

Postmortem

Marsilio Ficino,¹ *Apologia contra Savonarolam*

Apology of Marsilio Ficino on Behalf of the Many Florentines Deceived by the Antichrist, Girolamo of Ferrara, the Greatest of Hypocrites, to the College of Cardinals

I know, of course, Worshipful Cardinals, that many in the Sacred Council marvel that one hypocrite from Ferrara has deceived so many otherwise clever and erudite Florentine men for nearly a full five years. And with good reason they wonder exceedingly indeed when they consider that so many great persons have been duped by one particular man. But truly, no mortal man, but the most crafty demon, and not a single demon, but a demonic horde, has assaulted (alas!) miserable mortals through the most occult snares and duped them by means of astonishing machinations. No one really marvels anymore, but, rather, all grant without controversy that the first parents of the human race, fortified as if children of God with divine wisdom and virtue, established in Paradise, and instructed by angels, were nevertheless deceived by one certain diabolic spirit. Why, then, should it seem marvelous that the Florentines, exceedingly unfortunate especially at this time, have been clandestinely besieged and seduced by a strong horde of demons under an angelic mask? Do we not believe that the Antichrist will miraculously seduce many persons preeminent in both prudence and probity?²

Moreover, that Girolamo, prince of hypocrites, led by a spirit not so much human as diabolic, has seduced us, not merely setting traps for us but even sapping our vital energies, there are, in fact, many proofs: a certain utterly incomparable craftiness in this Antichrist persistently feigning virtues while in truth disguising vice, a vast passion, a savage audacity, an empty

1. Like Savonarola, Ficino (1433–1499) was the son of a court physician (to the Medici), himself trained as a physician, and was introduced to the philosophy of Aristotle through that training. Under Medici patronage he translated all the works of Plato into Latin and composed commentaries on many of them. He was ordained at the age of forty and eventually became a canon of the Cathedral. As a philosopher-theologian, he sought to reconcile Neoplatonism with Christianity, outlining a pagan revelation parallel to the Hebraic. Though not the head of a formal school, his circle of intellectual intimates is sometimes referred to as a Platonic Academy. His ideas on astrology and talismans, related to medical lore, were not generally accepted by colleagues such as Pico della Mirandola.

2. Triple alliteration: *vel prudentia probitateque prestantes*.

boasting, a Luciferian pride, a most impudent mendacity supported at every point with imprecations and oaths; the face, the voice, the speech frequently lightning fast while declaiming, carrying his listeners along not so much by voluntary persuasion as by violence. For often in the midst of disputation he would suddenly cry out, take fire, and thunder forth, being carried away exactly like those possessed by demons, or the Furies, as the poets are wont to describe it. Sometimes he would even fall into prophecy, mixed indeed with lies, so that while he might easily dupe or compel the populace by means of some of his predictions, such as they were, he might also, by means of his lies and evil works, be finally refuted.

Moreover, for what reasons the Astrologers, as well as the Platonists,³ conjectured that Savonarola had been inspired by many and conflicting or unlucky influences of the stars, it is not expedient to dispute at present. But I might briefly say that from conflicting and unfortunate influences and confusions of the stars, just as from certain signs, the Astrologers conjectured, as did the Platonists, that Savonarola—or rather, as I should more correctly say, Sevonerola!⁴—had become subject to various and wicked demons. But whether he was thus made subject by strange and marvelous means, or whether he rather subjected himself to evil spirits by his own pride and iniquity, it is certain that devils and similar influences, flowing together into his diabolic spirit as into their own workshop, at once breathed out a venom pestilential wherever exhaled; and not him only did they infect and destroy, but also those drawn near to him in whatever fashion and this very populace itself, committed to and too much believing in him. They say that a certain similar misfortune impending over the Ephesians was discovered and expelled by Apollonius of Tyana in the form of a certain squalid old man directed by evil demons.⁵

3. Ficino was a leading light of both groups and thus antagonistic to Savonarola, who makes clear his disapproval of astrological prognostications time and time again (see, e.g., the opening of the third sermon on Psalms above). See also Donald Weinstein's brief discussion of late Quattrocento Florentine astrology, in *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970) pp. 87–91.

4. Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), characterizes this as "Ficino's own word play—*saevus Nero* (savage Nero)" (p. 34-6, n. 22), referring to a figure in contemporary apocalyptic writings. See also Lorenzo Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation: The Savonarolan Movement in Florence, 1494–1545* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 100.

5. Apollonius (first century A.D.), a wandering ascetic and wonder-working imitator of Pythagoras, was compared by some to Christ and after death became the focus of a pagan divinity cult. He is mentioned in Eusebius' *Gospel Preparation*, bk. IV, chap. 13. This bizarre episode is recounted in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius*, bk.

I also long ago discovered the same thing in this Sevonerola, although in the beginning, after the Republic had undergone sudden change, while the French were agitating Florence with various terrors here and there, I myself also, together with the fearful populace, was terrified by I know not what demon and for a time deceived, but quickly I came to my senses and for three whole years now I have warned many known to me, frequently in private and often publicly, and not without great peril, so that they might flee far away from this poisonous monster, born to be a disaster for this people. I pass over the insurrections and lethal hostilities which have arisen there and the neglect of public affairs and the wasteful expense and most grievous damages which have made advances there.

This without doubt is the worst: that he has tainted so very many, partly by his pride and heretical pertinacity, partly, as I have said, he has demented and utterly stupefied them in the manner of that fish which they call the torpedo [the electric ray], a fruit undoubtedly worthy of such a diabolic seed. Moreover, that this can be done and is a common thing, we have that most weighty witness, Paul the Apostle, reproving the Galatians: "O stupid Galatians, who has so bewitched you not to believe the truth?" [Gal. 3:1]. I also think that the addendum, "not to believe the truth," carries a good deal of hidden meaning. For those who have heedlessly consented to falsehood, bewitched by seducers, have not been deprived only once of the light of truth, but they also become more distrustful about receiving truth. Truly, everyone whosever ought to be cautioned against "holy" preachers, when they hear them cursing and frenzied, so that they might have that Gospel passage ever before the eyes and ears of the mind: "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but within they are rapacious wolves; by their fruits you shall know them" [Matt. 7:15–16]. Finally, Paul himself in the second letter to the Corinthians briefly encapsulates the whole matter thus: "Such pseudo-apostles are guileful laborers, transfiguring themselves into apostles of Christ, nor is this any wonder. For Satan himself transfigures himself into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers are transfigured as if into ministers of justice; their end shall be according to their works" [II Cor. 11:13–15].

And so, I conclude this brief apology thus: that clearly no one ought to

IV, chap. 10. The old man is stoned to a pulp by the crowd and shapeshifts into a slavering dog the size of a lion. Perhaps this is meant to stand as a counterweight to Christ's driving the demons from two possessed men into some nearby swine at Gadara (Matt. 8:28–34; Marc. 5:1–19; Luc. 8:26–39).

6. The Vulgate has *insensati* ("senseless") rather than *stupidii*. Also, the phrase *non credere veritati*, which so impresses Ficino, is attested in some manuscripts but is excised from the modern Stuttgart edition.

wonder at the Florentines. Not all, I say, for many had detected long ago the tyrannical malignity of Savonarola and his quasi-satellites, but many, I say, have been seduced by his diabolic fraud; some even have been induced into this same malignity by a demon's instigation, especially since Florence had to contend not with one demon to be exact, but, as the Gospel also bears witness [Marc. 5:9], with a dire legion of demons attending Savonarola. Indeed, from what a plague have divine clemency, the foresight of the Supreme Pontiff, and your diligence, inspired from heaven by the seraphic Francis [of Assisi],⁷ happily just liberated us, with the College of Canons⁸ of our Cathedral also assisting and a number of eminent citizens looking after affairs in the Republic, and Joanne [i.e., Giovanni] Canacci⁹ especially urging on this work. For we have taken up arms not against the gods, as they say that Aeneas and his comrades-in-arms fought unaware for the sake of Troy, so that afterward they rued it: "Ah, me! divine law does not require that one place one's trust in unfriendly gods,"¹⁰ but against the inhabitants of the underworld and Tartarean monsters, as did Orpheus for the sake of Eurydice or Hercules for glory. Thus we have fought, with God's favor, to protect the liberty not only of Florence but also of the Roman Church, so that after battle, it may be sung of us: God has arisen and has dispersed His enemies in Antichrist, all who hate God have fled from before His face; as smoke dissipates, they have dissipated, as wax flows away from fire, so have these false and proud sinners run away to perdition from before the face of God [paraphrase of Ps. 67:1-2]. Because He, the All-Powerful, Who certainly resists the proud, but gives His grace to the humble, has shown strength with His arm; He has dispersed with Lucifer those proud in the thoughts of their hearts [paraphrase of Luc. 1:51-52].

