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Rethinking the Renaissance in the aftermath of Italy's crisis

Alison Brown

The crisis of 1494 and its impact on Renaissance culture

No one familiar with the histories and chronicles of Italy in the years from 1494 to 1530 can be unaware of the sense of crisis that pervades these writings. According to Francesco Guicciardini, the arrival of the French army in 1494 introduced 'a flame and a plague into Italy' which 'not only overthrew the states but changed their forms of government and the methods of warfare', turning everything 'upside down' and causing the ruin of Italy. Even his more reflective *History of Italy*, written in the late 1530s, described the invasions as 'the calamity of Italy' in introducing years of appalling disasters and fear, which were all the worse because they followed a period of unparalleled prosperity.¹ The 1494 invasion was followed by other French invasions in 1499 and 1515. In 1502 the Spanish invasion of southern Italy

¹ Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Florence*, chs. 10–11, trans. M. Domandi (New York, 1970), pp. 88–9; *The History of Italy*, trans. C. Grayson (Chalfont St Giles, 1966), pp. 85–6.

brought Spain into the country, and then, after Charles V was elected emperor in 1519, the Germans too, whose bloody Sack of Rome in 1527 also awakened fears of Lutheranism and the new Protestant heresies. Each state experienced the crisis at different moments: Florence in a repetitive cycle of Medici expulsions (1494, 1527) and restorations (in 1512 after the sack of Prato by Spanish troops, and in 1530 after the long siege by imperial and papal armies); Milan through conquests and domination by France (1499–1512 and 1515–25) and Spain (from 1525 on); Naples in the initial French onslaught (1494) and subsequent conquest by Spain (1501–4); Venice in a disastrous defeat and temporary dismemberment of its mainland empire (1509); and Rome in the great Sack. Humanists may have exaggerated the part played by these events in transforming the world they knew. Nevertheless, these political upheavals clearly triggered an ubiquitous crisis of confidence in the humanist culture that had created and nourished the distinctive identities of the independent city-states.

Although the focus here will be on the longer-term influence of the invasions on writers and intellectuals, it is important at the outset not to undervalue the violence of the invasions as a factor in the Italians' perception of change. It was the initial defeat of the Neapolitan forces and their allies by the French at Mordano in the Romagna on 20 October 1494 that first demonstrated that the French fought to kill; and shortly after the fortress was destroyed and its inhabitants murdered, reports about 'the cruelty of Mordano' spread terror and consternation among the neighbouring states. Even the territories of the French king's supporters were sacked and pillaged, so it was not surprising that his army was awaited with trepidation throughout Italy, even in cities like Florence, where the king was initially welcomed as a liberator. According to one Florentine chronicler, Charles's polyglot army consisted of 'bestial men, as were the Swiss, Gascons, Normans, Bretons, Scots and men of many other tongues, who not only were not understood by our men, but couldn't even understand each other'.² After numerous threatening incidents, Charles left Florence as its unloved conqueror, in receipt of a large indemnity as the price of evacuating his troops from the city.

In Rome, pope Alexander was persuaded to negotiate only by the

² Bartolomeo Cerretani, *Storia fiorentina*, ed. G. Berti (Florence, 1994), p. 201; cf. 218–20.

sight of Charles's guns paraded through the city; and, after one more massacre at Valmontone, the king achieved his conquest of the kingdom of Naples by the most savage of all his assaults, on the castle and town of Monte San Giovanni, where between 700 and 1000 inhabitants, mostly civilians, were slaughtered. Naples fell after an assault lasting about three weeks. Although it was quickly recaptured after Charles returned to France, his retreat was marked by yet another bloody engagement at Fornovo, in which the marquis of Mantua gave orders to give no quarter, on pain of death, but simply to kill 'for the glory of the Latin name'. By then, the French were as fearful of the Italians as the Italians had been of them on their arrival, 'not like the men who went to Naples, who were fat and rubicund . . . Now their bodies seem emaciated and their clothes in shreds'. So they were relieved to return home, as men (we are told, in another revealing indication of the national prejudice that war intensified) 'who believe there is no other sky, no other pleasures, no other sun except in France'.³

Fear and irrational belief in the power of fortune now replaced the humanists' earlier confidence in the power of reason and prudence as guides for the rulers of city-states and became for Machiavelli the bases of a new political morality, as we shall see. The contrast is striking if we compare two writings by Florentine humanists in defence of their city at the beginning and end of the fifteenth century, Leonardo Bruni's 1403–4 *Panegyric or Praise of the City of Florence* and Bartolomeo Scala's 1496 *Defence of Florence*, in which Florence was transformed from the resplendent centre of a stable universe to the unstable hub of a fragmenting galaxy. Bruni (later first chancellor of Florence, like Scala) wrote his work just after the city had been saved from attack by the unexpected death of the duke of Milan in 1402. Influenced by Aristides' praise of ancient Athens, the *Panegyric* opens with a confident description of Florence's ordered beauty and magnificence before going on to describe the city's Roman origins, its love of liberty, and its republican institutions. Republicanism was also a theme of Scala's defence of Florence, written after he was reappointed chancellor of the Savonarolan regime that succeeded the Medici in 1494. But in contrast to Bruni's opening praise of Florence

