifir, 2009), 43-59.

In the midst of Paruta's violent regime, in 1432, Biondo determined to move his family away from Forlì once more. In Rome, Biondo quickly established himself as a capable and effective bureaucrat, at different points working as protonotary and abbreviator before being appointed papal secretary in 1434. He would hold his position in the curia, with one significant interruption, from the turbulent papacy of Eugenius IV through the time of Nicholas V, Callixtus III and Pius II. His work as a member of the curia was the most productive of Biondo's life, and the time he spent in Rome inspired his greatest works in history, geography and archaeology, including *De Roma instaurata* and *Historiarum ab inclinatione Romani imperii*. Despite the difficulties which Eugenius IV encountered during his papacy – “a reign subject to fortune”¹⁶⁷– the enduring admiration which Biondo felt for him is expressly documented in both *De Roma instaurata* and *Historiarum ab inclinatione Romani imperii*, in which he relates his gratitude for their relationship. Biondo's esteem for Eugenius IV was not, however, universally shared among the humanists of the curia; in *De varietate fortunae*, Bracciolini insists that Eugenius “always involved himself in continual wars, as if impatient to peace and calm,”¹⁶⁸ and these enemies had a tendency to reappear; Eugenius had instigated a feud with the Colonna family in Rome, he had lent his support to the Florentine and Venetian republics in the recent war, angering Milan and their allies. His ill-advised and unsuccessful attempt to dissolve the Council of Basel resulted in his banishment from Rome; together with his court, Eugenius spent the majority of his exile in Florence.

¹⁶⁷ In the chapter title for Eugenius IV, in Elizabeth McCahill, *Reviving the Eternal City: Rome and the Papal Court, 1420-1447* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁶⁸ Full text is reproduced in Riccardo Fubini and Stefano Caroti. *Poggio Bracciolini Nel VI Centenario Della Nascita: Mostra Di Codici e Documenti Fiorentini* (Florence: Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, 1980).

For Biondo and other members of the curia, notably his younger colleague Leon Battista Alberti, their years in Florence amounted to much more than a vocational assignment; in this time, they established important personal connections with the humanist scholars of Florence and their exchanges played an important role in the “trasformazione umanistica” of the papal court.¹⁶⁹ Nogara writes: “Non mai infatti come allora fu universalmente accettata la massima che la conoscenza della civiltà classica, e perciò delle opere artistiche e letterarie prodotte da essa, sia lo strumento più valido e più sicuro di gloria e di grandezza anche politica.”¹⁷⁰ Fifteenth-century humanists began to recognize more and more the value of literary (and artistic) achievement and the considerable power which derives from cultural eminence. Biondo, Alberti and the rest of the curia arrived in Florence at a critical moment – just as Cosimo de' Medici established himself as *de facto* lord of the city. Cosimo presided over the advent of a new cultural and political age in Florence, largely as a result of his own dominance over the intellectual community and his promotion of cultural and artistic pursuits. Angelo Mazzocco writes that, in Cosimo's Florence, “Biondo was totally captivated by the novelty and brilliance of this new culture and followed closely the learning of the Florentine humanists.”¹⁷¹ During these years, both Biondo and Alberti made significant contributions to the vernacular tradition and they continued their scholarship in the spirit of the civic, Florentine humanists long after their departure.

¹⁶⁹ Nogara's introduction to Flavio Biondo and Bartolomeo Nogara, *Scritti Inediti e Rari Di Flavio Biondo* (Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1927), lxxiii.

¹⁷⁰ Nogara's introduction to Flavio Biondo and Bartolomeo Nogara, *Scritti Inediti e Rari Di Flavio Biondo* (Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1927), lxxiii.

¹⁷¹ Angelo Mazzocco, *A New Sense of the Past: the Scholarship of Biondo Flavio 1392-1463* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), 12.

Following the death of Eugenius IV in 1447, Biondo's position in the curia weakened considerably; he had inspired jealousies and made enemies, and by 1449 he was briefly estranged. In light of these lessened responsibilities, however, Biondo found the necessary time to begin his major works of scholarship. In these interim years he complained to his friends of his professional and financial stagnancy, what he describes as "otium perniciosissimum"¹⁷², though he was not quite as idle as he claims; he was well-known among intellectual circles for his talent as a scholar, and in 1447, he was commissioned by Alfonso d'Aragona, the King of Naples, to write *Italia illustrata*. This work represented a thematic culmination of Biondo's previous studies of geography and societal institutions in both classical and modern society, so expertly depicted in *De Roma instaurata* and *Historiarum ab inclinatione Romani imperii*. As Jeffrey White affirms, "His learning, energy, and unselfishness were profound. He used these, honestly, methodically, originally – though not without error or immoderation – to combine texts with his own discourse into an absolutely new creation, the *Italy Illuminated*."¹⁷³

In the final years of his life, Biondo faced yet another political threat: the fall of Constantinople, the center of eastern Christianity, to the Ottoman Empire. The Venetian Republic, which then extended all the way to the eastern coast of the Adriatic sea, became particularly vulnerable as the final barrier between the Turks and mainland Italy – and in fact, the Venetians and the Ottoman Empire would soon be at war. These

¹⁷² In Biondo's "letter to Bracelli, 11/54", reproduced in Flavio Biondo and Jeffrey A. White, *Italy Illuminated* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

¹⁷³ Angelo Mazzocco, *A New Sense of the Past: the Scholarship of Biondo Flavio 1392-1463* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), 17.

events had a profound influence on the composition of Biondo's final work, *Roma Triumphans* (1459). In response to the Turkish threat, Pope Pius II convoked the Congress of Mantua in 1459 with hopes of uniting the great powers of Europe in a crusade against the Ottoman Turks, the common enemy of Christendom.¹⁷⁴ Biondo travelled with the curia to Mantua for the duration of the Council, but the meetings were unsuccessful. An ailing Biondo returned to Rome where he died in 1463. Pius did go on to make a call for a (rather toothless) new crusade, but he died just a year after Biondo. The Venetians were left to fend off the Turks on their own as the powers of mainland Italy tried to establish some internal stability in the face of growing external threats.

ii. Written works

While he is justly remembered for his successful career in the papal chancery, Flavio Biondo was first and foremost a revolutionary historiographer; his scholarship made critical contributions to the secular revision of humanist perspectives on classical Roman history, especially regarding the origins of the Latin language. Where previous historians painted a picture, Biondo built a living model. His works provide a critical, historical basis for the revival of classical ideas by establishing himself and his fellow humanists as the cultural descendants of Roman antiquity. The way in which Biondo examines the notion of cultural decline and rebirth contributes to a growing sense of

¹⁷⁴ On Pius II's crusade, see David Chambers, *Popes, Cardinals and War the Military Church in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe* (London: Tauris, 2006), 69-72.

civic identity within humanist scholarship, one which continued to develop well beyond the fifteenth century. Importantly, Biondo considers language to be a vital element of classical history and he relies on the similar notions of cultural continuity in both his social histories and his defense of the Italian vernacular. Mazzocco affirms that, with Biondo, “all contemporary social and political undertakings, be it the education of the young, the Turkish threat, or the universal governance of the papacy, were judged in light of antiquity.”¹⁷⁵ In viewing classical sources as a practical model for the contemporary world, Biondo makes critical advancements in the study of history, geography, archaeology and the humanist understanding of the origins of language.

In his long and eventful career as a distinguished notary and then as apostolic secretary, Biondo interacted with diplomats and heads of state from every corner of Europe, from England to the Ottoman Empire. His diplomatic responsibilities had endowed him with a profound understanding of the diverse political climates around Italy and he was personally attuned the historical rivalries which had menaced the Italian peninsula throughout his lifetime, beginning with the relentless tug-of-war over his hometown of Forlì. In the course of his travels, he also came into contact with many of the greatest humanist scholars of the early fifteenth century. The most influential was Florentine Chancellor Leonardo Bruni, who instilled in Biondo the values of civic humanism which he had inherited from his illustrious predecessor, Coluccio Salutati. In the appraisal of Celenza, “The phase of perfection in Florentine humanism was reached

¹⁷⁵ Angelo Mazzocco, *A New Sense of the Past: the Scholarship of Biondo Flavio 1392-1463* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), 15.

with Leonardo Bruni.”¹⁷⁶ Additionally, Bruni has been identified as the first “modern” historian for his secular division of historical periods.¹⁷⁷ A century earlier, Petrarch had distinguished the classical period from the “darkness” (*tenebrae*) of cultural decline which followed; Bruni built upon these divisions, remarkably aware that he was living in the dawn of a new age. In these ways, Bruni was an undoubtedly prominent figure in defining the civic culture of Florentine humanism – so much so that his absence as a key figure in this project may raise questions. However, as this is a narrative of transition and innovation, I argue that Bruni’s civic contributions consist primarily in refining the mentality elaborated by Salutati as opposed to initiating any critical changes in the civic agenda of the Florentine humanists. He was a tremendously worthy successor to Salutati, but a successor nonetheless. In terms of his contributions to historical scholarship, Bruni was indeed a true innovator but it was Biondo who applied these new perspectives to the history of language, and in doing so, Biondo made a critical step in refuting the typically Medieval notion of “classical bilingualism” espoused by Dante in the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia* and gave the vernacular languages a real possibility for grammatical refinement. For this, Biondo – and not Bruni – is the vernacular hero of the era. Nevertheless, Bruni had a formative influence on Biondo who came to embrace a secular, tripartite vision of history as well as the civic mentality of the Florentines, even after his return to Rome. These important cultural encounters along with his intense professional challenges made Biondo keenly aware of the civic and intellectual environment of the time and this awareness is reflected in his works.

¹⁷⁶ Christopher Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance, Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 37.

¹⁷⁷ Bruni’s idea of humanism is outlined in Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1975), 41-43.

In terms of his overall influence on the civic and vernacular threads of humanist scholarship, Biondo made two critical innovations. First, the novel, tripartite vision of history first elaborated by Bruni and Biondo fundamentally changed the humanists' relationship to classical scholarship and the ancient world. They embraced a more secular progression of history from the ancient world to the middle ages to the contemporary era and in doing so, they drew the ancient world closer; the scholarship of classical Rome became more relevant and accessible when viewed as a part of the cultural legacy of Italy. Biondo's reanimation of Roman antiquity as a model for contemporary society signaled a new age in the civic mentality of the humanists, one which sought not only to imitate but to build upon the civic, literary and cultural traditions of antiquity. Biondo's second major contribution arose as an extension of his exhaustive analysis of classical texts. In his debate with Bruni, recounted in *De verbis Romanae locutionis*, Biondo provides evidence to refute Latin's privileged status as an "artificial" language, described by Dante in the *De vulgari eloquentia* and discussed in chapter one. Biondo's alternative theory of linguistic history changes the way humanist scholars relate Latin to the vernacular languages and brings new hope for the grammatical regulation of a literary Italian vernacular. Giuseppe Marcellino writes: "possiamo dire che proprio la concezione storiografica di Biondo costituisce il sostrato della sua tesi della trasformazione linguistica."¹⁷⁸ While Dante, in the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*, had provided ample reasoning for writing in the vernacular despite its supposed grammatical limitations, according to his view of linguistic history the vernacular languages would always lack the inherent dignity and the grammatical rigor

¹⁷⁸ Giuseppe Marcellino in Angelo Mazzocco, *A New Sense of the Past: the Scholarship of Biondo Flavio 1392-1463* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), 48.

attributed to Latin. When Biondo succeeds in demonstrating that the spoken vernaculars of classical Rome were not fundamentally separate from Latin but merely a lower register of the same language, he disproves Dante's theory of "classical bilingualism" and pushes the intellectual community to reappraise their previously held notions of vernacular history. While Biondo wrote almost exclusively in Latin, he earns his place among the champions of the vernacular tradition for these revolutionary perspectives on the origins and the grammatical potential of "native" language. To best illustrate these fundamental innovations to the civic, vernacular course of humanist scholarship, my examination focuses on Biondo's first major work and his last: *De verbis Romanae locutionis* (1435) and *Roma triumphans* (1459).

Biondo's explicit discussion of language is featured in his earliest major work, *De verbis Romanae locutionis*, a dialogical treatise from 1435. Scholars have cited Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* (also known as the *Origines*) as well as Cicero's *Brutus* as Biondo's most prominent influences. Foreshadowing the monumental works of historiography which would follow, Biondo's assertions on language are rooted firmly in the historical continuity which Biondo perceives between classical Rome and his contemporary environment. Biondo dedicated the work to Leonardo Bruni who, within the dialogue, appears as Biondo's primary opponent. In response to a discussion of ideal Latin in Bruni's *Dialogi ad Petrum Histrum* (1401)¹⁷⁹, Biondo's *De verbis Romanae locutionis*¹⁸⁰ reexamines certain conceptions about the history of language, particularly

¹⁷⁹ Reproduced in Leonardo Bruni and Stefano Baldassarri, *Dialogi Ad Petrum Paulum Histrum*. (Florence: Olschki, 1995).

¹⁸⁰ Citations from *De verbis Romanae locutionis* are in Flavio Biondo and Bartolomeo Nogara, *Scritti Inediti e Rari Di Flavio Biondo* (Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1927), 115-130. English translations by Kelly McBride.

those elaborated by Dante in the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*. It is unlikely that Bruni or Biondo had consulted Dante's linguistic works directly, but still their arguments touch on many similar themes as a reflection of their common basis in typically Medieval notions of natural and artificial language. In *Dialogi ad Petrum Histrum*, Bruni supports Dante's theory of a two-language system in Rome, where Latin had always existed separately as an immutable, artificial instrument of the intellectual elite. Bruni argued that, in addition to Latin, there existed a plebeian, vernacular language, used by the common people. In Bruni's view, this separate spoken language, over time, had mutated into the contemporary vernaculars in Italy. This theory drew a fundamental distinction between Latin and the "natural" vernacular languages. In *De verbis*, Biondo uses historical and literary sources to refute Bruni's (and Dante's) notion of "classic bilingualism"; he argues that Latin, while often degraded or corrupted, was the one and only language in ancient Rome and that the variation between Latin and the vernacular languages was a question of learning as opposed to a true structural or substantive difference.

The debate which Biondo recreates in *De verbis* took place at the Florentine court of Eugenius IV in March of 1435 and Biondo composed his account just a month later. Biondo, accompanied by the figures of several illustrious humanists, debates the linguistic state of classical Rome, sometimes known as the *questione del Latino* – a critical precursor for the coming debates of the *questione della lingua* which, beyond establishing the general viability of the vernaculars for literary production, determined which of the Italian vernacular literary models should prevail as the linguistic standard. In this preliminary debate on Latin in the classical world, Biondo and his fellow humanist

interlocutors argue whether Latin had been the common language of all people, or if it existed in ancient Rome as it did in *Quattrocento* Italy – as a separate, grammatical language for literature. Biondo champions one side of the debate aided by fictionalized characters of Antonio Loschi and Cencio de' Rustici. The opposing faction is led by Brunini, with support from the characters of Poggio Bracciolini and Andrea Focchi. To begin, they define the question: did people in ancient Rome speak literary Latin, or did they speak something more like the contemporary vernaculars?

Biondo cites Livy's account of Tullus Hostilius and Cicero's *De Oratore* to demonstrate that there was not a significant difference between literary Latin and the spoken vernaculars of Rome. He does however concede that the Latin of educated people was far superior to that of commoners; he argues that the register of one's language is determined by education and social position. The difference therefore lies in grades of refinement – not in the inherent nature of the languages. Biondo writes:

“Nec tamen ideo non latinum vel, quale nostra habent tempora vulgare, omni latinitate carens erat, sed, quod in fratribus iisdem genitis parentibus saepenumero videmus contingere, ut militia unus, alter doctrina clari evadant, tertio per vitae ignaviam, aut quia sinistro sit natus sidere, inglorio remanente, trinae huiusmodi locutionis latinae germanitati accidisse constat.”¹⁸¹

Like Dante, Biondo discusses languages in terms of the natural affinity of a familial relationship. This association appears repeatedly in the major defenses of the Italian literary vernacular and seems to endure in our collective consciousness even today, as we often depict both genealogy and linguistic diversity as a growing tree. Biondo's

¹⁸¹ Biondo in *De verbis*, 121. “Nevertheless, nor was [the language of the masses] not Latin, like the language the masses of our time have, which completely lacks all Latinity, but as we often see happens, that the [manner of speaking] which has been engendered by the parents is the very same in brothers, it is understood that there exists a relationship/affinity between the three modes of speaking Latin, with the result that one [register] is like the military, another is characterized by illustrious learning, and for the third by the idleness of life, or because it was born by the inauspicious star, remains undistinguished.”

identification of three different modes, or registers, of Latin echoes Dante as well in the distinction of high, medium and low forms of language. As we know, Dante was writing about the vernacular while Biondo was writing about Latin; this critical parallel, however, would not be lost on future defenders of the vernacular such as Lorenzo de' Medici and Pietro Bembo who would rely on the humanist reconstruction of Latin as a guide for their elaboration of a vernacular literary tradition. In Biondo's description of the three registers of Latin, he correlates linguistic characteristics with vocational usage (*militia* and *doctrina clari*). In a way, Dante does this as well in his designation of the four characteristics of the *volgare illustre*, especially in his consideration of language as a necessary tool for legal and civic matters (*aulico* and *curiale*). While these professional comparisons do not overlap directly, they show that both Dante and Biondo were thinking about language in terms of its utility for civic pursuits.

As further evidence that literary Latin and the spoken vernacular were closely related, Biondo cites examples of learned foreign visitors to the curia who spoke Latin very poorly, while illiterate Roman commoners were capable of understanding the orations of great intellectuals:

"Qua vel maxima adducor coniectura, ducentis supra millesimum annis post conditam urbem, priusquam ulla barbaries, quae diu resedisset vel populo Romano par vel numero et potentia superior, urbem accolisset, quaecumque dicerentur litterata Latinitate poemata orationesque omnes pariter intellexisse."¹⁸²

With this example, Biondo illustrates that Latin was a single, natural language, spoken and written in different registers. If all Romans, regardless of their station and their

¹⁸² Biondo in *De verbis*, 126. "I am especially persuaded by such conjecture, for 200 years above the 1000th after the founding of the city [of Rome], before any barbarian, who for a long time had remained either equal to the Roman people or superior with respect to their number and power, lived near the city, whatever was designated orations and learned Latinate poems, everyone understood them equally."

education, could follow the orations of illustrious scholars, then their native, spoken language must have been fundamentally the same. In both the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante emphasizes the value of communicating in a way which is accessible not only to illustrious scholars but to the common people; this desire for a broad dissemination of wisdom and virtue becomes a core argument in the promotion of vernacular literature, particularly for Alberti, Machiavelli and Bembo – three eminently practical defenders of the vernacular tradition.

As further evidence against the notion of Latin as an artificial, immutable language, Biondo uses examples from Cicero's history of Roman oratory, *Brutus*, to demonstrate the similarity of the basic rules which governed both classical Latin and popular Roman speech. He writes:

"De Gaii et Lucii fratribus Caepatii filiis, quae idem habet *Brutus*, ad rem similiter videntur facere, quos "oppidano quodam et incondito genere dicendi" usos, non ex scriptis orationibus sed ex vocis pronuntiationisque sono parum laudatos videtur Cicero pertransire."¹⁸³

In *Brutus*, Cicero recreates the speech of two brothers, Gaius and Lucius, who were capable orators despite their lack of formal rhetorical ability. In this, Cicero's written record of the spoken register, Biondo finds critical evidence for his theory of Latin's status as a natural language as well as his theory of the contemporary vernacular.

To contextualize his Latin arguments within the *Quattrocento* linguistic landscape, Biondo specifies that the popular, spoken register of Latin was not the same as the contemporary vernacular; they did, however, share a Latinate affinity. To explain the

¹⁸³ Biondo in *De verbis*, 127. "Of the brothers Gaius And Lucius, the sons of Caepasius, whom Brutus has the same, for the matter they seem to do similarly, they who have used "a certain provincial and uncivilized manner of speaking," Cicero seemed to pass through the sound of the pair of them, having been praised not for their written speeches but for the pronouncements of their voice."

transition from the classical to the contemporary vernaculars, Biondo suggests that Latin was degraded and corrupted by the influence of Barbaric invaders after the fall of the Roman Empire. While humanists often deferred to this "theory of the catastrophe" to explain the breakdown of classical, literary Latin during the Middle Ages, Biondo suggests that all registers of Latin were subject to the same corruption. The contemporary Italian vernaculars, therefore, had evolved from the low, spoken register of Latin:

"Temporibus vides quae Ciceronis aetatem praecesserant illos qui aut extra Romam vixerant, aut Romae domesticam habuerant aliquam barbariem, a nitore locutionis Romanae aliquo recessisse, et barbarie illa infusatos fuisse: postea vero quam urbs a Gothis et Vandalis capta inhabitari coepta est, non unus iam aut duo infuscati, sed omnes sermone barbaro inquinati ac penitus sordidati fuerunt; sensimque factum est, ut pro Romana latinitate adulterinam hanc barbarica mixtam loquelam habeamus vulgarem."¹⁸⁴

For Biondo, the fall of Rome signified "both an historical and linguistic break."¹⁸⁵ In showing the mutations and corruptions of Latin in ancient Rome, Biondo demonstrates that Latin was "an organic linguistic entity conditioned by human and historical factors and thus susceptible to changes and capable, therefore, of evolving into a modern language, such as the Italian *volgare*."¹⁸⁶ This point is critically important, as it represents the first secular, historical perspective on the origin of the Italian vernaculars as well as a significant contrast to the Medieval notion of Latin as an immutable, "artificial" language. Biondo's theory is revolutionary not only for its deviation from the intellectual consensus of previous scholars, but also for the fact that his narrative contradicted the history of linguistic diversity taught in the Bible. With his carefully

¹⁸⁴ Biondo, *De verbis*, 129.

¹⁸⁵ Angelo Mazzocco, *A New Sense of the Past: the Scholarship of Biondo Flavio 1392-1463* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), 29.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 17.

curated citations, Biondo demonstrates that the Italian vernaculars, though degraded by time and circumstance, originated in classical Latin and were therefore fundamentally worthy of, and amenable to, grammatical regulation.

Surviving manuscripts of *De verbis* indicate a limited though relatively speedy dissemination of the text. Marcellino suggests that interest was limited to linguistic scholars and that copies of the manuscript, while few in number, were well circulated among leading humanists. He writes: “L’opera di Biondo, quindi, fu letta nelle cerchie degli umanisti più interessati alle questioni linguistiche, ma nel complesso possiamo supporre che la sua diffusione manoscritta sia stata circoscritta.”¹⁸⁷ This scholarly attention to *De verbis* is further evidenced by the response of Leon Battista Alberti in the third book of his *Libri della famiglia*, written between 1433 and 1437. Alberti and the vernacular defenders to follow all subscribe to Biondo’s revision of linguistic history and they begin to approach the refinement of a literary Italian vernacular in terms of the Latinate origins which Biondo identifies. In his later works, which focus primarily on questions of history, civics and archaeology, Biondo continues to build on the same notions of secular history and social continuity which support his revolutionary perspectives on language. His meticulous examinations of civics, culture and language in the classical Roman world are the key and the common thread to his entire body of works. His historiographical writings, including the *De Roma instaurata* (1444-1446) and *Roma Triumphans* (1459), in their visionary reconstruction of the physical and institutional landscape of ancient Rome, reflect the principal ambition and defining

¹⁸⁷ Giuseppe Marcellino in Angelo Mazzocco, *A New Sense of the Past: the Scholarship of Biondo Flavio 1392-1463* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), 78.

element of his scholarship – to revive the cultural traditions of the classical world, and moreover, to expose the ways in which they are relevant and useful to modern society.

Biondo's *Roma Triumphans* (1459)¹⁸⁸, his final major work, was written in the same year as the Council of Mantua, under the shadow of the Turkish threat. Hankins writes: “the project as a whole is framed as a means to achieve the fondest political dream of Pius II, the work's dedicatee: motivating Christians to participate in a great crusade to recover formerly Christian lands in the East from the Turks.”¹⁸⁹ It features Biondo's most refined civic commentary as well as a culmination of the historiographical, geographical, archaeological and civic discoveries of his earlier works. The five parts of *Roma Triumphans* are divided into discussions of religion, government, military, customs of everyday life and finally, the triumph of the Roman civilization. Hankins writes that, in *Roma Triumphans*, Biondo “is laying foundations for the whole Renaissance project as envisaged by Petrarch a century before. His goal is to assemble and arrange the ancient sources needed to reconstruct what Rome was like in the period of its greatest flourishing in order to bring about the civilizational reforms the humanists longed for.”¹⁹⁰ In this finally major work, Biondo makes no secret of his political motivations; in light of the fall of Constantinople (1453) and the encroaching threat of the Ottoman Empire, Biondo intends to glorify Roman civilization and expose the wisdom of classical antiquity as a model for the uncertain future of the Italian

¹⁸⁸ Citations from *Roma Triumphans* are from Flavio Biondo, et al. *Rome in Triumph* (Cambridge: I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2016). English translations by Frances Muecke.

¹⁸⁹ James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 289.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

peninsula. The dedication and the proem in particular give evidence to Biondo's refined civic sensibilities.

In the dedication, Biondo writes:

“Qua fretus confidentia non verebor facere editionem multis hoc tempore, ut mea fert opinio, profuturam. Exciti enim a te ingentes Italiae, Galliarum, Hispaniarum, et Germaniae populi in magnam praeclaramque expeditionem quam paras in Turchos, Graeciam, Constantinopolim, Moesiaque dura et crudeli tyrannide prementes, nonnulla in ipso opere edocebuntur, aliquando alias simili in rerum difficultate gesta, ut ipsa priscorum virtutis imitatio generosi quibusque animi sit ad rem capessandem stimulos additura.”¹⁹¹

Biondo's statement of purpose is explicitly civic, and in the tradition of the Florentine civic humanists he seeks to present his scholarship in a way which will benefit society, specifically in light of the contemporary political landscape. This desire to generate utility for as many people as possible was a critical theme for Dante and it becomes a core argument for vernacular authors in the late *Quattrocento* as well. While Latin remained an instrument of the privileged elite, vernacular texts made wisdom and virtue more accessible to the people. This was especially relevant in a mercantile city like Florence, where the vernacular was often used for reading and writing in practical, business-related affairs. These merchants were often “literate” in the modern sense, though not in the classical Latin sense, and vernacular authorship (and translations) allowed for the wisdom of great scholars to reach a larger number of citizens. Biondo does not make this explicit connection between utility and vernacular production, but he is driven by the

¹⁹¹ Biondo, *Roma Triumphans*, Dedication, 2; 2-4. “I shall not fear to publish a work that in my opinion will be of benefit to many at this time. In it the mighty peoples of Italy, France, Spain and Germany whom you have roused to join the great and glorious expedition that you are preparing against the Turks...will learn of deeds performed in earlier times in other places in similarly difficult circumstances so that imitation of the prowess of the ancients is itself another factor likely to stimulate all noble spirits eagerly to undertake the enterprise.”

same civic mentality which inspired later scholars, notably Alberti, to apply the same reasoning to their defense of vernacular literature.

Biondo's proem in *Roma Triumphans* gives an apt essentialization of his overarching approach to scholarship: with a thoughtful examination of the "prowess of the ancients", he aims to provide wise and useful advice for modern endeavors. In writing, Biondo imagines – and perhaps hopes to incite – the return of a Christian, cultural empire in which France, Spain, Germany and the Italian states would unite against the looming peril of Turkish conquest, not unlike Dante's image of a universal empire in *De monarchia*. For Biondo, that which ultimately defines the state is "the durable power of the people, and the consequent inability, first of the kings, then the patricians, later the senatorial nobility, to completely control the polity of their own interest."¹⁹² Biondo's exposition of the structure of the Roman republic is mainly cultural, and shows that he was highly aware of the dynamics of power within a state, a sensibility which undoubtedly served him well as both a historian and a civic bureaucrat. The hierarchy of power is of critical concern for Biondo, who ascribes the well-being of a state, more than any other factor, to the individual virtue of the ruler; this is an early manifestation of what Hankins defines as "virtue politics" which "insists that rank in society should be a function of human excellence rather than of heredity; the well-born are not entitled to rule unless they are also wise and virtuous."¹⁹³ This notion of individual virtue, often reminiscent of Dante's ideas on nobility in the *Convivio*, would

¹⁹² James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 295.

¹⁹³ James Hankins, "Blondo Flavio on the Roman Republic" in Frances Muecke and Maurizio Campanelli, *The Invention of Rome: Biondo Flavio's Roma Triumphans and Its Worlds* (Geneva: Droz, 2017), 109.

remain an important theme for Alberti and the later civic humanists. Hankins writes that “virtue” , in the view of the fifteenth-century humanists, was achieved “by the study of the humanities, “good letters” – the humane arts of literature, philosophy and oratory – which provided training in the forms of excellence that were characteristic of free men and women.”¹⁹⁴ If the greatness of a state is determined by individual virtue and virtue is achieved through literary pursuits, then there exists a direct, inherent connection between language and civic stability. While still focused on Latin and the institutions of classical Rome, Biondo identifies this essential link between language and civics, or more specifically, law. He writes:

“Romani enim maximam orbis partem suae subactam dictioni ita pacaverunt cultamque bonis moribus et artibus reddiderunt, ut disiunctae mari montibusque et fluminibus separatae gentes ac linguis litteraturaque differentes populi per Latinae linguae communionem perque communes omnibus Romanos magistratus una eademque civitas sint effecti;”¹⁹⁵

Biondo’s specific identification of language and law as the preeminent factors of social stability is fundamentally important; against a backdrop of perpetual civic instability, Biondo was one of many humanist scholars to propose new (or newly revived) models for peace and political security. As civic scholars, the humanists’ focus on law and systems of government seems self-explanatory, but this concurrent focus on the unifying and stabilizing power of language is critical, too: it quantifies the literary tradition as a supreme cultural good. This idea of language as a marker of civic and

¹⁹⁴ James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 296.

¹⁹⁵ Biondo, *Roma Triumphans*, Proem, 2; 6. “After the Romans had brought the largest part of the world under their sway, they made it so peaceful and so civilized it with good customs and conduct that races divided by sea and mountain and kept apart by rivers and people who had different languages and ways of writing were made one and the same state, through sharing the Latin language and all having the Roman magistrates in common.”

cultural achievement, illustrated here by Biondo in the time of Cosimo de' Medici, becomes a defining element in the political philosophy of Cosimo's grandson, Lorenzo, and his fellow late-*Quattrocento* humanists, discussed in chapter three.

In the body of *Roma Triumphans*, Biondo examines the civic and cultural institutions of classical Rome to identify the specific characteristics which determined its greatness. He finds three: first, the Romans adhered to a religious morality; second, they displayed a cosmopolitan readiness to admit worthy foreigners as citizens and civic actors; finally, the greatness of classical Rome was upheld by the personal and professional virtue of its leading citizens. While Bruni, in his *Laudatio Florentine urbis*, argues that republican liberty is the primary characteristic of Rome's greatness, in *Roma Triumphans* Biondo suggests that Rome's greatness derives instead from "innate Roman virtue and piety, transmitted via customs and mores."¹⁹⁶ In Biondo's perspective, we see some of the characteristics of the emerging Medicean cultural agenda which allowed Cosimo and his descendants to establish authority over Florence without any institutional or hereditary right: the Medici never commanded any particularly imposing military force; they maintained their position in Florence, as well as Florence's position on the larger political landscape, by establishing the city as a center of cultural eminence and civic virtue. In *Roma Triumphans*, Biondo demonstrates a similar understanding of the connection between cultural influence and political power. In the second half of the century, Lorenzo and his secretary Angelo Poliziano would continue to elaborate this nuanced strategy of cultural diplomacy. Mazzocco writes:

¹⁹⁶ James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 300.

“Many aspects of the *questione della lingua* were directly influenced by political motives and deeply affected by one’s philosophical beliefs and philological orientation.”¹⁹⁷

Biondo’s positions on both language and civics rely on his extensive research into the customs and cultural institutions of the classical world and the ways in which this Roman legacy can be useful and instructive for contemporary society.

In summarizing *Roma Triumphans*, Frances Muecke writes: “Overt endorsement of Pius II’s campaign follows from the main idea that drives *Rome in Triumph*, that is, that the Roman state, in its totality, presents a high-point of human civilization that has not been surpassed. Through conquest and the resulting spread of a common language, the Romans had brought long-lasting peace and stability to their empire, which they ruled with good laws and practices disseminating beneficent ethical, civil and political values.”¹⁹⁸ In this passage, Muecke epitomizes the critical aspect of Biondo’s approach to history, one which aims to revive the cultural legacy of the Roman world, especially those elements which brought peace and stability to their civilization. In this examination of Roman greatness, Biondo identifies a common linguistic tradition as the critical element of civic stability. In this fundamental connection which he posits between language and civics, as well as his innovative and systematic approach to classical history, Biondo perpetuated a monumental change in the methods of humanist study – Burckhardt, in fact, writes that Biondo “exercised the profoundest influence on the whole

¹⁹⁷ Angelo Mazzocco, *A New Sense of the Past: the Scholarship of Biondo Flavio 1392-1463* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), 3.

¹⁹⁸ Muecke’s introduction to Flavio Biondo, et al. *Rome in Triumph* (Cambridge: I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2016), ix.

European world of learning.”¹⁹⁹ His works illuminate the cultural and civic atmosphere of classical Rome in a way which transformed their celebrated history into a guide for modern civilization – “an exemplary for human life.”²⁰⁰ Biondo’s empirical defense of the vernacular languages in *De verbis romance locutionis*, along with his recognition of the critical role of language in the cultural identity and stability of a state²⁰¹ in *Roma Triumphans*, laid the groundwork for a new phase of humanist inquiry, one which sought to better contemporary society with the wisdom of the past.

III. Leon Battista Alberti

Even among his remarkable contemporaries, Leon Battista Alberti is a fascinating character. A quintessential “Renaissance man”, he lived from 1404 to 1472²⁰² and his works span a vast range of subject matters, genres and linguistic styles, effortlessly mixing tradition with the truly avant-garde. As Anthony Grafton affirms: “Alberti amazed and enthralled his contemporaries by bringing together images and ideas, levels of expression and artistic motifs, that had previously existed separately.”²⁰³ While he is often remembered for his significant artistic and architectural achievements, his

¹⁹⁹ Jacob Burckhardt and S. G. C. Middlemore, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Penguin, 2004), 186-187.

²⁰⁰ Muecke’s introduction to Flavio Biondo, et al. *Rome in Triumph* (Cambridge: I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2016), ix.

²⁰¹ On the Italian Renaissance “state”, see James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 63-70.

²⁰² Dates for Leon Battista Alberti’s life and works in Luca Boschetto, *Leon Battista Alberti e Firenze: Biografia, Storia, Letteratura* (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 2000).

²⁰³ Anthony Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti: Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 6.

contributions to mathematics, historiography and vernacular literature have, rather unfairly, garnered less critical attention. Several recent studies, however, notably those of Martin McLaughlin, Timothy Kircher and Brian Maxson, have taken a more holistic approach to Alberti's astounding catalogue of works; I aim to continue on this path by examining Alberti's revolutionary contributions to the vernacular tradition in light of his distinctly civic, though unique, approach to humanist scholarship.

Alberti had a prestigious classical education and was a great admirer of Livy, Sallust and especially Cicero. He was a gifted Latinist from a young age, and many of his works were written in Latin. However, despite this “predilection for archaic forms”²⁰⁴, Alberti was free and often even eccentric in his rhetorical style; it was one of the many ways in which he deviated from the conventions of his humanist contemporaries. Kircher writes that, in Florence, Alberti was skeptical of the prescribed methods of “Medici-sponsored humanism”²⁰⁵ and on questions of morality, erudition and language, especially, he often took a divergent position. Among these acts of rebellion, perhaps most importantly, Alberti was one of the first civic humanists to resume the *Trecento* tradition of vernacular authorship; Maria Passarelli, in fact, describes him as “il campione solitario e isolato”²⁰⁶ of the early fifteenth-century vernacular tradition. It is important to note, however, that despite his unconventional methods, the scope of Alberti's scholarship still aligned in many ways with his fellow humanists. Like Biondo,

²⁰⁴ Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 150.

²⁰⁵ Timothy Kircher, *Living Well in Renaissance Italy: the Virtues of Humanism and the Irony of Leon Battista Alberti* (Tempe: (ACMRS (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies), 2012), 3.

²⁰⁶ Maria Passarelli, *La Lingua Della Patria: Leon Battista Alberti e La Questione Del Volgare* (Rome: Bagatto Libri, 1999), 9.

Alberti viewed the classical world as a model for civic and cultural achievement; his application of classical artistic and literary forms to contemporary projects is evident throughout his scholarship, from his architectural works to his elaboration of a vernacular grammar.

As a young man, Alberti was named secretary to the papal chancery in Rome. There, he encountered several other influential humanists, including Flavio Biondo. As colleagues in the curia, they both spent nearly a decade in Florence during the exile of Pope Eugenius IV. Over the course of these years in Florence, Alberti forged deep personal connections with the humanist leaders of the city. Their influence was responsible for a humanist transformation in the curia, even after Eugenius and his court returned to Rome. While Alberti eventually surpassed Biondo as a one of the preeminent figures of the humanist tradition, he often relied on Biondo's scholarship to support his perspectives on the classical world and, most explicitly, his theories on vernacular language. Building on the ideas of linguistic history which Biondo elaborates in *De verbis romanae locutionis*, Alberti revives many of Dante's arguments for vernacular literature with newfound historical authority.