Certainly, God often defers the punishment of other sins to the future judgment, but impious pride made oppressive with every pestilence He more often strikes also with present justice. What could be more manifest than this miracle? God, very indulgent till now, has borne with this blasphemous as long as he has deluded the people like a magician by means of the name and Cross of Christ. But truly when first he attempted publicly to desecrate the very body of Christ in the Eucharist through trial by fire, almighty God, shaking the heavens with sudden rain and thunder and lightning, exposed

7. The Franciscans were instrumental in Savonarola's downfall.

8. Of whom Ficino was one.

9. A leading citizen of Florence who advocated handing Savonarola over to the power of the Pope.

10. Vergil, *Aeneid* 2.402-403.

this arrogant and utterly barbaric impiety and instantly aroused His people to burn this man with the same fire. And so, after the special thanks owed first to God, we give great thanks to the Supreme Pontiff and to you, the Sacred College, and we humbly commend to you the people of Florence and the Cathedral College, most devoted to the Roman Church.

Francesco Guicciardini,¹¹ *The History of Florence*

From Chapter XVI

It will not be out of order to speak at some length of his [Savonarola's] qualities, for neither in our age nor in those of our fathers and forefathers was there ever seen a monk endowed with so many virtues, or one who enjoyed so much reputation and authority. Even his enemies admit that he was learned in many subjects, especially in philosophy, which he knew very well and used so skillfully for his purposes that one would have thought he had invented it. He was so well versed in sacred scripture that many people believe we would have to go back several centuries to find his equal. His judgment was very profound not only in matters of erudition, but in worldly affairs as well. In my opinion, his sermons demonstrate clearly that he knew very well the principles that govern this world. Endowed with these qualities, and with an eloquence that was neither artificial nor forced but natural and easy, his sermons were by far the greatest of his age. It was marvelous to see what audiences and what reputation he kept, for he preached for many years not only during Lent, but on many of the holidays as well. Moreover, he was in a city full of subtle and fastidious minds, where even excellent preachers came to be considered boring after one Lenten season, or at most two. These virtues were so clear and manifest in him that they are recognized not only by his supporters and followers, but by his enemies as well.

But questions and differences of opinion arise concerning the goodness of his life. It should be noted that if he had any vice at all, it was only simulation, caused by ambition and pride. Those who observed his life and habits for a long time found not the slightest trace of avarice, lust, or of any other form of cupidity or frailty. On the contrary, they found evidence of a most devout life, full of charity, full of prayers, full of observance not of the externals but of the very heart of the divine cult. Although his detractors searched industriously during the investigation, they could not find even the slightest moral defect in him. The work he did in promoting decent behavior was holy and marvelous; nor had there ever been as much goodness and religion in Florence as there was in his time. After his death they disappeared, showing that whatever virtue there was had been introduced and maintained by him. In his time, people no longer gambled in public and were even

11. Son of a Florentine aristocrat (1483–1540), he studied law and pursued a diplomatic career, as had his father. His *History of Florence* was written before his first embassy to Spain in 1512.