³ Marcello Adriani, Florence, Archivio di Stato, Signori, Dieci, Otto, Legazioni e Commissarie, Missive-Responsive, 4, fol. 81v.

as the stable centre or hub of an orbit whose power radiated out to the periphery, like ‘the moon surrounded by the stars’, Scala begins with a digression on Lucretian atomism and the power of fortune that can overturn everything at will when it rages against us, as had happened recently, he wrote, when Florence lost her subject cities Pisa and Montepulciano after the French invasion.⁴ Openly attributing this new view of the power of fortune to Lucretius, the Roman poet whose recently recovered poem *On the Nature of Things* followed the Greek atomist Epicurus, Scala was careful to say that he was not completely convinced that the world originated in ‘the fortuitous clash of invisible atoms’, as Lucretius and Epicurus believed. Nevertheless, he declared he was equally sceptical about those who removed fortune ‘totally from human affairs’, since, without God’s dispensation, nothing can deflect nature’s impetus when it rages against us, ‘as has clearly happened to us now’.

This new view of fortune’s destabilizing power was shared by other Italians writing about these years. In a letter written to the king of Naples in 1495 (anticipating his later dialogue *On Fortune*), the king’s secretary Giovanni Pontano explained the present crisis as the work of the heavens, which would carry everything in its wake if unopposed, ‘like an unbounded river, suddenly swollen with rain and water’. His metaphor in turn influenced the Florentine patrician Bernardo Rucellai’s *Commentary on the French Invasion* (written after he had discussed history writing with Pontano in Naples), in which he also compared the invasion to a raging river that would be impossible to control once it had broken across the boundaries of the Alps. And it was then made famous by Machiavelli in his discussion of the power of fortune in chapter 25 of *The Prince*, where he likened fortune to ‘one of our destructive rivers which, when it is angry, turns the plains into lakes, throws down the trees and buildings’, as had happened, he said, to Italy in his own day.⁵ Scala, Pontano, and Machiavelli—as well as Machiavelli’s university teacher, Marcello Adriani—were all early readers of Lucretius’s poem and of Diogenes

⁴ Leonardo Bruni, *Panegyric to the City of Florence*, trans. B. G. Kohl in Kohl and R. G. Witt (eds.), *The Earthly Republic* (Philadelphia, 1978), pp. 144–5; Bartolomeo Scala, *Apologia contra vituperatores civitatis Florentiae* (Florence, 1496), in his *Humanistic and Political Writings*, ed. A. Brown (Tempe, Ariz., 1997), pp. 396–7.

⁵ All discussed in M. Santoro, *Fortuna, ragione e prudenza nella civiltà letteraria del Cinquecento* (Naples, 1967), esp. pp. 11–21.

Laertius's *Life of Epicurus*, the two texts that helped to circulate Epicurus's radical and subversive ideas about the universe in the fifteenth century. Heretical though these ideas were (the existence of multiple worlds created by the chance clash of atoms within empty space, where life evolved without the support of caring gods or an afterlife), they were given new relevance by the crisis after 1494. The crisis also encouraged the dissemination of new Lutheran and reformist heresies, which destroyed the earlier syncretism that had blended classical and Christian belief in a stable, earth-centred world. Together these challenges led to new thinking not only about the moral basis of politics (reflected in Machiavelli's later radicalism) but also about the structure of the world itself, in which the earth was displaced by Galileo and his contemporaries from the centre of the universe.

So the cultural implications of the crisis were more profound than the initial events suggested. From their earliest days, the communes had promoted the ideal of active citizenship by identifying themselves with ancient republics. Even if the political reality was very different from the ideal, citizen debates and humanist writings in the new lordships and in oligarchies like Florence reveal the continuing vitality of classical republicanism as a language that bonded city-dwellers and gave them a sense of their own cultural past. Although republicanism is not the only defining characteristic of Renaissance culture, it represented a set of distinctive values directly relevant to urban dwellers. To live and share in the social and political life of cities had a civilizing and humanizing effect on individuals, it was believed. The idea that a citizen without his city was only 'a painted image or a form of stone' was widely held, not only by the Dominican preacher Remigio de' Girolami (d. 1319) but by laymen like Dante (d. 1321), who remained immensely influential through his great poem, the *Divine Comedy*. When Dante is asked in Paradise (viii.115–16), 'would man be worse off on earth if he were not a citizen?', he briefly replies, 'yes, and here I ask no proof', because men are born with different abilities that can only be fulfilled in socially mixed and diversified cities. Dante represents an outlook widely diffused at the time, that citizens should participate in governing their cities, ruling and being ruled in turn, as Aristotle put it, and that this constituted their particular 'activity' and 'virtue' as city-dwellers.