Beyond his attention to vernacular language, Alberti's scholarship displays an enduring preoccupation with the role of intellectuals in civic life. Far from the contemplative withdrawal of Petrarch, Alberti forcefully advocates for the active participation of the *saggio* in both the public and private spheres. In Alberti's view, the family and the state are similar entities, and both require a wise and virtuous leader to maintain stability and collective well-being. These theories are presented best in two of Alberti's dialogical treatises: *Della famiglia* (1433-1434) and *De iciarchia* (1470). These

works emphasize an ideological connection between civic stability and language, one which Alberti conceptualizes in *Della famiglia* and later puts into practice with the *Grammaticetta* (1441), his grammar of the contemporary Florentine language. Passarelli writes that, throughout Alberti's written works, "I nodi del confronto erano quelli fondanti della cultura umanistica: la lingua, il rapporto con la tradizione e il ruolo degli intellettuali."²⁰⁷ While his work was not always well-received at the time, Alberti's scholarship, particularly his civic-cultural notion of the *lingua-patria*, would become critically important for successive generations of humanists.

i. Alberti the Secretary

The Alberti family once enjoyed a prominent position in Florence; in the fourteenth century, they were one of the wealthiest and most visible families in the city. However, their alliance with the popular White Guelph faction, and their support of the *ciompi* rebellion, would be the cause of their near-demise. In 1382, under the leadership of the aristocratic Albizzi, the newly-restored Florentine oligarchy expelled several prominent White Guelph families from the city – including the Alberti. As a result, Leon Battista, while ancestrally Florentine, was born and raised in Genoa. By 1428, he had completed a doctorate in canon law in Bologna and he began his career as secretary to the Bishop of Bologna, Cardinal Niccolò Albergati. As a papal legate in service of Albergati, Alberti travelled throughout northern Italy as well as to France, Germany and the Netherlands.

²⁰⁷ Maria Passarelli, *La Lingua Della Patria: Leon Battista Alberti e La Questione Del Volgare* (Rome: Bagatto Libri, 1999), 9.

In 1432, a year after the election of Eugenius IV, Alberti travelled to Rome where he took Holy Orders and began a decades-long career as a member of the papal chancery.

When Alberti arrived in Rome, the new pope was already embroiled in the Council of Basel, a general council called by his predecessor, Pope Martin V. The Swiss meetings were sparsely attended and Eugenius hoped to dissolve the Council in order to hold new meetings in Italy, in which the Greeks had agreed to participate. His efforts, however, were not well-received and shortly after, political tensions erupted much closer to home. In 1434, Rome reclaimed communal autonomy from the papacy and Eugenius IV was cast out of the city.²⁰⁸ Disguised as a common monk, the pope fled down the Tiber to the port of Ostia, where he boarded a Florentine ship and was carried north. Alberti travelled with the curia to Florence along with Poggio Bracciolini and Flavio Biondo, establishing a critical point of contact between the curial humanists of Rome and the civic humanism of the Florentines. They arrived at the dawn of a new political and cultural age in Florence, just as Cosimo de' Medici established his rule over the *Signoria*. Alberti's "Florentine decade" signaled an important evolution in his scholarship and, in some ways, a homecoming. His time in Florence was marked by intense cultural activity and served as the backdrop for the majority of his linguistic production. While this was but one of the many outposts of Alberti's professional activities, it was this extended sojourn in Florence which motivated his innovative – and occasionally antagonistic – contributions to the advancement vernacular humanism.

²⁰⁸ Civic autonomy in Rome was suppressed by Boniface IX in 1398.

In 1438, Eugenius finally convened his meeting with the Eastern branch of the Church, the Council of Ferrara-Florence, so named because an outbreak of plague forced them to move from Ferrara to Florence only a year into the proceedings. Alberti was in attendance in Ferrara and Florence for the Council, but he was never a particularly ambitious member of the clergy and, while in Florence, he began to step back from his formal responsibilities in the papal chancery. He acquired several ecclesiastical endowments in Tuscany, notably the priory of Gangalandi and later the rectory of Borgo San Lorenzo, and these afforded him a certain amount of independence which he used to travel and conduct his most important works of scholarship. Though he returned to Rome with Eugenius IV in 1443, he was never again cast off from Florence entirely; the personal relationships he accumulated during this period would endure for the rest of his life and allow him to retain a connection to Florentine society. While he spent the final twenty years of his life based in Rome, he travelled frequently, often to Florence and Urbino. His works from this period include *De re aedificatoria* (finished in 1452), *Regule lingue florentine* (written before 1454) and *De iciarchia* (1470). In his final years, Alberti often moved in the “humanist court” of Lorenzo de’ Medici. Decades after his first stay with Eugenius and the curia, Alberti found that the intellectual culture in Florence was changing, most notably in their attitudes towards vernacular literature. In this new phase of Florentine humanism, Alberti became a mentor and friend to several important rising humanists including Cristoforo Landino, Marsilio Ficino and Angelo Poliziano.

ii. Written works

As a result of his family's exile, and to an extent, his illegitimate birth, Alberti was always a bit of an outsider – but this was perhaps to his benefit. Over the course of his very large life, he was a witness and a student of a multitude of diverse traditions from Bologna to Rome, but he never truly belonged to one or another. As a result, Alberti's scholarship is truly innovative, and often eccentric. His playful imagination is best on display in two of his very minor works, though it should be noted that his sense of humor did not in any way diminish the rigor of his scholarship: at the age of twenty, he composed the *Philodoxus* (1424), a theatrical work in Latin which he managed to pass off as a long-lost piece of classical literature.²⁰⁹ Years later he wrote *Canis* – a formal Latin funerary oration for his beloved dog. On a more conservative level, Alberti's major works include the vernacular dialogue *Della famiglia* (1433-1434); the artistic treatise *De pictura* (1435); an enormous, ten book work on architecture, *De re aedificatoria* (finished in 1452) and the civic dialogue *De iciarchia* (1470). His most ambitious Latin literary project is the *Momus* (written before 1450), a mythological comedy inspired by Lucian's works in which he satirizes political, artistic and intellectual society.²¹⁰ It has sometimes been read as a roman-à-clef for the papal court in the mid-fifteenth century – a veiled commentary on perils of unwise leadership²¹¹. While roughly half of Alberti's works are

²⁰⁹ Maria Passarelli, *La Lingua Della Patria: Leon Battista Alberti e La Questione Del Volgare* (Rome: Bagatto Libri, 1999), 9.

²¹⁰ On the "enigma of the *Momus*", see Timothy Kircher, *Living Well in Renaissance Italy: the Virtues of Humanism and the Irony of Leon Battista Alberti* (Tempe: (ACMRS (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies), 2012), 225-230.

²¹¹ In Sarah Knight's introduction to Leon Battista Alberti et al., *Momus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

written in Latin, his prolific vernacular scholarship marks a critical advance not only in the theory, but in the use of the Florentine language.

Throughout his cross-disciplinary collection of works, Alberti shows an underlying adherence to three principal themes: the role of artists and intellectuals in public life, the valuable potential of a refined linguistic tradition and the inherent link between classical Rome and their own modern society. These themes are representative of the civic mentality which had risen among the *Quattrocento* humanists – especially in Florence. Earlier scholars, particularly Salutati, had debated the virtues of active and contemplative living and many preferred to follow the introspective, isolationist example of Petrarch; for Alberti, this was tantamount to treason.²¹² He believed that “man is born on order to be useful to other men”²¹³ and that useful work, in the public and private sphere, was the best safeguard against the perils of Fortune. Alberti equated virtue and perfection with divine order, and thus, he sought the natural order of all things – in art, in mathematics, in society and in language. Critical opinion seems to acknowledge that generally, Alberti’s linguistic style is governed more by form and function than by elegance; while he concedes the value of *eloquenza* in politics, he proposes that there are but two truly dignified reasons to speak – asking to learn, or responding to educate. With apt brevity, he explains: “El favellare dà sete, el tacere no.”²¹⁴ Garin describes

²¹² Garin writes that, for Alberti, “l’assentarsi dalla società umana per la pura ricerca è denunciato come un tradimento.” Eugenio Garin, *La Cultura Del Rinascimento* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2012), 85.

²¹³ Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1975), 61.

²¹⁴ Alberti, *De iciarchia*, reproduced in Leon Battista Alberti and Cecil Grayson, *Opere Volgari* (Bari: G. Laterza, 1966).

Alberti's distaste for linguistic excess as a "virtuous efficacy"²¹⁵ derived from his desire to be of practical use – it is this same desire which motivates Alberti to write in the vernacular, for the benefit of the many and not just the privileged few.

Alberti sought to elevate the vernacular tradition in several ways: he applied classical forms, such as the dialogue, to vernacular authorship, he translated classical works (from Latin as well as Greek) into the vernacular and he composed his own regulated grammar of the contemporary Florentine language, the *Grammatichetta* (1441). This brief but highly innovative treatise – a concrete and systematic regulation of vernacular grammar – followed several earlier, ultimately less-successful elaborations of Florentine grammar, including Giovanfrancesco Fortunio's *Regole* from 1516.²¹⁶ In the *Grammatichetta*, ever attentive to form, Alberti stresses the importance of applying the rules of language correctly and giving careful attention to agreements of gender, number and tense. He also provides a standardized lexicon. In the conclusion, Alberti frames his ennoblement of the vernacular as a service in honor of the *patria*, recalling the connection between language and society, as well as the fundamental role of the intellectual in civic life. The elaboration of this small grammar occurred in the same period as another one of Alberti's spirited enterprises: the *certame coronario*²¹⁷, a vernacular poetry competition in Florence. The judges, chosen from his esteemed colleagues of the curia, dismissed the idea of a refined vernacular and declined to

²¹⁵ Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1975), 62.

²¹⁶ Dates for Fortunio in Brian Richardson, "The Creation and Reception of Fortunio's *Regole Grammaticali* (1516)." (*The Italianist*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2016).

²¹⁷ For a detailed account of the *Certame coronario*, see Timothy Kircher, *Living Well in Renaissance Italy: the Virtues of Humanism and the Irony of Leon Battista Alberti* (Tempe: (ACMRS (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies), 2012), 187-195.

choose a winner. In response, an “anonymous” sonnet was circulated – in Latin – condemning their judgement. If you had not already guessed, all signs indicate that the mystery author of this *Protesta* was Alberti himself.²¹⁸

Despite Alberti’s modern-day acclaim, many of his contributions – like the *certame coronario* – were not received well by his contemporaries and few original copies of his work remain. Even in modern scholarship, Alberti’s seminal works on art and architecture have elicited a great deal of critical study while others have languished in near obscurity. On the fate of Alberti’s linguistic legacy, Passarelli writes: “una battaglia d’avanguardia e quasi personale, l’ecllettismo e l’estraneità della sua posizione di intellettuale rispetto all’establishment culturale vicino a Cosimo de’ Medici, impedirono al suo modello, molto lontano dalla tradizione trecentesca, di imporsi.”²¹⁹ While later vernacular authors would draw linguistic inspiration from the great works of the fourteenth century, Alberti advocated for the grammatical regulation of the Florentine vernacular as it existed in his own time. His unique approach was partially adopted by Cristoforo Landino, though it would never reach the canonical levels of Machiavelli or Bembo. Nevertheless, Alberti’s work represents a critical step towards these (admittedly more successful) future endeavors.

The civic mentality of the Florentine humanists made a lasting impression on Alberti, especially regarding the virtue of cultural achievement and the value of a native literary tradition. While the *Grammaticetta* provides a technical elaboration of

²¹⁸ Mirko Tavoni, *Latino, grammatica, volgare: storia di una questione umanistica* (Padua: Antenore, 1984), 65.

²¹⁹ Maria Passarelli, *La Lingua Della Patria: Leon Battista Alberti e La Questione Del Volgare* (Rome: Bagatto Libri, 1999), 9.

vernacular grammar, Alberti's theories behind the ennoblement of the vernacular and their connection to civic virtue are best elaborated in the dialogical treatise *Della famiglia* (1433-1434). Years later, in his final major work *De iciarchia* (1470), Alberti refines and further elaborates his theories on family, society and "virtuous efficacy", those things which drove his vernacular impulse. The following section will take a closer look at these two works in an effort to highlight Alberti's less famed contributions to the progression of humanist scholarship. Despite Alberti's complicated relationship with the powers-that-were in Florence, he fashioned himself into a true civic humanist and one of the most avid – and skilled – proponents of vernacular literature in his time.

Alberti wrote *Della famiglia* between 1433 and 1434, the period in which both he and Cosimo de' Medici made their triumphant returns to Florence. It was a critical moment for the Florentines, one which saw the onset of a new political and cultural era. The communal age had come to a definitive end, replaced by a powerful oligarchy, unofficially led by the Medici. Florence was wealthier, busier and more powerful than ever – and their civic ambitions expanded. This bolstering of political influence coupled with the humanist commitment to civic utility brought about a refined conceptualization of the "state", a new sense of cultural pride and a desire for glory. Renée Watkins writes: "Like Machiavelli almost a century later, Alberti combines literary authorities and practical experience to teach what works, what leads to success."²²⁰ Indeed, both Alberti and Machiavelli often give a sense of being eminently more practical than diplomatic.

²²⁰ Watkins' introduction in Leon Battista Alberti and Renée Neu Watkins, *The Family in Renaissance Florence: Book Three* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1994), 10.

In *Della famiglia*, Alberti's theories of both language and civic engagement are featured in discussions on education, marriage, home economics and friendship. At its core, it is a deeply personal work and very distinctly Albertian, "delighting in heavy ironies and elaborate insinuations."²²¹ The dialogical format of the treatise allows for the expression of conflict and gives readers a chance to relive the moral and social preoccupations of the interlocutors. The dialogue was a flexible, polymorphous format, especially at the beginning of the fifteenth century when the revival of classical forms came into contact with the lively novella tradition of the previous century. *Della famiglia* incorporates elements of multiple genres, including the Ciceronian dialogue, the "ricordo" mercantile and the *declamazione*. Most prominently of all, *Della famiglia* takes shape from Xenophon's Socratic dialogue, *Oeconomicus*.²²² Beyond their stated purposes for home management, both *Della famiglia* and *Oeconomicus* can be read as manuals for the successful leadership of not only a family, but the state as a whole. This interpretive duality emphasizes the continued importance of service to both public and private life, as well as the enduring cultural notion of the family as a small state and vice versa. Alberti later expands on this specific correlation, as well as his philosophy of service, in *De iciarchia*. Importantly, both of these works are written in the vernacular.

Della famiglia is "that revealing work where Alberti paints the Florentine merchant class in the fullness of its good sense and sober ostentation."²²³ Book I focuses on

²²¹ Watkins' introduction in Leon Battista Alberti and Renée Neu Watkins, *The Family in Renaissance Florence: Book Three* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1994), 1.

²²² Martin McLaughlin, "Alberti Self-Fashionista: the name, the self-portrait, the autobiographies." (GRL Lecture Series - Italian section, 2 December 2016, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore MD).

²²³ Citations for *Della famiglia* are taken from Leon Battista Alberti and Cecil Grayson, *Opere Volgari, Vol. I* (Bari: G. Laterza, 1966).

familial relationships and parental responsibility while Book II focuses more closely on the bonds of marriage. Book III, which is “the most dramatic, far-ranging, and down-to-earth”²²⁴ focuses on matters of the household and Book IV extends beyond the family to discuss friendship among men. In writing his moral and philosophical treatises in the vernacular, Alberti “wants the two kinds of knowledge and literacy to mix: he wants popular wisdom to be incorporated in literature and he wants merchants to read more elaborate thinking than was usual in their account books, diaries, memoirs and chronicles.”²²⁵ Like Dante, and even to an extent Salutati, Alberti is in tune with the requirements of his intended audience: they wanted to contribute to the common good by making the wisdom of the classical world available to their fellow citizens, including those without the benefit of a Latin education. Especially in a city like Florence, where the merchant class was wealthy and established but not necessarily formally educated, the value of vernacular scholarship became ever more apparent. In disseminating his philosophy for “virtuous” living to as broad an audience as possible, Alberti feels that he is contributing to the stability of the social hierarchy and fulfilling his own obligation to the common good. Moderation, vigilance and careful management of the household (and of the state) are Alberti’s remedy for the corruption and instability which had plagued his early life.

Most relevant to Alberti’s linguistic legacy is the preface to Book III. This introduction, framed as a dedicatory letter to his cousin and dear friend Francesco d’Altobianco, is concise and straightforward but rich with textual evidence. To begin,

²²⁴ Watkins’ introduction to Leon Battista Alberti and Renée Neu Watkins, *The Family in Renaissance Florence: Book Three* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1994), 2.

²²⁵ *Ibid*, 8.

Alberti muses on the fall of classical Rome; was the greatest loss the empire itself or was it instead the tradition of classical Latin? He writes that in the loss of the Latin language, the peoples of Italy were deprived of the “emendatissima lingua” that is owed to them. Moreover, Alberti writes that his contemporaries have lost the wisdom of classical authors on “le buone arti a bene e beato vivere.”²²⁶ Alberti lauds the equity and justice of Roman administration, but he maintains that the Latin literary tradition was just as great an adornment to the empire – and just as great, if not more, of a loss than their civic authority:

“E pare a me non prima fusse estinto lo splendor del nostro imperio che occecato quasi ogni lume e notizia della lingua e lettere latine. Cosa maravigliosa intanto trovarsi corrotto o mancato quello che per uso si conserva, e a tutti in que’ tempi certo era in uso. Forse potrebbesi giudicare questo conseguisse la nostra suprema calamità.”²²⁷

Like Biondo, Alberti takes a cultural approach to civic greatness; in his judgement, the loss of the Latin literary tradition was their “supreme calamity.” As Italy was invaded and occupied by foreign groups – “Gallici, Goti, Vandali, Longobardi, e altre simili barbare e molto asprissime genti” – their language was corrupted by outside influence. For either want or necessity, to be better understood or to placate their foreign oppressors, the Italian people began to speak in other languages and many foreigners tried to learn the language of the land. He writes: “Onde per questa mistura di dī in dī insalvatichè e viziosi la nostra prima cultissima ed emendatissima lingua.”²²⁸ Alberti affirms Biondo's theory that the contemporary Italian vernaculars were not a biblical curse as Dante

²²⁶ Alberti, *Della famiglia*, 163.

²²⁷ Alberti, *Della famiglia*, 153-154.

²²⁸ Alberti, *Della famiglia*, 154.

claimed; they were in fact based in Latin but degraded by time and contaminated by foreign influence.

Alberti's adherence to this "theory of the catastrophe" builds directly on Biondo's recent revision of linguistic history in *De verbis Romanae locutionis* (1435), the account of his debate on the nature of spoken Latin in ancient Rome. Alberti expands on Biondo's position of a one-language system, arguing firmly against Brunni's (and Dante's) theory of classical bilingualism. He negates the typically Medieval conception of Latin as an artificial language, impermeable to degradation or change. Like Biondo, Alberti draws examples from classical sources to give legitimacy to his arguments and reinforce their intellectual connection to Roman antiquity. He cites instances in which Roman servants were described as struggling with cases and other nuances of Latin structure, demonstrating the same difficulty displayed by the uneducated Florentines with similar agreements in the vernacular. This comparison emphasizes the rhetorical structure common to both languages, a key notion in successive vernacular endeavors.

In recalling many of the same historical examples as Brunni, particularly regarding the language of women, servants, and illiterate orators, Alberti treats Brunni and Biondo's question of Latin as effectively settled in Biondo's favor. Alberti asks:

"E con che ragione arebbono gli antichi scrittori cerco con sì lunga fatica essere utili a tutti e' suoi cittadini scrivendo in lingua da pochi conosciuta? Ma non par luogo qui stenderci in questa materia; forse altrove più a pieno di questo disputaréno. Benché stimo niuno dotto negarà quanto a me pare qui da credere, che tutti gli antichi scrittori scrivessero in modo che da tutti e' suoi molto voleano essere intesi."²²⁹

²²⁹ Alberti, *Della famiglia*, 155.

Alberti is convinced that ancient authors wrote in a way which would be comprehensible to as many readers as possible. In their own scholarship, Dante and Biondo express a similar intention; their aim is to be useful, and as such, their works must be broadly accessible. It is a simple question of virtue economics: the more people read their works, the more utility they generate in writing. Expanding on Biondo's theory of language, Alberti draws an important parallel between civic utility and native scholarship, one which reflects the popular, mercantile spirit of Florence. Alberti freely acknowledges the rich sophistication of Latin literature, but he fails to understand why vernacular works, however worthy, should be held in disdain. He writes that Latin is "piena d'autorità, solo perché in essa molti dotti scrissero."²³⁰ Dante, in *De vulgari eloquentia*, had expressed this idea that a literary tradition builds authority through use and Alberti repeats it here in *Della famiglia* to explain how the Latin tradition became so very illustrious. Future defenders of the vernacular, from Lorenzo de' Medici to Pietro Bembo, rely on this argument to encourage vernacular authorship and endow the native literary tradition with the same authority as Latin. In producing their own vernacular works, they expand and legitimize the vernacular literary canon.

Following the cultural arguments of Biondo, Alberti's discussion of language suggests that the stability and the civic eminence of classical Rome were sustained by the Latin tradition; he concludes that their language, even more than their system of law, was the most powerful institution of the empire. Acknowledging the stability and the noble legacy which Latin afforded to the classical Roman world, Alberti suggests that Florence (and the peoples of Italy in general) might pursue similar civic ambitions

²³⁰ Alberti, *Della famiglia*, 163.

through the establishment of refined literary tradition of their own. Alberti specifies that in writing this work, he does not expect any acclaim beyond perhaps an appreciation of his desire to be useful. As he says – in what has become the mantra of this dissertation – “parmi più utile così scrivendo essercitarmi, che tacendo fuggire el giudicio de’ detrattori.”²³¹ Above all else, Alberti strives for utility, and in this work he makes clear that little could be more useful than a native scholastic tradition.

Many years later, over the three books of *De iciarchia* (1470), Alberti revisits several of his themes from *Della famiglia*, particularly virtue, nobility and social stability, in a more explicitly civic context. While a number of fifteenth-century humanists wrote treatises of civic and moral philosophy²³², Alberti was among the very first (since Dante) to compose such a work in the vernacular. In making this choice, Alberti is practicing what he preached in earlier works; not only does a vernacular treatise benefit a greater number of people, it contributes to the authority and the legitimacy of the vernacular literary tradition. Luca Boschetto writes: “Dalla *Famiglia* al *De iciarchia*, i numerosi dialoghi di argomento morale composti a stretto contatto con la realtà sociale e culturale della città, e senza dubbio concepiti per rispondere alla esigenze del settore più colto e civile del pubblico fiorentino di testi volgari, rappresentano una vera e propria sfida per il lettore moderno.” Alberti is indeed an unusually challenging figure, but this *sfida* which he presents is more easily explained when his vernacular contributions are considered in light of his civic and historical perspectives.

²³¹ Alberti, *Della famiglia*, 156.

²³² An overview of the connections between ethics and politics in the *Quattrocento* humanism can be found in Timothy Kircher, *Living Well in Renaissance Italy: the Virtues of Humanism and the Irony of Leon Battista Alberti* (Tempe: (ACMRS (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies), 2012), 35-45.

Alberti, like Dante, was born to a White Guelph Florentine family and they both spent years in exile as a result of this affiliation. Compared to the high aristocracy of the Black Guelph faction, the White Guelphs supported a more popular agenda as well as increased representation in the republican government of Florence. In their discussions of true nobility, both Dante and Alberti expose these more popular sensibilities when they emphasize individual virtue over the power which derives from wealth or noble birth; their commitment to vernacular literature derives, in part, from this same egalitarian view of nobility and virtue. A Latin education is often reserved to those who are born to wealth and privilege, and Alberti wanted his works to be as useful as possible, to reach as many people as possible, for the benefit of society at large. Boschetto speaks of Alberti's scholarship as a response to the needs of his contemporary society; in Alberti's view, there is nothing more necessary (or virtuous) than spreading wisdom to others and, as he explained in *Della famiglia*, this is best accomplished by writing in the vernacular.

Just a few years earlier, Biondo's scholarship had demonstrated that, in classical Rome, even its illiterate citizens were not cut off from the moral wisdom of great thinkers and orators. In their shared, cultural interpretation of civic greatness, Biondo and Alberti recognize the linguistic unity of Rome as a principal factor of its stability and success. By writing works like *De iciarchia*²³³ in the vernacular, Alberti seeks to recreate this sense of social unity in his contemporary cultural environment by empowering even the less illustrious citizenry to lead their families and their communities in a virtuous

²³³ Citations for *De iciarchia* are from Leon Battista Alberti and Cecil Grayson, *Opere Volgari, Vol. II* (Bari: G. Laterza, 1966).

manner. Like *Della famiglia*, *De iciarchia* is framed as a dialogue, a format which Alberti favors perhaps for the ability to directly address and rebuff the arguments of his “detractors.” The title “*De iciarchia*” refers to the classical Greek term *iciarco*, which Alberti defines as “supremo omo e primario principe della famiglia sua”.²³⁴ As described in *Della famiglia*, Alberti views the family and the state as comparable entities, just on a different scale: “pare a me che la città com’è costituita da molte famiglie, così ella in sé sia quasi come una ben grande famiglia e, contro, la famiglia sia quasi una piccola città.”²³⁵ Importantly, Alberti proposes that any collective of people, from a family to civic state, necessitates an *iciarco* – a person who will justly and wisely provide for the rest of the group in terms of material necessities, stability and security. While *Della famiglia* focuses somewhat intimately on the management of family life, *De iciarchia* addresses the virtues, habits and obligations of the man-who-leads, whether he be the patriarch of a family, a military commander or a prince – or a naval commander.²³⁶

In the dialogue, Alberti is accompanied by two revered friends: Niccolò Cerretani and Paulo Niccolini, as well as Paulo’s son and nephews. The narrative framing of their conversation reflects the nature of the dialogue itself and speaks to Alberti’s innovative flexibility with genre. Alberti, Niccolò and Paulo – the actual father of one of their young companions – serve as the *iciarchi*, the models of authority who, by their words and their actions, transmit the fundamental characteristics of virtue to the next generation. Above all, Alberti promotes an ethic of service:

²³⁴ Alberti, *De iciarchia*, 273.

²³⁵ Alberti, *De iciarchia*, 266.

²³⁶ I would be remiss to omit naval commanders from this list, as Alberti defers repeatedly to analogies of seafaring, enough that I’m convinced there may be some inside joke.

“Questa servitù impose la natura, summa e divina legge de’ mortali, a te, a me, a quello, a tutti. Nulla n’è lecito repugnarli; e nollo ubbiendo saremmo e pessimi cittadini e omini alieni da ogni umanità, simili alle fere nate in la selva, vivute in deserta solitudine.”²³⁷

Alberti describes his call to civic utility as a divine obligation; like Biondo, he believes that the well-being of a society depends on the individual virtue of leading citizens and, as a member of the ecclesiastical and intellectual community, Alberti was obligated to serve as a model of civic virtue. Alberti felt that it was virtuous to make the natural world better reflect the divine order of God, and as such, he sought natural order in all things, from art to language to civic order. Along these same lines of natural order, Alberti regards the role of a “prince” as fundamentally similar to that of the father – one of ultimate servitude as opposed to unchecked civic dominance. The prince, as the *iciarco* of the city, should serve as a model of citizenship:

“E così affermano tutti i savi antiqui scrittori passati a’ quali io molto credo, e mostrano come costui si debbe reputare vero principe, qual sia superiore in cose non lievi e fragili, ma stabili di sua natura ed etterne, e nulla subiette alla volubilità e temerità della fortuna, per qual cosa e’ sia bene atto a comandare e meriti essere ubbedito. E questo chi dubita sarà la virtù, la bontà, la perizia di cose degne e utilissime a sé, a’ suoi, alla patria?”²³⁸

In his observations of the classical world, Alberti seeks the order and the stability which *Quattrocento* Italy desperately lacked and he emphasizes once again his ethic of service and utility to the *patria*. His faithful reliance on classical sources serves as further evidence of his profound connection with the intellectual legacy of classical Rome and his practical, Biondo-esque interpretation of history, which “per sua natura mostra l’ordine delle cose passate, e rende la ragione delle presenti; e dicesi ch’egli è vincolo della società fra gli uomini.”²³⁹ Alberti, like Biondo, perceives a direct social

²³⁷ Alberti, *De iciarchia*, 195.

²³⁸ Alberti, *De iciarchia*, 193.

²³⁹ Alberti, *De iciarchia*, 232.

continuity between classical Rome and their contemporary environment in their language, their civic institutions and their history. In his observations of history, therefore, Alberti is able to identify both the reason behind his own society as well as a model for stability and social order. As he seeks to demonstrate throughout *De iciarchia*, virtuous leadership is a necessary element of this stability.

Conversely, Alberti explains, little could be more pernicious to a state than the leadership of a man who does not serve as a model of virtue for those who should obey him, a man who believes himself noble and superior based solely upon his wealth or the position of his birth. Alberti's discussion of nobility recalls sentiments espoused by Dante in the *Convivio*, particularly regarding their mutual wariness of riches.²⁴⁰ It is important to note that Alberti, the son of an exiled White Guelph, was not enthralled with the leadership of Cosimo de' Medici – who rose up as the first citizen of Florence by virtue of his extravagant wealth. Alberti writes:

“Come detto è, la imperfezione de le ricchezze non solamente nel loro avvenimento si può comprendere, ma eziandio nel pericoloso loro accrescimento; e però che in ciò più si può vedere di loro difetto, solo di questo fa menzione lo testo, dicendo quelle, quantunque collette, non solamente non quietare, ma dare più sete e rendere altri più defettivo e insufficiente.”

Both Dante and Alberti insist that famous families and earthly riches are not valid characteristics of nobility, as these can easily be the product of fortune as opposed to virtue. Instead of aspiring to material wealth and vapid acclaim, Alberti advocates moderation, perseverance and active service on behalf of the family and the state as a whole.

²⁴⁰ Dante, *Convivio*, IV, xi, 1; see Dante Alighieri and Giorgio Inglese, *Convivio* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2014).

Towards the end of the conversation in *De iciarchia*, unsatisfied by these modest ambitions, Paolo's nephew (one of the youthful, unnamed interlocutors) retorts that what Alberti describes is akin to "exquisite mediocrity". However, unlike his young and untempered companion, Alberti was critically aware of the very great toll which fortune could have on a family; like Dante before him, the circumstances of Alberti's own life had been dictated by political upheaval in Florence and it was this pointed desire for unity and order which motivated both and Dante and Alberti to seek more stable, enduring models of civilization. In imagining this new society, Alberti identifies civic order, individual virtue and a refined literary tradition as the critical elements of greatness. In light of Alberti's tepid sentiments towards Cosimo's leadership, it is curious to think that, just a few years later, these same ideas of civic virtue and stability would be adopted by Cosimo's grandson Lorenzo as the basis for his own civic agenda, including his promotion of Florentine literature.

Written at the end of Alberti's life, *De iciarchia* represents the final iteration of the overarching themes of Alberti's scholarship. These themes, which Passarelli identifies as "quelli fondanti della cultura umanistica,"²⁴¹ are the role of the artist-intellectual in civic life, their relationship to the classical world and the cultural value of a native literary tradition. A close reading of Alberti's dialogues shows that he was keenly aware of the social and cultural realities of his time, and just one generation later, when Florence had assumed a more dominant position on the European political stage, Alberti's conceptualization of the *lingua-patria* would rise to the forefront of intellectual concern.

²⁴¹ Maria Passarelli, *La Lingua Della Patria: Leon Battista Alberti e La Questione Del Volgare* (Rome: Bagatto Libri, 1999), 9.

The novel and incisive commentary in his dialogues not only represents an important example of vernacular authorship, it provides an invaluable perspective on the civic and intellectual atmosphere of the mid-fifteenth century – as well as an important glimpse of things to come.

IV. Conclusion

Together, Flavio Biondo and Leon Battista Alberti signal a new phase in humanist ideology, one with a modernized view of history and a refined sense of civic and cultural identity. Drawing on the works of Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, and Plato, they decry fortune and affirm the value (and virtue) of working for the common good. Both born to important families, they grew up to experience war, exile and precipitous changes of fortune, events which had a formative influence on their ethical sensibilities and scholarly ambitions. As civic servants and members of the papal chancery, they were well-read and well-traveled, thus gaining an intimate and comprehensive awareness of their social environment. These unique perspectives on the contemporary landscape along with their exhaustive investigations of the classical world allowed them to operate within a revised historical narrative, one which affirmed both their cultural and linguistic ties to Roman antiquity. Perhaps more than anything else, Biondo and Alberti distinguished themselves for their revolutionary perspectives on history and their practical application of classical wisdom to modern civic and linguistic concerns.

Their extensive scholarship on the classical world brought new life to the legacy of Rome and began to answer important questions on the nature of their language, their

connection to the ancients and their role as intellectuals in the political sphere. In their civic writings, both Biondo and Alberti look to the enduring stability of the ancient Roman republic as a functional guide for wise and ethical practices in family and civic life. In reading Alberti, “the ancient ideas have undergone a startling metamorphoses. They have been completely assimilated to the problems and ways of life of the urban society of quattrocento Italy, and they are convincingly couched in its Tuscan tongue.”²⁴² The linguistic element was crucial, they realized, not only as an aesthetic form, but as “the very organon for objectifying and passing on the wisdom of human experience”.²⁴³ In identifying the cultural value of language, Biondo and Alberti change the tide of vernacular scholarship and create a legitimate intellectual space for the important literary works to come, including those of Angelo Poliziano, Cristoforo Landino, and the de facto Lord of Florence himself, Lorenzo de’ Medici.

²⁴² Joan Kelly-Gadol, *Did Women Have a Renaissance?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 216.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, 215-216.

Chapter Three – The late *Quattrocento*: Lorenzo de' Medici and Angelo Poliziano

Introduction

While scholarship justly acknowledges Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio as the early masters of Florentine (and Italian) literature, the first half of the fifteenth century brought considerable challenges to the emergent native tradition. Vernacular literature was simply seen as lesser – lacking the nobility and authority of classical Latin, a perspective which early defenders of the vernacular, namely Dante, Leon Battista Alberti, Cristoforo Landino and later, Lorenzo de' Medici himself, directly acknowledge in their vernacular compositions. In a period where mastery of classical Latin was still considered the highest standard of achievement, few scholars even attempted to match the vernacular masterpieces of the previous century. The second half of the *Quattrocento* marked a critical turning point, predominantly driven by the changing political landscape in Florence, one which was still republican in theory but was taking on far more 'courtly' characteristics. Since their definitive rise in 1434²⁴⁴, political and cultural matters in Florence had been guided by the Medici family – de facto lords of the city. Lorenzo 'the Magnificent' ascended to this powerful, though delicate, position in 1469 where he, like his father and grandfather, presided over a masterful circle of artists

²⁴⁴ Cosimo de' Medici returned from exile in 1434, definitively establishing his position in Florence.

and humanist scholars; these included such preeminent Renaissance figures as Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini, Cristoforo Landino, Leon Battista Alberti, Marsilio Ficino, Sandro Botticelli, Michelangelo Buonarroti and Lorenzo's personal secretary, Angelo Poliziano.

The unofficial status of Medici power was a defining element of their civic agenda, always at the forefront of their considerations. What they could not claim by right, the Medici acquired with capital – either financial, or cultural. While the family bank provided considerable economic power, it would not have been enough to monopolize political influence in the city without their nuanced strategies of cultural diplomacy. For Lorenzo especially, the most critical among these strategies became the revival of their native literary tradition. Following the exhaustive efforts of the early fifteenth-century humanists in reclaiming classical literary Latin, Lorenzo and his circle came to recognize, fully, the cultural value of a literary language. Just as Latin had been to ancient Rome, for Lorenzo and Poliziano especially, the *volgare illustre* became an emblem of Florentine identity, an achievement which would affirm their political and cultural preeminence in Europe and draw the admiration of future generations. In the very best-case scenario, they might also achieve eternal fame and glory for themselves. Both Lorenzo and Poliziano are careful, though, not to esteem their own works too highly. At least as they describe it, they are most interested in being useful and in contributing to the common good. In the Medici's unique and tenebrous position, however, what was good for the gander was good for the goose – peace and prosperity in the city was the best guarantee of continued loyalty from the Florentine people.

Lorenzo considered his tenure in power to be crucially dependent upon the civic and cultural stability of the city and thus, for Lorenzo (and Poliziano), the development of a native literary tradition became a matter of exigent civic concern – as well as a moral imperative: the refinement and legitimization of a Florentine literary language would serve as an enduring codification of their cultural achievements, as well as an assurance of their legacy – a sort of literary immortality. While there remained a contingency throughout the *Quattrocento* that upheld the “artificial” superiority of Latin, Leonardo Bruni or Niccolò Niccoli, for example, Lorenzo and Poliziano were in an uncommonly influential position. Poliziano’s philological prowess along with Lorenzo’s undeniable cultural authority brought a newfound legitimacy to vernacular literature. As is evident throughout their literary works, at the core of their vernacular strategy we find stylistic traces of the great Tuscan authors of the *Trecento*, Dante and Petrarch especially, whom they depict as the masters of a bygone era of native glory. Lorenzo and Poliziano present their own vernacular activity and that of their contemporaries as a revival of this tradition, a secondary ‘renaissance’ which belonged exclusively to Florence. While Lorenzo and Poliziano’s particular elaboration of literary Florentine would fail to establish itself as the definitive model of vernacular language going forward, their attention and innovation to the *Trecento* tradition makes critical steps in renewing the pursuit of an “illustrious vernacular”; they build a bridge over the explicitly Latinate humanism of the early *Quattrocento*, from the works of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio on one side to their own vernacular compositions on the other. In reverence to Celenza, however, and for that matter to Flavio Biondo, I must note that the Latin

humanists of the early *Quattrocento*, in the end, were fundamentally important to the intellectual legitimacy of Lorenzo and Poliziano's vernacular revival.