afraid to do it at home. The taverns that used to cater to wayward and vice-ridden youth were closed; sodomy was suppressed and decried. A great many women gave up their shameful and lascivious clothing. Nearly all boys were made to give up their many shameful practices, and brought back to a holy and decent way of life. Under his direction, Brother Domenico organized them into companies, and they went to church, wore their hair short, and would hurl stones and insults at lecherous men, gamblers, and women who wore lascivious clothing. At carnival, a day generally celebrated with a thousand iniquities, they first held a religious procession full of devotion; then they would go about collecting dice, cards, make-up, shameful books and pictures, and then would burn them all in the Piazza della Signoria. Older men turned toward religion, mass, vespers, and sermons, and went to confession and communion often. At carnival time a great number of people went to confession; alms and charity were distributed in abundance. Every day the friar urged men to abandon pomp and vanity, and to return to the simplicity of religion and the Christian life. To this end he proposed laws concerning the ornaments and clothing that women and children wore; but they were so severely attacked by his enemies that the Council only passed those concerning children—and even they were not observed. Through his preaching, men of all ages and stations joined his order, including many noble youths from the first families of the city, and many older men of reputation such as Pandolfo Rucellai, a member of the Ten and ambassador to King Charles; messer Giorgio Antonio Vespucci and messer Malatesta [Sacramoro],¹² canons of Santa Reparata, good, serious, and learned men; maestro Pietro Paulo da Urbino, a physician of reputation and good life; Zanobi Acciaiuoli, who was very learned in Latin and Greek; and many others like them. In all of Italy there was not a convent like San Marco. He so enthusiastically directed the young men in their studies—not only of Latin and Greek but of Hebrew as well—that they promised to become ornaments to religion. And though he did all that for men's spiritual welfare, he did no less for the city and the public welfare.

When Piero had been expelled and the parliament called, the city was so badly shaken and the friends of the old regime were in such disfavor and

12. The "Judas of San Marco." He persuaded Savonarola against escape while San Marco was under attack and later clawed his way to the Vicar Generalship of the Order, in which role he worked zealously to suppress all remnants of devotion to his former superior's memory.

danger that even Francesco Valori¹³ and Piero Capponi¹⁴ could not protect them. That many of them would be done great harm seemed inevitable. If that had come about, it would have been a great blow to the city, for many of them were good, wise, and rich men of great houses and family connections. Dissension would surely have arisen among those who governed, as happened in the Twenty, and the divisions would have been deep because several men of nearly equal rank were seeking to achieve preeminence. New upheavals, more parliaments, further expulsions of citizens, and several revolutions would have been the result; and in the end, Piero would perhaps have returned, which would have meant disaster and ruin for the city.

It was Brother [Girolamo] alone who made it possible to avoid all this confusion and chaos. He introduced the Great Council, which put a bridle on all those eager to become masters of the city. He proposed the appeal to the Signoria, which acted as a safeguard for the preservation of the citizens. He brought about universal peace simply by impeding those who wanted to punish Medici supporters under color of re-establishing the ancient order.

Without doubt these efforts saved the city and, as he so truly said, worked to the advantage of both those who now governed and those who had governed. Because the results of his works were so good, and because several of his prophecies were fulfilled, many people continued to believe for a long time that he was truly sent by God and that he was a true prophet, despite the excommunication, the trial, and his death. For my part I am in doubt, and have no firm opinion on the matter. I shall reserve my judgment for a future time, if I live that long; for time clears up everything. But I do believe this: if he was good, we have seen a great prophet in our time; if he was bad, we have seen a great man. For, apart from his erudition, we must admit that if he was able to fool the public for so many years on so important a matter, without ever being caught in a lie, he must have had great judgment, talent, and power of invention.

13. Though of the Medicean party under Lorenzo, Valori grew disgusted with Piero because of his ineptitude. He became an ardent supporter of Savonarola and leader of the Piagnoni, serving in various offices of the Republic, including Gonfalonier of Justice. It was he who lowered the minimum age for participation in the Grand Council from thirty to twenty-four, opening the door to the Compagnacci. He also was chiefly responsible for denying the right of appeal to the Medicean conspirators of 1497, an incident which led many to criticize Savonarola for compromising his principles, since this right had been established at his urging. He and his wife were murdered during the riot which accompanied the attack on San Marco.
14. A leading Florentine citizen, one of the four ambassadors to King Charles along with Savonarola, he preferred an oligarchic form of government and became a fierce opponent of the friar. He was killed in battle at the siege of Soiana, near Pisa (1496).