Even when many cities fell into the hands of single rulers in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the debate about government

continued. Did 'activity' mean being politically active or simply active as working townspeople, not sequestered from the world in monasteries, 'idle upon their knees', as Machiavelli later put it in his poem *The Golden Ass*? Was 'virtue', as the Roman historian Sallust suggested, a quality that develops through being politically active or was it an inborn quality that made some citizens better rulers than others? And which type of government best protected liberty and equality? These were much-discussed topics in debates and writings addressed both to young nobles in courts like those of Ferrara and Mantua and to citizens of republics. They help to chart the progression from the more egalitarian ethos of communal guild republicanism to the elitism of fifteenth-century civic humanism.

It was not however the progression towards elitism in itself that constituted the essence of the crisis. Debate about the best form of government was central to classical republicanism, and the fact that it continued throughout the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth only serves to demonstrate that one of its key ideals—open argument on both sides of the question—was alive and well. The crisis manifested itself when Italian states began to lose confidence in the relevance of humanist and republican values themselves, in a deconstructive process that began by questioning their validity and ended by destroying the stable Ptolemaic universe that had underpinned them. We can first see this happening in Milan, where republican government was briefly re-established on the death of the last Visconti duke in 1447. The people were summoned to a meeting at which they appointed a government of twenty-four 'captains and defenders of liberty' to preserve 'the grace of liberty' unexpectedly granted to them by God, and this encouraged other cities like Pavia, Lodi, Piacenza, and Parma to follow suit. Only three years later, however, they were all back under the control of a single ruler, Francesco Sforza, who was acclaimed duke by a popular assembly, 'since it was agreed that it was impossible to live in liberty'. Subsequently, the historians of the new Sforza regime helped to undermine republican idealism by pointing out how biased the histories of the famed Leonardo Bruni were in praising Florence at the expense of Milan, for, as another historian put it, 'differing versions . . . are given by the winners and by the losers'. This anticipated Machiavelli, who some sixty years later wrote in his *Discourses on Livy* (ii.5) that all records are prejudiced because they represent only the views of the conquerors

and not the conquered. Bruni's republicanism was also undermined by Poggio Bracciolini, the disillusioned ex-chancellor of Florence who, in a eulogy he wrote of Venice in 1459, discredited even Bruni's classical republican models, calling Sparta 'deeply-unhappy', Athens 'perverse', and the greatest of them all, Rome, 'not a republic at all but a den of thieves and a despotism of the cruellest sort'.⁶

Twenty years later there is even clearer evidence that belief in republican values was being undermined in Alamanno Rinuccini's *Dialogue on Liberty*. Rinuccini wrote the dialogue in 1479 during the Pazzi War, fought by Florence to defend its 'liberty' after the abortive conspiracy against the Medici a year earlier. But far from defending the Medici as protectors of Florence's liberty, Rinuccini instead condemned them as tyrants, telling us that 'the fine words and the golden letters', in which the word liberty was inscribed on one of Florence's banners symbolizing its famous love of freedom, 'clash with the facts'. The notion of ideals 'clashing with the facts' alerts us to the extent of Rinuccini's radicalism. By describing Lorenzo de' Medici's 'tyranny' as he had experienced it, Rinuccini defines liberty in Florence in a similarly concrete way: as the rule of law which ensured civil equality, selection of office-holders by lot, and the open and free debate of civic matters in political meetings. This was Bruni's definition of republicanism in his *Panegyric*, but in presenting it as a critique of government in his own day, Rinuccini gave reality to abstract definitions. Justice was no longer equal but favoured those with power and influence; meetings were no longer summoned openly; men were too intimidated by threat of exile and imprisonment to exercise freedom of speech; offices were not drawn by lot but given to satellites, and taxes were spent not on the common good but on 'horses, dogs, birds, actors, sycophants, and parasites'.⁷

It seemed to many that only Venice represented true republicanism in Italy before the events of 1494. But although the city was widely

⁶ Poggio Bracciolini, *In Praise of the Venetian Republic*, trans. M. Davies in J. Kraye (ed.), *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1997), vol. ii, pp. 137–8.

⁷ Alamanno Rinuccini, *Dialogue on Liberty*, trans. R. N. Watkins, *Humanism and Liberty: Writings on Freedom from Fifteenth-Century Florence* (Columbia, S.C., 1978), pp. 197, 204–7.

admired as a model of republican government with its carefully elected lifetime doge or duke, its legislative Great Council of hereditary nobles, and its Senate, it always remained a static model, representing stability rather than innovation, as we can see from Venetian analyses of their constitution both before and after their crisis of 1509. Domenico Morosini's treatise *On the Well-Ordered Republic* had already wanted to restrict government to fewer magistracies; and after the defeat stability was praised as the principal virtue of the republican system. Yet, as the Florentine Francesco Vettori pointed out, Venice could also be considered a tyranny in restricting political office to nobles, who constituted only 4 per cent of the population, and the administration to non-noble citizens, who constituted only 5 to 8 per cent. Moreover, its rulers were all old men, the average age of the doges being seventy-five, and its committee members usually over fifty: an inward-looking group, whose attempts to preserve their purity by refusing to marry down ended in paralysis and loss of power. By the mid seventeenth century the nobility were forced to sell membership rights in the Great Council, 'prostituting' their city in the eyes of critics and making a mockery of its much-vaunted republicanism. For this reason, Venice's political thought, 'stubbornly holding on to medieval notions of . . . grace and ancient utopias of perfection',⁸ developed in a very different direction from Florence's.