The rigorous reconstruction of the classical Roman landscape which occurred over the first half of the *Quattrocento*, both physical and intellectual, allowed scholars such as Bruni, Biondo and Alberti to re-evaluate certain medieval conceptualizations of linguistic history and the origins of the vernacular languages. As discussed in chapter two, Biondo's discovery of the nature of spoken language in ancient Rome was a critical finding; it determined that Latin was not only an "artificial" language for writing and thereby disproved the dichotomy of "natural" and "artificial" languages. As a result, Biondo, and later Alberti, were disavowed of Dante's biblical notion of the vernaculars as inherently disordered. In this way, the vernaculars became worthy of grammatical regulations and, under the conscious guidance of Lorenzo and Poliziano, Florentine literature returned on the humanist scene with a refined sense of purpose and potential. In the wake of their influence, vernacular literature grew more popular both in and outside of Florence; all that was missing was a definitive model of literary language; the debates over what this model should be continued into the early *Cinquecento*, when Machiavelli and Pietro Bembo – discussed in chapter four – made their critical interventions.

II. Lorenzo de' Medici

In the center of Florence, on the bustling road between San Marco and the Duomo, the Palazzo Medici Riccardi presents a rather unremarkable facade²⁴⁵. Inside, however, there is a small chapel adorned with the masterpiece of fifteenth-century painter Benozzo Gozzoli: *The Journey of the Magi*. This fresco, reminiscent of traditional Flemish tapestries, wraps around three walls to depict an allegorical procession of the Medici patriarchs. Near the end of the procession, a boy with golden curls sits regally atop a white stallion – this boy is Lorenzo de' Medici, called “the Magnificent”. He was born in 1449, the heir apparent to the Medici banking empire as well as the unofficial political dynasty established by his grandfather, Cosimo “the Elder.” Lorenzo would never hold a formal title but, by virtue of his influence, he acted as lord of Florence from 1469²⁴⁶ until his rather premature death in 1492. In his life, he was “the most important citizen of Florence in what is generally considered that city’s most important hour”²⁴⁷

After the calamitous events of the Pazzi conspiracy in 1478, where the Medici barely survived an attempted coup, a surprisingly successful negotiation between Lorenzo and the King of Naples increased stability in Florence and definitively established Lorenzo’s prestige as a political actor. With newfound authority, he positioned himself at the center of a truly remarkable circle of humanist intellectuals, even establishing himself as a poet in his own right. While he is undoubtedly one of the

²⁴⁵ n.b. The pasticceria across the street makes Nutella doughnuts at 4pm on school days.

²⁴⁶ Vital dates for the Medici family from Lorenzo’s own record, edited and reproduced in Lorenzo de’ Medici and Tiziano Zanato, *Comento De’ Miei Sonetti*. (Florence: Olschki, 1991). Dates for Lorenzo’s works in Sara Sturm, *Lorenzo De’ Medici* (Woodbridge: Twayne Publishers, 1974).

²⁴⁷ Sara Sturm, *Lorenzo De’ Medici* (Woodbridge: Twayne Publishers, 1974), vii.

best known figures of the Renaissance, Lorenzo's legacy as a statesman and a patron of the arts has often overshadowed his own achievements as a poet and humanist scholar. This unfortunate division ignores the ways in which both Lorenzo's civic and literary activities were driven by the same underlying philosophy, a refined civic mentality which emerged among the late fifteenth-century Florentine humanists. Sarah Strum writes: "Lorenzo was both a leader in its principal events and a singularly faithful mirror of its major intellectual movements."²⁴⁸ More than faithful to the intellectual tradition, he was a progressive defender of artistic innovation, especially as it contributed to the cultural capital of the city. Lorenzo's reign is often regarded as a 'golden age' of humanist culture in Florence; his personal commitment to scholarship and art (along with his generous patronage) supported the work of an unparalleled generation of Renaissance masters.

Raised among the influence of Cosimo's humanist circle, Lorenzo was keenly aware of the value of the arts, both for the enrichment of Florentine society and as a signal of their cultural achievement. This desire to establish an important cultural legacy derived from the prevailing civic and moral philosophies of the moment. From a moral perspective, in the tradition of Latini, Dante, Salutati, Bruni, Alberti and others, the virtue of civic activity (or utility) had been firmly established. However, the humanist notion of civic virtue evolved as they refined their understanding of the classical world. As Hankins writes: "In general they valued participation in politics, the active life, and public service in this life, as against a "medieval" outlook that supposedly privileged the contemplative over the active, subordinated the temporal to the eternal, and oriented

²⁴⁸ Sara Sturm, *Lorenzo De' Medici* (Woodbridge: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 8.

politics to the salvations of souls.”²⁴⁹ In studying the political models of classical society, earlier scholars such as Salutati sought to recapture the unity and the stability of the Roman Empire. By imitating these models, they hoped to bring peace and order to their own chaotic political landscape. In the course of this undertaking, scholars began to observe an important connection between cultural eminence and civic stability. Biondo and Alberti, among others, proposed that civic stability relied heavily on social factors, with the two most essential being carefully elaborated systems of language and law.

While law seems an obvious preoccupation for civic philosophers, the importance which they ascribed to language was highly significant. This connection marked a critical moment for the rise of vernacular literature, where the morality and the civic ambitions of the late fifteenth-century humanists converge: it was moral and just to contribute to the civic order and the common good, and in their study of classical Rome, scholars determined that a strong and vibrant cultural tradition – necessarily supported by a literary language – was a critical factor of social and civic stability. As a result, Lorenzo and many of his fellow Florentine humanists, echoing the arguments of Alberti, came to believe that it was not sufficient to merely imitate classical forms. Roman antiquity had flourished by means of the elaboration and refinement of their own native tradition; therefore, to build a truly great society (one which was both powerful and secure) Florentine humanists would have to do the same. In this way, the establishment of a Florentine literary language became both a moral and a civic imperative. In building their language and their legacy, they saw a way to fortify their position on the European political stage.

²⁴⁹ James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 95.

While Lorenzo's legacy is not without controversy, he is remembered as a bastion of humanist values, an unparalleled patron of the arts and a lifelong proponent of the *studia humanitatis*. Though his literary ambitions were often put on hold by the demands of his political career, he continued to write vernacular poetry throughout his life. While it may seem as though this was an activity of leisure, Lorenzo's *Canzoniere* amounted to far more than a hobby; instead, it was: "un atto di politica culturale, limpidissimo nel disegno di rivendicazione a tutta la poesia toscana del primato in Italia, e altresì abile nel presentare il "signore" di Firenze come l'erede e il continuatore di così grande tradizione."²⁵⁰ In terms of his literary legacy, Lorenzo was one of the most vital proponents of vernacular scholarship; as the civic and cultural authority in Florence, his commitment to the native tradition was too influential to ignore. He drew fellow Florentines (and some illustrious visitors) to the notion that a sophisticated cultural and literary tradition would be far more valuable, and far more powerful, if it were their own. In his *Canzoniere*, Lorenzo writes: "Si giudica la lingua greca più perfetta che la latina, e la latina più che la ebraica, perché l'una più che l'altra meglio esprime la mente di chi ha o detto o scritto alcuna cosa."²⁵¹ Here he affirms the connection between the "perfection" of a society and its language, as well as the value of native expression. He and fellow scholars, notably Angelo Poliziano, returned to the fourteenth century examples of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio as a foundation for their tradition. Though perhaps not as Dante imagined, his idea of a *volgare illustre*, a refined vernacular literary language, had finally risen to the forefront of intellectual concern. In the shadow

²⁵⁰ Lorenzo de' Medici, cited in Zanato's introduction to *Comento De' Miei Sonetti*. (Florence: Olschki, 1991), xi. Following citations are from the same edition.

²⁵¹ Lorenzo de' Medici, *Comento De' Miei Sonetti*, 71-72; 144.

of their civic ambitions, Lorenzo and the late fifteenth-century humanists were determined to reinvigorate and legitimize the Florentine literary tradition.

i. Lorenzo, Lord* of Florence

The Medici dynasty emerged from the banking trade which flourished in the republican, mercantile atmosphere of fifteenth-century Florence. Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici (1360-1429) built a successful career in banking, under the guidance of his uncle, before founding the Medici Bank in 1397. Once he was entrusted as chief papal banker, Giovanni and the bank quickly amassed significant wealth. His son was Cosimo (1389-1464), whose shrewd and careful management expanded not only the bank, but the social and political influence of the Medici family. Mackenney writes: "A republic built around guild structures gave way to an oligarchy defined by family factions, and from that oligarchy the Medici emerged, exercising control through a network of clientage that expanded to the increasing isolation of any possible opposition."²⁵² Cosimo never assumed a formal title, but by means of his very well-funded brand of diplomacy he lived out his life as the political leader of the city. Within the republican framework of Florence, Cosimo achieved this status as "first among equals" with a combination of keen instincts and bribes. In 1438, he was named *Gonfaloniere* of Justice, head prior of the city government and standard-bearer of the republic. With this appointment, Cosimo secured a measure of legitimacy for the political activities of the

²⁵² Richard Mackenney, *Renaissances: the Cultures of Italy, c. 1300-c. 1600* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 50.

family, evidenced by the fact that the same position would later be offered to his heir, Piero. By some estimates, Cosimo was the richest man in Europe and after his death he would be remembered by many Florentines as the *pater patriae*.

Cosimo's son Piero, unfortunately remembered as "the Gouty", had already taken over as head of the bank when his father died in 1464. Despite his intellectual capabilities, Piero's legacy is often obscured by the brevity of his tenure and the fact that he was perpetually unwell. It was Piero's confinement to bed which made the Medici Palace the effective seat of the Florentine government. By all accounts, Piero was a relatively capable politician and banker, though his strictness in the repayment of loans sometimes garnered unfriendly sentiment among the merchants. As head of the family, Piero upheld his father's legacy of artistic patronage (including the commission of Gozzoli's masterpiece in the Magi Chapel) and he continued to grow the family library. Also like Cosimo, he was an attentive parent who was devoted to the education of his children. After five years in power, Piero succumbed to gout and a lung condition which had plagued him for the better part of his life. After his death, Piero was succeeded (and more or less eclipsed) by his famed son, Lorenzo.

From his birth in 1449, Lorenzo was the intended successor of the Medici dynasty. As a young boy, he was a frequent companion to his grandfather Cosimo, who favored him, and as a result, Lorenzo was exposed to the political dealings of his family from a young age. At sixteen, he represented his family at the court of the Sforza in Milan. The following year he undertook diplomatic missions to court of Pope Paolo II in Rome and to the d'Aragona court in Naples. Kent writes that, for Lorenzo, the voyages were "an apprenticeship in grasping the ways of the Italian courts and becoming acquainted with

their leading lights, in testing himself in a world full of dissimulation and intrigue.”²⁵³ It was a fortunate thing that he began his training young; in 1496, at just twenty years old, Lorenzo succeeded his father as head of the Medici dynasty – and of Florence. It seems that Lorenzo, like his grandfather, had a way with people; still without an official position, he gained a great deal of favor and influence with his keen instincts and charm (to be clear, Medici “charm” was often supported by a large sum of cold, hard cash). Lorenzo’s first real political alliance, arranged for him just months before his father’s death, was his marriage to Clarice Orsini. As the daughter of a noble Roman house, their union created opportunities for both families which Clarice was often called upon to mediate. Their dominance of the Medici in Florence ensured that, while at home, they were surrounded predominantly by allies. However, their political relationships outside of the city were often more contentious.

The 1471 election of Pope Sixtus IV²⁵⁴ foreshadowed an eruption of anti-medicean sentiment in Rome, Naples, and then eventually, within the city of Florence itself. The new pope, Francesco della Rovere by birth, quickly built alliances – especially with Naples. While making peace with other corners of the peninsula, the pope accumulated a series of grievances against the Medici, namely, their blatant nepotism in ecclesiastical appointments, their exploitation of an alum mine (in Tolfa, not far from Rome) and their resistance to the expansion of papal territory. The Medici enjoyed a good measure of protection through their strong alliance with Galeazzo Maria Sforza, the Duke of Milan, but Sforza’s death in 1476 left Lorenzo suddenly vulnerable. By the

²⁵³ F. W. Kent, *Lorenzo De' Medici and the Art of Magnificence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 14.

²⁵⁴ On the feuds and politics of Sixtus IV, see David Chambers, *Popes, Cardinals and War the Military Church in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe* (London: Tauris, 2006), 79-89.

winter of 1478, Pope Sixtus IV had quite enough of Florentine dealings under the Medici and gave his support to the plotting of a coup. His nephew Riario joined forces with the Pazzi family in Florence – the most bitter rivals of the Medici. A coalition of assailants including Riario, Francesco Pazzi, Bernardo Bandini Baroncelli, and Francesco Salviati brutally attacked Lorenzo and his brother Giuliano in the Duomo, in the midst of mass. Giuliano was killed, but Lorenzo was successfully protected. With cries of “liberty”, the Pazzi declared to the public what they had done.

Quickly, the Pazzi discovered that they had made a grave miscalculation. The people reacted with shock and fury to the attack and within a matter of days the conspirators (as well as some of their family members) had been executed, imprisoned or driven from the city. A famous sketch of Leonardo da Vinci depicts Baroncelli, Giuliano’s assassin, bound and hung by the neck.²⁵⁵ The Pazzi family was ruined, stripped of their wealth, exiled and even expunged from public record. In this response, the people of Florence had made their allegiances clear; outside of Florence, however, support for the Medici remained less enthusiastic. Pope Sixtus IV and the Pazzi had acted with the support of several other external powers including the Republic of Siena, the Duchy of Urbino and the Kingdom of Naples. Following Lorenzo’s swift vengeance against the conspirators, the pope excommunicated him and formed an official alliance with Naples and Siena. They demanded that the imprisoned conspirators be released into their custody, but Lorenzo refused. They sent a military coalition into Florentine territory in June of 1478 and the provincial *borghi* endured a two-month siege.

²⁵⁵ Events of the Pazzi conspiracy are outlined in Poliziano’s *Coniurationis Commentarium*, reproduced in Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 305-322.

With defeat looming, Lorenzo consulted with the *Signoria* and resolved to embark on a last-ditch diplomatic mission to Naples. He was held there by King Ferdinando for three months, but accommodated as an illustrious guest. The king hoped that, in Lorenzo's absence, the people of Florence would turn their support to the pope. Instead, he found that they were unfailingly loyal to Lorenzo. Milan, as well, began pressuring Naples for peace with the Medici. Finally, they reached an accord and in March of 1480, Lorenzo returned to Florence as a hero. In the *Istorie fiorentine*, Machiavelli writes: "Tornò pertanto Lorenzo in Firenze grandissimo, se egli se n'era partito grande, e fu con quella allegrezza della città ricevuto, che le sue grandi qualità e freschi meriti meritavano, avendo esposto la propria vita per rendere alla patria sua la pace."²⁵⁶ Sixtus IV suddenly found himself in a more precarious position. Cornered by this new alliance between Florence and Naples along with the growing threat of the Ottoman Turks, he resolved to make peace and lifted Lorenzo's excommunication.

In Florence, Lorenzo's influence was greater than ever. He took advantage of this swell of support to create the *Consiglio dei Settanta*, a council which would step in for the traditional government in moments of political crisis. While the regular councilors of the republic, even the *Gonfaloniere*, served strictly limited appointments, the members of Lorenzo's new council were permanent. This lasted until 1490, at which point Lorenzo pared the council back to seventeen members. In the interim decade, Lorenzo managed to expand the territory of the Florentine Republic and also improve relations with several of their Tuscan neighbors, including Lucca and Siena. When Sixtus IV died in 1484, Florence was free of yet another external menace. Lorenzo had

²⁵⁶ Machiavelli, *Istorie fiorentine* in Niccolò Machiavelli and Mario Martelli, *Tutte le opere* (Florence: Sansoni, 1971), 406.

a far better relationship with Sixtus' successor, Innocent VIII, who had spent much of his life in the service to the King of Naples. He had little experience in civic matters, and he came to rely Lorenzo's political knowledge and counsel. In 1488, Lorenzo married his daughter Maddalena to the Innocent's illegitimate son, Franceschetto Cybo. The following year, Innocent named Giovanni de' Medici a cardinal when he was just thirteen. Lorenzo made these arrangements for his children as his health began to seriously decline; he suffered from old injuries and from the same gout which had so incapacitated his father.

Lorenzo's weakening coincided with the rise of the Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola and his special brand of austere, fire-and-brimstone populism which denounced corruption and indulgence along with the "heretical" Greco-Roman tastes of the Florentine elite. There were cracks forming in the foundation of the very delicate Medici power structure and Lorenzo was fading too quickly to patch them up. He endured rather a terrible decline in his final years, and I'm sorry to report that the epilogue is not any nicer: Lorenzo's son Piero, who is often characterized as feeble and entitled, rose to the helm of a very precarious ship. In 1494, after only two years in power, Charles VIII and the French army crossed the alps to assert a hereditary claim in Naples.²⁵⁷ The strength of Lorenzo's Milan-Naples-Florence alliance had been too great an obstacle but Lorenzo was gone and Charles' Italian ambitions had been on hold for too long. When Charles requested Piero's permission to cross through Tuscany, Piero hesitantly declared neutrality. He then embarked on an impromptu diplomatic visit to

²⁵⁷ On the march from France to Naples and the reactions of the Italian states, see Christine Shaw and Michael Mallett, *Italian Wars 1494-1559: War, State and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019) 16-27.

Charles' camp in which he made concessions of Florentine territories – without the sanction of the *Signoria*. Already swayed against the Medici by the dire predictions of Savonarola, the people of Florence were outraged by Piero and they exiled the Medici from the city. This marked the end of the first Medici dynasty and made way for the revival of the Florentine republic.

While certainly not without controversy, Lorenzo's political career had an almost inconceivably profound influence on the political landscape of the Italian peninsula. On the European stage, he was regarded as a major political actor – more akin to a monarch than a private, republican citizen. Beyond the military might of the Florentine Republic, Lorenzo's influence derived from his own very culturally attuned approach to diplomacy. The fact that he sealed his peace with Sixtus IV by sending artists to the Vatican really exemplifies these methods. Zanato writes that Lorenzo was “dimidiato fra il politico e il poeta.”²⁵⁸ Machiavelli made a similar reflection at the time: “Si vedeva in lui due persone diverse, quasi con impossibile coniunzione congiunte.”²⁵⁹ While clearly not impossible, Lorenzo's broad fusion of talents was indeed quite extraordinary. As Machiavelli's phrasing suggests, Lorenzo's civic and literary accomplishments were not parallel threads in his philosophy. Instead, each side – the poet and the politician – informed the other across Lorenzo's many endeavors.

²⁵⁸ Cited in Zanato's introduction to Lorenzo de' Medici and Tiziano Zanato, *Comento De' Miei Sonetti* (Florence: Olschki, 1991), vii.

²⁵⁹ Machiavelli, *Istorie fiorentine* in Niccolò Machiavelli and Mario Martelli, *Tutte le opere* (Florence: Sansoni, 1971), 490.

ii. Written works

Benedetto Croce famously labeled the period from 1375-1475 as “the century without poetry”²⁶⁰ but Lorenzo, as well as his secretary Angelo Poliziano and others (notably Luigi Pulci, author of the marvelous epic *Morgante*), were making critical headway in the resurgence of the Florentine vernacular tradition decades before the close of the century. While it is true that the era of *classicismo volgare* was yet to emerge, this illustrious literary tradition which unfolded over the sixteenth century derives its order, grammaticality and intellectual legitimacy from the rather brave experimentation of previous works. Why brave? As Celenza writes: “an intellectual’s social position was shaped and conditioned as well by the intellectual field, where thinkers advanced competing positions, all of them vying for a specific place in the debate on canonicity and literary legitimacy.”²⁶¹ As we have seen, especially with Leon Battista Alberti, the Medici held not only political power but overwhelming cultural influence; it was their circle who controlled the intellectual consensus of the scholarly elite. It is easy, then, to see how, despite previous attempts towards a similar end, it was Lorenzo’s vernacular ambitions which finally took hold within the going ideology of Florentine humanism. Lorenzo was to vernacular scholarship what Marie Antoinette would be to feathered hats: the unequivocal tastemaker of the time.

Despite Lorenzo’s elevated position, in the company of his fellow humanists, he was familiar; he carried himself as an equal among them – as in his political life, he not-

²⁶⁰ Cited in Sara Sturm, *Lorenzo De’Medici* (Woodbridge: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 26, note 4.

²⁶¹ Christopher Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance, Humanists, Historians, and Latin’s Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 103.

so-secretly ruled under the guise of democracy. A friendly neighborhood icon, Lorenzo became primarily responsible for a renaissance within the Renaissance. The vernacular literary tradition of the Florentine *Trecento* was stagnant, obscured by the Latinate humanism of the early *Quattrocento*. Kristeller writes that, in the fifteenth century, the vernacular tradition “had to conquer its territory from medieval Latin.”²⁶² Who better than a poet-politician for such a campaign? Lorenzo’s idea of conquest ventured far beyond the geographical. As Burckhardt writes: “If we seek to analyze the charm which the Medici of the fifteenth century, especially Cosimo the Elder (d.1464) and Lorenzo the Magnificent (d.1492) exercised over Florence and over all their contemporaries, what shall find that it lay less in their political capacity than in their leadership in the culture of the age.”²⁶³ The Medici, who had gained their position by influence as opposed to any hereditary right, were intimately aware of the personal, cultural elements of lasting leadership. This sociopolitical consciousness is eminently present in Lorenzo’s scholarship. It manifests in both his use of the vernacular, building the tradition by example, and in his ideological defense of native literature. Zanato writes: “per merito di Lorenzo, lingua e letteratura di Firenze si avviavano al primato nella Penisola.”²⁶⁴

Over the course of his rather brief life, Lorenzo composed a number of written works, many of which remain understudied in comparison to his other achievements. As a young poet, Lorenzo’s “entrata in Parnaso” was defined by typical themes of love, often inspired by Lucrezia Donati, a girl he grew up with in Florence. In his sonnets, as

²⁶² Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts: Collected Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 120.

²⁶³ Burckhardt, Jacob, and S. G. C. Middlemore. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. London: Penguin, 2004, 145.

²⁶⁴ Zanato’s introduction in Lorenzo de’ Medici and Tiziano Zanato, *Comento De’ Miei Sonetti* (Florence: Olschki, 1991), xxxii.

well as various *canzoni*, *sestine* and *ballate*, he often follows the metrical example of Petrarch. Later on, he experimented quite broadly with genre, often tempering classical forms with a contemporary Florentine influence. While not a comprehensive list, Lorenzo's minor works include *Nencia da Barberino* (1469-1472), a vernacular parody in verse; the *Novella di Giacoppo* (1469) which follows the model of Boccaccio's novellas; *La cacciatore col falcone* (1473), a treatise on falconry and *Sacra rappresentazione dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo* (1491), an ethical treatise for his son Piero told through the deeds of two apostles. Lorenzo's two major works are his *Canzoniere* (c. 1465-1477) and his *Comento de' miei sonetti* (c. 1480-1492).²⁶⁵ There is also a very important prefatory letter in the *Raccolta aragonese*, which Lorenzo commissioned. While Lorenzo's name graces the letter, more recent appraisals have convincingly identified Poliziano as its true author. This preface, therefore, will be discussed in the second half of the chapter while Lorenzo's individual lyrical contributions to the collection will be discussed below.

Above all else, Lorenzo's scholarship was shaped by "his own observations of life in his native Tuscany, the Italian vernacular tradition of love poetry, the classical influence, and religious and philosophical questions."²⁶⁶ He considered the fate of Florence in the long term, ever aware of their status (and their vulnerability) on the European political stage. Recalling the attitudes of Coluccio Salutati, who aspired to create something new from antiquity, Lorenzo was among the first to pursue civic stability by means of a new cultural tradition, as opposed to a resurgence of the old. In

²⁶⁵ Dates for Lorenzo's works in Sara Sturm, *Lorenzo De' Medici* (Woodbridge: Twayne Publishers, 1974); see also Zanato's introduction to Lorenzo de' Medici and Tiziano Zanato, *Comento De' Miei Sonetti* (Florence: Olschki, 1991), vii-xliii.

²⁶⁶ Sara Sturm, *Lorenzo De' Medici* (Woodbridge: Twayne Publishers, 1974), viii.

light of this ideology, the establishment of the Florentine literary language became a critical aspect of Lorenzo's civic agenda. While it is difficult to essentialize Lorenzo's contribution to vernacular scholarship, the most critical aspects of his legacy are his return to the model of *Trecento* literature, his treatment of the literary tradition as a pillar of cultural eminence and finally, his unparalleled ability to wield influence on the intellectual landscape. This last point all but assured the canonicity of the first two.

Lorenzo's literary and cultural ambitions for Florence are most evident in two works: his lyrical contributions to the *Raccolta aragonese* (1476) and his *Comento de' miei sonetti* (c. 1480-1492); they illustrate not only Lorenzo's vernacular style, but also the civic philosophy which underlies his vernacular impulse. Lorenzo's vernacular production was: "Un riprender coscienza dell'umanità della tradizione letteraria in volgare, un riconoscersi in essa, un voler dilatare nel passato il proprio orizzonte stilistico per trarne lena al futuro."²⁶⁷ Looking to the future, he resuscitated the Florentine literary tradition of the fourteenth century, framing it as a critical element of cultural eminence and civic stability. As Judith Allen affirms, Lorenzo was committed to "transforming and exalting Florentine poetry, to his own acclaim and that of the city."²⁶⁸ In the end, Lorenzo's personal works express only a fraction of his profound ideological commitment to the promotion of Florence and Florentine culture as a model of modern civilization. Still, these written works represent the best evidence that we have, and Lorenzo knew this too: his written legacy reaches us, more than five centuries later, in a

²⁶⁷ Zanato's introduction in Lorenzo de' Medici and Tiziano Zanato, *Comento De' Miei Sonetti* (Florence: Olschki, 1991), xxxi.

²⁶⁸ Judith Allen, "Lorenzo's Star and Savonarola's Serpent: Changing Representations of Simonetta Cataneo Vespucci." (*Italian Studies*, Volume 69, no.1, March 2014, 4-23), 6.

nearly modern way. In supporting a novel but living tradition, Lorenzo made his writing more accessible not only to his community, but to later eras of readership.

In 1476, Lorenzo commissioned the *Raccolta aragonese*, an anthology of Tuscan vernacular poetry. The title pays homage to the intended recipient of the collection, Federico d'Aragona, son of the King of Naples. When the two met in Pisa, Federico had expressed an interest in preserving the tradition of Tuscan poetry. For his part, Lorenzo was unlikely to forgo an opportunity to show off this most precious cultural commodity. Chad Shorter writes: "Lorenzo traded on the glory of Europe's cultural center not simply out of convenience; Florence lacked the military strength to assert its will on the battlefield. Sophistication, pageantry, wealth, and art were Florence's imperial influences."²⁶⁹ In the *Raccolta*, Lorenzo positions himself and his fellow Florentine humanists as the heirs to the great literary tradition of *Trecento*. His entire vernacular strategy is predicated on the revival of this tradition as a foundation for the cultural authority of Florentine literature.

Zanato describes the *Raccolta* as "un ricco panorama delle letteratura toscana, a mezzo tra operazione critico-filologica e politico-culturale."²⁷⁰ The voluminous original manuscript, which was unfortunately lost, contained 499 texts spanning from the origins of Florentine poetry to Lorenzo's own compositions. It begins with an important *epistola*, which as mentioned above, has been convincingly attributed to Poliziano, Lorenzo's secretary and one of the greatest philologists of his time. The body of the work opens with Boccaccio's *Vita di Dante* as a preface to Dante's *Vita nova*, followed by a selection

²⁶⁹ Chad W. Shorter, "An Assembly of Self and State: The Impossibile Congiunzione of Lorenzo De' Medici's Poetry." (The University of Wisconsin - Madison. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2015), 88.

²⁷⁰ Lorenzo de' Medici and Tiziano Zanato, *Comento De' Miei Sonetti* (Florence: Olschki, 1991), 315.

of Dante's other *canzoni*, *ballate* and sonnets. While Dante and Petrarch, the "due soli" of the tradition, provide the most most notable influences within the *Raccolta*, Petrarch's lyrics from the *Canzoniere* are conspicuously absent. While the precise reason for this omission is unclear, Petrarch is undeniably present throughout the collection in style if not in substance (much like this dissertation). Other featured authors of the *dolce stil novo* include Guido Guinizelli and Guittone d'Arezzo, two of the earliest examples of vernacular verse in Tuscany. They are followed by Guido Cavalcanti, Cino da Pistoia, Giovanni Boccaccio, Luigi Pulci and Matteo Maria Boiardo, among others. In a glorious vindication for Alberti, Lorenzo also includes the participants from the *Certame coronario* which at the time, the judges had deemed unworthy even of their consideration. This indicates rather a significant cultural reversal in the interim three decades. Lorenzo's poems are featured at the end of the volume as a "strategic bookend" to Dante – two poets with an unwavering commitment to the political fortune of Florence.²⁷¹ By inserting his own contributions, Lorenzo aims to depict continuity in the Florentine tradition. He elevates himself by association, appropriating the *tre corone* as the foundation for his own legacy. In releasing this collection to the great powers beyond Florence, Lorenzo is eager to "draw attention to his own profile and to exploit the reciprocal prestige between his name and Florence's cultural history."²⁷²

While it is evident that Lorenzo was committed to his own artistic production on an intellectual level, it seems clear that this work in particular was conceived with an explicitly political aim. While the texts are relatively devoid of political content, the

²⁷¹ Chad W. Shorter, "An Assembly of Self and State: The Impossibile Congiunzione of Lorenzo De' Medici's Poetry." (The University of Wisconsin - Madison. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2015), 102.

²⁷² Ibid, 92.

compilation and dissemination of the work is a meaningful political act in itself. In the end, Lorenzo's own poems constitute merely a fraction of the impact of the work. More than the artistic value, his works are significant for the canonical narrative they create. Lorenzo positions himself as a next step in the *trecento* tradition; in doing so, he depicts a tradition which is both established and growing. Lorenzo fully embraces the civic function of language and he aims to use the native accomplishments of Florence to promote their cultural eminence. Like his grandfather Cosimo, who lent his support to Alberti's *certame coronario* in 1441, Lorenzo perceived an important equivalency between cultural prestige and political power. In the rich and chaotic landscape of fifteenth-century Italy, it was rarely enough for a leader to be merely strong; he had to be cultured, clever and wise. On many occasions over the course of the century, the gracious diplomacy of (certain) leaders and their emissaries was the saving grace of an already war-torn peninsula. For Lorenzo, the *Raccolta* was yet another act of cultural diplomacy.

Lorenzo's lyrical contribution to the *Raccolta* features nine sonnets, two *canzoni* and five *canzoni a ballo*. Of these sixteen texts, eleven are taken directly from his *Canzoniere*. Thematically, Lorenzo's collection in the *Raccolta* is similar to that of his *Canzoniere* with the noted addition of a distinctly Dantescan *dolce stil novo* influence. This inclusion demonstrates how Lorenzo's poetic style evolved over the course of his life. While his youthful poetry exuded a distinctly Petrarchan style, his later works favor the themes of the *dolce stil novo* and Dante in particular. While the texts from his *Canzoniere* are, appropriately, more Petrarchan, the influence of both authors are apparent in Lorenzo's contributions to the *Raccolta*. Strum writes: "Despite the highly

derivative nature of almost all of Lorenzo's lyrics, his contemporaries generally considered them his greatest literary achievement."²⁷³ While the forms and the vocabulary imitate Dante and Petrarch, Lorenzo's assimilation of contemporary themes demonstrates a meaningful element of personal innovation. He borrows stylistic components from the *Trecento* tradition and infuses them with the rising Neoplatonic influence of Marsilio Ficino.²⁷⁴ As Shorter explains: "Recasting an established conceit of Italian love poetry – the image of the lady on the lover's heart – in terms of Ficinian metaphysical speculation represents a rich example of Lorenzo's attempt to appropriate the authority and the fame of Florence's lyric tradition."²⁷⁵ By incorporating diverse elements of the Florentine intellectual tradition, both from the fourteenth century and the contemporary era, Lorenzo aims to project a narrative of continuity and development within their native literary canon.

The melding of influence which defines Lorenzo's poetic innovation is neither haphazard nor casual in its elaboration. Shorter writes: "Lorenzo has conjoined these elements of disparate poetic traditions within a framework of the philosophy that was the vogue in Lorenzo's intellectual circle – Ficinian Neoplatonism."²⁷⁶ Ficino had an undeniably large presence in Lorenzo's philosophical formation, as well as that of the Florentine intellectual community in general. His most important work, *Theologia*

²⁷³ Sara Sturm, *Lorenzo De'Medici* (Woodbridge: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 59.

²⁷⁴ On Ficino's humanism, see Christopher Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance, Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 101-113; see also Christopher Celenza, "The revival of Platonic philosophy" in Hankins, *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 72-97; also Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1975), 9-11; 95-100.

²⁷⁵ Chad W. Shorter, "An Assembly of Self and State: The Impossibile Congiunzione of Lorenzo De' Medici's Poetry." (The University of Wisconsin - Madison. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2015), 89.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 103.

platonica de immortalitate animarum (1469-1474) was dedicated to Lorenzo. Earlier in the fifteenth century, the reintroduction of Greek letters in Florence had opened a vast new realm of classical scholarship. The philosophy of Plato, which had been effectively lost to Europe apart from a few notes and fragments, generated a storm of intellectual activity. Beyond translating a vast number of Plato's works from Greek to Latin, Ficino made critical efforts to reconcile classical Greek philosophy with Christian morality.

Celenza writes that in *Theologia Platonica de immortalitate animarum* (1482), Ficino "made an important statement defending Christianity against some of the by then traditionally heterodox positions, especially those associated with Avveroism."²⁷⁷

Ficino's theologically informed interpretation of Plato became the basis for the "Renaissance Neoplatonist" philosophy which developed over the following decades. As a childhood student of Ficino, Lorenzo was an early proponent of his philosophy.

Lorenzo's reboot of the *Trecento* literary tradition, defined by his application of contemporary philosophy to the forms of Dante and Petrarch, is best illustrated by a particular sonnet in the *Raccolta*, "Se con dolce armonia due istrumenti"²⁷⁸:

Se con dolce armonia due istrumenti
nella medesima voce alcun concorda,
pulsando l'una, rende l'altra corda
per la conformit  medesmi accenti:
cos  par dentro al mio cor si risenti
l'imgo impressa, a 'nostri sospir sorda,
se per similitudin si ricorda
del viso, ch'  sopra l'umane menti.
Amor, in quanti modi il cor ripigli!
Ch  fuggendo l'aspetto del bel viso,

²⁷⁷ Christopher Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance, Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 102.

²⁷⁸ Sonnet is reproduced and discussed in Lorenzo de 'Medici and Paolo Orvieto, *Tutte le opere, vol. 1* (Roma: Salerno editrice, 1992), 178-83.

d'una vana pittura il cor pascendo,
o che non vegghino altro i nostri cigli,
o che il pittor già fussi in paradiso,
lei vidi propria: or va d'Amor fuggendo.

Thematically, this sonnet represents a micro-*raccolta* of conceptualizations of love in Italian vernacular poetry, recast“ in terms of Neoplatonic harmony and contemplation of supreme beauty.”²⁷⁹ While predominantly reliant on Dante and Petrarch, in the *Raccolta* Lorenzo subtly invokes the Provençal and Sicilian origins of the Tuscan tradition as well. The Neoplatonist lens through which Lorenzo opens the sonnet serves to demonstrate the “modern” intellectual atmosphere in Florence. With the opening “Se”, Lorenzo casts an introspective, philosophical tone. In the first quatrain, his choice of vocabulary emphasizes unity and harmony: *armonia, medesima, concorda, conformità*. The harmony of the instruments is a metaphor for the harmony between Plato’s physical and metaphysical spheres as interpreted and described by Ficino. These two spheres exist in diametric opposition; one is matter and the other is God. In Aristotelian terms of cause, God is without any cause, he exists *per se*, whereas matter – in its passivity – requires all four causes: efficient, final, material and formal. Humanity, bound to materiality but possessed of a divine, immortal soul, inhabits an intermediary position between the two spheres. Ficino believed that by virtue of our “angelic minds”, humans are drawn to happiness and to the light of God by an innate longing – this longing is love. As Celenza describes: “It is love, for Ficino, that implants in all living things with the desire to propagate. It is love which, through a system of universal linkages known

²⁷⁹ Chad W. Shorter, “An Assembly of Self and State: The Impossibile Congiunzione of Lorenzo De’ Medici’s Poetry.” (The University of Wisconsin - Madison. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2015), 107.

as “sympathies” – mutual but sometimes occult attractions – unites the earthly with the heavenly.”²⁸⁰

Lorenzo’s depiction of love and his beloved echo several different voices from the origins of vernacular poetry. In verse six, he describes her *imago* as impressed within his heart. This notion of incised beauty on the heart of the poet-lover recalls the Provençal troubadours and the Sicilian poets who, in their thirteenth-century lyrics, commonly sang of their beloved’s name or likeness being etched on their hearts. In verse seven, the use of *similitudin* for *somiglianza* is borrowed from Dante; in the first tercet, the *vana pittura* which had captured Lorenzo’s heart recalls Petrarch’s treatment of a portrait of his beloved Laura, and even further back, Giacomo da Lentini’s image of a painted lady in his *canzone* “Meravigliosamente”. The overarching connection which Lorenzo establishes between the *imago impressa*, the *umana mente*, the *bel viso* and the *vana pittura* derives from Ficino’s notion of divine beauty²⁸¹ which the mind is able to contemplate only through the appreciation of beauty in the material sphere. Lorenzo’s systematic incorporation of these diverse ideologies is his way of claiming the styles of the *Raccolta* for Florence and bringing depth and authority to the emerging tradition. Despite the fact that Lorenzo included this sonnet both in his *Canzoniere* and in the *Raccolta*, it has garnered very little critical attention. This is an unfortunate oversight, as it represents a prime example of Lorenzo’s methodical amalgamation of contemporary philosophy with the lyrical styles of the “old” Florentine tradition. Lorenzo endeavored to present his work and that of his vernacular contemporaries as the result of a true literary

²⁸⁰ Christopher Celenza, “The revival of Platonic philosophy” in Hankins, *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 89.

²⁸¹ In Marsilio Ficino, et al. *Platonic Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), XI.4.

revival of *Trecento* Florence. He studies and adopts the styles of the “three crowns” as the Latin humanists had done with the great authors of classical antiquity and thereby establishes a methodological parallel between the study of classical and vernacular literature. Years after the *Raccolta*, Lorenzo continued to elaborate his classical treatment of the Florentine tradition in his final major work, the *Comento* of his sonnets.

The *Comento de' miei sonetti* was written between 1480 and 1492, from the height of Lorenzo's political eminence through his premature decline. While the work is structurally complete, Lorenzo was still in the process of revising the commentary when he died.²⁸² Following the general evolution of Lorenzo's lyrical production, the *Comento* demonstrates that, in his later years, he was drawn more to the influences of Dante than of Petrarch. Marianne Shapiro defines the *Comento* as a “second Laurentian *canzoniere*” – this one more autobiographical than the first, in the style of Dante's *Vita nova*.²⁸³ It mirrors the *Convivio* as well, a point which Lorenzo explicitly acknowledges, “soprattutto per la nature fortemente filosofica del prosimento, nonché per il rapporto versi-prosa.”²⁸⁴ These connections to the *Vita nova* and the *Convivio* are evident in the parallel construction of the works, in which the authors provide vernacular, prose commentary to a corpus of their own lyrical compositions. Furthermore, each commentary serves to bind the corpus of sonnets in the guise of an amorous narrative. As Dante did with his odes to Beatrice, Lorenzo compiles his sonnets to Lucrezia Donati – often indicated as simply as “D” or allegorically as Diana. (Poor Gemma and Clarice!) In their commentaries, Dante and Lorenzo provide the philosophical, interpretive key to

²⁸² Sara Sturm, *Lorenzo De' Medici* (Woodbridge: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 64.

²⁸³ Zanato's introduction in Lorenzo de' Medici and Tiziano Zanato, *Comento De' Miei Sonetti* (Florence: Olschki, 1991), xiii.

²⁸⁴ Lorenzo de' Medici and Tiziano Zanato, *Opere: Lorenzo De' Medici* (Torino: Einaudi, 1992), 557.

their respective lyrical corpuses. In this way, in what would become Lorenzo's final contribution to the legitimacy of vernacular production in Florence, the literary structures as well as the style and the vocabulary of Dante assume a critical role in Lorenzo's proposed "native" revival.

In total, the *Comento* features an introductory letter followed by forty-one sonnets from Lorenzo's *Canzoniere*. They are ordered chronologically, from three distinct periods in Lorenzo's life. The first nine sonnets date between 1474 and 1477. In these years, following a successful accord with Milan and Venice, Lorenzo had overcome many of the early challenges to his rule – though in retrospect this was more an "eye of the hurricane" break in hostilities. This relatively peaceful, secure landscape became "the backdrop for the beginnings of his extensive and influential involvement with Florence's university, the *Studio*" and for "the growth of his reputation as a connoisseur of ancient and contemporary art."²⁸⁵ The second period, between 1478 and 1479, produced only the tenth sonnet. These were the years marred by the tragic events of the Pazzi Conspiracy and the hardship which followed for Lorenzo and for Florence. His commentary on this sonnet is intensely personal, referring explicitly to the adversity he faced in those years. The final sonnets are dated between 1480 and 1483, the period of Lorenzo's heroic return from Naples and the very height of his political and cultural influence. While the sonnets and the commentary themselves are quite impressive from a literary standpoint, the truly revolutionary aspects of the work consist in the structure, a conscious revival of Dante, and the explicit defense of vernacular scholarship which Lorenzo presents in the introduction. Considering that the sonnets are borrowed from

²⁸⁵ Judith Allen, "Lorenzo's Star and Savonarola's Serpent: Changing Representations of Simonetta Cattaneo Vespucci." (*Italian Studies*, Volume 69, no.1, March 2014, 4-23), 6.

his previous compilations, the most critical element of the *Comento*, in terms of the theoretical advancement of the Florentine vernacular, resides in the concise but remarkable preface.

In several ways, Lorenzo's arguments in the introduction to the *Comento* resemble Dante's commentary in the introductory treatise of the *Convivio*. There are distinct commonalities with Poliziano's *epistola* in the *Raccolta aragonese* as well, which will become evident in the following section. Sturm writes: "The prologue to the *Comento* is more than the author's theoretical justification of his subject, opinions, and procedure. It has the tone of polemic, of a serious response to direct criticism on several fronts."²⁸⁶ Rather than providing an introduction to the subject matter, Lorenzo's introduction is focused on justifying the composition of the work as a whole, in genre, in subject and most notably, in the choice of vernacular language over Latin. On the subject of genre, which in this case compels the author to (perhaps pridefully) write about his works, Lorenzo paraphrases a sentiment espoused by Alberti: it is better to endeavor to contribute something than to hide in fear of the judgements and criticisms of others. On the matter of his subject – love – Lorenzo writes:

"E giudicando più tosto secondo la natura comune e consuetudine universale degli uomini, se bene non l'oserei affermare, pure credo l'amore tra gli uomini non solamente non essere repressibile, ma quasi necessario, e assai vero argomento di gentilezza e grandezza d'animo, e sopra tutto cagione d'invitare gli uomini a cose degne e eccellenti, et esercitare e ridurre in atto quelle virtù che in potenza sono nell'anima nostra."²⁸⁷

²⁸⁶ Sara Sturm, *Lorenzo De' Medici* (Woodbridge: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 68.

²⁸⁷ Lorenzo de' Medici, *Comento*, Proem, 26. This and the following citations from Lorenzo's *Comento* are reproduced from the Lorenzo de' Medici and Tiziano Zanato, *Comento De' Miei Sonetti* (Florence: Olschki, 1991).

In Lorenzo's justification of love as an ennobling influence and a worthy literary topic, the influence of Ficino shines through.²⁸⁸ As Strum explains, Lorenzo's attitude towards amorous passion is clear to "whoever understand the nature of love, for its true definition is nothing other than an appetite for beauty."²⁸⁹ This innate draw is what motivates our "angelic minds" to turn towards greatness and virtue.

To conclude, Lorenzo transitions to the third anticipated criticism: his choice of vernacular language. Some, he fears, may judge that the vernacular is not "capace o degna di alcuna eccellente materia o subietto."²⁹⁰ It is Lorenzo's judgment, however, that everything is better when it is communicable, universal and it truly contributes to the common good. The vernacular, he writes, is not rendered less dignified by being common; instead, the commonality makes it even more beneficial to the "sommo bene". Rather than criticize and discredit the tongue in which they were "nato e nutrito", Lorenzo encourages people to consider the relative perfection of their language. To this end, much like Dante in *De vulgari eloquentia*, Lorenzo designates four essential qualifications of a literary language. Building on Dante however, he offers examples of *Trecento* literature as proof that Tuscan is up to the mark. While one or two of these qualifications, he writes, are inherent to the language itself, the others, he warns, can be subject to opinion or fortune. The first quality he describes is expressivity; a literary language requires an elevated capacity to express thoughts and emotions. These qualities are evident, he says, in the natural and theological arguments of Dante's *Comedia*. Secondly, the language must be harmonious, as demonstrated by the sweet

²⁸⁸ Particularly evident in Lorenzo's works is Ficino's *De Amore o Commentarium in Convivium Platonis* (1469).

²⁸⁹ Sara Sturm, *Lorenzo De' Medici* (Woodbridge: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 67.

²⁹⁰ Lorenzo de' Medici, *Comento*, Proem, 65; 144.

and lively verses of Petrarch. As in his sonnets, Lorenzo's discussion of harmony echoes Ficino²⁹¹:

"...essendo l'armonia (come è detto) proporzionata alla natura umana, si può inferire il giudizio della dolcezza di tale armonia convenirsi a quelli che similmente sono bene proporzionati a riceverla, el giudizio de' quali debba essere accettato per buono, ancora che fustino pochi: perché le sentenzie e iudicii degli uomini più presto si debbono ponderare che numerare."²⁹²

Lorenzo writes that the sweetness we perceive in language derives from the proportional harmony between the language and our own human nature. Whether the language is pleasing or not therefore depends on appetite more than on reason, making it more susceptible to fortune. Moving from harmony to utility, Lorenzo next considers the degree to which a language is useful, as an instrument, for everyday questions of argument and thought. This, he concludes, is the product of great thinkers making use of the language, elevating the literary tradition alongside the subject. After all, Lorenzo writes, the language is the means and the subject is the end. The fourth and final point rests predominantly on fortune, and it prompts the most explicitly political discussion:

"Resta un'altra sola condizione che dà reputazione alla lingua, e questo è quando il successo delle cose del mondo è tale, che facci universale e quasi comune a tutto il mondo quello che naturalmente è proprio o di una città o d'una provincia sola. E questo si può chiamare felicità e prosperità di fortuna che vera laude della lingua, perché l'essere in prezzo e assai celebrata una lingua nel mondo consiste nella opinione di quelli tali che assai la premono e stimono: né si può chiamare vero e proprio bene quello che dipende da altri che da sé medesimo."²⁹³

Again Lorenzo recalls the notion of language as a cultural good and he concludes that external praise, coming from those who lack the societal context of the tradition, is not

²⁹¹ For an overview of Ficinian Neoplatonism, see Christopher Celenza, "The Revival of Platonic Philosophy" in James Hankins, *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁹² Lorenzo de' Medici, *Comento*, Proem, 76-77; 145.

²⁹³ Lorenzo de' Medici, *Comento*, Proem, 84-85; 146.

true praise at all, but mere fortune. This, like a double-edged sword, both disparages the lingering precedent of Latinate humanism and proactively shields him from vernacular critics. In the end, Lorenzo determines that the true dignity of language lies predominantly in the first questions of capacity, utility and harmony. He writes that, culturally, Florence is merely in the adolescence of a burgeoning tradition, “e potrebbe facilmente, nella iuventù e adulta età sua, venire ancora in maggiore perfezione, e tanto più aggiungendosi qualche prospero successo e augumento al fiorentino imperio.”²⁹⁴ With this analogy of growth, Lorenzo looks to the future, towards a realization of their civic and literary potential. Eschewing the Latinate praxis of the early quattrocento, he relies primarily on the foundations of the *tre corone*, exalting them as a sort of new literary aristocracy. Like Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio – and Cavalcanti, he gives due credit to Cavalcanti as well – he writes in the language in which he was born, explaining that Hebrew, Greek and Latin, too, were mother tongues in their own time. He concludes therefore that their own vernacular is equally worthy of literary treatment.

In his methodical and persuasive introduction, which Marianne Shapiro identifies as an “encomium of the Tuscan literary language”²⁹⁵, Lorenzo gives important insight into the theory behind his decades of vernacular practice. He relies heavily on Dante, not only as a literary model but as a linguistic philosopher, categorizing and qualifying the elements of a language which deem it worthy and capable of literary use. Zanato writes, that in the *Comento*, “la gloria della lingua era fatta risalire a Dante, Petrarca e

²⁹⁴ Lorenzo de' Medici, *Comento*, Proem, 105-106; 149.

²⁹⁵ Marianne Shapiro, “Poetry and Politics in the *Comento* of Lorenzo De' Medici.” (*Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 4, 1973, pp. 444–453), 444.

Boccaccio, veri modelli, e in tutte le direzioni, della musa medicea.”²⁹⁶ Lorenzo’s emphasis on the virtues of the *Trecento* tradition is a critical part of his own literary legacy, as the great works of Florence-past establish a sense of historical authority. In praising them, Lorenzo elevates his own scholarship and that of his fellow Florentine humanists. This historical renown, combined with Lorenzo’s mighty influence, successfully presented the “new” vernacular scholarship of Florence as a glorious revival, one which affirmed the cultural eminence of the Florentine Republic. The “impossible fusion” of poet and politician which Machiavelli attributes to Lorenzo is evident not only in the *Comento* but throughout his written works. Every aspect of his scholarship, from the language to the subject to the carefully selected dedicatee, is devised in pursuit of the “sommo bene” – specifically, for the benefit of his family and of Florence. Strength and stability in Florence were the best guarantee of the people’s favor and the endurance of the family legacy: the position of the Medici in Florence reflected the position of Florence in the greater Italian landscape; their power was reliant on diplomacy and cultural influence as opposed to legitimate force. Lorenzo was keenly aware of this dynamic, and in each of his literary contributions we find traces of the civic ideology which defined his ambitions for Florence – ambitions which his secretary, Angelo Poliziano, sought to reify through his prolific contributions to the emerging canon of vernacular Florentine literature.

²⁹⁶ In Zanato’s introduction to Lorenzo de’ Medici and Tiziano Zanato, *Comento De’ Miei Sonetti* (Florence: Olschki, 1991), xxxi.

III. Angelo Poliziano

On a Sunday in April 1478, at the critical moment of the Pazzi conspiracy, Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici were viciously attacked in the Duomo of Florence. Giuliano was killed, but Lorenzo's life was spared when he was hurried into the sacristy and locked safely away. His savior was his personal secretary and lifelong friend, Angelo Poliziano. Indeed, the most disappointing historical inaccuracy of the recent Netflix series "Medici: The Magnificent" lies in their resigned, cowardly depiction of poor Poliziano – shown running away. In truth, Poliziano may have been reserved, but he was really quite bold in many aspects of his short but remarkable life; he shied not from attacks, nor criticism, nor personal judgment, nor intellectual controversy. Across his literary production, Poliziano's style was eclectic; he valued individuality over the Ciceronian *imitatio* which guided the scholarship of many (if not most) *Quattrocento* humanists. Sapegno writes that for Poliziano, this fervor for Ciceronian *imitatio*, while certainly useful, amounted to "una lunga e faticosa esercitazione letteraria."²⁹⁷ Poliziano, instead, drew from an extensive, often unusual canon of sources to create his own style – both in Latin and in the Florentine vernacular. While Poliziano's iteration of the literary *volgare* would fail to establish itself as the definitive model, his broad, unique, historically-grounded approach to literature made critical contributions to the revival of the vernacular lyrical tradition and to the refined philological methods which would later support the work of such scholars as Pietro Bembo, Gian Giorgio Trissino and Niccolò Machiavelli.

²⁹⁷ Natalino Sapegno, *Compendio Di Storia Della Letteratura Italiana* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1963), 267.

Over the course of his career, Poliziano was a secretary, translator, professor, poet, ordained priest and the most advanced philologist of his age. In 1475, when he was just twenty-one years old, Poliziano was brought into the Medici household as Lorenzo's personal secretary and tutor to his son Piero. It is well-documented that Poliziano, unconventional as he was, often found himself at odds with Clarice Orsini, Lorenzo's strictly devout wife. It was this tension which, in 1479, prompted Poliziano's departure from the Medici household and subsequent travels through northern Italy. He returned to Florence as a professor at the *Studio* where he lectured on lesser-known classical authors and composed his most important works of philosophy and philology. He translated excerpts from Homer's *Iliad*, as well as the late-Roman neoteric poetry of Catullus which, rather unconventionally, focused more on personal life than on the exploits of heroes. Beyond Catullus, Poliziano's favorite authors included Martial, Apuleius and Columella. McLaughlin writes that Poliziano's Latin poetry confirms his "predilection for allusive brevity."²⁹⁸ His vernacular *oeuvre* displays a similar preference. While Poliziano was closely associated with Lorenzo de' Medici and his Florentine circle for the majority of his adult life, when compared with Lorenzo, he pursued an even more ambitious vernacular style. Where Lorenzo designated language as an instrument of thought, Poliziano embraced the Aristotelian notion that the words were the thoughts themselves. In Poliziano's view: "L'uomo raggiunge la coscienza di sé e della sue facoltà proprio per mezzo della parola."²⁹⁹ Building on Dante in *De vulgari eloquentia*

²⁹⁸ Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 188.

²⁹⁹ Vittore Branca, *Poliziano: e L'umanesimo Della Parola* (Torino: Einaudi, 1983), 21.

and Lorenzo in his *Comento*, Poliziano's perspective on language further emphasized the rational, expressive value of a "native" literary tradition.

While Poliziano had less direct involvement in civic affairs than some of the other scholars featured in this project, his literary production, his proximity to the Medici and his correspondence with other heads of state across Europe all provide considerable evidence of his political awareness and his distinctly civic mindset. Celenza writes: "Poliziano's newly evolved philological techniques are strikingly modern, but he developed them in relation to factors in his intellectual environment, in an antagonistic social context where the resolution of textual questions was an important means toward the end of amassing cultural capital."³⁰⁰ Drawing on the legacy of the fourteenth century, Poliziano joined Lorenzo in his ambitions to affirm the political and cultural eminence of Florence through the promotion of their own literary vernacular. Poliziano's work in particular brought about "a revolution in philological method"³⁰¹ which directed the ongoing refinement of the Florentine literary language. An important aspect of this method derived from Poliziano's secular, textual, Biondo-esque approach to history. Grafton writes: "Earlier Florentine humanists had studied the ancient world in order to become better men and citizens. Poliziano by contrast insisted above all on the need to understand the past in the light of every possibly relevant bit of evidence — and to scrap any belief about the past that did not rest on firm documentary foundations"³⁰²

³⁰⁰ Christopher Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance, Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 103.

³⁰¹ Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: the Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 48.

³⁰² Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: the Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 72.

This historically-grounded approach set a new empirical standard for humanist scholarship in Florence, one which moved away from Ficino's rational Neoplatonism towards a more objective, Aristotelian ethos. Especially in his final years, Poliziano, along with fellow scholars Lorenzo Valla and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, embraced "a growing newer style of philosophical inquiry which embraced traditional areas of philosophy in a philologically sophisticated manner."³⁰³ This evolution in philological methods represents Poliziano's most enduring contribution to humanist scholarship. Above all, Poliziano was driven by a desire to transcend conventions and create something new; these intentions are evident in his choice of genres, his choice of sources, and most notably, the way he treats and uses language.

i. Poliziano the Secretary

Angelo Ambrogini, commonly known in scholarship as Angelo Poliziano or Politian, was born in Montepulciano, in the countryside of central Tuscany, in the summer of 1454.³⁰⁴ His father Benedetto, a noted jurist, was murdered in 1464. The attack was politically motivated – a result of his declaration of support for Piero de' Medici. The family was left in reduced circumstances and Poliziano, at the age of ten,

³⁰³ Christopher Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance, Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 103.

³⁰⁴ Dates for Poliziano's life and works in Paolo Orvieto, *Poliziano e L'ambiente Mediceo* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2009); also, Elizabeth Welles "Angelo Poliziano" in Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 23-305.

was sent to live with a cousin in Florence. Despite his humble position, Poliziano excelled; he was a precocious scholar, circulating his Latin letters in Florence from the age of thirteen. In 1470, he began his translation of Homer's *Iliad*. He completed the first two books in 1473 and he dedicated them to Lorenzo and his brother Giuliano. The circumstances of his father's death meant that Poliziano had a claim on the Medici household, and beyond that, Lorenzo was favorably impressed by his work. Right away, he took Poliziano under his protection and gave him access to the impressive Medicean library. As part of Lorenzo's circle, Poliziano encountered the most important Florentine humanists, including Marsilio Ficino, as well as the Greek scholars Giovanni Argiropulo and Demetrio Calcondila. Poliziano's acclaim grew, and in 1475, Lorenzo named him as his personal secretary as well as tutor to his young son, Piero.

As Lorenzo's personal secretary, Poliziano's political career and the civic mentality he espoused in his writings were intimately tied to Lorenzo's cultural ambitions for Florence. He entered the Medici household in 1475, when he was just twenty-one years old. Lorenzo was only five years older, but he was already a capable and established leader and he became Poliziano's most treasured mentor. While Poliziano has sometimes been classified as an unofficial courtier, that would be an oversimplification of the diverse and nuanced ways in which he contributed to Lorenzo's grand civic agenda. Marta Celati writes that scholars like Poliziano were "often involved personally in conceiving sophisticated cultural strategies aimed at effectively putting into practice specific political models, presented through different literary forms: historiography, oratory, treatises, and even poetry."³⁰⁵ While this was true for many of

³⁰⁵ Marta Celati, "Angelo Poliziano's Political Orations: The Humanist in Government." (The Modern Language Review, vol. 115, no. 2, 2020), 321.

the cultural centers of Italy, Medici rule in Florence was particularly fragile. While other leaders were backed by hereditary titles or imposing military forces, the Medici dynasty was predominantly reliant on cultural capital and popular influence. Poliziano was among the most talented and influential practitioners of the cultural, intellectual and literary tradition Lorenzo sought to establish. In terms of their larger political strategy, Lorenzo and Poliziano pursued cultural achievement as a safeguard for the stability and prosperity of Florence; as long as the city flourished, the people were likely to uphold their support of the Medici.

Poliziano's tenure as secretary was in fact quite brief; he served only four years, from 1475 to 1479. However, this period happened to coincide with a particularly tumultuous and meaningful series of events, both for Lorenzo personally and for the political future of Florence. By the time Poliziano entered into Lorenzo's service, conflict was already brewing between Lorenzo and Pope Sixtus IV. Florence was protected, however, by their strong diplomatic relationship with Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Duke of Milan, and their new alliance with Venice. It was in these years that Poliziano produced two of his most significant works, both literary, but with a distinctly political purpose. The first was the introductory letter to the *Raccolta aragonese*, which he helped Lorenzo to compile. This anthology, intended for the son of the King of Naples, was "a political vehicle to export a prototypically Tuscan artifact as a representation of Florence's cultural and philosophical prestige."³⁰⁶ Poliziano's introductory letter provides an important defense of the Tuscan literary tradition with notes of Dante, Alberti, and of course, Lorenzo. The second work was Poliziano's *Stanze per la giostra*, a condensed

³⁰⁶ Chad W. Shorter, "An Assembly of Self and State: The Impossibile Congiunzione of Lorenzo De' Medici's Poetry." (The University of Wisconsin - Madison. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2015), 97.

vernacular epic in celebration of Florence's critical new alliance with Milan and Venice. Poliziano imagined the work, built around Giuliano de' Medici and his lady, as his Virgilian masterpiece commemorating an important moment in history. It remained unfinished, however, following Giuliano's murder. Instead, immediately following the attack, Poliziano wrote the *Coniurationis commentarium* (1478)³⁰⁷ which Celati defines as "the cornerstone of Lorenzo's multi-pronged system of political propaganda after the failure of the Pazzi conspiracy."³⁰⁸

In the difficult year which followed, Lorenzo and Poliziano parted ways – but only briefly. Even during his year-long absence from Florence, Poliziano continued to pursue the vernacular agenda of the Florentines. While in the service of the Gonzaga family in Mantua, Poliziano composed his *Orfeo* (1479-1480), the first secular work of theater written in the vernacular. He returned to Florence in the following year as a professor of philosophy and rhetoric at the *Studio*. Despite his brief absence and his altered role, Poliziano would remain, for the rest of his life, a highly influential figure among the Florentine humanist elite; the critical and philological works which Poliziano produced through the 1480s, most notably the *Miscellanea*, garnered praise across Europe and had a profound impact on the methodologies of future humanist scholars. While Poliziano's interests shifted in the final decade of his life, from poetry to philosophy and philology, his underlying commitment to scholarship as cultural capital is omnipresent throughout his works. Especially in his final years, Poliziano confirmed that the civic

³⁰⁷ Elizabeth B. Welles' English translation of *Coniurationis Commentarium* can be found in Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 305-322.

³⁰⁸ Marta Celati, "Angelo Poliziano's Political Orations: The Humanist in Government." (*The Modern Language Review*, vol. 115, no. 2, 2020), 323.

mentality he adopted as Lorenzo's secretary was not a condition of his employment but a sincerely held ideology. Even after he left his position as secretary – and even after Lorenzo's death – Poliziano maintained his commitment to civic achievement in Florence, most explicitly with a series of little-known political orations, written in the final two years of his life under the imperiled leadership of his former pupil, Piero. Celati writes: "While the close relationship between Poliziano and Lorenzo has always been acknowledged and underlined, nevertheless an even more direct political cooperation seems to link Poliziano and Piero, in a context where the new and inexperienced ruler must have been in urgent need of the collaboration of his former tutor and expert humanist, who had also supported his father amid difficult circumstances."³⁰⁹ Of these orations, the most significant are *Pro oratoribus Senensium ad Alexandrum sextum pontificem maximum*, written for the election of Pope Alexander VI in 1492, and two more, both titled *Pro oratoribus Florentinorum ad Alphonsum Siciliae regem*, marking the death of Ferdinando d'Aragona and the succession of his son in 1494. These orations are evidence of Poliziano's "unexpected and concrete political commitment"³¹⁰ which endured throughout his life. In the wake of Lorenzo's death, Poliziano devised these works to establish a continuum of rule and cultural tradition between Lorenzo and Piero, supported by his own efforts and this of his fellow Florentine humanists.

Ultimately, Poliziano's orations – his final acts of Laurentian cultural diplomacy – were unsuccessful. The balance of power in Florence had always been fragile, and Lorenzo's loss proved too great of an upset to overcome. Poliziano died in 1494,

³⁰⁹ Marta Celati, "Angelo Poliziano's Political Orations: The Humanist in Government." (*The Modern Language Review*, vol. 115, no. 2, 2020), 323.

³¹⁰ *Ibid*, 322.

depriving Piero of yet another life-long support. The army of Charles VIII was moving in, the ambitious new pope was pursuing his own agenda and Girolamo Savonarola was preaching in the streets of Florence, stirring discontent against the indulgent ruling elites.³¹¹ Celenza writes: “Savonarola’s emphasis on faith over reason and his condemnation of ‘vanities’ of all sorts was intimately related to Florentine civic traditions, as was the way in which Savonarola preached and disseminated his message.”³¹² The Medici were branded as despots, suffocating the proud, republican traditions of Florentine *libertas*. The tides of popular sentiment rose up against Piero de’ Medici, and he was exiled. Only a few years later, Savonarola fell out of favor as well. Florence entered a new republican age, best characterized by the work of the civic servant, historian, literary scholar and political philosopher, Niccolò Machiavelli.

ii. Written works

Poliziano’s literary prowess was not only his greatest talent, but one of the most critical instruments of Lorenzo de’ Medici’s civic and cultural ambitions for Florence. He established himself young and spent the majority of his life as a privileged member of Lorenzo’s humanist circle. As an author and translator, Poliziano was more or less

³¹¹ On the cultural impact of the events of 1494, see Alison Brown “Rethinking the Renaissance in the aftermath of Italy’s crisis” in John Najemy, *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance: 1300-1550* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 246-254.

³¹² Christopher Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance, Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 105.

equally proficient in vernacular Italian, Latin and classical Greek.³¹³ Across his scholarship, he promoted a *docta varietas* which aimed to broaden the scope of classical *imitatio* to include diverse authors and periods of scholarship. McLaughlin writes that Poliziano “pursues eclecticism and originality both in theory and in the practice of writing in Latin and the vernacular.”³¹⁴ Lorenzo’s desire to revive the native Florentine literary tradition created an auspicious environment for Poliziano’s rigorous but unconventional literary impulses. In this progressive intellectual climate, Poliziano made a number of important contributions to the evolving trends in humanist scholarship. Predominantly, these trends included the revival of the Florentine literary tradition, a secular, textually-grounded conceptualization of history, a more critical approach to classical manuscripts and a transition from Ficinian Neoplatonism towards the more objective empiricism of Aristotle.

In different phases of Poliziano’s life, from young lyricist to secretary to professor, his tastes evolved. In the same period, there was an important shift in the prevailing attitudes and approaches towards classical philosophy in Florence. Poliziano’s own scholarship – especially his lectures on Aristotle and his refinement of critical and philological methods – was highly influential to this progression. Bianchi reminds us that it would be anachronistic to discuss Poliziano’s work in terms of contemporary philological standards but nevertheless, Poliziano must be credited for establishing a new model of critical and philological rigor in the manuscript tradition of the humanists.

³¹³ On Poliziano’s Latin works, 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, 2001), 188-200.

³¹⁴ Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 215.

In the early stages, different manuscripts of a text were tracked down and examined quite casually. Where they found discrepancies, scholars took liberty in determining the “correct” version. Bianchi writes that Poliziano was the first “to go beyond this approach and to grasp the necessity of considering the manuscript tradition historically.”³¹⁵ While Flavio Biondo’s revolutionary treatment of historical texts was certainly an influence, McLaughlin remarks: “Unlike Bruni and Biondo, Poliziano had a fondness for ‘brevitas’ which would never have allowed him to take Livy as a model for a historical work.”³¹⁶ I would remark that his taste for brevity foreshadowed the famous declaration of Shakespeare, but Poliziano – in contrast to Leon Battista Alberti – never seems particularly driven by wit. In fact, Poliziano was often characterized as a reproachful, antagonistic fellow.

This contrarian nature is evident in Poliziano’s two well-documented disputes, first with Neo-Latin historian Paolo Cortese and then later with Bartolomeo della Scala, Lord of Verona. These debates highlight a critical aspect of Poliziano’s scholarship: his distaste for dogmatic Ciceronian *imitatio*. Sapegno writes: “Il Poliziano si scaglia vivacemente contro gli imitatori servili di Cicerone, chiamandoli scimmie e pappagalli.”³¹⁷ Poliziano, like Salutati, was driven by a desire to create something new. In a letter to Cortese, Poliziano proclaims: “Non exprimis, inquit aliquis, Ciceronum. Quid tum? non enim sum Cicero; me tamen, ut opinor, exprimo.”³¹⁸ His declarative

³¹⁵ Luca Bianchi, “Continuity and change in the Aristotelian tradition” in in Hankins, *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 54.

³¹⁶ Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 193.

³¹⁷ Natalino Sapegno, *Compendio Di Storia Della Letteratura Italiana* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1963), 256.

³¹⁸ Poliziano, cited in Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 203.

“Quid tum?” recalls Alberti, for whom the phrase became a motto of intellectual progress. McLaughlin writes that Poliziano’s works in both Latin and the vernacular “exhibit that *docta varietas* that he defends against Coretsi’s Ciceronianism; and all his writings betray a fondness for minor models, as well as a connoisseur’s delight in lexical rarities.”³¹⁹ It is important to note, however, that Poliziano never condemns Cicero; in fact, he praises and defends him in the introductory chapters of the *Miscellanea*. What he did reject was the sort of “extreme Ciceronianism” which had come to dominate Latinate scholarship over the course of the *Quattrocento*. Poliziano made his case well, but the question was hardly settled. In the early sixteenth century, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola would elaborate on Poliziano’s arguments in a similar debate with the famous Venetian, Pietro Bembo. On questions of both classical imitation and vernacular linguistics, Bembo’s model would eventually prevail. However, Poliziano’s legacy of scholarship remains an indispensable stepping-stone in the refinement of the vernacular literary tradition.

As his generally eclectic preferences might suggest, Poliziano’s own written works vary broadly across language and genre. While not a comprehensive list, his early works include a number of personal and professional letters, his translation of the first two books of the *Iliad*, several Latin *Elegie*, the *Stanze per la giostra* (begun 1475-1478), parts of the *Raccolta aragonese*, the theatrical *Orfeo* (1479) and a large collection of *Rime*. Later, as a professor at the Florentine *Studio*, he wrote his

“Someone might object: “But you do not express yourself like Cicero.” What of it? I am not Cicero. But I think I express my own self.” The full letter (to Paolo Cortesi) is reproduced in its entirety with commentary in Angelo Poliziano and Shane Butler, *Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³¹⁹ Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 215.

Miscellanea (1483), the four dialogical *Sylvae* texts, an influential series of inaugural lectures for his courses on Aristotle, and finally, his explicitly political orations in support of Piero's new position of leadership in Florence. While Poliziano's diverse intellectual pursuits would exert their influence on multiple aspects of humanist scholarship going forward, in strict terms of his influence on the progression of the literary vernacular, Poliziano's contributions can be summarized in one fundamental point: his vernacular poetry and his theoretical defense of vernacular scholarship served to reify Lorenzo's literary ambitions for Florence. Poliziano's masterful rhetoric combined with Lorenzo's cultural authority reinvigorated the Florentine literary tradition and brought both urgency and legitimacy to the call for a *volgare illustre* as the ultimate marker of civic achievement. The two works which best demonstrate the civic aspect of Poliziano's literary agenda hail, unsurprisingly, from his years as secretary to Lorenzo. His theoretical justifications of vernacular literature are best illustrated in the introductory letter to the *Raccolta aragonese*. While it is Lorenzo's signature which graces the letter, recent appraisals, especially that of Michele Barbi³²⁰, have convincingly identified Poliziano as its true author. In practice, Poliziano's vernacular innovations are best featured in his unfinished, though masterful, encomiastic poem, *Stanze per la giostra*. This concise but sophisticated work incorporates the grandeur of classical literature with the flexibility and contemporaneity of the vernacular. Moreover, in incorporating his patrons into the encomiastic tradition, Poliziano glorifies Medicean Florence and exemplifies the cultural power of literature.

³²⁰ Michele Barbi, "La Raccolta Aragonese" in *Studi sul Canzoniere di Dante* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1965), 217-326.

As discussed among the works of Lorenzo, the *Raccolta aragonese* was among the most significant acts of Medicean cultural diplomacy. This anthology of the vernacular lyrical tradition, with a significant emphasis on Tuscan contributions, including those of Lorenzo himself, served as: “a political vehicle to export a prototypically Tuscan artifact as a representation of Florence's cultural and philosophical prestige.”³²¹ The preface of this collection, now attributed to Poliziano, provides the first critical reflection on vernacular poetry and, building on the work of Biondo and Alberti, affirms the dignity of the Florentine language in a new, philologically rigorous way.³²² Like Lorenzo, Poliziano seeks to establish commonality between the humanist revival of classical literature earlier in the century and their own revival of the *Trecento* tradition of Florence: “as many ancient authors were lost in the Middle Ages, so (‘similmente’) many early Tuscan poets were neglected in the medieval shipwreck of culture.”³²³ Lorenzo and Poliziano rely on the vernacular works of the *Trecento* as the foundations of their literary heritage, but they embrace the mutable aspect of language and position themselves in the early stages of a flourishing Florentine literary tradition – a true *volgare illustre* – which was yet to demonstrate its full potential. The dedicatory letter, addressed “Allo Illustrissimo Signore Federico d’Aragona, Figliolo del Re di Napoli”, provides Poliziano’s critical retrospective of the vernacular tradition, highlighting the richness and inherent nobility of the Tuscan language. In a similar way to Lorenzo in the

³²¹ Chad W. Shorter, “An Assembly of Self and State: The Impossibile Congiunzione of Lorenzo De’ Medici’s Poetry.” (The University of Wisconsin - Madison. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2015), 97.

³²² Citations from the opening *epistola*, below, from Lorenzo de’ Medici and A. Simioni, *Opere, vol. I*, (Bari, Laterza, 1939), 3-8.

³²³ Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 209.

preface of his *Comento*, Poliziano calls attention to the continuity of the Florentine tradition and the potential of their language as an enduring mark of cultural eminence.

Poliziano opens with a glorification of the classical tradition, both in works “of the hand” and “of the mind”. He writes: “Imperocché, sì come dal mare Oceano tutti li fiumi e fonti si dice aver principio, così da quest’una egregia consuetudine tutti i famosi fatti e le maravigliose opere degli antichi uomini s’intende esser derivati.” Like the rivers from the ocean, the great works of antiquity all derive from a singular, glorious tradition. Poliziano, who who was constantly innovating, aspired not only to imitate these customs, but to use them broadly, as a model, for an equally illustrious tradition of their own. On developing the arts he writes: “L’onore è veramente quello che porge a ciascuna arte nutrimento”. In one way, this statement recalls Lorenzo, who writes in his *Comento* that he wishes to honor the language in which he was “nato e nutrito”. It affirms the inherent connection which Lorenzo describes between a language and a culture. Additionally, the idea that an art must be nourished is reflected repeatedly in defenses of vernacular; Dante in *De vulgari eloquentia* and Lorenzo in his *Comento* both suggest that a language is glorified by the expansion and refinement of the literary canon. Poliziano drew from an uncommonly broad “ocean” of sources in his scholarship – it was his own typically eccentric way to nourish the growth of the vernacular tradition. He writes that in works of the great classical authors, the deeds of excellent men are made immortal in verse: “potessino i valorosi e chiari fatti delli uomini eccellenti con la virtù del poetico stile rendere immortali”. Later, Poliziano will bring the same eternal fame to Giuliano de’ Medici, to the Medici family and to the city of Florence with his encomiastic mini-epic, *Stanze per la giostra*.