By contrast, Florence's experience of crisis after 1494 was far more dramatic than Venice's. It first overthrew the Medici in favour of more open government in 1494, then restored them to power with Spanish help in 1512, then overthrew them again in 1527, for the last three violent years of Florentine republican government, before finally restoring them to power in 1530 with the help of the emperor Charles V, who established the Medici as dukes two years later. Through this prolonged crisis, in which each change was mediated by foreign invaders, Florentine political thought was transformed. Rejecting utopianism, Florentine writers instead adopted a new realism that destroyed the old consensus about humanist and republican values, thereby helping to undermine these values themselves.

⁸ J. Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago, 1999), pp. 56–7, 75.

The new political realism

The immediate impact of the French invasion in Florence was to overturn the Medici regime and restore a more open republic. The initial intention of the men from the old elite who helped to overthrow the Medici was to institute a republic on the Venetian model. They were supported by the sermons of the Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola, who also recommended imitating Venice. The Great Council he helped to create, however, was quite unlike Venice's, since it consisted not of hereditary nobles, as in Venice, but of a wide mix of oligarchs, middle-class merchants, and artisans (the last two groups being excluded from government altogether in Venice), and also because the Council selected more and more office-holders by lot. So although no populist himself, the reform Savonarola encouraged led to something quite new: the presence of 'almost all Florence in the government'. The radicalism of this reform has been underestimated, perhaps because it did not survive the counter-attack of the old elite and the return of the Medici in 1512. For, as had happened in Milan during the Ambrosian republic, the experience of popular government in the crisis conditions of war and famine alienated the oligarchs, who initially withdrew from government altogether and then returned only after a lifetime head of state was created. Far from ensuring stability, however, these reforms reintroduced endemic factionalism that taught Florentine writers a series of important lessons about politics. Force was more important than legitimacy or ability in exercising power, liberty and equality were delusory ideals, and political necessity overrode religious and moral constraints.

The importance of force was an early lesson learnt by Machiavelli and by Paolo Vettori, the brother of his friend, the diplomat and historian Francesco Vettori. The message that Paolo gave cardinal Giovanni de' Medici (soon to become Pope Leo X) on his return to Florence in 1512 was that, whereas his father Lorenzo and his forebears had maintained power 'more by skilful management than by force', 'you need to use force more than skilful management'.⁹ A year

⁹ Paolo Vettori, 'Memorandum to Cardinal de' Medici about the affairs of Florence', trans. R. Price in Krayer (ed.), *Cambridge Translations*, p. 239.

later, in chapter 6 of *The Prince* (dedicated first to Giovanni's brother Giuliano and then, in 1515, to his nephew Lorenzo), Machiavelli wrote that to be successful a leader needed to be powerful and armed. In his later *Discourses on Livy* (iii.30) he added that a ruler had to be capable of overriding the laws if need be, in order to save the republic, a role that he believed neither the friar Savonarola nor the lifetime head of state, the timorous and law-abiding Piero Soderini, had been capable of playing. By the time the Medici made their final return to Florence in 1530, the argument for the use of force had become explicit. 'Considering how many enemies we have', Francesco Vettori wrote in 1530, 'we have to consider holding the state by force'; for with insufficient money to reward enough citizens with paid offices to ensure their support, 'only one way is open to us, that Alessandro [de' Medici] become the boss and do what he likes, and that the city be left with this empty name of liberty.'¹⁰ Francesco Guicciardini agreed. Believing as he did that 'all states are illegitimate and, excepting republics, inside their own city walls and not beyond them, there is no power whatsoever that is legitimate' (as he wrote in his *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*), Guicciardini accepted unquestioningly the authority of the unpopular Alessandro (who became duke of Florence in 1532), telling the Florentine exiles three years later that, once established, a state has unlimited power. This presumably would have made their heroic stand at Montemurlo in 1537 quite unjustified in his eyes, not a legitimate defence of liberty but 'a mere game of bagatelle', as his brother Luigi called it.¹¹

Machiavelli's *Prince* is usually regarded as the most radical statement of the new realism: 'getting at the real truth of the matter, rather than how it is imagined to be', as he expressed it in chapter 15. He provocatively urged new princes whenever necessary to be cruel rather than kind, parsimonious rather than generous, and cunning and deceitful rather than truthful. But his friends Guicciardini and Vettori were equally radical. Guicciardini called the new realism

¹⁰ 'Parere I', in Francesco Vettori, *Scritti storici e politici*, ed. E. Niccolini (Bari, 1972), pp. 306–7.

¹¹ Francesco Guicciardini, *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, trans. A. Brown (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 158–9, *Maxim* 48, *ibid.*, p. 172; 'Risposta . . . alle querele de' fuorusciti', *Opere inedite*, ed. G. Canestrini (Florence, 1866), vol. ix, p. 355; Luigi Guicciardini, letter to his son Niccolò, 14 April 1537, in R. von Albertini, *Firenze dalla repubblica al principato*, trans. C. Cristofolini (Turin, 1970), p. 278, n. 2.