In his introduction, Poliziano establishes a parallel between his addressee, Federico d'Aragona, who had requested the anthology, and Pisistratus, the ancient King of Athens who called for all of Homer's works to be collected and assembled. In posing this comparison, Poliziano both honors Federico and makes an important historical connection between the classical Greek tradition and his own efforts. By grounding the *Raccolta* in an existing tradition, as he does in many of his works, Poliziano was able to bring method and legitimacy to his scholarship, however unconventional it may have been. He defends himself with precedent, whether Greek, Latin or Florentine, though in the opening to the *Raccolta*, he purposefully defers only to the Florentine authors. In punctuating his own words with excerpts from Dante and Petrarch, Poliziano uses the wisdom of the *Trecento* Florentines to support his own arguments as the Latinate humanists so often did with references to classical literature. He brings new light to the grandeur of the Florentine poets while simultaneously rooting his own activities in the traditions of Florence. To close the analogy to Pisistratus, Poliziano exclaims: "Oh veramente divini uomini, e per utilità degli uomini al mondo nati!" In the words "per utilità degli uomini" we see the repetition of the most consistent, and perhaps the most fundamental, argument of the early vernacular authors: it is virtuous to work for the well-being of mankind, and what could be more useful than bringing wisdom and virtue to others? A native literary tradition makes knowledge accessible to a greater number of people and allows the community to live in a more virtuous way. Additionally, as Lorenzo and Poliziano were keenly aware, cultural prestige translates easily to political influence.

In the body of Poliziano's letter, he provides a history of the vernacular tradition in Italy, beginning in the Middle Ages, when the "virtuosi fatti" of the classical tradition were lost. With the obscurity of these great works, Poliziano writes, "ogni benigno lume di virtute è spento". At last, the great authors of classical Greece and Rome were rescued by the interventions of the early Italian humanists, who so carefully collected their works and revived their artistic and intellectual methods. Poliziano then writes: "Erano similmente in naufragio molti venerabili poeti, li quali primi il deserto campo della toscana lingua cominciarono a coltivare in guisa tale, che in questi nostri secoli tutta di fioretti e d'erba è rivestita." In terms of Poliziano's literary agenda, this is the most critical point: like Lorenzo in his *Comento*, Poliziano frames their continuation of the Florentine literary tradition as a glorious revival, comparable, if not equivalent, to the "renaissance" of classical scholarship in the early *Quattrocento*. Moreover, Poliziano writes that in their time, the vernacular tradition is blooming; he evokes images of spring, youth and renewal which equate to Lorenzo's analogy of linguistic 'adolescence'. In a clever though almost fawning reversal, Poliziano credits Federico (who had requested the collection) with dragging the Florentine poets from the dark waters of oblivion. Poliziano expresses his desire that the collection should please Federico, but then, as if to shrug away his concerns, he writes: "Né sia però nessuno che quella toscana lingua come poco ornata e copious disprezzi." Poliziano's estimation of the Florentine language is the most illustrious and florid to date:

"se bene e giustamente le sue ricchezze ed ornamenti saranno estimati, non povera questa lingua, non rozza, ma abundante e pulitissima sarà reputata. Nessuna cosa gentile, florida, leggiadra, ornata; nessuna acuta, distinta, ingegnosa, sottile; nessuna alta, magnifica, sonora; nessuna finalmente ardente, animosa, concitata si puote immaginare, della quale non pure in quelli duo primi, Dante e Petrarca, ma in questi altri ancora, i quali tu, signore, hai suscitati, infiniti e chiarissimi esempi non risplendino."

In this description, Poliziano borrows and expands upon earlier characterizations of the Florentine language. McLaughlin writes: “The justification for treating these Tuscan texts with the same care as was accorded to classical works resides in the excellence of the Tuscan *volgare*. The words used in defence of the vernacular echo those of Alberti, Ladino and Lorenzo himself in defining it as ‘abundante e pulitissima’.”³²⁴ On the origins of Italian vernacular literature, Poliziano first cites the Sicilian School, which is most appropriate, but then mistakenly credits them with having inspired the French lyrical tradition. As discussed in the first chapter, it was in fact the Provençal troubadours who brought vernacular poetry to Sicily. It is unclear whether this is an honest misconceptualization or a calculated revision for the pride of the Italian tradition; after all, Poliziano is rigorous but he has an agenda. While the Sicilians may not have influenced the French, they were certainly a source of inspiration in Tuscany. Poliziano acknowledges the early works of Guittone d’Arezzo, though he is hardly impressed, comparing him to later poets as “quel rozzo aretino.” In the same period, Poliziano judges that Guido Guinizelli, founder of the *dolce stil nuovo*, is “tanto di lui più lucido.” Continuing in the ‘sweet new style’, Poliziano arrives at Dante: “da cui la bella forma del nostro idioma fu dolcemente colorita.” He lavishes praise on Dante’s “frenemy” Guido Cavalcanti as well, lamenting that Cavalcanti could have done more, “se in più spazioso campo si fusse esercitato.” He writes that Cavalcanti is “nelle invenzioni acutissimo, magnifico, ammirabile, gravissimo nelle sentenzie, copioso e rilevato nell’ordine, composto, saggio e avveduto.” This description, especially the designations of

³²⁴ Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 210.

precision, gravitas, abundance and order, aligns closely with Dante's requisites for the *volgare illustre* and conforms almost precisely to Lorenzo's defense of the vernacular in his *Comento*.

Above all, Poliziano praises Dante and Petrarch: "quelli dui mirabili soli, che questa lingua hanno illuminata: Dante, e non molto drieto ad esso Francesco Petrarca, delle laude de' quali, sì come di Cartagine dice Sallustio, meglio giudico essere tacere che poco dirne." Channeling Alberti, Poliziano remarks that, among all of the poets he names: "né ingegno né volontà ad alcuno di loro si vede essere mancato." While he has always conducted his own scholarship as a conscious act of civic activity, here Poliziano ascribes a similar ethic of virtuous work to his Florentine predecessors. While this notion is convenient to create a sense of ideological continuity, it rings true for the fact that Dante expressed a similar pursuit of the *sommo bene* through scholarship in the introduction to his *Convivio*. To conclude, Poliziano returns to his analogy between Federico d'Aragona and Pisistratus: while the Athenian king succeeded in reviving one great poet, Federico has surpassed his honor in reviving the entire Tuscan tradition. In doing so, Poliziano writes, Federico brings eternal glory to the vernacular poets – and also to himself. What Poliziano describes here, at the end of his letter, is put into practice in his *Stanze per la giostra*. In recording the excellent deeds of Giuliano de' Medici, Poliziano strives to attain the same eternal glory, both for the Medici and for himself.

In the same years, and under the same civic guise, Poliziano composed the *Stanze per la giostra*, his vernacular masterpiece, as well as the greatest singular literary work in support of the Medicean cultural agenda under both Lorenzo and Piero.

Francesco Bausi describes the *Stanze* as: “un poemetto celebrativo in memoria di Giuliano (appena ucciso nella congiura dei Pazzi) che fosse al tempo stesso anche un’operazione politico-propagandistica a favore della famiglia Medici e del loro potere.”³²⁵ With this work, Poliziano seeks to glorify not only the Florentine literary language, but also the moral virtue and cultural prestige of the Medici dynasty. While it was initially conceived and drafted in Poliziano’s time as secretary to Lorenzo, it was published in 1494 in a vain attempt to prop up the Medici legacy as Piero struggled to keep things afloat. While the *Stanze* have garnered a moderate amount of attention in critical scholarship, more recent studies, notably those of Bausi and Paolo Orvieto, have tried to resolve some the enduring controversy which has surrounded the work, notably regarding the dates of completion/abandonment and the philosophical integrity of the overall theme.

On the first account, the *Stanze* is unfinished, and has commonly been dated to 1475-1478. It had been (reasonably) assumed that Poliziano abandoned it after Giuliano’s death in the Pazzi conspiracy (1478), or perhaps even earlier, following the death of Giuliano’s beloved Simonetta (1476). However, Bausi demonstrates that Poliziano returned to the work even after the first *stesura* of the late 1470s. An exchange of letters between Poliziano and Pico della Mirandola from 1483 reveals that the second version – that which would later be published – was not yet complete. This indicates, of course, that Poliziano continued to refine the existing books until he agreed to publish it, prematurely, in 1494. Bausi writes: “Poliziano si sarebbe risolto nel 1494 a

³²⁵ Angelo Poliziano and Francesco Bausi, *Stanze per La Giostra* (Messina: Università Degli Studi Di Messina, Centro Internazionale Di Studi Umanistici, 2016), 158.

stampare quel che restava delle *Stanze*, nell'intento precipuo di condurre un'operazione politico-culturale a sostegno del periclitante potere di Piero..."³²⁶ In his last flurry of activity, much of which was produced in support of Piero's floundering new regime, Poliziano's hurried release of the *Stanze* was his final truly 'literary' contribution to the cultural legacy he had pursued together with Lorenzo.

Beyond the date of composition, the allegorical theme of the *Stanze* has long been a subject of controversy; earlier appraisals, including those of Martelli, Stefano Carrai and initially, Paolo Orvieto, identify a strict observance to Ficinan Neoplatonism. However, Orvieto's later analysis (based on the interpretations of Attilio Bettinzoli and Emilio Bigi) argues that there is, in fact, no cohesive Ficinian allegory. In light of the multitude of apparent influences in the *Stanze*, as well as Poliziano's staunch opposition to dogmatic *imitatio*, Orvieto's revised appraisal becomes even more convincing; I too observe that in the *Stanze*, like many of his works, Poliziano employs his usual, fragmentary style. According to this interpretation, in the *Stanze*, Poliziano "non si riscontra alcuna coerente allegoria filosofica e ficiniana, ma solo un impianto ascensionale di carattere 'morale', analogo a quello dei petrarcheschi *Triumphs*, e identico a quello sintetizzato nel ben noto standardo – dipinto da Botticelli – che Giuliano recò alla giostra, dove era raffigurata Minerva..."³²⁷ The image of Minerva, goddess of wisdom and philosophy, represents the triumph of reason over passion. In the *Stanze*, the *donna amata* eventually assumes the form of Minerva as the hero is brought to reason by virtue of his love for her; while Poliziano may not follow a strictly

³²⁶ Bausi in Angelo Poliziano and Francesco Bausi, *Stanze per La Giostra* (Messina: Università Degli Studi Di Messina, Centro Internazionale Di Studi Umanistici, 2016), 158-159.

³²⁷ Ibid, 162.

Neoplatonic allegory, here we see that Ficino's influence is certainly there, especially in the ennobling power of love. Bausi writes: "la vittoria nella giostra è voluta da Dio affinché Giuliano possa progredire nel suo itinerario di crescita e di formazione umana, uscendo dall'età delle passioni e accedendo alla vita attiva e civile."³²⁸ Giuliano, as we know, would not live to fulfill this grand destiny, but the encomiastic nature of the poem served to glorify the Medici dynasty and the "civilization" of Florence more than Giuliano individually.

As in many of his works, Poliziano draws inspiration for the *Stanze* from diverse literary genres and styles, both from the classical world and his contemporary era. McLaughlin describes the *Stanza* as an epyllion, similar to a brief epic, but the language which Poliziano uses is "not on the heroic level, but instead observes a kind of middle elegance, which is at times varied to include technical or pastoral dictation."³²⁹ The hero of this pseudo-epic is Iulio, a young man who diverts himself with hunting and disparages those who fall prey to the guiles of the fairer sex. Love takes note of this haughty resistance; he lures Iulio into the woods with the image of a deer who, before his eyes, transforms into the beautiful Simonetta. Iulio is struck with Love's arrow and falls deeply in love with her. The figure of Simonetta-the-nymph is based on Giuliano's real love (and a favored muse of Botticelli), Simonetta Cattaneo Vespucci, who died in 1476, not even a year after she was proclaimed "queen" of Giuliano's famed tournament. In the story, when Iulio falls in love with Simonetta, the hunter-Iulio (and the

³²⁸ Bausi in Angelo Poliziano and Francesco Bausi, *Stanze per La Giostra* (Messina: Università Degli Studi Di Messina, Centro Internazionale Di Studi Umanistici, 2016), 169.

³²⁹ Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 213.

life he lived) must “die” to give way to a whole new life, governed by temperance and reason. Bausi writes: “Iulio deve sconfiggere l’amore carnale, seguendo l’esempio della casta Simonetta; per arrivare alla vita contemplativa del saggio, dovrà passare attraverso l’esperienza della morte di Simonetta, e alla fine, la propria morte lo consegnerà alla dimensione della fama eterna.”³³⁰ In reality, Giuliano was not made “eternal” by his own death but through the words of Poliziano (as well as the paintings of Botticelli). From a civic-cultural standpoint, the story of Iulio and his ascendance to reason serve to immortalize a curated image: the Medici, emblemized by the figure of Iulio, are cultured and wise, and their victories are achieved by means of their virtue. In the words of Orvieto: “l’ultimo significato delle *Stanze* sta tutto nella metamorfosi di Iulio, prima dopo aver indossato le armi di Pallade, cioè da uno stato di istintualità prerazionale (in preda alle disparate passioni) a uno stato di ‘sapienza’ (e di ‘temperanza’) che è, per Poliziano, l’unica evoluzione umana auspicabile e in effetti possibile nel corso di questa vita.”³³¹ Putting his own virtuous wisdom to practical use, Poliziano frames the introduction of the *Stanze* in a decidedly civic context:

“Le gloriose pompe e ‘ fieri ludi
della città che ‘l freno allenta e stringe
a’ magnanimi Toschi, e i regni crudi
di quella dea che il terzo cielo dipinge
e i primi degni alla onorati studi
la mente audace a celebrar mi spinge
sì che i gran nomi e’ fatti egregi e soli

³³⁰ Bausi in Angelo Poliziano and Francesco Bausi, *Stanze per La Giostra* (Messina: Università Degli Studi Di Messina, Centro Internazionale Di Studi Umanistici, 2016), 169.

³³¹ Paolo Orvieto, *Poliziano e L'ambiente Mediceo* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2009), 265.

Fortuna o Morte o Tempo non involi.”³³²

Poliziano is clear that the great men and deeds immortalized in the work belong explicitly to the Florentine tradition. He praises the “magnanimi Toschi”, and explains that he is compelled to write “sì che i gran nomi e’ fatti egregi e soli/ Fortuna o Morte o Tempo non involi.” By the time Poliziano was writing, the work of such scholars as Flavio Biondo and Leon Battista Alberti had effectively demonstrated how well the memory of a society and a culture – not to mention the lives of great men – can be preserved, and in a way immortalized, through the written tradition. The search for political stability in classical scholarship, omnipresent in the works of Dante and Salutati, had become more focused on the cultural aspects of civic continuity, especially concerning ethics, law and language – three of the greatest examples of human ingenuity. Against the distinct civic landscape of Lorenzo and Poliziano’s Florence, these cultural works constituted the most important type of civic activity and stood to generate the most overall “good” for their society.

Through the rest of the introduction, Poliziano gives us a purposefully vague overview of his intended subjects, with only a veiled allusion to Giuliano’s tournament in the very first verse. The “gloriose pompe e’ fieri ludi/ della città” could be understood as a mention of the jousts, but could also function as a synecdochical reference to the Florentine cultural tradition in general. As Warman Welliver writes: “Florentines were notoriously subtle, not to say devious.”³³³ The question of deviousness is, of course, a

³³² Poliziano, *Stanze per la giostra*, I, 1, 1-8; 175. This and the following citations are from Angelo Poliziano and Francesco Bausi, *Stanze per La Giostra* (Messina: Università Degli Studi Di Messina, Centro Internazionale Di Studi Umanistici, 2016).

³³³ Warman Welliver, “The Subject and Purpose of Poliziano's Stanze.” (*Italica*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1971, pp. 34–50), 34.

subject for debate – one which will receive a fuller treatment in the following chapter on (the great and often mischaracterized) Niccolò Machiavelli. Their subtlety, however, is quite evident throughout Lorenzo and Poliziano's campaign of cultural diplomacy. This patriotic agenda is revealed itself once again at the close of the introduction, where Poliziano dedicates one stanza to the acclaim of Lorenzo:

Ma, fin ch'all'alta impresa tremo e bramo
e son tarpati i vanni al mio disìo,
lo glorioso tuo fratel cantiamo,
che di nuovo trofeo rende giulio
el chiaro sangue e di secondo ramo:
convien ch'io sudi in questa polvere, io.³³⁴

While Poliziano specifies that he will sing of Lorenzo's brother, he suggests that in another poem he will extoll the glory of Lorenzo. While this second work was never brought to fruition, the intention itself tells us about Poliziano's literary program and his desire to continue building the Florentine literary tradition with like contributions. While circumstance – or perhaps *Fortuna* – changed the course of Poliziano's life and, eventually, his scholarship, his works retain a strong sense of the civic mentality which he acquired in his years with Lorenzo. The final verse of the stanza, "convien ch'io sudi in quest polvere, io" implies that Poliziano feels bound to the Medici tradition and that this work of glorifying their name and their city is a hallowed obligation which has befallen him alone. Poliziano was first writing the *Stanze* just years after he had been rescued from diminished circumstances by Lorenzo, and was still writing when he saved Lorenzo during the Pazzi conspiracy. The symbiotic nature of their fortune could only

³³⁴ Poliziano, *Stanze per la giostra*, I, 6, 1-6; 176-177.

have reinforced Poliziano's feeling that he was inherently beholden to the Medici family, and in fact, he served Lorenzo's son through his very final days.

From a narrative perspective, the first book of the *Stanze* focuses on Iulio falling in love with Simonetta and transforming into a man of virtue through the contemplation of his love for her. After striking Iulio with his arrow, Cupid rushes to Cyprus, to the garden of Venus, to tell his mother of his latest conquest; his arrival at the garden of Venus opens a beautiful (though uncharacteristically lengthy) pastoral digression on the particulars of Venus' castle and realm. In the opening of the second book, Poliziano takes a deep dive into the encomiastic element of the *Stanze* with a reverential history of the Medici dynasty:

“L'antica gloria e 'l celebrato onore
chi non sa della Medicea famiglia
e del gran Cosimo, italico splendore,
di cui la patria sua si chiamò figlia?
E quanto Petro al paterno valore
aggiunse pregio, e con qual maraviglia
dal corpo di suo patria rimosse abbia
le scellerate man', la crudel rabbia?
Di questo della nobile Lucrezia
nacquene Iulio, e pria ne nacque Lauro”³³⁵

While the “celebrato onore” is a rightful claim, Poliziano's ascription of “antica gloria” to the Medici is really a calculated element of fiction. In fact, they had risen to wealth and glory with Giovanni de' Medici's banking enterprise barely a century earlier. In committing

³³⁵ Poliziano, *Stanze per la giostra*, II, 3, 1-8; 4, 1-2; 219-220.

their memory to eternal fame in such a way, however, Poliziano superimposes the Medici into a landscape of classical glory; it may not be true, but the impression nevertheless has the power to enter into our collective imagination.

Poliziano continues to aggrandize the Medici when he designates Cosimo as the “italico splendore, /di cui la patria sua si chiamò figlia”. He is not merely the *splendore fiorentino*, but *italico*. While Cosimo’s acclaim did indeed extend beyond Tuscany, Poliziano’s mention of Italy followed by an unspecified “patria” could almost suggest that Cosimo was the father of all of Italy. Poliziano continues on to recount the cruel demise of Piero, which was still fresh in the memory of the Florentines when the *Stanze* were written, less than a decade later. Following Piero, Poliziano arrives at Giuliano and finally Lorenzo, who, as Poliziano seems to suggest in the introduction, was intended to be the subject of his own poem – I admit my own great disappointment that this second installment never materialized. After this laudatory digression on the Medici, Poliziano then returns to the narrative action on Cyprus, where Venus declares that Iulio, to win his beloved, must prove himself worthy and demonstrate his valor in arms; the remainder of book two tells of an elaborate dream sent to Iulio which first foretells his victory in the joust:

“...E già la Gloria
scendea giù folgorando ardente vampo;
con essa Poesia, con essa Istoria
volavan tutte accese del suo lampo.
Coste’ pareva che ad aquistar vittoria
rapissi Iulio orribilmente in campo,”³³⁶

³³⁶ Poliziano, *Stanze per la giostra*, II, 32, 1-6; 230.

Though he hesitates, Iulio is dragged to the field, and to victory, by Glory, Poetry and History. These are the perfect forces to drive Iulio's triumph, as they aptly essentialize the foundations of Poliziano's "civic" literature; with his own poetry, building on the historical legacy of Florence, Poliziano brings acclaim and eternal glory to his patrons and to the city.

Sadly, Iulio dreams of more than his victory; a second part foretells the tragic death of his beloved Simonetta. As Welliver explains, however, Iulio's sorrow "turns again to joy as a happy Simonetta reprises as his tutelary Fortune and leads his to immortal fame."³³⁷ Iulio awakens, deeply moved by what he has experienced, and invokes Minerva, Glory and Love to help him achieve the eternal fame of which he dreamt. The work unfortunately ends there, without ever truly reaching the tournament. While the narrative is technically incomplete, it nevertheless depicts a relatively cohesive arc – a hybrid of Petrarcan and Ficinian themes. From the opening verses, one can observe a "filigrana Petrarquesca"³³⁸, especially in the narrative arcs, which specifically recall Petrarch's *Trionfi*. First, Iulio's metamorphosis represents the triumph of Love over his previous self, who denied Love (I, 23-24; I, 39-68; II, 10-22). Later, with the premonition of Simonetta's demise, there is a triumph of Fortune and Death over Love (I, 55-57; II, 35-37). In the end, however, Fame triumphs over both Death and Time (II, 15, 19, 31-34, 40, 42, 46) with the eternal Fame of Iulio and his beloved. In invoking Petrarch's *Trionfi*, Poliziano once again incorporates elements of the *Trecento* tradition in his own eclectic literary framework, bringing depth and historicity to the "new"

³³⁷ Warman Welliver, "The Subject and Purpose of Poliziano's Stanze." (*Italica*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1971, pp. 34–50), 36.

³³⁸ Vittore Branca, *Poliziano: e L'umanesimo Della Parola* (Torino: Einaudi, 1983), 44.

Florentine canon. On Poliziano's treatment of Petrarchan themes and his use of language from Petrarch (and to an extent, Boccaccio as well), Branca writes: "È, in fondo, un processo di rivendicazione e di rivitalizzazione analogo a quelli condotti negli stessi anni dall'Alberti per la trattatista discesa da Dante e in volgare, dal Magnifico per il romanzo lirico e i canti carnascialeschi e la sacra rappresentazione, dal Pulci per la rigogliosa ma sgangherata fioritura canterina, dal Pico e dal Benivieni per l'impostazione del commento ideologico."³³⁹ Together with Lorenzo and Poliziano, these other scholars participated in what may seem a literary trend, but was in reality a concerted effort to revive the Florentine literary tradition and coax the great works of the *Trecento* out of obscurity. With a revised understanding of vernacular history, a refined philological methodology and a more extensive knowledge of the classical literature, the authors of the late *Quattrocento* and beyond were in a newly privileged position to elaborate a structured, sophisticated vernacular tradition.

Poliziano's second major influence in the *Stanze*, derived from Ficino, is predominantly evident in Iulio's love-driven metamorphosis: "l'ascesa dalla vita dei sensi alla vita contemplativa"³⁴⁰ Importantly, this suggestion of contemplation does not contradict the Medicean ethic of civic activity – Ficinian contemplation is the means by which men become virtuous and therefore worthy of civic influence; it does not remove them from public life. Branca explains that, in the allegory of his metamorphosis, Iulio's beloved Simonetta is "l'anima razionale, la vita attiva, l'amore delle virtù terrene (civili e politiche) che nella scala ficiniana, si sostituisce a quello pandemio e volgare."³⁴¹ As a

³³⁹ Vittore Branca, *Poliziano: e L'umanesimo Della Parola* (Torino: Einaudi, 1983), 49.

³⁴⁰ Vittore Branca, *Poliziano: e L'umanesimo Della Parola* (Torino: Einaudi, 1983), 45.

³⁴¹ *Ibid*, 45.

symbol of active virtues, Iulio's devotion to Simonetta represents devotion to the care of Florence. While Ficino himself, especially in his later years, deferred to a more reclusive (not to mention peculiar) intellectual life, Poliziano (and of course Lorenzo) were firmly committed to the civic implications of their scholarship while they had breath in their bodies, and perhaps even later – I like to imagine them milling around the Seventh Sphere of *Paradiso* making the same arguments with the other “contemplatives”. Of course, they could also be relegated elsewhere, but I think that Dante, based on his desire for stability in Florence, would have taken a generous stance towards Lorenzo and Poliziano's various proclivities.

On the later fate of the *Stanze*, Bausi suggests that Poliziano returned to the manuscript after Giuliano's death, “per ricavarne un testo in lode del giovane e sfortunato fratello di Lorenzo, quasi un corrispettivo poetico al *Coniurationis commentarium*, che si chiude con grandi lodi di Giuliano e delle sue virtù.”³⁴² The two works were written at one of the most critical and perilous moments of Lorenzo's tenure in Florence, and between Lorenzo and Poliziano's diplomatic efforts, Florence emerged not only unscathed but more powerful than before. In releasing the *Stanze* in Piero's moment of crisis, Poliziano was likely hoping to recreate their remarkable comeback in the 1480s. Despite these efforts, the dynasty fell. The idealized legacy of Laurentian Florence, however, most certainly remains. In assimilating the Medici into the classical, mythological tradition, Poliziano makes two distinct contributions to the cultural legacy of Medicean Florence: first, he fulfills Lorenzo's ambition, as described in the *Comento*, of

³⁴² Bausi in Angelo Poliziano and Francesco Bausi, *Stanze per La Giostra* (Messina: Università Degli Studi Di Messina, Centro Internazionale Di Studi Umanistici, 2016), 157.

advancing the vernacular literary through the composition of important works. Secondly, Poliziano's encomiastic angle paints the Medici as heroic, virtuous figures of history.

IV. Conclusion

As the de facto Lord of Florence and his personal secretary, it comes as no surprise that Lorenzo de' Medici and Angelo Poliziano were particularly invested in "native" cultural achievements. The ingenious strategy of cultural diplomacy which they pursued through their own vernacular production was remarkable; in their joint compilation of the *Raccolta aragonese*, along with their individual lyrical works, Lorenzo and Poliziano made critical innovations to the Florentine literary tradition. Together, they represent the moment in which the classical humanism of the fifteenth century came full circle to support – and no longer obscure – the native literary legacy of Florence. The refined conceptualizations of history, philosophy and language which had emerged from the "lost" Latin humanism of the *Quattrocento* all became critical to the legitimization of vernacular literature over the course of the sixteenth century. On Lorenzo's humanist circle, Burckardt writes: "The famous band of scholars which surrounded Lorenzo was united together, and distinguished from all other circles of the kind, by this passion for a higher and idealistic philosophy...But perhaps the best thing of all that can be said about that, with all this worship of antiquity, Italian poetry found a sacred refuge, and that of all the rays of light which streamed from the circle of which Lorenzo was the

center, none was more powerful than this.”³⁴³ Lorenzo used this tremendous influence to inspire a shift in the civic codification of Florentine humanism; in pursuing the literary vernacular as a prime element of cultural capital, Lorenzo and Poliziano reframe the advancement of the vernacular tradition as an essential element of the civic activity of humanist scholars in Florence.

In their efforts to situate their writing within an established, historical framework, Lorenzo and Poliziano brought new critical attention to the literary masterpieces of the Florentine *Trecento* and, especially with the *Raccolta*, constructed a history of the vernacular lyrical tradition. By concluding the anthology with Lorenzo’s own poems, which could be described as conscious, philosophically-revised *imitatio* of Dante and Petrarch, Lorenzo and Poliziano convincingly depict Florentine literature as a reinvigorated, progressive tradition. In the introduction to his *Comento*, Lorenzo declares that this tradition is merely its adolescence – in his view, the greatest, most illustrious contributions were yet to come. Lorenzo and Poliziano’s promotion and practice of vernacular authorship marked a turning point in the cultural validity of Florentine literature; while their own particular iterations of Florentine failed to establish themselves as the definitive model, they offered precedent and legitimacy for the generation of scholars to follow. This group would include such figures as Niccolò Machiavelli, Pietro Bembo and Baldassare Castiglione, whose writings would signal the end of the “lost” period of transitional humanism and make way for the era of *classicismo volgare*. These scholars, who would transition seamlessly between Latin and an evermore refined and authoritative Tuscan vernacular, were native not only to

³⁴³ Jacob Burckhardt and S. G. C. Middlemore, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Penguin, 2004), 146.

vernacular language, but to vernacular scholarship as well. In these years, at long last, the Florentine language came into its glory, with a rhetorical precision and a cultural authority previously reserved to the ancients. Finally, in terms of eternal fame and glory, I can only imagine that Lorenzo and Poliziano both would be satisfied by the knowledge that you are reading about them right now.

Chapter Four – The *Cinquecento*: Niccolò Machiavelli and Pietro Bembo

Introduction

In the early *Cinquecento*, as the Italian Wars raged from Milan to Naples, an increasing number of scholars looked beyond local allegiances to better consider the cultural notion of “Italy”. In the previous century, early struggles between the political powers of the peninsula had given way to a relative balance; these powers had always remained, however, culturally and administratively independent. In this time of peace and prosperity, courtly culture flourished across the peninsula. This artistic and gentele society, best encapsulated by Castiglione in *Il Cortegiano*, came crumbling down in the devastating wake of the Italian Wars, beginning with the invasion of Charles VIII in 1494.³⁴⁴ As the powers of Italy began to fall into foreign hands, the commonalities of their “Italianness” came into better view; the idea of an expressly Italian literary tradition had been, for some time, a pillar of cultural politics in Florence, but by the dawn of the sixteenth century, the great works of the Florentine *Trecento* had a growing audience outside of Tuscany as well. Vernacular production was gaining popularity in the other cultural centers of Italy, including Venice, Naples, Urbino and Ferrara, but in their own distinctive ways. Despite the rising interest in native literature, the Italian vernaculars

³⁴⁴ On the political interests of the French in Italy, see Christine Shaw and Michael Mallett, *Italian Wars 1494-1559: War, State and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 8-9.

still lacked the consistency and the stylistic regularity of classical Latin. As their political autonomy was siphoned away, the humanist scholars of Italy turned their attention inward; they replaced their desire for cultural eminence on the larger European stage with an urgent need for self-preservation. As a result, under the looming threat of cultural erasure, vernacular humanism was endowed with an increasing sense of literary authority over the course of the early sixteenth century. These monumental changes on both the political and literary landscape are best displayed in the works of two of the best-known scholars of the period, humanist giants Niccolò Machiavelli and Pietro Bembo. While both Machiavelli and Bembo have been the subject of abundant scholarly consideration, their treatment at the conclusion of this project is fundamental as their vernacular works are emblematic of the social legitimacy and cultural eminence which scholars in the previous chapters worked to achieve. While Bembo especially can be viewed as a beginning for the modern, regulated Italian tradition, this project regards his works as a finish line after two long centuries of linguistic instability.

The first section of the chapter examines the turbulent political environment of Machiavelli through the lens of his prolific vernacular authorship, notably his *Dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua*. Machiavelli claims the supremacy of Florentine among the Italian vernaculars and suggests that, in the formation of an “Italian” literary tradition, the language should retain its designation as *fiorentino*. While Machiavelli is best remembered as a political theorist, he deserves equal, and perhaps more generous, praise for his contributions to historiography and vernacular literature. His notable reliance on the forms and conventions of classical sources, which he applies to his own vernacular scholarship, is evidence of his profound feeling of connection to the great

scholars of antiquity, best summarized in a well known letter to Francesco Vettori, as discussed below. As a leading figure in the Florentine republic, Machiavelli's profound engagement in civic life makes him an invaluable witness to the tumultuous political climate of his time.

Transitioning away from Machiavelli's decidedly secular atmosphere, the chapter – and the dissertation – will conclude with a study of Pietro Bembo, the supreme literary tastemaker and papal secretary who codified the Italian literary language. In a passage reminiscent of Dante's account of the divine concession of language to Adam and Eve, Bembo reaffirms the paramount importance of language in human society: “tra tutte le cose acconce a commuovere gli umani animi, che liberi sono, è grande la forza delle humane parole.”³⁴⁵ He laments the variation among the Italian vernaculars, citing these divisions as a barrier to communication and to knowledge. Notably, Bembo is only the second non-Tuscan featured in the dissertation, yet he makes a watershed contribution to the advancement of the Florentine vernacular tradition. His appearance at the culmination of the project is evidence of the diffusion and distinction of vernacular Florentine – the literary canon of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, but also the theoretical defenses of Alberti and Poliziano – even before Bembo's time. In his most influential work, *Prose della volgar lingua*, Bembo builds his discussion around these earlier contributions, making explicit reference to both Dante and Alberti. In contrast to Lorenzo and Poliziano's less constrained idea of a “growing” tradition, Bembo proposes a limited, well defined model of *imitatio* for the composition of vernacular literature. Over

³⁴⁵ Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, I.i; 5. This and the following citations from *Prose* are from Pietro Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua* (Bologna: Libreria Italiana Zanichelli, 2019). Edition from Pietro Bembo and Carlo Dionisotti, *Prose e Rime Di Pietro Bembo* (Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1966).

three dialogical books, Bembo effectively canonizes the literary stylings of Petrarch and Boccaccio and establishes a definitive stylistic model for the Florentine vernacular. In their practical, methodical, textually-based approach to vernacular scholarship, Machiavelli and Bembo emblemize the new era of *classicismo volgare* in which the Florentine language, through grammatical regulation and deliberate advancement by humanist scholars, is finally afforded the cultural and intellectual legitimacy formerly reserved to Latin.

II. Niccolò Machiavelli

“It is better to be feared than to be loved.” This phrase has become the essence of Niccolò Machiavelli’s legacy in popular culture, in film, television, video games and a hip-hop album by Tupac Shakur. For this album, *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*, Tupac created the alias Makaveli. He wrote the album in a fury, shortly after he was released from prison, reflecting Machiavelli’s own prolific writings in exile following his arrest in 1513. So, while Machiavelli has undoubtedly been remembered, the issue with our Machiavellian motto lies in questions of context; to begin with, “it is better to be feared than to be loved” is not even the complete sentence. And the work from which it derives, *Il principe*, was written in a very particular (and rather problematic) civic and historical context. In full, Machiavelli writes: “Nasce da questo una disputa: s’egli è meglio essere amato che temuto, o temuto che amato. Rispondesi, che si vorrebbe essere l’uno e l’altro; ma perchè egli è difficile, che e’ stiano insieme, è molto più sicuro

l'esser temuto che amato, quando s'abbi a mancare dell'un de' duoi."³⁴⁶ In sacrificing the context of his declaration, we do a grave disservice to his legacy and we fundamentally misunderstand his point; I suspect this second issue would have bothered him the most. If we take a more holistic view of Machiavelli's career and his literary production, the contemporary implication of the term "Machiavellian", an unscrupulous cunning, hardly seems appropriate. While he was clever, and even cunning, there is in fact a well elaborated civic ethos behind his philosophy. If we consider the prevailing qualities of *virtù* in Machiavelli's own time, we find that he was perhaps one of the most virtuous men of his age. It is imperative that Machiavelli, like his fifteenth- and sixteenth-century contemporaries, be evaluated properly in context, as a person, as an author and as a civic actor. Celenza writes: "If you are reading this...you have probably never witnessed a public execution or been close to someone who has. Most likely, you have not been physically tortured during legal proceedings...The world you inhabit is not his world."³⁴⁷

Machiavelli's career spanned a challenging new era of instability in Italian politics, predominantly driven by the onset of the Italian Wars in 1494 and the peninsula's progressive loss of civic autonomy to larger European powers. Machiavelli's personal fate was intimately tied to these wars and to the course of Medici power in Florence, especially following their return from exile in 1512. The Medici had been absent for nearly two decades, in which time Florence had reestablished itself as a republic. Machiavelli therefore spent the first half of his adult life in this newly republican

³⁴⁶ Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, XVII, in Niccolò Machiavelli and Mario Martelli, *Tutte le opere* (Florence: Sansoni, 1971), 282.

³⁴⁷ Christopher Celenza, *Machiavelli: a Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 4.

environment as a civic servant, chancery secretary and diplomat. When the Medici returned, Machiavelli was branded a republican enemy and sent to languish in exile. Dante could certainly have commiserated – both were unceremoniously cast out of public life in Florence, and both, facing the aimless disenfranchisement of exile, refocused their energy on scholarship. It was during his exile (1513 - 1518) that Machiavelli wrote his *I Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio*, three books on the customs of ancient Roman Republic, as well as his best known work, the concise yet befuddling³⁴⁸ *Il principe*. Right after completing the *Discorsi*, in the pits of ennui, he composed a surprisingly jovial theatrical comedy, *La mandragola*. While he hardly intends it as a serious work, as he states openly in the prologue, the travails of his anti-hero, Callimaco, provide an incisive glimpse into Machiavelli's personal notion of virtue.

While Machiavelli is often studied as a founder of modern civic philosophy, his works of history and even literature are far too valuable to be overlooked. I once led a debate on whether Machiavelli was a “good historian”; my students argued in the affirmative and lost by one vote, on the premise that Machiavelli did not record an objective view of history. I, however, remain firm in my resolve and the Florentine *Studio* clearly agreed with me when they commissioned him to write the *Istorie fiorentine* in 1520. We know that Machiavelli wrote from his own bias, but he nevertheless provides methodical, exhaustive treatments of history as he knew it; as Celenza reminded us, our world was not Machiavelli's world and our methods were not his methods. Moreover, in Machiavelli's well defined bias, he gives invaluable perspective on the prevailing

³⁴⁸ For a breakdown of the competing interpretive theories on *Il principe*, see James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 449-453.

attitudes towards civics, history and language in his time. Importantly, he recorded most of this not in Latin but in the Florentine vernacular. The political landscape was changing, but the impulse for a native literary tradition, reignited by Lorenzo's humanist circle several decades earlier, remained a critical aspect of the Florentine civic mentality. Machiavelli's own thoughts on language are summarized in his *Discorso intorno alla nostra lingua* from 1525. Over the course of his final years, Machiavelli made no secret of his boredom and resentment at being (repeatedly) cast out of public life in Florence. In his isolation, however, he produced a revolutionary collection of civic and historical works, compiled invaluable records of current events and made vital contributions to the growing canon of vernacular scholarship. The timing was fortuitous, as Italy was plunging into dark days; the Italian Wars threatened their civic autonomy and, as a consequence, their cultural identity became more meaningful than ever.

i. Machiavelli the Secretary

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in Florence in 1469, the same year in which Lorenzo de' Medici rose to power.³⁴⁹ This "golden age" of Renaissance humanism into which Machiavelli was born rose and fell in concert with the first Medici dynasty. Cosimo de' Medici had helped to establish the Italic League with the Peace of Lodi in 1454 and

³⁴⁹ Machiavelli's dates in Christopher Celenza, *Machiavelli: a Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); see also Francesco Bausi, *Machiavelli* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2005).

this effective balance of power on the Italian peninsula contributed to a new environment of peace and prosperity. The great houses of Italy, including the Medici, began to take on a more courtly culture, on which Mackenney writes: “It was a world that delighted in its own effortless superiority, unaware of changes in the balance of power beyond Italy itself – and it was untested by wind and weather. In 1494 the storm broke.”³⁵⁰ In fact, this “storm” had been brewing outside of Italy for decades. Over the second half of the fifteenth century, a series of major developments on the greater European landscape coalesced to wreak havoc on the fragile political dynamic in Italy. By the 1490s, the Italic League began to break down. Outside of Italy, the French had consolidated power after the Hundred Years War and, in 1492, the Catholic monarchy of Spain defeated the last Muslim stronghold in Europe to definitely reconquer the Iberian peninsula. They were powerful, unified monarchies, something the Italians could not seem to manage – or tolerate. Through the Angevin line, the French had a claim on the throne of Naples, held by the d’Aragona family since 1435. By 1494, with Lorenzo de’ Medici dead, his son exiled and the government in theocratic chaos, Florence suddenly became less of an imposing roadblock in the French army’s southward trek. Charles VIII began his first campaign for Naples, marking the beginning of the Italian Wars. The French were forced to withdraw, however, when the Venetian Republic formed an alliance with Maximilian I of Austria and Ferdinand V of Spain. This recourse to Spain set a dangerous precedent of bilateral foreign influence on the Italian peninsula, a condition of enormous consequence for Florence.

³⁵⁰ Richard Mackenney, *Renaissances: the Cultures of Italy, c. 1300-c. 1600* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 51.

In 1494, as Charles VIII moved towards Naples, Piero de' Medici was driven from Florence, thus ending the first Medici dynasty. The Florentine people fell to the dogmatic extremism of the Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola, who preached against the Hellenistic indulgence of the ruling class. His band of followers were known as the *frateschi*, those who heed the friar, but were alternatively dubbed the *piagnoni* (whiners): "a name first hurled at them in opprobrium, which they consequently adopted as their own"³⁵¹ – the "deplorables" of late fifteenth-century Florence. Machiavelli was a young man of twenty-five when the Medici were exiled and Savonarola took power; by 1498, however, public favor had turned against Savonarola as well.

The Italian powers outside of Florence were less enraptured with Savonarola's apocalyptic rhetoric, "those of a more secular bent, who, though they considered themselves good Christians, nonetheless appreciated ancient literature and the new art of the Renaissance, considering Savonarola a fanatical, antirational extremist."³⁵² Tensions continued to rise until Savonarola was excommunicated by Pope Alexander VI in 1497. He was imprisoned in the Palazzo Vecchio, where, under torture, he admitted to inventing his prophecies. He and his two main friars were hung and burned in Piazza della Signoria; their ashes were thrown into the Arno river to discourage his followers from rallying around them as relics. For the first time since Cosimo de' Medici consolidated power in 1430s, rule in Florence returned to the hands of the oligarchical elite. A new republican government formed, on rather a trial-and-error basis, under the leadership of Piero Soderini. By 1502, he was named *gonfaloniere* – head of the priors,

³⁵¹ Christopher Celenza, *Machiavelli: a Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 28.

³⁵² Christopher Celenza, *Machiavelli: a Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 28.

representatives from the major guilds – but with one pretty significant upgrade. In the era of Dante and Salutati, priors served a term of only two months, allowing for a great number of eligible men to participate in government. It also meant a lack of continuity, however, with continuous turnover. In this new republic which insisted on stability, Soderini was named *gonfaloniere* for life.

When Savonarola fell, the loyalties of the Florentine people were divided between his *piagnoni*, old sympathizers of the Medici and a mix of everyone else. Machiavelli was among this final category – an opponent of the *piagnoni* with no pronounced sympathies on the Medici one way or another; this made him an excellent candidate for the new republican government led by Soderini. Celenza writes: “Soderini, along with like-minded supporters, took the lead in forming a government with new and, they hoped, more balanced approaches in mind.”³⁵³ While Savonarola had expanded participation in government, Soderini pulled in the reins. He formed a small, tight-knit government coalition, all with a vested commitment to the traditional Florentine principles of *libertà*. However: “The rub, as always, lay in the question of what liberty meant. Was it freedom from foreign domination? This, for the most part, is how Machiavelli came to construe things.”³⁵⁴ Considering that Machiavelli’s political career unfolded predominantly over the course of the Italian Wars, watching as Italy was slowly subsumed by foreign rule, it is clear why self-determination became the one of the priorities of his civic ideology.

³⁵³ Christopher Celenza, *Machiavelli: a Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015) 31.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 32.

Machiavelli formally entered into the service of the Florentine government in 1498. He first served as secretary to the Second Chancery, the body responsible for internal policy and matters of war. Soon after, this group was integrated with the *Dieci di Libertà e di Pace*, the council which oversaw matters of diplomacy and, essentially, foreign intelligence. These were Machiavelli's years of grand adventure, when he was sent on diplomatic missions to Switzerland and France, and spent some highly influential time with Cesare Borgia, famed military commander and son of the Pope Alexander VI.³⁵⁵ Between 1502 and 1503, Machiavelli was a part of Cesare's traveling court and witnessed the often vicious but highly effective strategies which guided his campaign in the second installment of the Italian Wars. Cesare, along with other larger-than-life figures of history, became a lifelong fascination for Machiavelli.

Always wary of mercenaries, in 1504, Machiavelli proposed to Soderini that Florence form a communal army. Savonarola's ill-fated government had proposed a similar measure, but leaders feared a repeat of a critical moment in Roman history; a powerful local general could rise against the republic and turn Florence into a dictatorship. In the new republic, many were concerned that Soderini, already made *gonfaloniere* for life, might pursue a similar tactic and Machiavelli was sensitive to these concerns when he wrote his *Cagione dell'ordinanza*, outlining his plan for the formation of a Florentine military. As a part of this plan, he proposed a new magistracy – known as *i Nove* – which would oversee the military in times of peace. Once he was permitted to enact his proposal, he was made the leader of “the Nine”, a role which he fulfilled

³⁵⁵ For an overview of Alexander VI and Cesare Borgia's military campaigns, see David Chambers, *Popes, Cardinals and War the Military Church in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe* (London: Tauris, 2006), 93-101.

along with his two other positions until 1512. Despite the successes of the Soderini government, the Florentine people remained divided in their political loyalties.

Outside of Florence, Pope Julius II was forming a “Holy League” with the Venetians, the Duke of Ferrara and the Spanish crown.³⁵⁶ Soderini’s government was still loosely allied with the French, and the Holy League set their sights on a return of the sympathetic Medici government; in the face of such an imposing foe, the republican government had little hope of survival.³⁵⁷ Soderini was driven from the city, but Machiavelli clearly hoped to stay. In fact, he wrote a document for the Medici in order to aid the transition of government. Evidently, they were unappreciative of the gesture. Shortly thereafter, Machiavelli was accused of plotting a conspiracy against the Medici; he was imprisoned for fifteen days, tortured, and then exiled to his farm in the Florentine *provincia*. Despite his well documented misery in exile, his literary career flourished. Over a decade later, after Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici had gained control of Florence, Machiavelli finally managed to negotiate his return to public life. As an experienced wartime counselor, he was elected Chancellor of the *Procuratori delle Mura*, which allocated resources for the defense of the city. Alas, his long-awaited return to government service arrived at an inopportune moment; two years later war broke out once again and the Medici government was deposed – along with Machiavelli. It begs the pitiful question: if Machiavelli had held out, or simply been refused, for two more years, would he have been embraced by his contemporaries as a lost hero of the

³⁵⁶ On the formation of the Holy League, see Christine Shaw and Michael Mallett, *Italian Wars 1494-1559: War, State and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 115-119.

³⁵⁷ On the restoration of Medici power, see Christine Shaw and Michael Mallett, *Italian Wars 1494-1559: War, State and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 134-136.

republic? To our (and certainly Machiavelli's) great disappointment, we can only speculate.

ii. Written works

It is a curious thing that Machiavelli has become one of the most widely read authors of early modern Italy despite his relatively blunt, unadorned literary style. It is important to consider, however, that in contemporary scholarship, his major works are not read as literature so much as political theory. Francesco Bausi writes: "Del "politico", Machiavelli ha anche la cultura: una cultura non "professionale", non "specialistica", non accademica, formatasi in modo disordinato e non sistematico, e usufruita senza soverchi scrupoli di esattezza filologica o erudita, ma col precipuo intento di supportare, con un adeguato corredo di *exempla* e di modelli (disinvoltamente estrapolati dai rispettivi contesti ed adatti alla circostanze e alle necessità dell'argomentazione), il discorso politico."³⁵⁸ Machiavelli was eminently practical, and for his purposes, the sophistication of his prose was not nearly as important as the effective transmission of useful knowledge. When considering Machiavelli as an author, it is interesting to ponder the question as to whether or not he was truly a "humanist": while there are arguments against his conformity to the traditional model, by virtue of his education, the cultural environment of his upbringing, his professed love of classical scholarship and his

³⁵⁸ Francesco Bausi, *Machiavelli* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2005), 18.

unshakeable dedication to civic utility, I am confident in designating him as one of the last civic humanists of Florence.³⁵⁹

As Machiavelli affirms in his *Discorsi*, the things which shape a child will forever after inform his behavior – itself a formulation of Aristotle. This is not, however, to say that Machiavelli did not possess his own style or approach to scholarship. In a stark contrast to the otherworldly Neoplatonism of Ficino and his followers in the mid-1400s, Machiavelli, in his life and his scholarship, was much more driven by observation than by theory. Celenza writes: “Machiavelli reveals a tendency that runs through all of his work: the propensity to observe human beings and their behavior like an anthropologist *avant la lettre*. He is much less concerned with observing what should be the case. He concentrates rather on what is the case.”³⁶⁰ This tendency has interesting implications for governance and warfare, of course, but also for Machiavelli’s observations and use of language.

While Machiavelli is often categorized as a civic philosopher, I would argue that he is first and foremost a historiographer. His most famous works on civic theory are grounded in historical records as well as his own acute, methodically recorded observations. Celenza writes: “Machiavelli cared too much about having his plan work out in practice, to weigh it down with too much theory.”³⁶¹ This observational approach can perhaps account for his distinctive literary voice; he is incisive, often witty and about as subtle as a brick through a window – unlike Lorenzo and Poliziano, he was not one

³⁵⁹ For a general overview of Machiavelli’s engagement with humanist literary culture, see James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 429-436.

³⁶⁰ Christopher Celenza, *Machiavelli: a Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 48.

³⁶¹ Christopher Celenza, *Machiavelli: a Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 49.

to cloak his civic agenda in a florid allegory. His political works are explicitly political, and while he clearly derives enjoyment from poetry and literature, he treats them with a lightness and humor which is absent in his civic contributions. In light of these differences in tone, it is important to acknowledge two separate streams in Machiavelli's literary production: there are his professional works, comprised of civic and historical treatises, and there are his more personal works of literature. His correspondence should be subject to the same personal/professional distinction. His major treatises include his *Discorso sopra le cose di Pisa* (1499) on the events of the first Italian War; *Il Principe* (1513), on the ideal attributes of princes and principalities; his *Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio* (1517), a political treatise based on Livy's history of ancient Rome; *Dell'arte della guerra* (1519-1520), on the science of warfare and finally, his history of Florence, the aptly titled *Istorie fiorentine* (1520-1525). While these professional works are quite cohesive in subject, his literary works vary. They include the first and second *Decennali* (1506 and 1509); narrative poems in *terza rima*; three prose comedies, *Andria* (1517), *Mandragola* (1518) and *Clizia* (1525); and a novella, in the style of Boccaccio, the *Belfagor arcidiavolo* (1518-1527). One final work cannot be reasonably categorized between one stream or the other, and that is his linguistic treatise, *Discorsi intorno alla nostra lingua* (1525), which is discussed below.

Among all of his works, a unifying theme which emerges is Machiavelli's specific notion of *virtù*.³⁶² This word becomes a point of contention in translations, for Machiavelli's writings more than most. Machiavelli's notion of "active virtue" is closer to

³⁶² For a full discussion of Machiavellian virtue, see James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 463-475; also, Harvey Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996).

the classical Greek *δύναμις*, meaning “active power” than *ἀρετή*, which traditionally signifies “excellence” or “moral virtue”. So, while the ethical component is situational, the importance of activity and utility remains consistent from earlier civic humanists. Throughout the development of humanist thought, the concept and implications of civic virtue were both far-reaching and in constant evolution. In Florence especially, the mentality of republican *libertas* imparted a sense of civic and social responsibility not just on leaders, but on individual citizens; virtue, therefore, was achieved by fulfilling these obligations and creating utility for the community. In the fourteenth century, Salutati had written extensively on virtue and civic responsibility in *De nobilitate legum et medicinae* and a century later, Alberti expanded on many of the same ideas in *Della famiglia*, specifically how this commitment to wise leadership applies both to one’s family and to the state. Both works, however, reflect the civic priorities of a particular moment in history. Salutati was contending with perpetual feuds between the political factions of early republican Florence, whereas Alberti was writing (at least during his time in Florence) under the cultural and political dominance of the Medici.

Machiavelli was writing in a yet another political environment, one which was facing the loss of political autonomy both in Florence and across the Italian peninsula. Contrary to the atmosphere of earlier civic humanists from Salutati to Poliziano, in Machiavelli's era, partisan disagreements fell secondary to the threat of foreign rule. For Machiavelli, then, the attributes and approaches which proved most useful for the maintenance of the state evolved to reflect the changing geopolitical climate, and considering the state of affairs in Italy, his methods can appear self-interested or even vicious. In the context of the Italian Wars, however, Machiavelli was drawn back to the

origins of civic humanism where the scope was simply to reclaim civic and social stability. In an even more dangerous environment than the late *Trecento*, Machiavelli had to calibrate his response accordingly; as he demonstrates with the recommendations he composes for the Medici upon their return in 1512, his primary interest, beyond any individual government, was the autonomy, stability and well-being of Florence. He is a late Renaissance Lord Varys – loyal only to the realm.

As a theorist and exponent of vernacular literature, Machiavelli's contributions to the vernacular corpus bear a surprisingly similarity to those of Angelo Poliziano. He provides a methodical, theoretical defense of vernacular literature with particular emphasis on the aspects of pride and utility in growing one's native tradition. He puts this method into practice by composing all of his major works in the Florentine vernacular which, despite the growing popularity of vernacular literature, was still unusual, especially for civic and historiographical treatises. Machiavelli takes a step further than both Lorenzo and Poliziano, however, when he aims to establish Florentine as not only as a worthy language for literature – this question was more or less settled by the time of Lorenzo and Poliziano – but as the common literary language for all of Italy. In the courtly atmosphere of Lorenzo, Florentine literature was treated as cultural capital. In the context of Machiavelli's war zone, Florentine literature became an instrument of cultural identity for all of Italy as their political institutions languished under the increasing threat of foreign domination. The Florentines were willing to share, but make no mistake: the language of Dante belongs exclusively to them. Even today, many Florentines will rebuff any comment on their charming *gorgia* and remind you that Florentine is the "real" Italian.

Following the example of previous vernacular authors, specifically Dante, Poliziano and Lorenzo, Machiavelli consciously expanded the vernacular canon with new and enlightening works. As these theorists before him affirm, a literary tradition gains stability, sophistication and authority through the accumulation of literary and academic works. With his straightforward style, Machiavelli sets a precedent for vernacular scholarship outside of the literary realm; his unadorned, observational approach foreshadows the “scientific vernacular” which emerged over the following century along with revolutionary, more empirical approaches to medicine and the natural sciences – as demonstrated in the works of such scholars as Giordano Bruno and Galileo Galilei. Machiavelli’s literary works, which by his own admission he takes less seriously than his “professional” scholarship, are remarkable as well for their range, wit and creativity. His theatrical comedy *Mandragola*, in particular, is often found to be extraordinarily funny. These specific features of his literature seem to derive from Machiavelli’s belief that there are certain immutable characteristics of human nature which persist through these ages. This belief, along with his acute anthropological sensibilities, are evident throughout his writing, from his political theory to his elaboration of literary characters. Whether in Livy’s Rome or Boccaccio’s Florence or Cesare Borgia’s military camp, Machiavelli knows that there are certain things which make people tick; in understanding these things, Machiavelli can plan accordingly. In a translation of Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*, Bernard Crick writes of “So Many Machiavellis”.³⁶³ This is a fitting way to introduce him as he is a uniquely puzzling figure, often difficult to characterize. He taunts his readers with doubt and, even today, it is easy to fall under the spell of his

³⁶³ In Niccolò Machiavelli and Bernard R. Crick, (*The Discourses*. London: Penguin Books, 2003), 15.

self-assured propaganda. For Machiavelli, of course, the “best” approach for any particular work was that which suited his political aim. For this reason – though he knew they were likely to be circulated – Machiavelli’s personal letters provide a less measured glimpse into his perspectives.

A particularly intimate look at his literary tastes and habits is featured in a letter he wrote in 1513, shortly after he was expelled from Florence. The letter is addressed to Francesco Vettori who, at the time, was serving as the Florentine ambassador to the court of Pope Leo X. Like most of Machiavelli’s writings, the letter is not in Latin but in Florentine. With his typical irony, he discusses his life in exile, his activities and his current projects – including his plan for the composition and presentation of *Il principe*. The letter hails from a particular moment in Machiavelli’s life: in his forties, after more than a decade of hustle and bustle as a diplomat and civic servant, he had been unceremoniously cast out of his vocation and his city. He was miserable, but also suddenly free to dedicate himself more fully to scholarship. As Machiavelli describes it, it was that or haggling over the price of wood or gambling with the vagrants at the local inn. He did all three, of course, but his scholarship is the most relevant to our purposes.

He opens the letter to his illustrious friend with sentiments of relief; he had not heard from Vettori for some time and was very glad to receive word – he had feared that Vettori was angry with him for showing some of their correspondence to mutual friends. In his reduced circumstances, Machiavelli was more in need of his friends than ever, especially one like Vettori who was decidedly “in” with the new Medici government in Florence. Machiavelli writes that, in his absence, he is comforted in the knowledge that Vettori is serving Florence so well and he encourages his efforts:

“E poiché la fortuna vuol fare ogni cosa, ella si vuole lasciarla fare, stare quieto e non le dare briga, e aspettar tempo che la lasci fare qualche cosa agl’huomini; e all’hora starà bene a voi durare più fatica, vegliar più le cose, e a me partirmi di villa e dire: eccomi.”

In his mention of fortune, Machiavelli exposes his civic humanist roots. He characterizes fortune as the enemy of the civic stability and control the Florentines desperately needed and here we see that Machiavelli, like earlier civic humanists, especially Alberti, upholds the value of human work and ingenuity as a safeguard against the unpredictability of fortune. He urges Vettori, therefore, to work even harder and to keep an even closer eye on things. On his own account, more than anything, Machiavelli just needs a way to escape the prostrating tedium of exile. He needs to be seen and heard, and that is very much what he hoped to accomplish with the works he composed in exile. He goes on to describe the day-to-day life he is living, twenty days since he had last been in Florence. He rises early, with the sun, and makes his way into the woods on his land where he gossips with the wood-splitters and listens to their arguments as he passes through:

“Partitomi del bosco, io me ne vo ad una fonte, e di quivi in un mio uccellare. Ho un libro sotto, o Dante o Petrarca, o uno di questi poeti minori, come Tibullo, Ovidio e simili: leggo quelle loro amoroze passioni, e quelli loro amori ricordomi de' mia: gòdomi un pezzo in questo pensiero.”

When he tends to his bird nets, he brings along a small Aldine volume of Dante or Petrarch, or one of the Roman poets, something light and amorous which he knows well and in which he can lose himself for a time, reminiscing on his own loves. The profound familiarity which he develops with Dante becomes evident in his later works, especially the *Discorso intorno alla nostra lingua*. He continues:

“Transferiscomi poi in sulla strada, nell'hosteria; parlo con quelli che passano, dimando delle nuove de' paesi loro; intendo varie cose, e noto varii gusti e diverse fantasie d’huomini.”

Even in his daily people-watching, Machiavelli is analytical. He speaks with the travelers as they come and go from the tavern and he comes to understand things about the peoples' tastes and desires. These comments reflect Machiavelli's views on human nature which he believes to be constant and therefore, predictable. In true Machiavellian style, his theories on human behavior (like everything else) are guided by his own careful observations. After lunch, he returns to the tavern to play games of chance with the locals; one can only imagine the tensivity of strategizing a bet against Machiavelli.

Later in the evening, Machiavelli retreats to his study. Celenza writes: "for those people who wrote and read in the Renaissance, was a kind of sacred space, where you received your most intimate friends in a space adorned with books art, and objects that meant the most to you."³⁶⁴ This section of the letter is perhaps the most significant, in that it provides an overview of Machiavelli's own tastes and desires. In describing his readings habits, Machiavelli gives a telling glimpse of the works which inform his later scholarship, including, most importantly, his *Discorso intorno alla nostra lingua*.³⁶⁵ He writes:

"Venuta la sera, mi ritorno a casa ed entro nel mio scrittoio; e in sull'uscio mi spoglio quella veste cotidiana, piena di fango e di loto, e mi metto panni reali e curiali; e rivestito condecentemente, entro nelle antique corti delli antiqui huomini, dove, da loro ricevuto amorevolmente, mi pasco di quel cibo che solum è mio e ch'io nacqui per lui; dove io non mi vergogno parlare con loro e domandarli della ragione delle loro azioni; e quelli per loro humanità mi rispondono; e non sento per quattro hore di tempo alcuna noia, sdimentico ogni affanno, non temo la povertà, non mi sbigottisce la morte: tutto mi transferisco in loro."³⁶⁶

Come evening, Machiavelli steps into another world.

³⁶⁴ Christopher Celenza, *Machiavelli: a Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 59.

³⁶⁵ Citations from the *Lettera a Vettori* (December 10, 1513) are in Niccolò Machiavelli and Mario Martelli, *Tutte le opere* (Florence: Sansoni, 1971), 1158-1160.

³⁶⁶ Machiavelli, *Lettera a Vettori*, 1160.

When he removes his everyday clothing, dirty with mud, he releases himself from his earthly travails. Once suitably dressed in his regal attire, he crosses the threshold into the court of the ancients. Lovingly received by them, he writes “mi pasco di quel cibo”.³⁶⁷ This idea of nourishing oneself with wisdom recalls Dante’s *Convivio*, the encyclopedic, vernacular work in which Dante sought to transmit “crumbs” of ancient wisdom to those without the benefit of a Latin education. The use of *mi pasco*, specifically, recalls one of Petrarch’s best known sonnets, “Pace non trovo” where he writes “pascomi di dolor, piangendo rido”.³⁶⁸ They are spiritually sustained, for better or for worse, by this “grazing”. In his interactions with the masterpieces of *Trecento*, Machiavelli finds yet another way to promote Florentine literature, even its vocabulary and its images. Reprising the sentiments of early *Quattrocento* humanists, including Salutati and Biondo, who felt that they were the rightful intellectual heirs to Roman antiquity, Machiavelli writes that he was born for the wisdom of the Florentine authors, that it belongs to him. In this meditative space, Machiavelli is unashamed to interact with them and to ask them to explain their reasoning; in their “humanity”, the ancients respond. Celenza writes: “Learning, and specifically learning in the liberal arts, gave one the quality of *humanitas*, and for Machiavelli it is this precise quality that the ancient authors he loves so well possess.”³⁶⁹ In their presence, he forgets his boredom and his troubles, he fears neither poverty nor death. They transform him.

He continues:

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Francesco Petrarca, *Opere* (Florence: Sansoni, 1992), *Canzoniere* cxxxiv, 82.

³⁶⁹ Celenza, *Machiavelli*, 60.

“E perché Dante dice che non fa scienza senza lo ritenere lo havere inteso - io ho notato quello di che per la loro conversazione ho fatto capitale, e composto uno opuscolo *De principatibus*; dove io mi profondo quanto io posso nelle cogitazioni di questo subietto, disputando che cosa è principato, di quale spezie sono, come e' si acquistano, come e' si mantengono, perché e' si perdono. E se vi piacque mai alcuno mio ghiribizzo, questo non vi doverrebbe dispiacere; e a un principe, e massime a un principe nuovo, doverrebbe essere accetto: però io lo indirizzo alla Magnificentia di Giuliano. Filippo Casavecchia l'ha visto; vi potrà ragguagliare in parte e della cosa in sé e de' ragionamenti ho hauto seco, ancora che tutta volta io l'ingrasso e ripulisco.”³⁷⁰

In the first line (a prime example of his aforementioned clunky syntax) Machiavelli recalls Dante's *Purgatorio*, in which Beatrice explains to Dante that knowledge is useful only when it is understood and retained. Machiavelli has kept this mind while composing his new work, *De principatibus*. It is interesting to note that the title appears here in Latin though the final work would be written in Florentine. He gives Vettori an overview of the topics he will treat, and writes that a prince, especially a new prince, should be grateful for sources of knowledge. In that light, he intends to dedicate the work to Giuliano de' Medici, Duke of Nemours, the new leader of Florence. He discusses his plan with Vettori and indicates that he has also shown parts of the work to their mutual friend, Filippo Casavecchia. It is clear that Machiavelli is hoping to convince the Medici of his utility and, in dedicating the work to Giuliano, to show that he holds no animosity towards their new government. However, he is still wary:

“Dubiterei che alla tornata mia io non credessi scavalcare a casa, e scavalcassi nel Bargiello; perché, ancora che questo stato habbia grandissimi fondamenti e gran securità, tamen egli è nuovo, e per questo sospettoso.”³⁷¹

He fears that if he were to return to Florence, he would more likely end up imprisoned in the Bargello than allowed to return home. In the description, Machiavelli shows that, unlike Dante, Machiavelli considers Florence separately from any individual civic

³⁷⁰ Machiavelli, *Lettera a Vettori*, 1160.

³⁷¹ Machiavelli, *Lettera a Vettori*, 1160.

administration. The city, Machiavelli writes, is strong with formidable origins, but this second iteration of the Medici government was new; he imagines they are suspect of him as he is suspect of them. For this reason, he hopes that his friends will intervene on his behalf:

“Appresso al desiderio harei che questi signori Medici mi cominciassino adoperare, se dovessino cominciare a farmi voltolare un sasso; perché, se poi io non me gli guadagnassi, io mi dorrei di me; e per questa cosa, quando la fussi letta, si vedrebbe che quindici anni, che io sono stato a studio all'arte dello stato, non gli ho né dormiti né giuocati; e doverrebbe ciascheduno haver caro servirsi di uno che alle spese di altri fussi pieno di esperienza.”³⁷²

He hopes that he will be able to demonstrate the wisdom and expertise he has accumulated over fifteen years of civic service and that the Medici will receive his offering well and soften their judgment and suspicion towards his loyalties, concluding:

“E della fede mia non si doverrebbe dubitare, perché, havendo sempre osservato la fede, io non debbo imparare hora a romperla; e chi è stato fedele e buono quarantatré anni, che io ho, non debbe poter mutare natura; e della fede e bontà mia ne è testimonio la povertà mia.”³⁷³

Despite his fall from grace, Machiavelli had no intention of breaking forty-three years of loyal affection for Florence. Nothing, he writes, could change his “natura” which, as a native Florentine, instills in him an unconditional affinity for his home and for his language. Years later, once successfully reinstated in the Florentine government, he describes this connection more fully in his *Discorso intorno alla lingua*.

Machiavelli is one of the more curious figures to pen a treatise on language. In contrast to earlier promoters of vernacular scholarship, including Dante, Alberti and Lorenzo de' Medici, Machiavelli was not necessarily a gifted rhetorician. He was, however, a varied and prolific vernacular author as well as a brilliant analytical thinker.

³⁷² Machiavelli, *Lettera a Vettori*, 1160.

³⁷³ Ibid.

He prioritizes consistency and communicability, and this can perhaps account for the relative ease of reading his prose so many centuries later. His *Discorso o dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua* was written in 1525, coinciding with his long-awaited reinstatement in the Florentine government. The attribution of the *Discorso* to Machiavelli was originally established by his son, Bernardo, but later became a subject of debate; in the twentieth century, Cecil Grayson questioned the attribution and Mario Martelli wrote an entire volume negating Machiavelli's authorship. More recent appraisals, however, especially that of Paolo Trovato, support my own conviction that Machiavelli is indeed the author.³⁷⁴ Machiavelli's literary voice, which is a unique combination of imaginative, direct and sarcastic, feels distinctively evident in the *Discorso*; when compared to Machiavelli's other works, his literary works in particular, the *Discorso* demonstrates a stylistic consistency both in language and in tone.³⁷⁵

The content of the *Discorso* is indicative of the final period of Machiavelli's life, after his years of leisurely literary study in exile. His letter to Vettori, describing his nightly retreat to literature, gives a preliminary glimpse of the sources which support his linguistic arguments. His later elaboration of the *Discorso* is lighthearted but nevertheless rigorous; as in his political works, Machiavelli supports his arguments with concrete observations and extensive citations – when he wants to make a point, Machiavelli brings receipts. Always political, as Bausi affirms, he puts significant emphasis on vernacular scholarship as a point of civic pride. He also repeats the

³⁷⁴ Paolo Trovato, "Discorso intorno alla nostra lingua" in Sasso, Gennaro. *Machiavelli: Enciclopedia Machiavelliana*, (Rome: Istituto Della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2014).

³⁷⁵ On the attribution debate, see: Sasso, Gennaro. *Machiavelli: Enciclopedia Machiavelliana*. (Rome: Istituto Della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2014).

sentiment of earlier vernacular enthusiasts, notably Alberti and Lorenzo de' Medici, who prize the "natural" aspect of expressing oneself with native language. While he does not make explicit reference to Lorenzo or Poliziano's works, he continues their defense of *Trecento* literature, that of Petrarch and Boccaccio, but most of all Dante, as the foundation of the vernacular literary tradition.

From the opening line, he makes no secret of his civic agenda. He begins:

"Sempre che io ho potuto onorare la patria mia, eziandio con mio carico e pericolo, l'ho fatto volentieri; perché l'uomo non ha maggiore obbligo nella vita sua che con quella."³⁷⁶

Right away he declares both the obligation and the honor of serving one's homeland.

Like Alberti in *Della famiglia* and Lorenzo in his *Comento*, Machiavelli perceives the natural affinity between a person and their language along the same lines as the affinity between family members. He remarks vividly:

"Perché, se battere il padre e la madre, per qualunque cagione, è cosa nefanda, di necessità ne seguita il lacerare la patria essere cosa nefandissima, perché da lei mai si patisce alcuna persecuzione per la quale possa meritare di essere da te ingiuriata, avendo a riconoscere da quella ogni tuo bene; talché, se ella si priva di parte de' suoi cittadini, sei piuttosto obbligato ringraziarla di quelli che la si lascia, che infamarla di quelli che la si toglie."

Again like Lorenzo, Machiavelli suggests that we are nourished by our culture as we are by our parents; in recognition of everything they have given us, they deserve honor – not infamy. In the spirit of honoring his Florentine language and culture, Machiavelli sets out to determine the exact nature of the language used by the fourteenth-century Florentine poets: was it Italian, Tuscan or Florentine? While he does not presume to settle the question, he hopes, at least, to provide some additional context.

³⁷⁶ Machiavelli, *Dialogo*, 923-924. This and the following citations are from Machiavelli, Niccolò and Mario Martelli. *Tutte le opere*. (Florence: Sansoni, 1971).

First, Machiavelli affirms the supremacy of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio within the celebrated *Trecento* tradition. To make determinations about their language, like Dante in *De vulgari eloquentia*, he must consider the languages of other regions as well. To simplify things, Machiavelli divides the peninsula in five general regions: Lombardia, Romagna, Tuscany, and the greater territories of Rome and Naples. He recalls Dante's designation of Italy as the "bel paese là dove il sì suona"³⁷⁷ but cautions readers that this should not be understood to extend to Spain or – gasp – Sicily. He determines the commonalities of "Italian" languages across all the regions of the peninsula in terms of the "eight parts of oration", the classical iteration of parts of speech. The verb, he argues, is the chain and the nerve of language; if there is consistency between the verbs, languages must have a "comune intelligenza."³⁷⁸ He writes:

"Perché quelli nomi che ci sono incogniti ce li fa intendere il verbo, quale infra loro è collocato; e così, per il contrario, dove li verbi sono differenti, ancora che vi fusse similitudine ne' nomi, diventa quella un'altra lingua. E per esempio si può dare la provincia d'Italia; la quale è in una minima parte differente nei verbi ma nei nomi differentissima, perché ciascuno Italiano dice *amare, stare e leggere*, ma ciascuno di loro non dice già *deschetto, tavola e guastada*."³⁷⁹

Even if there is variation in the nouns, which, as he specifies, there often is, the consistency of the verbs allows non-local readers to infer meaning. On the other hand, if the verbs do not correspond, common nouns are not enough to establish structural similarities.

Another quality which differentiates between the Italian languages is pronunciation, especially the inclusion or exclusion of final vowels: the Tuscan say *pane* while the

³⁷⁷ Machiavelli, *Dialogo*, 924.

³⁷⁸ Machiavelli, *Dialogo*, 925.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

Lombardi and Romagnoli say *pan*. He determines, then, that the geographical origins of the *Trecento* authors were highly consequential to their vocabularies and their manners of writing. He must compare their language to other writings from different areas of Italy, specifically “natural” writings: “dove non sia arte ma tutta natura.”³⁸⁰ In an evolution of the earlier conceptualization of natural and artificial languages espoused by Dante and Brunetti, Machiavelli considers writing in one’s own vernacular to be “natural” while writing in any acquired language, regardless of its origin, necessarily becomes *arte*. It is widely known that Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio were Tuscan, but Machiavelli asks: were they writing in their own language? Boccaccio affirms in the *Decameron* that he writes in Florentine, while Petrarch, as far as Machiavelli knows, makes no particular mention. As Boccaccio writes in favor of Florentine and Petrarch is neutral, beyond his preference for Latin, Machiavelli focuses on Dante. He writes:

“...mi fermerò sopra di Dante; il quale in ogni parte mostrò d'essere, per ingegno, per dottrina e per giudizio, uomo eccellente, eccetto che dove egli ebbe a ragionare della patria sua; la quale, fuori d'ogni umanità e filosofico istituto, perseguitò con ogni specie d'ingiuria. E non potendo altro fare che infamarla, accusò quella d'ogni vizio, dannò gli uomini, biasimò il sito, disse male de' costumi e delle leggi di lei; e questo fece non solo in una parte della sua *Cantica*, ma in tutta, e diversamente e in diversi modi; tanto l'offese l'ingiuria dell'esilio!”³⁸¹

As I mentioned before, Machiavelli does not mince words. In these few lines, Machiavelli is both exalting and reproachful of Dante. He feels that Dante is so profoundly insulted by his exile that, despite his otherwise brilliant and judicious example, he goes against his very humanity in defaming his homeland. The tone of their works from their respective periods of exile suggest that Dante, unlike Machiavelli, struggled to differentiate Florence from individual government administrations; while

³⁸⁰ Machiavelli, *Dialogo*, 925.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Machiavelli is hopeful for his return and maintains faith in the resiliency of Florence, Dante insults their customs and their laws and he damns his fellow Florentines not just in part, but throughout his *Comedia* – which Machiavelli had evidently studied at length. How the Florentines would despise Dante, Machiavelli writes, if any one of his terrible predictions had come true! He theorizes that it is this same disgust with Florence that makes Dante deny that the language in which he writes is, in fact, Florentine. In this, Dante “fu tanto cieco, che perse ogni sua gravità. dottrina e giudizio, e divenne al tutto un altro uomo.”³⁸² Machiavelli suspects that such a loss of senses, in his own time, would have Dante cast out as a crazy person. He intends to prove that Dante, contrary to his own perception, wrote in Florentine:

“Ma perché le cose che s'impugnano per parole generali o per conietture possono essere facilmente riprese, io voglio, a ragioni vive e vere, mostrare come il suo parlare è al tutto fiorentino, e più assai che quello che il Boccaccio confessa per se stesso esser fiorentino, e in parte rispondere a quelli che tengono la medesima opinione di Dante.”³⁸³

In this passage, Machiavelli summarizes his underlying approach to scholarship: the flimsiness of broad terms and conjecture cannot stand up against true, live examples. The common language of Italy, he writes, should be that which shares the most commonalities with the other Italian languages. It should be that language from which the others draw new terminology. It is natural, he writes, that languages should take on terms from one another and expand their vocabulary. With the growth of philosophical and artistic traditions, new terms are necessarily inherent to the growth of a language. He acknowledges that the evolution of a language is inevitable and thus argues that it is necessary to preserve good models in writing:

³⁸² Machiavelli, *Dialogo*, 926.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

“Ma in qualunque di questi duoi modi che la lingua si muti, è necessario che quella lingua persa, volendola, sia riassunta per il mezzo di buoni scrittori che in quella hanno scritto, come si è fatto e fa della lingua latina e della greca.”³⁸⁴

The direct comparison between the Florentine literary tradition and Latin and Greek recalls the contributions of Flavio Biondo, discussed in chapter two, who gave evidence to the notion that Latin was not an artificial literary language; it had developed over time and become refined through the works of great authors. Poliziano and Lorenzo, too, affirm the growth and development of literary traditions through the accumulation of sophisticated works. They also directly affirm the virtue and the utility which derives from contributing to the emerging tradition.