'reason of state', which he said would justify cruel and immoral deeds like murdering prisoners of war, if necessary, while Vettori defended his radicalism by saying that he was 'talking about the things of this world according to the truth and without regard for what people will say', in contrast to the utopianism of writers like Plato and 'the Englishman Thomas More'. He defined all governments as tyrannies, not only in Florence, where many citizens wanted to participate in politics but were left 'on the side-lines, to watch the game', but also in Venice, which, although 'the oldest and most stable republic there is', was still a tyranny because 'three thousand nobles hold under more than 100,000 people and no commoner can become a gentleman'. France was equally tyrannical, for despite having a 'most perfect' king, nobles alone possessed arms and paid no taxes, which were paid by poor peasants with no recourse to justice.¹²

Vettori's thoughts on government were clearly influenced by the Sack of Rome and the disastrous, if heroic, last Florentine republic. All these writers were republicans, especially Machiavelli, who 'loved liberty extraordinarily', according to Giovanbattista Busini. Yet they all, in different ways, undermined the old republican ideals of liberty and equality with their new realism about politics. This can be seen most clearly in Machiavelli's and Guicciardini's blueprints for how Florence should be governed after the unexpected deaths of Giuliano and Lorenzo de' Medici left a vacuum in the city. Written at the request of cardinal Giulio de' Medici, cousin of Pope Leo, both Machiavelli's *Discourse on Remodelling the Government of Florence* and Guicciardini's *Dialogue on the Government of Florence* retained a facade of popular republicanism by proposing to reinstate the Great Council and by asserting the merits of Florence's republican tradition. But the reality would have been rather different. According to their plans, the Great Council would no longer appoint all office-holders but merely the less important political offices and the paid administrative ones. Machiavelli even deprived it of its legislative functions, while preserving its role as final court of appeal. And political power would no longer have been exercised by an elected two-monthly priorate and its advisory colleges but by an executive appointed for life and a legislative council to be selected (and

¹² Guicciardini, *Dialogue*, p. 159; Vettori, *Sommario della istoria d'Italia*, in *Scritti storici*, pp. 145–6.

controlled) by the Medici in Rome during their lifetimes. Admitting the loss of liberty this would entail, Machiavelli sought to placate the populace by giving them a new passive role as 'witnesses' of what went on in the government palace, with the right to protest against measures they disliked, thereby restoring to them 'a position that resembles what has been taken from them'. In his blueprint, Guicciardini more radically attacked the validity of the concepts of liberty and equality. Through his spokesman, the Medicean new man Bernardo del Nero, he called 'this word "liberty"' a 'disguise and excuse' to dazzle and conceal rulers' true ambition, since most of those who preached liberty would not hesitate to join a restrictive regime if they thought they would be better off there.¹³

Where Guicciardini and Machiavelli differed was in their admiration for ancient Rome as a model of republican government. Whereas Guicciardini admired Venice more than Rome and thought it was as misguided to quote the Romans all the time 'as it would be to expect a donkey to run like a horse', Machiavelli consistently praised Rome's republican institutions, especially its citizen army, and provocatively declared that the conflict between the social orders had been a good thing because it contributed to Rome's freedom through the creation of the Tribune of the Plebs. Guicciardini thought this was like 'praising a sick man's disease because of the virtues of the remedy applied to it'.¹⁴ Nevertheless, by the 1520s even Machiavelli had become sceptical about the relevance of ancient republicanism to his times, as we can see from his two last political writings, *The Art of War*, which he began in 1518 and published three years later, and the *Florentine Histories* which he was commissioned to write in 1520 and completed in 1525 for cardinal Giulio de' Medici, by then pope Clement VII. Although they are usually assumed to promote the Roman model for Florence, in fact Machiavelli argues the opposite: Florentine factionalism was so different from Rome's that the latter's political experience was no longer relevant. Nor was its literary culture, which, instead of strengthening Italy, had in fact contributed to its defeat.

The Art of War is thought to represent Machiavelli's most

¹³ Guicciardini, *Dialogue*, pp. 35–7, 38–9; cf. *Maxim* 66, *ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁴ Guicciardini, *Maxim* 110 and *Considerations on Machiavelli's Discourses* in his *Selected Writings*, trans. M. Grayson (London, 1965), pp. 30, 68.

persuasive attempt to reintroduce ancient Roman ideals through its leading speaker, the renowned *condottiere* Fabrizio Colonna. But although Fabrizio begins the dialogue by claiming that it is 'not impossible' to reintroduce ancient ways of fighting according to the model of 'my Romans', his view is immediately challenged by another speaker who asks him why as a professional soldier he has not himself reintroduced the ancient methods he praises. To this Fabrizio's defence is that times have changed, for, whereas ancient culture unified citizens and soldiers in love of the common good, in the Italy of his day the culture of civilians was totally divorced from military life, in dress, customs, and language. At the end of his painstaking analysis of ancient military techniques, Colonna in fact concludes that, far from offering a working model for reform, they were totally impractical for present-day armies, whose lack of training, religion, and discipline made them incapable of doing what the Romans had done. How could soldiers be trained all day long as the Romans trained theirs? How could they be made to abstain from the gaming, lasciviousness, blasphemy, and rudeness that they demonstrate every day? 'By which God or which saints shall I get them to swear on oath, by those they adore or by those they curse . . . how can those who scorn God revere men?' Their leaders were just as bad, valuing a ready wit, gold, gems and wanton pleasures more than military valour: hence 'the incredible fear, rapid retreats and amazing losses' that came about in 1494.