To demonstrate that Dante wrote in Florentine, and that Florentine is therefore the model of literary “Italian”, Machiavelli makes a fun choice: he imagines a conversation between himself and Dante. Like Petrarch writing to Cicero, he is generally praiseful but forthright in his criticism. Machiavelli writes:

“Quando questo che io dico sia vero (che è verissimo) io vorrei chiamar Dante, che mi mostrasse il suo poema; e avendo appresso alcuno scritto in lingua fiorentina, lo domanderei qual cosa è quella che nel suo poema non fussi scritta in fiorentino. E perché e' risponderebbe che molte, tratte di Lombardia, o trovate da sé, o tratte dal latino.... Ma perché io voglio parlare un poco con Dante, per fuggire “egli disse” ed “io risposi”, noterò gl'interlocutori davanti.”³⁸⁵

With Dante's texts in front of him, Machiavelli asks: what about this is not Florentine? To avoid any bland back-and-forth, he presents their “conversation”. To Machiavelli's original question, the figure of Dante explains that his incorporation of foreign terms into Tuscan constitutes a new language, a “curial” vernacular. On the *Comedia*, specifically, Machiavelli continues:

³⁸⁴ Machiavelli, *Dialogo*, 926.

³⁸⁵ Machiavelli, *Dialogo*, 926.

“N. Che lingua è quella dell'opera?

D. Curiale.

N. Che vuol dir curiale?

D. Vuol dire una lingua parlata dagli uomini di corte, del papa, del duca i quali, per essere uomini litterati, parlano meglio che non si parla nelle terre particolari d'Italia.

N. Tu dirai le bugie.”³⁸⁶

Here, Machiavelli reaches the pinnacle of smug; Dante explains that he considers his language to be “curial”, but what does curial actually mean? Anyway, according to Machiavelli’s initial description of what makes a language, “Florentine” and “curial” are not mutually exclusive descriptors. He goes on to provide examples from the *Comedia* where Dante used exclusively Florentine vocabulary, such as *ciance* as opposed to the Lombard *zanze*. And then, the real kicker: if Dante’s language is not Florentine but specifically “curial”, then why, upon reaching the sixth circle of the *Inferno*, does Farinata degli Uberti greet Dante with:

“La tua loquela ti fa manifesto
di quella nobil patria natio,
alla quale forse fui troppo molesto?”³⁸⁷

As far as Machiavelli is concerned, Dante has given himself away. Dante “the interlocuter” is forced to agree. For the sake of linguistic cross-reference, Machiavelli compares Dante’s language to that of Luigi Pulci in *Morgante*. He asks Dante to read the first tercet of the *Inferno* and then he stops him:

“N. E' basta. Leggi un poco ora il Morgante.

D. Dove?

³⁸⁶ Machiavelli, *Dialogo*, 927.

³⁸⁷ Dante, *Inferno*, cited in Machiavelli, *Dialogo*, 927.

N. Dove tu vuoi. Leggi costì a caso.”³⁸⁸

Dante obliges, and is again forced to concede that the languages are fundamentally similar. It was inevitable that Dante should write in Florentine because, in Machiavelli’s view, art can never entirely repel nature. On the example of Dante, Machiavelli concludes, authors should write as Dante wrote, but not still say the things which Dante said about their language and their home. To Dante’s notion that his “curial” language is superior to Florentine, Machiavelli quips “tu vuoi ch’e’ sia migliore l’imitatore che l’imitato...”³⁸⁹ Suddenly feeling generous again, he continues:

“tu e gli altri che hanno scritto, essendo stati celebrati e letti in varii luoghi, molti vocaboli nostri sono stati imparati da molti forestieri e osservati da loro, tal che di proprii nostri son diventati comuni.”³⁹⁰

Precisely because of Dante and his fellow Florentine authors, Machiavelli reasons, the Florentine language has become known in other places and serves as a guide and point of reference for other Italian languages. Florentine is more self-reliant than the others. Notably, Machiavelli makes the same arguments for self-sufficiency in matters of state and matters of war. In a time when so many of the great Italian cities, duchies and kingdoms had become reliant upon, and then eventually subsumed by foreign power, Machiavelli’s call for self-sustainability is not only understandable but prudent. Tracing the history of vernacular literature from Provence to the Sicilians to the Tuscans, he writes:

“E che l’importanza di questa lingua nella quale e tu, Dante, scrivesti, e gli altri che vennono e prima e poi di te hanno scritto, sia derivata da Firenze, lo dimostra esser voi stati fiorentini e nati

³⁸⁸ Machiavelli, *Dialogo*, 928.

³⁸⁹ Machiavelli, *Dialogo*, 929.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

in una patria che parlava in modo che si poteva, meglio che alcuna altra, accomodare a scrivere in versi e in prosa.”³⁹¹

Notably, Machiavelli corrects Poliziano in correctly asserting that Provençal poetry migrated to Sicily and not the reverse. He argues that the progression of this history, and the eventual success of the Florentine works, demonstrate that Tuscan is simply better suited to literary writing than the other vernaculars:

“E che sia vero, si vede in questi tempi assai Ferraresi, Napoletani, Vicentini e Viniziani, che scrivono bene e hanno ingegni attissimi allo scrivere; il che non potevano far prima che tu, il Petrarca e il Boccaccio, avessi scritto. Perché a volere ch'e' venissino a questo grado, disaiutandoli la lingua patria, era necessario ch'e' fussi prima alcuno il quale, con lo esempio suo, insegnassi com'egli avessino a dimenticare quella lor naturale barbaria nella quale la patria lingua li sommergeva.”³⁹²

Machiavelli admits that other cities have produced great vernacular authors, but none of them, he argues, would have managed such achievements without the prior examples of Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch. He concludes, therefore, that the idea of an “Italian” language or a “curial” language cannot exist, as they both take structure from the great literary examples of the *Trecento*, which as he demonstrated earlier, are decidedly Florentine. Putting his argument to rest, he writes: “io mi restai tutto contento, parendomi d’averlo sgannato.”³⁹³ Dante the interlocutor concedes, and so Machiavelli is satisfied – anyone who has read *Mandragola* can attest that Machiavelli does love to get his own way.

³⁹¹ Machiavelli, *Dialogo*, 930.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid.

III. Pietro Bembo

Pietro Bembo has the distinction of being the unofficial “fourth crown”³⁹⁴ of the Italian language, joining the hallowed ranks of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. While Bembo is remembered more often for his linguistic theory than his own poetry, his work nevertheless constitutes a fundamental contribution to the standardization and legitimization of Florentine as an “Italian” language for literature. If Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio were a band, Bembo would be their smooth-talking agent. Carol Kidwell’s recent biography of Bembo is subtitled “*Lover, Linguist, Cardinal*”³⁹⁵ and the order of descriptors, I suspect, is intentional. Despite his ecclesiastical career, Bembo was a notorious lover of the ladies. Not only did he carry on a series of high-profile love affairs, but more notably, he included women in his scholarship. In *Gli Asolani* (1497-1505), one of his first major works, he makes the rare choice to feature women (more than one!) as interlocutors in the dialogue. In his monumental treatise on language, *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525) he includes “conversing with women” among his arguments for elevating the vernacular. His *Rime* are, *de rigueur*, a prolonged Petrarchan ode to love and the wiles of the fairer sex. While Bembo’s contributions to the vernacular tradition have been the subject of abundant scholarly consideration, his treatment at the conclusion of this dissertation is fundamental; Bembo’s efforts, more than those of any other defender of the vernacular, brought about the official codification of the “Italian” literary language, effectively marking the end of a centuries-long hunt for the *volgare illustre*.

³⁹⁴ Giuseppe Patota, *La Quarta Corona: Pietro Bembo e La Codificazione Dell'italiano Scritto* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017).

³⁹⁵ Carol Kidwell and Pietro Bembo, *Pietro Bembo: Lover, Linguist, Cardinal* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press, 2004).

As a direct contemporary of Machiavelli, Bembo grew up among the Venetian humanists in a “golden age” of the Italian Renaissance. In the same way, Bembo’s adult life was punctuated by the Italian Wars and the gradual loss of political autonomy in Italy. As a curious consequence of this upheaval, Bembo’s rise coincided with Machiavelli’s fall. The year 1512 was pivotal for them both; as the Medici returned to Florence and Machiavelli was set to be deposed, Bembo arrived in Rome where he was named Papal Secretary to Pope Leo X. While Bembo evaded the expressly political career of his father, he nevertheless became a prominent figure in a highly politicized environment. As Papal Secretary, he took on a more direct involvement in civic affairs and over the course of his career, he became a leading cultural and intellectual figure across Europe. He also maintained a broad and illustrious circle of friends including Giulio de’ Medici, Lodovico Ariosto, Vittoria Colonna, Castiglione, Cardinal Franciotti della Rovere and Ercole Strozzi. Bembo also had a close relationship with fellow Venetian Aldo Manuzio, the most illustrious early print publisher on the Italian peninsula. Initially, Manuzio only printed works in Latin but, at Bembo’s urging, he began to print the great works of Florentine literature as well, with Dante and Petrarch among the first. Moreover, the editions of Dante’s *Comedia* and Petrarch’s *Rime* which Manuzio published were those prepared by Bembo himself; he had combed through the texts, removing any traces of a *Quattrocento* “update” to the language. His treatment of these works marked a new level of critical consideration for Florentine literature; establishing the viability of the works for print was an important step in elevating the vernacular canon.

As an author and scholar, Bembo is praised for his sophisticated literary style in both Latin and the vernacular. Contrary to Angelo Poliziano, whom Bembo had known personally since his childhood, Bembo resisted the notion of the *docta varietas* and was instead committed to identifying and analyzing the very best models of language for exclusive use. Like many humanists before him, Bembo adopted Cicero as the ultimate model for Latin prose. For poetry, like Dante, he deferred to Virgil. Eventually, Bembo realized that the rigorous methodology with which he and his humanist contemporaries approached the *imitatio* of classical Latin could – and should – be applied to vernacular language in the very same way. Again contrary to Poliziano, as well as Lorenzo de' Medici and Machiavelli, Bembo dismissed the contemporary iteration of Florentine vernacular in favor of the literary Florentine of the *Trecento*. After all, he was rather a purist for historical models. The fact that Bembo was born and raised outside of the Florentine cultural tradition gives an important indication of the wide dissemination of *Trecento* Florentine literature by the dawn of the *Cinquecento* as well as the growing interest in the 'question of language' in other cultural centers of Italy. While Machiavelli prized the "natural" aspect of Florentine literature, written by native Florentines, Bembo used his outside status to his advantage. Free from the natural affinity towards contemporary Florentine speech, he was able to approach the language of *Trecento* Florence as he did with Latin – as an art.

i. Bembo the Secretary

Pietro Bembo was born in 1470 to a noble family in Venice.³⁹⁶ His father Bernardo was a noted ambassador and scholar; on behalf of the *Serenissima*, he served as *podestà* – the highest civic office – to Ravenna and Verona. Even as a young boy, Pietro accompanied his father on his travels. This included a period in Florence in 1478, where Bembo met Lorenzo de' Medici and his humanist circle and acquired an early appreciation for Florentine literature. Bembo's father evidently intended for him to follow a similar political course; Bembo, however, had different plans and in 1506, he embarked on an ecclesiastical career. He travelled to Rome in 1512, in the company of Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, Lorenzo's illegitimate nephew. An instant success in the curia, Bembo was named secretary to Pope Leo X just a year after his arrival. He held this position for almost a decade until Leo's death in 1521. The following year Bembo departed from Rome for an extended sojourn in Padua, where despite his religious affiliation he lived a cozy (and not terribly discreet) family life with his Roman mistress, Faustina Morosina della Torre, and their three children, Lucilio, Torquato and Elena. It was in this period that Bembo composed his best known work, the linguistic treatise *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), though there is evidence that he began formulating the work years earlier. The first edition of his *Rime* was published by Manuzio in 1530 and in the same year, as the newly appointed official historiographer of Venice, Bembo also began working on his Venetian histories. In 1539, he was named to the cardinalate and called back to Rome, where he remained for the rest of his life.

³⁹⁶ Vital dates for Pietro Bembo and his works in "Voci dizionari ed enciclopedie" in Carlo Dionisotti and Claudio Vela, *Scritti Sul Bembo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), 145-171; see also Carol Kidwell and Pietro Bembo, *Pietro Bembo: Lover, Linguist, Cardinal* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 2004).

Bembo's long life, along with his official loyalties, can be divided between his early Venetian period and his adult life as a member of the curia, based predominantly in Rome. Bembo was born as a noble son of the *Serenissima* in one of its most glorious periods. As a natural meeting point between Eastern and Western Europe, the Venetian Republic became a critical (and superlatively wealthy) center for trade. With an expansive territory around the northern Adriatic coastline, they also commanded an imposing naval force. Over the course of the *Quattrocento*, they expanded into the Italian mainland; to protect their economy, they had to maintain control over their inland trade routes, as well as the lush forests which provided the wood for their vast fleet of ships.³⁹⁷ A rich and ambitious political force, they often found themselves at odds with the neighboring powers – Milan to the West and the Ottoman Empire to the East. At the time of Bembo's birth, Venice was seven years into the First Ottoman-Venetian War (1463-1479). The Venetian government's hesitant declaration of war against the Ottomans, an important trade partner, was a prime motivator for Pope Pius II's ill-fated crusade in the same years. Bembo was a young man at the outbreak of the Second Ottoman-Venetian War (1499-1503) when Venice was defeated yet again by Turkish forces and forced to surrender even more of their precious coastal territory. On the Italian mainland, where Bembo was enjoying his passionate but seemingly aimless twenties, the situation became equally menacing.

The Italian Wars began in 1494 when Charles VIII of France crossed into Italy to stake his historical claim over the Kingdom of Naples. The Venetians grew wary as

³⁹⁷ Karl Appuhn conducts a fascinating socio-ecological study on the Venetian Republic in *A Forest on the Sea: Environmental Expertise in Renaissance Venice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

France gained control over more and more of the Italian peninsula and they, in turn, established an imposing alliance with Maximilian I of Austria, later Holy Roman Emperor, and Ferdinand V of Spain. While this alliance was successful in repelling the initial French campaign against Naples, it effectively solidified a new dynamic of foreign control over the majority of the Italian peninsula. As the wars continued, the patchwork of Italian powers which had existed in a relative balance with each other in the second half of the fifteenth century were subsumed by either the French or the Spanish, in league with the Holy Roman Empire. The first significant push for the restoration of Italian authority came during the papacy of Julius II, the Warrior Pope, who vowed at the Congress of Mantua, in 1512, to launch a new campaign against the French.³⁹⁸ He successfully drove the French from Florence, where he reinstated the Medici, and from Milan, where he reinstated the Sforza. He did so, however, with continued support from the allies of the “Holy League” including Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. While Florence and Milan had been remitted into local hands, the influence of foreign rule was far from diminished. Julius II met a battlefield death in 1513, just months after Pietro Bembo arrived in Rome with his friend, Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici. The cardinals assembled for the papal conclave and on March 9, 1513, Giovanni de’ Medici (the second son of Lorenzo and Clarice Orsini) was named Pope Leo X.

Like his predecessor, Leo proved himself to be an active, ambitious pontiff and like his fellow Medici, he had a keen political instinct. His correspondence would be an essential element of his civic negotiations. As head of the Apostolic Datary, the office of

³⁹⁸ On Julius II and the French, see Christine Shaw and Michael Mallett, *Italian Wars 1494-1559: War, State and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 109-113.

the curia responsible for official communications, the new Medici pope chose our very own Pietro Bembo. Bembo's literary reputation preceded him, especially for *Gli asolani*, and his connection to other members of the Medici family was likely an advantage as well; it suggested that Bembo would be loyal to Leo's agenda. In their tenure together, they witnessed a number of startling changes to the cultural and political landscape in Europe. Ever wary of French ambitions in Italy, in 1514, Leo sent Bembo home to Venice to try to convince the powers of the *Serenissima* to break their alliance with the French crown. He was unsuccessful, and he returned to Rome defeated and at political odds with his home city. Within just a few years, however, the endurance of the Franco-Venetian alliance was no longer a pressing concern.

In 1516, Leo began preparations for a new crusade against the encroaching threat of the Ottoman Turks who, for decades, had been chipping away at the Venetian Republic and creeping ever-closer to the mainland of Italy.³⁹⁹ This crusade never came to fruition, however, as Pius' intended European allies were occupied with others concerns: In 1517, the German priest and professor of theology Martin Luther published his *Ninety-five Theses*, foreshadowing the Edict of Worms and the Protestant Reformation. Just two years later, in 1519, Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I died. Leo eventually agreed to name Charles V of Spain as Holy Roman Emperor and King of Naples, which had been a protectorate of the Papal States since the departure of the French in the previous Italian War. Hostilities with the French resumed shortly thereafter, in the summer of 1521. Six months into the war, when the papal alliance had

³⁹⁹ On war and the papacy of Leo X, see David Chambers, *Popes, Cardinals and War the Military Church in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe* (London: Tauris, 2006), 134-143.

just recaptured Milan from the French, Leo quickly grew ill and died. For Bembo, Leo's death signified a whole new environment in the curia, one in which he did not feel that he would belong. Bembo had a connection to the Medici for most of his life, and there had been much about Pope Leo X to suggest his status as a Medici; it is evident that the two shared a deep cultural connection. After Leo's death, Bembo used his own ill health as an excuse to step away from the turmoil of Rome. Despite his valiant and loyal efforts, there is little to suggest that Bembo was particularly successful in his diplomatic capacities; he was, however, one of the most gifted Latinists of the time and his years of correspondence on behalf of the Papal States had made him known across Europe, as evidenced by his correspondence with Erasmus and Reginald Pole. Bembo initially returned home to Venice, but soon settled in nearby Padua where he dedicated himself fully to scholarship – and to raising his not-so-secret family.

Despite Bembo's youthful indiscretions, in his later years he was deeply committed to his position as a cardinal. Bembo's letters suggest that he had desired this ecclesiastical elevation for some time, though he had, on various occasions, resigned himself to the idea that his ambition would never be fulfilled.⁴⁰⁰ When Pope Paul III finally named him to the cardinalate in 1538, there was a marked change in Bembo's scholarship; from the secular, humanist tastes of his early works, his focus shifted almost exclusively to works of theology and classical history. Following the conventions of his ecclesiastical position, he also wrote more frequently in Latin. Nevertheless,

⁴⁰⁰ Ronnie Terpening, "Pietro Bembo and the Cardinalate: Unpublished Letters to Marco Mantova." (*Lettere Italiane*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1980), 75–86.

Bembo's vernacular guidelines in the *Prose* were making their way around the peninsula and inspiring a new generation of vernacular authors.

ii. Written works

Bembo spent his early years as an illustrious wanderer. Though he maintained a connection to his native Venice throughout his life, his travels as a courtier, and eventually his professional duties in the curia, brought him into contact with the great political and literary figures from every corner of Italy. This broad cultural perspective, together with his extensive literary education, made Bembo uniquely qualified to assess the literary and linguistic traditions of Italy. While today he is most often remembered for his codification of the Florentine literary vernacular, in his own lifetime he was highly regarded as a man of letters deeply involved with both classical and contemporary literature. Bembo had specifically evaded the political career of his illustrious father, but by virtue of his literary talents, he was eventually drawn into the political fold as a leading member of the curia. In these years, and then later as a cardinal, Bembo became “uno dei protagonisti della vita culturale romana”⁴⁰¹ as well as “il gran maestro dell’umanesimo ciceroniano.”⁴⁰² His well-elaborated perspectives on classical *imitatio* are critically important to his written works in general, as it was his conservative,

⁴⁰¹ Giulio Ferroni, “Dal Classicismo a Guicciardini (1494-1559)” in *Storia della Letteratura Italiana*, vol. 6 (Milano, Mondadori, 2006), 5.

⁴⁰² Carlo Dionisotti and Claudio Vela, *Scritti Sul Bembo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), 80.

Ciceronian approach to Latin style which made him so effective as a vernacular grammarian.

Bembo was a prolific writer throughout his long career, both in a professional and literary capacity. His correspondence alone is worthy of study; his letters with Lucrezia Borgia have been called “the prettiest love letters in the world.” On the more official side of things, his works include the vernacular dialogue on love, *Gli Asolani* (1505), the linguistic dialogue *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), his vernacular *Rime* (1530), his Latin *Carmina* (1533) and *Historia Veneta* (1551) written in his capacity as official historiographer of the Venetian Republic. Bembo’s contributions to the vernacular tradition are fundamental, at least as significant as any other work discussed in this project, as he elevated the tradition in two critical ways: first, his push for the publication of Dante’s *Commedia* and Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* among a Manutian series literary “classics” brought historical authority to the great works of *Trecento* Florence. The second and most essential aspect of his vernacular legacy is his grammatical codification of the *Trecento* literary language in his *Prose della volgar lingua*. Unlike earlier iterations of Tuscan grammar, including Alberti’s *Grammatichetta* (1438-1441) and Giovanni Francesco Fortunio’s *Regole grammaticali della volgar lingua* (1516), which were not widely read, Bembo’s systematic treatment in the *Prose* had a profound and lasting impact on the literary culture of the Italian peninsula.

In considering Bembo’s written works, especially in the vernacular, it is critical to remember that he was not native to the Florentine tradition. Venice had their own language, but by the turn of the sixteenth century, the literary language of Florence was growing in popularity across the other cultural centers of Italy, Venice included. Against

the backdrop of the Italian Wars and the progressive loss of political autonomy across the Italian peninsula, the cultural identity of Italy as a whole became more apparent – and more important. Dionisotti writes that Bembo “da veneziano...interpretò con supremo rigore un’esigenza che, anche in quelle opere, fiorite negli stessi anni della letteratura di corte, si avverte evidentissima. Infatti, così nel poema dell’Ariosto come nel dialogo del Castiglione è uno sforzo, non soltanto conciliativo, tutt’intorno al nucleo centrale ferrarese o urbinato, ma al di sopra di quel nucleo, unitario e conclusivo sul piano nazionale italiano.”⁴⁰³ When compared to the explicitly Florentine agenda of Lorenzo and Poliziano, the idea of a literary culture for “Italy” represents a significant change in the scope of vernacular politics. The idea of a unified Italian state, or league of powers, had often been theorized (and occasionally pursued) in the *Tre-* and *Quattrocento*, but it was far from a political reality, even before the devastation of the Italian Wars. Even in writing *Il principe* in 1513 it seems that Machiavelli, among many others, was anticipating an eventual return to the courtly atmosphere of the late *Quattrocento*. As the years progressed, however, this idea became more of an illusion. The Sack of Rome in 1527 was a definitive nail in the coffin of the graceful (though corrupt) courtly Italy of Castiglione’s *Cortegiano*. It seems that Bembo came early to grasping the scale of this cultural crisis, given that his adoption of fourteenth-century Florentine literature as the foundation for an Italian cultural identity occurred at a most auspicious time. Dionisotti writes that in Bembo’s defense of the vernacular, “nella riforma che egli operò della lingua e letteratura volgare, il riflesso della crisi storica...risulta chiarissimo.”⁴⁰⁴ In defining a tradition of their own, the Italians would be

⁴⁰³ Carlo Dionisotti and Claudio Vela, *Scritti Sul Bembo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), 90.

⁴⁰⁴ Carlo Dionisotti and Claudio Vela, *Scritti Sul Bembo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), 89.

better able to resist the cultural influence of their French, Spanish and Austrian overlords. Bembo, in his *Prose*, depicts Florentine literature as an “Italian” cultural good, one which would allow the (former) Italian centers of political power to retain a sense of their own history and society in the face of an uncertain future.

Bembo found a historical basis for the Italian tradition in the great works of *Trecento* Florence. These works, predominantly Dante’s *Comedia*, Petrarch’s *Rime* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, were an important element of many of the early defenses of vernacular scholarship; this is certainly true for Lorenzo, Poliziano and Bembo, though their approaches to language differ in several important ways. Lorenzo and Poliziano viewed the Florentine tradition as a developing phenomenon and Poliziano especially adopted a *docta varietas* in his imitation, by which he sampled and experimented with different linguistic styles to create something new and unique. Bembo, instead, views the Florentine literary tradition within a cyclical view of history; the literature of the *Trecento* is not a starting point, but a fully self-contained tradition which had been corrupted by the competing linguistic influences of the *Quattrocento*. This revelation led Bembo to treat the vernacular in the very same way that the *Quattrocento* humanists treated Latin, by identifying and codifying the language of the “golden age”. It was Bembo’s task to aid the “revival” of this literature, not with the free-form, linguistic buffet approach of Poliziano, but in a methodical analysis of the “best” singular models of language. While Lorenzo, Poliziano and even Machiavelli advocated for the use of their contemporary Florentine vernacular, Bembo was a purist concerning *imitatio* who focused exclusively on the literary language of the *Trecento*. This was perhaps an

easier choice for Bembo to make given that, unlike the others, he was not native to the Florentine language.

Bembo's rigorous approach to the vernacular derived entirely from his methods in Latin; he knows that in order to properly apply to rules of classical *imitatio* to the vernacular, the designated linguistic model had to be precise – not to mention correct. The question of “proper” *imitatio* had been a subject of controversy among the humanists since Petrarch's own musings on the subject in his *Familiars* (29.13). In Petrarch's view, “the relationship between the source texts and the new one should be modeled on that between father and son: a subtle resemblance, but not an exact replica.”⁴⁰⁵ Petrarch's suggestion of a degree of liberty in imitation is not well defined; if *imitatio* should develop like a child of the source text, just how far from the tree should the apple fall? In answering this question, a generation earlier, Poliziano had embraced freedom and creativity. Bembo, however, advocates for a more restrictive approach, one which is more faithful to the “best” available models of the tradition. For Bembo, these models are clear: Cicero provides the finest examples of prose while Virgil provides the finest examples of poetry. With these texts available, why should they defer to other substandard works?

Bembo's perspectives on *imitatio* are best defined in his 1512 epistolary debate with Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1470-1533), sometimes referred to as the “younger Pico”, nephew of the Pico who had been Poliziano's dear friend, or “evil Pico” (by me personally) given that he was a ruthless inquisitor who killed a woman for fun.

⁴⁰⁵ Aileen Feng, *Writing Beloveds: Humanist Petrarchism and the Politics of Gender* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 136.

Despite their considerable theological differences, their letters suggest that the uncle and nephew – only six years different in age – shared a close bond and took similar approaches to scholarship. This closeness is evident in Gianfrancesco's debate with Bembo where he expands upon the perspectives formerly espoused by his uncle and Poliziano, especially those from Poliziano's influential debate with Paolo Cortese in 1489. Bembo and Pico's arguments pick up from this clash more than twenty years after the fact.

Pico promotes the *docta varietas* of Poliziano, whereas Bembo establishes himself as a stylistic purist along the lines of Cortese. The approach to *imitatio* which Bembo elaborates in this debate later becomes critical to his treatment of vernacular grammar. Carlo Vecce writes: "Bembo si accorge della derivazione di Pico da Poliziano, e la sua risposta è in realtà una risposta a Poliziano, impostata non tanto su una nuova riflessione teorica, ma sul ripensamento critico della propria storia di intellettuale e di umanista, che fino a pochi anni prima si era svolta tutta nel segno e nel magistero di Poliziano."⁴⁰⁶ Writing to Pico, Bembo completely dismisses Poliziano's eccentric, varied approach; nevertheless, Poliziano's efforts laid the framework for a later call for resolution on the question of imitation and, especially in his letter in the *Raccolta aragonese*, he presented important theoretical arguments for vernacular scholarship, many of which Bembo repeats in his *Prose*. As Machiavelli affirms, history always teaches us something – whether it be something to do or something to avoid. In the vernacular works of Poliziano, Bembo found something of both.

⁴⁰⁶ Carlo Vecce, "Bembo e Poliziano" in Vincenzo Fera and Mario Martelli. *Agnolo Poliziano: Poeta Scrittore Filologo: Atti Del Convegno Internazionale Di Studi, Montepulciano 3-6 Novembre 1994*. (Florence: Le Lettere, 1998, 477-503), 479.

In his first letter to Bembo in September, 1512, Pico summarizes his position on the liberty of *imitatio*. He writes: “imitandum inquam omnes bonos, non unum aliquem, nec omnibus etiam in rebus.”⁴⁰⁷ He is clear in his view of classical literature as a source of guidance and inspiration as opposed to a constraining, prescriptive methodology. McLaughlin writes: “What strikes Pico about the classical writers is their extraordinary variety, not their similarities: Cicero did not follow Demosthenes in everything, Livy sought a different route to historiographical frame than Sallust, and the styles of Plato, Xenophon and Aristotle could not be more different.”⁴⁰⁸ In addition to this preference for varied models, Pico echoes his uncle and Poliziano in his adherence to the Neoplatonist perspectives of Ficino, a philosophy which “upholds the priority of the writer’s natural instinct.”⁴⁰⁹ While Pico felt that his obscure pastiche of sources would be innately guided by a Platonic ideal, Bembo, like Machiavelli, relies on his own observational wisdom. As McLaughlin explains, Bembo “rejects Pico’s Neoplatonic reliance on the innate Idea of eloquence, since Bembo’s own experiences suggest that he only acquired this Idea through reading other authors.”⁴¹⁰ On the basis of this experience, Bembo explains that what he is offering is not a theoretical model of language, but a practical one. In his reply to Pico, titled *De imitatione*, Bembo writes:

⁴⁰⁷ “I say that one should imitate all good writers, not one single model, nor should they be imitated in everything.” In Giovanfrancesco Pico della Mirandola and Giorgio Santangelo, *“De Imitatione” Di Giovanfrancesco Pico Della Mirandola E Di Pietro Bembo* (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1954), 24.

⁴⁰⁸ Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 257.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁴¹⁰ Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 262.

“eos mihi vehementur probari, qui prosa oratione scripturi Ciceronam sibi unum ad imitandum propenerent; heroicis carminibus Virgilium.”⁴¹¹

Bembo explains that he arrived at this single-model approach as the third stage of his development as a Latinist. In his youth, he pursued an eclectic style; he eventually concluded, however, that it produced linguistically inconsistent works. In a second period, Bembo took individuality to the extreme in creating a Latin style entirely his own. This, he found, was problematic as well as he was unable to escape the shadows of classical influence without surrendering the classical tone entirely.⁴¹² In a stark reversal from the second phase, Bembo ultimately determined that the best *imitatio* derives from a single literary model.

He goes on to identify a tripartite course of literary *imitatio* which begins with imitation but then reaches and eventually surpasses the original model. Bembo does not realistically expect to surpass Cicero, but the idea gives him a threshold of eloquence to which he can aspire. In describing the applicable uses of Ciceronian prose, Bembo makes an important distinction between *imitari*, which applies only to elements of style, and *sumere* which includes subject matter, methodology of thought and other elements of content. For Bembo, style reigns supreme; he essentially agrees with Pico that matters of subject can be creatively treated and sourced, but the linguistic style must be well defined. Towards the end of the letter, based upon the “triumph of Ciceronianism in humanist Latin literature”⁴¹³, Bembo resolves to apply to his same

⁴¹¹ “I thoroughly approve of those who take Cicero as their sole model when writing prose, Virgil when writing epic poetry.” In Giovanfrancesco Pico della Mirandola and Giorgio Santangelo, “*De Imitatione*” *Di Giovanfrancesco Pico Della Mirandola E Di Pietro Bembo* (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1954), 49.

⁴¹² Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 263.

⁴¹³ Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 267.

methods of *imitatio* to a revival of the fourteenth-century Florentine tradition. He makes some humble apologies for his own Latin (as a formality – his Latin was excellent) and explains that the vernacular is his true focus. Echoing Cicero's *Tusculanae quaestiones*⁴¹⁴, Bembo writes:

“ad quae quidem conscribenda eo maiore studio incubuimus, quod ita depravata multa atque perversa iam a plurimus ea in lingua tradebantur, obsoleto prope recto illo usu atque proprio scribendi; brevi et videretur, nisi quis eam sustentavisset, eo prolapsura ut diutissime sine honore, sine splendore, sine ullu cultu dignitateque iaceret.”⁴¹⁵

In this letter, which McLaughlin calls “Bembo's literary credo”⁴¹⁶ we see the methodological evolution of Bembo's approach to literary style. As he writes to Pico, it is clear that Bembo has already determined that his framework of stylistic *imitatio* could be applied to the vernacular tradition as well as Latin. Later, he would fully elaborate this approach in his best known work, *Prose della volgar lingua*.

Bembo includes some notes on language in a letter to Maria Savorgnan, his first love, written in 1501; these same arguments later appear in the *Prose* which clearly had been in Bembo's mind for years before it was eventually published. While the specific dates of composition remain a matter of speculation, Giuseppe Patota suggests that the three books were written most likely between 1512 and 1516. Bembo formatted the *Prose* as a dialogue; the first book addresses the question of language from a

⁴¹⁴ Cicero, *Tusculanae quaestiones*, 2.2.5. In Cicero and C. D. Yonge, *Cicero's Tuscan Disputations* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), 66.

⁴¹⁵ “I was all the keener to write in the vernacular since most works were being written so corruptly and inelegantly in that language, and its correct usage and manner of writing had been so neglected, that it seemed to me that, unless someone propped it up, it would collapse to such an extent that for a long time it would lay prostrate, without honor, without splendour, and without any polish or dignity.” Pietro Bembo in Giovanfrancesco Pico della Mirandola and Giorgio Santangelo, *“De Imitatione” Di Giovanfrancesco Pico Della Mirandola E Di Pietro Bembo* (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1954, 53.

⁴¹⁶ Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 265.

theoretical standpoint while the second book investigates the specific qualities which make a language beautiful. The final book, still in a dialogical format, contains Bembo's grammar of literary Florentine. On the predominance of theory in the first two books, Claudio Marazzini writes: "Ciò spiega la profonda differenza rispetto alle altri trattazioni grammaticali cinquecenteschi: Bembo ha la stoffa del grande teorico, e per questo la sua opera condizionò il gusto e la cultura del secolo."⁴¹⁷ Beyond his rigorous theory, another reason for which Bembo's text was likely so successful is that he sets the history of the vernacular tradition firmly within the fraught civic and cultural environment of the moment; not only does his vision of vernacular history create a parallel to the revival of classical Latin, it makes the vernacular tradition critically relevant – and thereby more compelling – for contemporary scholars both and in and outside of Florence. To center my analysis on the civic aspects of Bembo's argument, I will focus predominantly on the contents of the first book.

Bembo, who advocated for a singular linguistic model in Latin imitation, builds his entire defense of vernacular literature around the benefits which derive from standardized language and the utility which is generated in expanding access to a refined literary canon. He argues that an established linguistic standard would help to correct the varied perceptions of vernacular literature which emerged with the literary experimentations of the courtly *Quattrocento* and bring the same cultural stability to Italy which Latin had once afforded to ancient Rome. Adopting Biondo's cyclical, tripartite vision of linguistic history, Bembo views the *Quattrocento* as a period of linguistic decline following the *Trecento* golden age of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio.

⁴¹⁷ Claudio Marazzini, *La Storia Della Lingua Italiana Attraverso i Testi* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006), 108.

Furthermore, Bembo demonstrates a profound understanding of the Medicean mentality which equated cultural achievement with civic stability; in the early *Cinquecento*, as political order became ever more elusive on the peninsula, Bembo presents the literary tradition as the intellectual community's best recourse for the preservation of cultural stability – or at least the possibility of a future revival. In contrast to the Medici humanists, however, who intentionally center Florence in their vernacular histories, Bembo depicts the vernacular tradition as a cumulative effort which developed from the contributions of scholars in Sicily and throughout the peninsula. While those born outside of Florence, like Bembo himself, were not native to Florentine language, Bembo's narrative of vernacular history allows his fellow "outsiders" to identify culturally with the literary model he proposes.