In the *Florentine Histories* Machiavelli elaborates on the Italians' failure to learn from the Romans. After describing in book i (chapter 5) how Italy had failed to preserve the common culture that it had enjoyed under the Romans (the same 'laws, customs, way of life, religion, language, dress and names') he proceeds to denounce (in the introductory chapters of books ii–vi) Italy's other failures. Instead of using law to protect liberty and ending the conflict between the nobles and the people by sharing honours between them, as the Romans did, the Italians perpetuated conflict by resorting to fighting and exile. Instead of using war to build new colonies and to enrich the public fisc, the Italians gave away ransoms and booty to their mercenary captains. And unlike the Romans, they failed to use war to purge the vices of leisure. This last criticism at the beginning of book v provides the greatest insight into Machiavelli's loss of confidence in the relevance of ancient culture to present-day Italy. Since the

endemic small-scale warfare of the fifteenth century was a state neither of settled peace nor of open war, Machiavelli wrote, Italy was unable to follow the ancient cycle from war to peace to war again, whose purgative effect prevented soldiers from being corrupted in periods of prolonged peace by learning or 'letters'. Modern war had by contrast failed to purge this learned culture that undermined its soldiers' ethos, thereby bringing about the barbarian invasions of 1494 and Italy's re-enslavement. As we know from his criticism in *The Art of War* of the culture of Italy's military leaders, who spent their days in their studies thinking up witticisms and writing letters, decorating themselves with gems and gold, and sleeping and eating more splendidly than others, the leaders Machiavelli had in mind were princely *condottieri* from families such as the Gonzaga, Este, and Montefeltro, whose courts were centres of classical learning. Is Machiavelli attacking the very qualities that for us today epitomize what we define as the Renaissance? To attempt to answer this question, we must turn in the concluding section to the culture of these courts to see the extent to which even there classical civilization was beginning to seem irrelevant to post-1494 Italy.

Renaissance culture in Italian courts

Italian courts were based in cities that had nearly all once been free communes. The communes had first revived ancient republicanism, inspiring their citizens with ideals of patriotism and active citizenship. Even when cities ceased to be self-governing, classical literature continued to be taught and cultivated by humanists in the new courts. At the Gonzaga court in Mantua and the Este court in Ferrara, the new 'liberal arts' schools of Vittorino da Feltre and Guarino da Verona provided models for humanist educators throughout Italy. As professional publicists, humanists also continued to debate the best form of government in the language supplied by classical republicanism, supporting either Scipio or Caesar according to whether their employer was a republic or a prince. And even in cities controlled by a single ruler republican ideology remained alive. Although the 'dangerous' word 'popolo' had been forbidden since 1385 under the lordship of the Visconti, the republic of 1447–50 shows that civic and

republican ideas survived. Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza was murdered in 1476 by students, we are told, of Sallust's *Catiline Conspiracy*, 'who wanted to copy those ancient Romans and be liberators of their country'. And when his brother Lodovico 'il Moro' was ejected from the city by the French in 1499, an abortive attempt was again made to re-establish a republic. Although these attempts failed, even the overlordship of the Habsburg emperors in the 1550s did not succeed in extinguishing the aspirations of Milan's citizens to recover their lost freedom.

Classical culture also helped to justify the growing splendour and magnificence of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century courts, whose de facto power was legitimized with the gloss that antiquity gave them. When Sigismondo Malatesta of Rimini buried medals of himself in the foundations of his most important buildings, he explained that this would give him glory in the same way that coins 'representing antiquity' glorified the names of ancient builders. For similar reasons the Gonzaga claimed that Mantegna's *Triumph of Caesar* paintings gave their family 'glory in having them in the house', and we may guess that the Este rulers of Ferrara believed that their collection of ancient gems, statues, and books did the same for them as they did for the aspiring prince, Lorenzo de' Medici, whose antiques helped to give him the cultural status he lacked as a banker in the still overtly republican Florence.

The legitimizing role of classical culture seems to have continued almost unbroken until at least the eighteenth century, making it difficult to identify a moment of crisis similar to the one experienced by the Florentine republicans. Yet if we look closely at the description of court life in Baldassare Castiglione's famous dialogue about the court of Urbino, *The Courtier*, we find that it betrays the same loss of confidence in Renaissance culture as do Machiavelli's later writings. Castiglione's dialogue was begun in 1507, revised in 1516 when Urbino was swallowed up by Leo X and given to his nephew Lorenzo, and finally printed in 1528. Its discussion of the virtues needed by the perfect courtier purports to admire a culture deeply imbued with classical values. The courtier should ideally be a man of noble birth and skilled not only in arms but also in the liberal arts, that is, in literature, oratory, music, and painting, as Castiglione reveals himself to be in the numerous exempla drawn from classical writings that pepper the text. But at the end of the first two books, we are told that

this paragon 'never was, nor perhaps ever could be'. Castiglione not only undermines the importance of military valour by presenting the duke as an impotent cripple, who 'rarely succeeded in what he undertook'; he also undermines the value of the courtier's learning by giving women the role of critical commentators who twice interrupt the discussion telling the men that their debate has become 'too protracted and tedious' and too academic, and urging them to 'speak in a way that you can be understood'. According to one of the disputants, Cesare Gonzaga, this man of virtue and learning seems more like a 'good schoolmaster' than a noble courtier, whose task should instead be to encourage magnificence and splendour on the model of the Mantuan court of Francesco Gonzaga, the duchess of Urbino's brother, 'who in this regard seems more like King of Italy than the ruler of a city'.¹⁵

This, it seems, is the model of the future, according to the later discussion in book iv about whether a prince or a republic was more likely to restore a Golden Age. This last book of *The Courtier* is prefaced by 'bitter thoughts' about how 'Fortune frustrates our weak and feeble plans, sometimes wrecking them even before we sight harbour', thoughts occasioned by the deaths of three of the speakers in the dialogue during its long gestation, who would have provided clear proof, we are told, of the brilliance of the court of Urbino. But it was not just this that embittered Castiglione, nor even Urbino's loss of independence in 1516. It was also the fact that by the time the book was completed, none of its few surviving protagonists was still living in Urbino. As Carlo Dionisotti memorably put it, 'the fragile splendour' of Guidobaldo's court was dimmed by the shadow of another society that was overhanging it, the ecclesiastical society of the papal curia in Rome.¹⁶ In this context, Castiglione's answer to the question of who best could restore a Golden Age was predictable: not the republic praised by another speaker, the Venetian Pietro Bembo, but a prince enjoying 'kingly and civic' powers and ruling in the image of God who controls the universe. The princes in whom future hope of success rested, according to Castiglione, were not even

¹⁵ Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. G. Bull (London, 1967), pp. 202, 41, 84, 221, 310, and 281–2, below.

¹⁶ Carlo Dionisotti, 'Chierici e laici', in *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Turin, 1967), p. 70.

Italians (with the sole exception of Francesco Gonzaga's son Federigo, whose nimble politics had enabled him to survive unscathed into the new imperial age), but the sons of the kings of France, England, and Spain, their task not to rescue Italy but to subjugate the 'infidels' to Christianity.¹⁷

By the early sixteenth century, papal Rome was the principal centre of courtly culture. As the nerve centre of religious and political patronage, it was the place where every lesser court kept a cardinal to represent its interests, as well as the hub of international diplomacy during the years of foreign invasions. Thanks to the extensive patronage of Julius II and the Medici popes, cultural life flourished after 1494, sodalities and games keeping alive a semblance of ancient practices and values. It was there that the most ambitious artistic projects were undertaken, such as Raphael's frescoes in the new papal apartments (or *Stanze*) and his tapestries for the Sistine chapel, Bramante's cloister for S. Maria della Pace, Michelangelo's planned tomb for Julius II and his Sistine ceiling. Yet in 1527 even Rome was attacked by the barbarian invaders. The sack of the city by German and Spanish mercenaries and the imprisonment of the pope finally shattered the myth of Rome as *caput mundi*, home and centre of Christendom and of the ancient Roman republic and empire. In the diaspora of artists and writers from the city, one painter, Sebastiano del Piombo, even wondered if he was the same man he had been 'before the Sack'.

By then, Christian Europe was being threatened not only by the Muslims, but also by the heretical Lutherans, whose ideas were beginning to spread in reformist or *spirituali* circles throughout Italy, both in large cities like Naples and Venice and in ducal courts. The French wife of Ercole d'Este, for example, was a Protestant and introduced the new ideas to the court of Ferrara, while aristocratic women such as Giulia Gonzaga and Vittoria Colonna worked at the centre of personal networks to disseminate reforming beliefs to other cities and courts in Italy. Faced with schism in the Church, the Papacy embarked on a period of reform that brought to an end the close and unselfconscious identification of scholars with ancient Rome, the 'homely confidence' in classical literature and the sense of continuity with the past that they had previously experienced there. The Council of Trent (1545–63) and its *Index of Prohibited Books* imposed an

¹⁷ Castiglione, *The Courtier*, pp. 296–9, 310, 312–13.

authoritarianism that increased people's awareness of the distance between classical and Christian culture, sending authors like Lucretius and Epicurus back underground again after their very brief airing, and Galileo Galilei (for being influenced by them and other new ideas about the universe) to prison.