Bembo dedicates the *Prose* to Giulio de' Medici who, at the time of publication in 1525, was the newly elected Pope Clement VII.⁴¹⁸ Bembo begins with a discussion of diversity among spoken languages in Italy and describes the communicative difficulties which arise as a consequence of this inconsistency. Bembo suggests that one's perception of language is guided by material experience, and echoing earlier civic humanists, he reflects on the domestic and civic utility which would derive from a common literary model:

"Anzi sí come la voce è a ciascun popolo quella stessa, cosí ancora le parole, che la voce forma, quelle medesime in tutti essendo, agevole sarebbe a ciascuno lo usar con le straniere nazioni; il che le piú volte, piú per la varietà del parlare che per altro, è faticoso e malagevole come si vede. Perciò che qual bisogno particolare e domestico, o qual civile commodità della

⁴¹⁸ On the papacy of Clement VII, see David Chambers, *Popes, Cardinals and War the Military Church in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe* (London: Tauris, 2006), 144-152.

vita può essere a colui presta, che sporre non la sa a coloro da cui esso la dee ricevere, in guisa che sia da lor conosciuto quello che esso ricerca?”⁴¹⁹

These issues of communication could be resolved, and great utility gained, in the standardization of their own literary language. The determination of this language, however, had been a matter of debate for hundreds of years: which, of the Italian languages, was the most *perfetta* and *gentile*, the most worthy of emulation? Bembo proposes two singular models: Petrarch for poetry and Boccaccio for prose. Calling back to the Aristotelian utility of Dante and Brunetto Latini which, in many ways, came to define the civic mentality of the fifteenth century Florentine humanists, Bembo proposes that there is utility in imitation; systematic imitation brings stability to a literary canon and makes the great works, those which induce others to virtue, accessible to a greater number of people. While a number of earlier defenses of the vernacular, including those of Dante, Alberti, Lorenzo and Poliziano, had considered the communal benefit of expanded access to literature, Bembo imagines the potential of the literary vernacular on a much grander scale.

Bembo's dedication presents the *Prose* as a simple matter of interest for those, like the new pope, who shared an affinity for vernacular literature. Bembo's theories, however, suggest a far more ambitious and calculated project: in promoting a standard model for vernacular literature, he aims to provide an instrument for cultural stability, one which would uphold the "Italian" civilization despite their political subjugation. In directing the work to the pope – a Medici pope whom Bembo knew to be sympathetic to

⁴¹⁹ Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, I.i; 173. This and the following citations are found in Pietro Bembo and Mirko Tavosanis, *La Prima Stesura Delle Prose Della Volgar Lingua: Fonti e Correzioni, Con Ed. Del Testo* (Pisa: Ed. ETS, 2002).

his cause – he is appealing to the highest spiritual and cultural authority on the peninsula:

“Il che a voi, Monsignore, come io stimo, non fia discaro, sí perché non solo le latine cose, ma ancora le scritte in questa lingua vi piacciono e dilettono grandemente, e tra le grandi cure che, con la vostra incomparabile prudenza e bontà le bisogne di santa Chiesa trattando, vi pigliate continuo, la lezione delle toscane prose tramettete, e gli orecchi date a’ fiorentini poeti alcuna fiata (e potete ciò avere dal buon Lorenzo, che vostro zio fu, per succession preso, di cui molti vaghi e ingenuosi componimenti in molte maniere di rime e alcuni in prosa si leggono) e sí ancora per questo, che della vostra città di Firenze e de’ suoi scrittori, piú che d’altro, si fa memoria in questo ragionamento, dalla quale e da’ quali hanno le leggi della lingua che si cerca, e principio e accrescimento e perfezione avuta.”⁴²⁰

This rich passage is particularly significant: the reverential tone is extended not only to Pope Clement VII himself, but to the grand cultural legacy of the Medici family. Despite the conservative, Latinate tendencies of the curia, Bembo knows that Clement VII has a personal fondness for vernacular literature; Bembo recalls the literary pursuits of the pope’s uncle, Lorenzo, and writes that Lorenzo is remembered in the work along with the other great writers of “his” (Giulio de’ Medici’s) Florence. Throughout the *Prose*, in which Bembo seeks to establish the “rules” which govern literary Florentine, he makes a subtle yet courageous bid to bring stability to the peninsula with a shared literary and cultural tradition. While the Italians struggled to resist the political influence of the powerful surrounding monarchies, for Bembo the codification of a literary language is a powerful act of resistance – and self preservation.

To open the dialogue, Bembo sets the scene: the men gather in a Venetian garden on a cold December day and they settle around the fire. They broach the

⁴²⁰ Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, I.i; 175.

question of vernacular literature and the figure of Ercole, a devoted Latinist, summarizes the conventional arguments against vernacular literature:

“messer Ercole, il quale solo della latina vago, e quella così lodevolmente, come s'è veduto, in molte maniere di versi usando, quest'altra sempre sí come vile e povera e disonorata scherniva, disse: - lo non so per me quello che voi in questa lingua vi troviate, perché si debba così lodarla e usarla nello scrivere, come dite. Ben vorrei e sarebbemi caro, che o voi aveste me a quello di lei credere persuaso che voi vi credete, in maniera che voglia mi venisse di scrivere alle volte volgarmente, come voi scrivete, o io voi svolgere da cotesta credenza potessi e, nella mia openione traendovi, esser cagione che voi altro che latinamente non scriveste.”⁴²¹

Ercole suggests, conveniently, that he would like to hear from Carlo's brother, Pietro, on his own rationale for writing *volgarmente*; this set-up allows Bembo to elaborate his arguments, which he does through the character of his brother, and to a lesser extent, Giuliano de' Medici as well. Ercole argues that the vernacular is poor, lowly and undignified but Bembo aims to demonstrate, with ample evidence and rationale, that the vernacular is indeed worthy and that it can be treated with the same grammatical regulation as Latin. Carlo reminds Ercole, the Latin loyalist, that he does not understand the value of writing in the vernacular because he had never bothered to try.

Repeating one of the most common arguments on the dignity of the vernacular, Carlo emphasizes the inherent closeness people have to the language into which they were born and nourished. He echoes Biondo in reminding his companions that, unlike the humanists, the Greeks were born into the Greek language and the Romans were born into Latin. In their own time, Bembo, Ercole and the others had acquired these languages at school, not naturally as they did with the Italian vernaculars. Like Dante, Alberti, Lorenzo, Poliziano and Machiavelli in their own vernacular defenses, Bembo

⁴²¹ Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, I.ii, 176.

attributes great meaning to the “closeness” people share with their native language. He wonders: why did the pro-Latin humanists go to such pains to so richly refurbish a far away place (Latin) while living in such lowly, humble dwellings themselves? In this analogy, reiterating the arguments of Alberti in *Della famiglia*, Bembo makes the connection between language and identity clear; for the Italian humanists, the vernacular language was their birthright, their home, a critical element of their identity. Ercole still wonders, however, if a society is proficient in two languages, why not use the one which is more refined in their writing? Carlo points out that if everyone had deferred to the previous tradition, the Romans would never have developed Latin literature at all; they would have continued to write in Greek:

“non le piú degne e piú onorate favelle siano da usare tra gli uomini nello scrivere, ma le proprie loro, quando sono di qualità che ricever possano, quando che sia, ancora esse dignità e grandezza; sí come era la latina ne’ buoni tempi.”⁴²²

Again like Alberti, Bembo suggests that a literary language is most useful and most expressive for the people who refined it from their own spoken language. As elegant as Latin was, it would never serve the Italians as it had served the people of ancient Rome; for Bembo, Cicero represents a golden age of Latin and in the *Prose*, he suggests that the literary vernacular had a golden age as well:

“Questo medesimo della nostra volgare messer Cino e Dante e il Petrarca e il Boccaccio e degli altri di lontano prevedendo, e con essa molte cose e nel verso e nella prosa componendo, le hanno tanta autorità acquistata e dignità.”⁴²³

When Bembo identifies the Florentine *Trecento* as a linguistic golden age, he establishes a critical parallel between phases of corruption and revival in Latin and

⁴²² Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, I.v; 180.

⁴²³ Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, I.v; 180.

vernacular literature. Giuliano contextualizes the decline of the vernacular tradition within their contemporary civic atmosphere:

"- Deh voglia Idio, - a queste parole traponendosi disse subitamente il Magnifico - che ella, messer Federigo, a piú che mai servilmente ragionare non si ritorni; al che fare, se il cielo non ci si adopera, non mostra che ella sia per indugiarsi lungo tempo, in maniera e alla Francia e alle Spagne bella e buona parte de' nostri dolci campi donando, e alla compagnia del governo invitandole, ce ne spogliamo volontariamente a poco a poco noi stessi; mercé del guasto mondo, che, l'antico valore dimenticato, mentre ciascuno di far sua la parte del compagno procaccia e quella negli agi e nelle piume desidera di godersi, chiama in aiuto di sé, contra il suo sangue medesimo, le straniere nazioni, e la eredità a sé lasciata dirittamente in quistion mette per obliqua via."⁴²⁴

In one of the most powerful declarations of the dialogue, Giuliano says “alla compagnia del governo invitandole, ce ne spogliamo volontariamente a poco a poco noi stessi”. In inviting foreign influence upon themselves – the Spanish and the French – they willingly strip away their own identity. While Bembo was not as directly involved in civic affairs as some of the other principle defenders of the vernacular, it is evident in his arguments that he was keenly aware of his own political environment as well as the inextricable connection which the humanists perceived between civic and cultural identity.

Ganging up on Ercole, their Latinist friend, Giuliano and Federigo recall how classical Latin was corrupted by foreign influence after the Fall of Rome. According to Giuliano, only when a language is free from servitude (to a foreign tradition) can it flourish. In this argument, Giuliano is particularly Florentine as he espouses the same notions of *libertas* which had defined the civic mentality of Salutati, Bruni and the later Florentine humanists. The figure of Giuliano exhibits a distinctly Medicean philosophy in the connection he posits between civic and intellectual culture; in constructing Giuliano's

⁴²⁴ Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, I.vii; 183.

arguments, Bembo the author displays an intimate familiarity with Florentine literature and the role it played in the cultural politics of fifteenth century Florence. With the *Prose*, Bembo seeks to pursue a similar strategy; while the Medici had treated the vernacular tradition as a marker of cultural eminence for Florence alone, Bembo imagines it as they key to preserving cultural stability across the war-torn Italian peninsula.

To emphasize the connection between the Florentine literary language and the other intellectual centers of the peninsula, Bembo depicts Florentine literature as a cumulative effort, a cultural artifact which has significant ties to Florence but which belongs to Italy as a whole. He gives due reverence to the great Florentine authors but, in direct opposition to Lorenzo and Poliziano, he makes efforts to de-centralize Florence in his vernacular history. On the origins of vernacular literature, Federigo acknowledges the formulaic influence of Provence but attributes Italian vernacular verse to the *Ciciliani* (as he calls them). He is careful to note that, at the time, Sicily was ruled by the Naples and, therefore, the Sicilian vernacular belongs to Italy. In his description of the pre-Tuscan origins of Florentine literature, including a pointed digression on the civic history of Sicily, Federigo's argument emphasizes the pan-Italian history of the tradition. Following another long digression from Federigo on morphological differences between the Italian vernaculars and Provençal, Ercole makes the eminently relatable admission that he stopped paying attention and was thinking about something else:

“Perciò che la latina lingua altro che una lingua non è, d'una sola qualità e d'una forma, con la quale tutte le italiane genti e dell'altre che italiane non sono parimente scrivono, senza differenza avere e dissomiglianza in parte alcuna questa da quella, con ciò sia cosa che tale è in Napoli la latina lingua, quale ella è in Roma e in Firenze e in Melano e in questa città e in ciascuna altra, dove ella sia in uso o molto o poco, ché in tutte medesimamente è il parlar latino

d'una regola e d'una maniera; onde io a latinamente scrivere mettendomi, non potrei errare nello appigliarmi. Ma la volgare sta altramente."⁴²⁵

Even if Ercole were persuaded by his friends' arguments and attempted to write in the vernacular, he would barely know where to begin. There are so many different vernaculars and manners of speaking across Italy, whereas for Latin, there are stable rules which apply everywhere. From Naples to Rome to Milan and beyond, Latin is the same and this cannot be said for the vernacular. In the words of Ercole, Bembo the author is detailing the precise issue he wishes to address in the *Prose*: The Italian literary vernacular, in order to maximize its benefit, was in need of regulation.

While there are a number of spoken vernaculars to consider, Giuliano suggests that a true language needs a written tradition. Giuliano, of course, suggests that Florentine is the best regulated:

“Perciò che se io volessi dire che la fiorentina lingua piú regolata si vede essere, piú vaga, piú pura che la provenzale, i miei due Toschi vi porrei dinanzi, il Boccaccio e il Petrarca senza piú, come che molti ve n'avesse degli altri, i quali due tale fatta l'hanno, quale essendo non ha da pentirsi.”⁴²⁶

In the persona of Giuliano, Bembo presents his regulatory suggestion for Italian literature. As earlier he had designated Cicero and Virgil as the ultimate models for Latin style, here he designates Boccaccio as the model for vernacular prose and Petrarch as the model for vernacular verse. He elects the prose style of Boccaccio over Dante for the fact that Dante sometimes uses a harsh, lowly style which is not suitable as a basis for imitation. Carlo confirms that Florentine is the most *gentile* and reminds the others that Pietro, a Venetian, explicitly chose the Florentine language to write *Gli Asolani*.

⁴²⁵ Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, I.xii; 192-193.

⁴²⁶ Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, I.xiv; 197.

Federigo agrees, and says that while Giuliano, as a Florentine, has a natural love for the language, many outside of Florence have nevertheless chosen the language for their own writing.

While the question of Florentine appears more or less settled, Giuliano still questions Carlo's preference for Boccaccio's prose over the contemporary Florentine vernacular. He quips: "si potrebbe dire, messer Carlo, che noi scriver volessimo a' morti piú che a' vivi."⁴²⁷ Giuliano suggests that if they are determined to base their language on the writers of another time, it was no different than writing in the language of another people. Carlo, however, explains:

"La lingua delle scritture, Giuliano, non dee a quella del popolo accostarsi, se non in quanto, accostandovisi, non perde gravità non perde grandezza; che altramente ella discostare se ne dee e dilungare, quanto le basta a mantenersi in vago e in gentile stato. La lingua delle scritture, Giuliano, non dee a quella del popolo accostarsi, se non in quanto, accostandovisi, non perde gravità non perde grandezza; che altramente ella discostare se ne dee e dilungare, quanto le basta a mantenersi in vago e in gentile stato."⁴²⁸

Spoken languages are mutable; Carlo argues, therefore, that popular speech should not be allowed to govern writing as the written tradition would be perpetually in flux. Virgil certainly didn't write as people spoke, but because of this, his works are still legible and accessible centuries later. In codifying their own language, the Italians' works would become more accessible not only to the contemporary audience, but also to readers in the generations to come – as testified by the present dissertation.

⁴²⁷ Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, I.xviii; 199.

⁴²⁸ Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, I.xviii; 203.

Essentially, the “correct” written language was a matter of careful judgement; it was right that the Italians should have a regulated tradition of their own, but it should derive from the best, purest moment of the tradition. Carlo says:

“Ma quante volte avviene che la maniera della lingua delle passate stagioni è migliore che quella della presente non è, tante volte si dee per noi con lo stile delle passate stagioni scrivere, Giuliano, e non con quello del nostro tempo.”⁴²⁹

Giuliano concedes to Carlo’s reasoning in a most Medicean way:

“Né io altresí voglio dire piú oltra, - rispose il Magnifico - poscia che, o la nuova fiorentina lingua o l’antica che si lodi maggiormente, l’onore in ogni modo ne va alla patria mia.”⁴³⁰

As long as proper acknowledgement was given to the Florentine tradition, Giuliano was satisfied with Carlo’s proposed forms. Ercole, too, concedes to the arguments of his friends, and they resolve to convene again the following day.

In the dedicatory letter of the second book, Bembo makes one final critical statement on the civic utility of a regulated vernacular:

“Due sono, monsignor messer Giulio, per comune giudizio di ciascun savio, della vita degli uomini le vie; per le quali si può, caminando, a molta loda di sé con molta utilità d’altrui pervenire. L’una è il fare le belle e le laudevole cose; l’altra è il considerare e il contemplare, non pur le cose che gli uomini far possono, ma quelle ancora che Dio fatte ha, e le cause e gli effetti loro e il loro ordine, e sopra tutte esso facitor di loro e disponitore e conservator Dio. Perciò che e con le buone opere, e in pace e in guerra, si fa in diversi modi e alle private persone e alle comunanze de’ popoli e alle nazioni giovamento, e per la contemplazione diviene l’uom saggio e prudente e può gli altri di molta virtù abondevoli fare similmente, loro le cose da sé trovate e considerate dimostrando.”⁴³¹

Bembo reflects on civic virtue in a way which builds upon the arguments of Dante in the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*, Alberti in *Della famiglia* and Lorenzo in his

⁴²⁹ Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, I.xix; 206.

⁴³⁰ Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, I.xix; 207.

⁴³¹ Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, II.i; 211.

Comento. In contrast to the earlier scholars, however, Bembo does not feel compelled to quantify the relative virtues of active or contemplative living; instead, he writes that both active and contemplative scholars can bring praise upon themselves and generate utility for others: in active living, men achieve good and worthy things. Meanwhile, contemplative scholars benefit others by gaining a better understanding of the world as a creation of God; in contemplating the order of nature, the causes and effects of the natural world, one contemplates divinity. Connecting these virtues to his contemporary political environment, Bembo writes that in peace and in war, both the active and contemplative paths serve the common good. The examples they set will induce others to follow similarly virtuous paths.

For Bembo, as for many of the vernacular authors who preceded him, the development of a refined literary tradition is critically important work which contributes to the civic and cultural stability of the community. Against the backdrop of the Italian Wars, Bembo presents the Florentine tradition as a necessary cultural good for all of Italy, one which provides not only stability but a means of preservation for Italian history and cultural identity. As the intellectual community comes to terms with foreign rule, these concerns are more relevant and more pressing than ever before. Dionisotti writes: “c’è qualcosa di profondamente vero in questa letteratura unitaria e indipendente d’una nazione sparita e soggetta in buona parte a potenze straniere.”⁴³² In the *Prose*, Bembo accomplishes two essential things: in the first two books, he addresses the conventional arguments against vernacular scholarship and convincingly demonstrates the civic and cultural value of a uniquely Italian tradition. His contextualization of the tradition within

⁴³² Carlo Dionisotti and Claudio Vela, *Scritti Sul Bembo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), 84.

the changing political atmosphere brings urgency to his arguments and presents the Florentine literary language as a means of defining and protecting their cultural legacy. Additionally, in the third book, Bembo provides a grammar of the *Trecento* literary language. Between the theoretical and practical elements of the treatise, Bembo not only explains why scholars should develop an Italian literary tradition but also how to do so properly, in the style of the greatest vernacular authors.

Bembo presented the *Prose* to Clement VII in 1525; it was published in the same year, leading to a relatively broad and speedy dissemination of the text. Over the course of the sixteenth century, Bembo's regulated model of the literary vernacular became the standard for vernacular writing across Italy. With an eye towards posterity, Bembo promotes the standardization of language as a measure of stability and communicability not only through space but through time. The stability of Latin had allowed the humanists to access to the wisdom of the classical world, and moreover, the history, the accomplishments and the heroes of the past would live on in the humanists' memory, immortalized in the words of great authors. A standard vernacular tradition would grant the humanists an opportunity to preserve their own culture in the same way – and indeed, with significant credit to Bembo, they succeeded.

IV. Conclusion

As the Italian Wars devastated the political landscape of the Italian peninsula, the courtly atmosphere of the late fifteenth century faded into memory. For the intellectual

community, the loss of political autonomy presented a threat to their cultural identity and history as well. The notion of an "Italian" identity, as a way to define and preserve their own customs and cultural achievements, became more urgent than ever before.

Machiavelli and Bembo, whose lives were deeply and directly impacted by the political turmoil of the period, make critical steps in defining the literary identity of Italy going forward. Even between Machiavelli and Bembo, however, we see some final, significant changes.

Like Lorenzo and Poliziano a generation earlier, Machiavelli advocates for the adaptation of their contemporary Florentine vernacular as a basis for literary language. They viewed Florentine literature as a new and growing tradition, and they understood its value as a marker of civic identity and cultural eminence. Over the second half of the fifteenth century, this literary diplomacy, mastered by the Medici, had proven successful in Florence and, consequentially, the great works of Tuscan literature had gained popularity throughout the Italian peninsula. Machiavelli, though brutally aware of the shifting political climate, maintained a decidedly Florentine mentality. In his *Discorso*, he revisits the vernacular theory of Dante to prove – to Dante personally – that his idea of the *volgare illustre* and the literary language in which Dante himself writes cannot be rightly identified as anything other than Florentine.

Outside of the Florence, Bembo began to consider the potential of the Florentine tradition on a larger territorial scale. In light of the encroaching influence of the Spanish and the French, Bembo came to view the Florentine tradition as a cultural good not only for Florence but for all of Italy. While he does not deny the Florentine origins of the "three crowns" he sees utility for the language beyond its native city. Departing from

earlier defenses of the vernacular, Bembo's *Prose* presents Florentine literature as an established tradition which needed to be revived, not as a growing tradition; as McLaughlin affirms: "Bembo's vernacular Ciceronianism eliminates the eclectic poetry of Poliziano and others of Lorenzo's circle, with their mixing of classical, popular, and even vulgar style and genres."⁴³³ Bembo was a linguistic purist, and his well-defined model for vernacular style, based on the prose of Boccaccio and the verse of Petrarch, set a definitive precedent for the future of Italian literature. Dionisotti writes: "le *Prose* del Bembo facevano storia, proprio perché, venendo di lontano, anche guardavano lontano, e riassumendo il succo di una vita giunta ormai oltre la maturità piena, miravano all'essenziale."⁴³⁴ Approaching the Florentine tradition from the outside, as art rather than nature, Bembo had the objectivity to treat Florentine literature with the same rigorous stylistic methods he applied to Latin. His well-reasoned theory combined with his grammatical codification of the *Trecento* literary language gave direction and authority to "Italian" literature, setting the course for the era of *classicismo volgare*.

⁴³³ Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: the Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 216.

⁴³⁴ Carlo Dionisotti and Claudio Vela, *Scritti Sul Bembo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), 53.

VI. Conclusion

Burckhardt writes that in *De vulgari eloquentia*, the newly exiled Dante seeks “an intellectual home in language and culture, which cannot be taken from him.”⁴³⁵ In the beginning of the sixteenth century, as Italy descended into warfare and foreign occupancy became an increasing reality on the peninsula, the Italian humanists, in a different sense, faced the loss of their home as well. From a historical perspective, some scholars, Machiavelli and Bembo included, came to view their political struggles as a signal of cultural decline; in defining a cultural and literary tradition which belonged solely to the Italians, scholars saw a path to preserve their own history and identity, even as their civic autonomy fell away; rather than resign themselves to political subjugation, they looked ahead to the inevitable revival which would follow.

As we have seen, the idea of language as a critical element of social stability was not new to the sixteenth century humanists; in Florence, the purpose of a refined vernacular literary tradition, from Dante in the early *Trecento* to the *classicismo volgare* of the *Cinquecento*, was often defined in terms of civic and social utility. As the civic environment in Florence evolved, from a mercantile *comune* to a thriving republic to a subject of France, the needs of society changed as well. In *De officiis*, Cicero writes: "Ita illi ipsi doctrinae studios et sapientiae dediti ad hominem utilitatem suam prudentiam

⁴³⁵ Jacob Burckhardt and S. G. C. Middlemore, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Penguin, 2004), 67.

intelligentiamque potissimum conferunt.”⁴³⁶ The Florentine humanists, in adopting this Ciceronian code of virtue, were called to pursue civic order and to provide for the needs of others, despite the changing political tides. Over the course of the fifteenth century, in line with this commitment to civic activity, the humanists came to identify a refined, native literary tradition as a quintessential element of civic stability and cultural continuity – even more so than their political institutions. While Latin remained the dominant language for scholarly pursuits, Leon Battista Alberti, Lorenzo de’ Medici and other civic scholars of the *Quattrocento* and beyond began to defend and promote vernacular literature in these same cultural and political terms.

In elaborating this project, I found the answer to a question which has been improperly addressed, if at all, in previous accounts of vernacular humanism: why, over the course of “the long *Quattrocento*”⁴³⁷ in Italy, did the vernacular literary tradition become a passion project of the political elite? The explanation is not simple, but can be easily followed with a properly constructed, interdisciplinary timeline: over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth century in Florence, emulating the great scholars of antiquity and following the example of such scholars as Dante and Coluccio Salutati, the intellectual community embraced an ethic which placed paramount value on the virtues of civic service. As Hankins describes, in the perception of the humanists, “Only those who have command of themselves and therefore know how to impose *κόσμος*, divine

⁴³⁶“ The principal thing done, therefore, by those very devotees of the pursuits of learning and science is to apply their own prudence and intelligence to human utility.” Cicero in *De officiis*, 1.44.156, cited in Timothy Kircher, *Living Well in Renaissance Italy: the Virtues of Humanism and the Irony of Leon Battista Alberti* (Tempe: ACMRS (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies), 2012), 37.

⁴³⁷ in Christopher Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance, Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

order, on the anarchy of human passions are worthy of commanding others.”⁴³⁸ Many humanists – though not Alberti – believed that these abilities derived from the study of good letters, and in their hunt for the divine order of the ancients, they developed an increasingly sophisticated view of the classical Roman world. As the century progressed, their discoveries brought about significant historical ramifications: Flavio Biondo, with Bruni and others, adopted a more secular vision of history which corrected certain scholastic perceptions of their own cultural and linguistic heritage. As a result, the Italian vernacular languages, no longer perceived as a product of Babelic sin, were rightly identified with their Latinate origins. Furthermore, Biondo’s scholarship determined that the greatness of classical Rome was upheld more by its cultural traditions than its political institutions; as the necessary vehicle for these cultural exchanges, the Latin literary tradition was identified as a primary element of civic stability. Leon Battista Alberti applied these theories to the contemporary landscape, arguing that the refinement of their own native literary tradition would be more valuable to society than continuing to rely on Latin, which belonged to ancient Rome. In Alberti’s view, contrary to many of his humanist contemporaries, it was not Latin itself which was so valuable; instead, the benefit derived from the Romans having elaborated a tradition of their own.

In the second half of the *Quattrocento*, the Italian peninsula had achieved a relative measure of civic stability. In Florence, for Lorenzo de’ Medici and Angelo Poliziano, vernacular literature promised more than just stability; it became a marker of their achievement and their cultural eminence within the greater political landscape of

⁴³⁸ James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 191.

Italy. While Alberti's vernacular philosophy had gained little traction within Cosimo's humanist circle, decades later, Lorenzo and Poliziano had more success in promoting many of Alberti's theoretical arguments. By virtue of his undeniable cultural authority, Lorenzo's interest in vernacular literary production drew the attention of the intellectual community – both in and outside of Florence. In the wars and devastation which followed at the turn of the sixteenth century, the Florentine idea of native literature as an instrument of civic stability had spread to Venice, Ferrara, Padua, Naples and other cultural centers of the peninsula. As a matter of civic pride, Machiavelli took steps to ensure that despite this growing adherence to the vernacular literary tradition, it would retain its designation as "Florentine." Meanwhile, beyond the rolling hills of Tuscany, Pietro Bembo was elaborating a vernacular project of his own: based upon his strict, Ciceronian methods of classical *imitatio*, Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* drew from Petrarch's poetry and Boccaccio's prose to establish a regulated model of the vernacular literary language. Despite the precipitous political decline of the early *Cinquecento*, what followed was a golden age of vernacular literature and scholarship, one which was more accessible than ever before to women and the popular classes.

Within the works of the eight civic scholars featured in this study, we find a chain of ideological progressions which together, or rather successively, led to the establishment and legitimization of Italian vernacular literature. Viewed in light of the evolving political environment, we see that the vernacular literary tradition, much more than an artistic endeavor, was legitimized by the contributions of civic actors as both a marker of cultural achievement and a contribution to the common good. It is equally important to recognize that the elements of humanist culture which ultimately motivated

these native impulses – the ethic of civic service, the secular, tripartite vision of history and the recognition of cultural achievement as a key factor of civic stability – derived almost entirely from the classical models which the *Quattrocento* Latin humanists had so carefully restored. Kircher aptly summarizes these key questions of humanist scholarship: “What is the good life? How is happiness attained? What is the importance of wealth, health, or political power? Is living well found in virtue or pleasure, or both? Is it realized in solitude, in cultivating one's private garden, or in society, in the urban exchanges with one's fellow citizens?”⁴³⁹ In answering these questions, the civic humanists of the *Quattrocento* unearthed a classical model of civilization, and over time, determined that the prime element of Roman greatness was its shared linguistic and literary tradition. For the humanists, then – who loved a revival – it was imperative that they return to the elaboration of a literary language of their own.

At the time when Bembo published his *Prose della volgar lingua*, the Florentines were not necessarily thrilled with outsider perspectives on how their language should be written. Dante, in his *De vulgari eloquentia*, and Lorenzo de' Medici, in the preface to his sonnets, made similar admonitions against the judgement of those who were not raised in the Florentine tradition. However, while the Florentine origins of the language were never forgotten (just as Machiavelli had wished), the literary tradition no longer belonged to Florence alone. Bembo's dialogical grammar, in Book III of *Prose*, was followed by a number of more practical, handbook-like Italian grammars, many of which appeared outside of Florence. These included Sperone Speroni's *Dialogo delle lingua* (1542), Ludovico Dolce's *Osservazioni nella volgar lingua* (1550) and Sansovino di

⁴³⁹ Timothy Kircher, *Living Well in Renaissance Italy: the Virtues of Humanism and the Irony of Leon Battista Alberti* (Tempe: (ACMRS (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies), 2012), 1.

Venezia's *Osservazioni della lingua volgare de diversi uomini illustri* (1562). From the Florentines, who naturally wanted their say, there was Pier Francesco Giambullari's *De la lingua che si parla e scrive in Firenze* (1552) and Benedetto Varchi's *L'Hercolano*, a dialogue written in Florentine on the subject of their spoken language, published in 1570. In these same years, the first vocabularies of the Italian language emerged as well; Francesco Alunno di Ferrara's *La fabrica del mondo*, considered the first methodical dictionary, was completed in 1548. Along with these linguistic treatises, the vernacular literary tradition became increasingly refined, as exemplified in the masterful works of Lodovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso, two of the greatest poets in the Italian tradition – neither of whom was Florentine. In the end we see that a linguistic tradition is far more than an instrument for writing; it is a vehicle for reason and culture, that which fundamentally sustains a civilization.

There can be little doubt that the Italian literary tradition has long captivated the attention of critical scholarship. It is still the case, however, that with every new work, further questions are raised. Recent, interdisciplinary works of social and intellectual historiography have just begun to establish new, more holistic perspectives on the humanist environment and I expect – *e mi auguro* – that similar studies will continue to emerge. This entire project, in fact, could be retread from a deliberately non-Florentine perspective; it would be interesting to examine the same connections between language, identity and stability in the cultural centers whose own vernaculars (Neapolitan, Venetian, even Ariosto's brusque Emiliano) were overruled as the definitive Italian *volgare illustre*. My own objectives could be expanded as well; the *questione della lingua* was hardly resolved in the sixteenth century, nor is it entirely settled today.

From a modern perspective, scholars are doing fascinating studies on the intersections between culture, identity and linguistic diversity within the contemporary Italian landscape. In a twist from the humanists, however, who pursued linguistic unity, recent studies have focused more and more on preserving regional language and culture. In the wake of television, digital media and the era *neostandard* Italian, scholars and YouTube stars alike are finding ways to enshrine local customs, from dialects to handmade pasta techniques to historical games, festivals and religious processions; these diverse traditions offer a glimpse into the rich local cultures which, thanks in part to these efforts, continue to survive throughout the peninsula. Flavio Biondo, of course, would remind us that these projects are essential – political regimes rise and fall but the stability of language and cultural tradition is what truly keeps a civilization alive.

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Curriculum Vitae

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Education:

Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland

Ph.D. Candidate in Italian Literature, 2014–2020 (expected)

Dissertation (in preparation): “*Vox Populi*: Vernacular Politics in Early Modern Italy”,
advised by Walter Stephens and Eugenio Refini

Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont

M.A., History of the Italian Language, 2009–2010

Graduated *magna cum laude*

MA Thesis: “Cecco Angiolieri, tra tradizione e innovazione”, advised by Raffaella Santucci (Middlebury College / Università degli Studi Roma Tre)

Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts

B.A., Italian Language and Literature, 2005–2009

Teaching Experience:

Graduate Instructor, Johns Hopkins University – 2017 to present

- Freshman Seminar: Tortured Body, Tortured Soul: Pain in Pre-Modern Europe (AS.211.136) Fall 2020.

- Italian Journeys: Medieval and Early Modern (AS.214.362) Spring 2020.
- Tortured Body, Tortured Soul: Pain in Early Modern Europe (AS.211.247) Fall 2019.
- SOUL Course: The Best of Youth: How Modern Italy Grew Up (AS.360.111.03) Fall 2017.

Teaching Assistantships, Johns Hopkins University – 2015 to present

- TA for Professor Walter Stephens in Death and Dying in Art, Literature and Philosophy: Introduction to Medical Humanities (AS.145.101), Fall 2018.
- TA for Professor Eugenio Refini in The Prince and the Demagogue: Machiavelli to House of Cards (AS.214.321), Spring 2018.
- TA for Professor Walter Stephens in Men, Women and Melancholy: Premodern Physiologies of Madness (AS.145.103), Fall 2017.
- TA for Professor William Egginton in The Cosmic Imagination: How Literature Changes Our Understanding of the Universe (AS.145.102), Spring 2017.
- TA for Professor Evelyne Ender in Introduction to Women, Gender and Sexuality (AS.363.201), Fall 2016.

Curriculum-based courses, Johns Hopkins University – 2015 to present

- Italian Elements I (AS.210.151), Fall 2015.
- Italian Elements II (AS.210.152), Spring 2016.

Courses developed and taught – Endicott College, 2011 to 2014

- Italian I, Fall 2011.
- Italian II, Fall 2011.
- Italian II, Spring 2012.
- Intermediate Italian, Spring 2012.
- Independent study: “Italian youth culture”, Spring 2012.
- Italian I, Fall 2012.
- Freshman survey: “Art and Literature in Renaissance Italy”, Fall 2012.
- Italian II, Spring 2013.
- Independent study: “Natalia Ginzburg”, Spring 2013.
- Italian II, Fall 2013.
- Intermediate Italian, Spring 2014.

- Freshman survey: “Art and Literature in Renaissance Italy”, spring 2014.

Pre-university teaching, Medford High School, Medford, MA – 2010 to 2011

- Spanish I
- Italian II
- Honors Italian III
- Honors Italian IV
- Advanced Placement Italian (self-developed curriculum)

Guest lectures

- Lectured on the “colonial cosmos”, *The Cosmic Imagination: How Literature Changes Our Understanding of the Universe* (AS.145.102) – Spring 2017.
- Lectured on “gendered language”, *Introduction to the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality* (AS.363.201) – Fall 2016.
- Authored and presented session on the “sworn virgins” of the Balkans, *Flânerie and Female Authorship in Contemporary Italian Cinema* (AS.214.689) – Fall 2016.
- Oversaw undergraduate debate preparation, *Machiavelli’s Mandragola* for *Machiavelli: A Renaissance Master* (AS.214.390) – spring, 2015
- Lectured and led class discussion, *Dante Visits the Afterlife: The Divine Comedy* (AS.214.479) – Spring 2015.
- Directed an abridged performance of *Machiavelli’s Mandragola* for *Machiavelli: A Renaissance Master* (AS.214.390) – Spring 2015.

Extracurricular teaching in Italian

- Swim instructor at Hidropark, an aquatic recreation center in Florence, Italy – August 2006.
- Volunteer language tutor at the *Ostello delle Donne*, shelter for immigrant women and children in Florence, Italy – October, 2007 to May, 2008.

Fellowships / Awards:

- Dean’s Teaching Prize, Johns Hopkins University, Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, Fall 2020.

- Graduate Fellow, Johns Hopkins University, Institute for Medical Humanities and Social Medicine, 2019 - 2020 academic year.
- Dean's Teaching Fellowship, Johns Hopkins University, Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, Fall 2019.

Translation work:

- Translation of legal documents for the Italian Senate on behalf of Dr. Susan Cooper, President of the World Council of Optometry – October, 2016.

Interpretation work:

- Interpreter of sworn court testimony for the U.S. Department of Justice – District of Connecticut – February, 2006.
- Interpreter for a series of research interviews between the Contessa Zena Peruzzi de' Medici and Prof. Katherine Lawrence of Brandeis College – March, 2010.

Conference Presentations:

- Boston University: Re-Membering – April, 2016, “La Storia Ideale Eterna: tra Vico e Foscolo”
- NeMLA – March, 2020, “Best Florentine Friends Forever: The Vernacular Legacy of Lorenzo de' Medici and Angelo Poliziano.

Institutional Service:

Endicott College –

- Co-faculty advisor to the Italian Club, 2012 - 2014
- Faculty-ResLife liaison to the sophomore class, elected 2013
- Student advising, 2011 - 2014

Medford High School –

- Co-faculty advisor to the Italian Club, 2010 to 2011

- Junior faculty advisor to the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), 2010 - 2011
- Member of Reaccreditation Committee, 2010 - 2011

Smith College –

- Member, Baltimore-area admissions committee, 2015 to present
- Volunteer, Baltimore County college fair representative, 2015 to present
- President, Smith College Italian Club, 2008-2009
- Master Tutor in the Italian Department, 2008-2009
- Tutor in the Italian Department, 2006-2009
- Tutor in the French Department, 2006-2009
- Match Secretary, Smith College Rugby Football Club, 2006

Languages:

Fluent in English, Italian

Proficient in French, Spanish

Reading knowledge in Latin

Basic reading knowledge in Arabic