The new religious controls also represented what has been called 'Italy's new investment in the values of social surveillance and reform', which in turn encouraged a return to the ordered, hierarchical society that had begun to be challenged. This was a direct response to anxiety about loss of social control created by almost continuous invasions that led to a perception among prominent cultural spokesmen of an Italy rendered 'effeminate' in its political helplessness. It also encouraged the displacement of discussion about political order and values to discussion about sexual and domestic matters in the private sphere, where it 'fueled the reappearance of the *querelle des femmes*' in many Renaissance writings.¹⁸ The 'language debate' also revived in the sixteenth century. Pietro Bembo's success in imposing Petrarch and Boccaccio as archaizing models for modern Italian (in his 1525 *Prose della volgar lingua*) was in part a result of the political crisis: perhaps a common, standardized language could unify an increasingly fragmented country. The language debate was also sustained by the establishment of new literary academies that attempted to bring writers under political control. One academy made its members agree in 1546 that 'to avoid any murmuring, no one may debate the Holy Scriptures'. The transformation of humanism as a result of these controls also undermined the civic culture that had originally helped to create the political ethos of humanism. Italian was increasingly used in the law courts instead of Latin, and local laws and statutes were now written in Italian; so too were plays and histories, and also funeral addresses, which became informal homilies delivered by friars instead of formal orations by humanists.

Thus change was not limited to politics but extended widely to the whole of Italian civic life. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, even the clothing of republican citizens had begun to change. The patrician youth of Florence 'cast off their togas' (the traditional long magisterial gowns) and adopted a new kind of dress, 'neither the sort

¹⁸ D. Shemek, *Ladies Errant: Wayward Women and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (Durham, N.C., 1998), pp. 31–2.

worn by their fathers nor in keeping with the style appropriate to citizens but flaunting their grandeur and magnificence'. Despite the Florentines' admiration for 'civilian dress and familiar manners', the Medici adviser Lodovico Alamanni thought it would be easy to get the next generation to 'adopt a [courtly] cape in place of a [republican] hood', as easy as adopting the habit of a monk, because 'they will renounce the republic and profess themselves in [the duke's] order'.¹⁹ By the mid sixteenth century, Torquato Tasso (1544–95) denounced the ancient republican 'hood of the Florentines' and the 'Venetian toga' as outdated garments fit only to be dressing-up or Carneval clothes for the princely councillor of his dialogues, *Malpiglio or about the Court* and *Il Gianluca or about the Mask*. These dialogues suggest that even the ostensibly republican and Ciceronian role Castiglione had ascribed to his courtier could no longer be translated to the courts of Tasso's day, where the garments worn by Florentine and Venetian republicans served only as masks for Carneval time, not proud symbols of ancient ideals.²⁰

If it is possible to define a moment when ideas catch on and seem relevant, then it must also be possible to define moments when they lose relevance. Sometimes we describe this as 'the end of an era'. But without necessarily thinking of the Renaissance as an era (as historians have tended to do for a long time), we can, I think, chart the erosion of belief in the political and cultural values we associate with the Renaissance in Italy. What better emblem of this new world from which to survey the old than Galileo Galilei (1564–1642). Born and educated in Pisa, Galileo taught mathematics in the university there for three years before moving to the university of Padua in the Venetian dominions. Although he made his name there for the astronomical discoveries through his telescope, he returned to Tuscany in 1610 to work freely for the Medici grand dukes, declaring that a republic like Venice could not offer the sort of legitimation he sought and that he desired to serve only a princely patron. The change in values represented by his move was predicated on the assumption that to serve a single patron brought purity because it was a monogamous

¹⁹ Jacopo Nardi to A. Lapaccini, 20 October 1501, in A. Verde, *Lo Studio fiorentino*, iii, 1 (Pistoia, 1977), p. 411; L. Alamanni, *Discorso*, 25 November 1516, in von Albertini, *Firenze dalla repubblica al principato*, p. 383.

²⁰ Incisively analysed by V. Cox, 'Tasso's *Malpiglio* ovvero *de la corte: The Courtier revisited*', *The Modern Language Review*, 90 (1995), pp. 897–918, esp. 911–14.

relationship instead of one of prostitution to an open and arbitrary market.²¹ So it was to the new stable centre of Florentine patronage, the Medici grand dukes, and not to the open market forces of a republic, that Galileo offered his telescopes and his revolutionary books, *The Starry Messenger* describing his four newly discovered satellites around Jupiter, dedicated to Cosimo II, and *The Dialogue concerning the Two Chief World Systems, Ptolemaic and Copernican*, dedicated to Ferdinand II. Trying in vain to procure a copy of *The Dialogue* a year after its publication in 1632, Thomas Hobbes percipiently told his patron that in Italy they were saying it was ‘a booke that will do more hurt to their religion than all the bookes have done of Luther and Calvin’.²² It is perhaps paradoxical that Galileo opted for a stable ducal patron as the centre of his universe at the same time that he displaced the earth from the stable centre of the old Ptolemaic system. But in so doing he showed that the civic culture that had made his achievement possible ended with the collapse of republicanism in the course of the sixteenth century.

²¹ M. Biagioli, *Galileo, Courtier: The Practice of Science in the Culture of Absolutism* (Chicago, 1993), p. 29.

²² Thomas Hobbes to William Cavendish (26 January 1633), cited in *La Corte, il mare, i mercanti* (Florence, 1980), p. 232 (9.26).