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Violence and Revenge in Fifteenth-century Political Literature

Abstract: This article investigates how the issue of violence is treated in Italian fifteenth-century political literature, with specific attention to a particular strand of texts that deal with the topic of conspiracy and enjoyed widespread diffusion in the second half of the 1400s. These works belong to different literary genres and offer significant case studies that allow us to explore the multiple functions of the idea of violence in literature and politics in the *Quattrocento*. Violence emerges a crucial factor and plays a pivotal role as a thematic, stylistic and ideological element in these works. In particular, the ideological overtones that this multifaceted component acquires, as both a structural and stylistic element, contribute to revealing the common political ground on which all these pieces of literature lay.
Key Words: Literature, Politics, Humanism, Renaissance, Violence, Conspiracy.

The fertile interplay between politics and literature is a well-known distinctive trait of Italian Renaissance culture, especially in the fifteenth century. This characteristic element clearly emerges in a specific strand of political literature that enjoyed extensive diffusion in the second half of the 1400s: an epoch that may be rightly defined as the "age of conspiracies" and that gives rise to the development of literary works devoted to the specific topic of political plots. This historical categorisation has been coined to label the precise time span between 1460 and 1480, when a considerable number of conspiracies took place in some of the most important states in the Italian peninsula.[1] Nevertheless, this specific definition is relevant not only from a historical perspective, but can be deservedly extended to the realm of literature and to the whole of the second half of the century, so as to encompass the parallel widespread production of several literary texts on the issue of conspiracies. In these works, violence is a crucial factor and plays a pivotal role as a thematic, stylistic and ideological element. This strand of historical and political literature, which has been only recently identified and analysed,[2] consists of a substantial corpus of texts belonging to different literary genres and offers significant case studies that

[1] From a historical point of view, the centrality of the issue of conspiracies in the 1400s has been underlined by Riccardo Fubini, with specific regard to the 60s and 70s of the century: Fubini, "L'Età delle congiure."

[2] On the development of this monographic genre of literary works on the topic of conspiracy in the fifteenth century see Celati's "Introduction" to Angelo Poliziano, *Coniurationis commentarium* 6-12.

allow us to investigate the multiple functions of violence in fifteenth-century literature and politics. The ideological overtones that the idea of violence acquires in these works, as both a structural and stylistic component, contribute to revealing the common political ground on which all these pieces of literature lie, although they display distinctive traits and perspectives.

The development of this literary output in the second half of the 1400s is closely connected with the emergence of new political ideologies, which reflected the simultaneous process of consolidation of new centralised powers throughout Italy. It is significant that propagandistic aims were at the core of many of these texts, which were written by humanists who were deeply engaged in the political life of their states. Albeit in a few cases these accounts of conspiracies cannot be directly traced back to the intention of celebrating and upholding the current rulers threatened by the plot, in most of these works the depiction of the conspirators' violent actions, and, on the other hand, the vivid portrayals of the brutal reprisal inflicted on the plotters fulfil the purpose of underpinning the established governments' viewpoint on the events. Thus, the image of a political regime jeopardised by the conspirators, as we shall see, appears as a fair and just political power, the only one able to keep the state in concord and prosperity, according to classical monarchical principles.

This paper focuses on the most important works in this corpus of texts on conspiracies, most of which were written by some of the chief humanists of the Italian *Quattrocento*. The earliest works on this topic were composed in 1453: Leon Battista Alberti's epistle *Porcaria coniuratio*, and the epic poem *Porcaria* written by a not very well known poet, Orazio Romano, both devoted to Stefano Porcari's conspiracy against pope Nicholas V in Rome in 1453.[3] Another pivotal text from this literary corpus is Giovanni Pontano's *De bello Neapolitano*, the historical account of the "first conspiracy of the barons" against Ferdinando of Aragon, king of Naples, including the narration of the war that followed the plot, between 1459-1465.[4] This was the only historiographical work produced by Pontano, who undertook this ambitious project straight after the war, in 1465, and worked on it until his death, in 1503. Finally, the most famous work is probably Angelo Poliziano's *Coniurationis commentarium*, the first account of the Pazzi conspiracy against the Medici brothers, written in 1478, immediately after the attack:[5] an elegant literary narration that can be considered the cornerstone of the Medici propaganda after the plot.

In all these works, the conspirators' plots are marked and represented at once as violent and criminal actions. This image is explicitly conveyed in the

[3] Alberti's *Porcaria Coniuratio* is edited by Regoliosi in Alberti's *Opere latine*. Orazio Romano's poem is edited by Lehnerdt. On the poem see also D'Elia.
[4] On Pontano's work see Monti Sabia; Bentley 184-253; Tateo 223-33; Ferraù 81-129; Senatore.
[5] The most recent edition of the text is my Poliziano, *Coniurationis commentarium*.

opening of texts, so as to underline immediately the brutality and dangerousness of the political attack and to ascribe to it a broader moral connotation, which mainly corresponds with the classical categories of *facinus* and *scelus* and therefore to the idea of crime. It is no coincidence that these very same words are those most frequently adopted by humanists to define the conspiracies.[6] These terms, along with several other verbal expressions, motifs and interpretive categories, are drawn from the chief classical work on this historical topic: Sallust's *De coniuratione Catilinae*, which is predictably the *auctoritas* most extensively employed by humanists as their major model.[7] In most of the fifteenth-century works on conspiracies, such as Poliziano's *Commentarium*, Alberti's *Porcaria coniuratio*, and Orazio Romano's *Porcaria*, the opening definition of the plot as a *facinus* or *scelus* not only immediately recalls the prototype of Sallust, but also emphasises the fierce and criminal character of the attack, highlighting its violent nature:

Pactianam coniurationem paucis describere instituo, nam id in primis memorabile facinus tempestate mea accidit parumque abfuit quin Florentinam omnem rem publicam penitus everteret.[8]

(*Coniurationis commentarium* §1)

(I proceed to narrate briefly the Pazzi conspiracy, since it was the most memorable crime which took place in my time and was not far from overthrowing the whole Florentine republic.)

Facinus profecto, quo a vetere hominum memoria in hanc usque diem neque periculo horribilius, neque audacia detestabilius, neque crudelitate tetrius a quoquam perditissimo uspiam excogitatum sit.[9]

(*Porcaria coniuratio* § 2)

(It was such an evil crime that nowhere has a more hideous murder been contrived in human history even by the most wicked men, nor a crime more horrendous for its dangerousness, nor more hideous for its recklessness, nor more gruesome for its cruelty.)

Insidias patriae qui struxit et arma parenti | Ipse parens refer et sceleri si Roma nefando | Annuerit, tenues nam si fragor impulit auras, | Romuleos iterum formidat curia raptus.[10]

(*Porcaria*, I, vv. 1-4)

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[6] On this terminology see also Chiabò 130-31.

[7] On the reception of Sallust in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, see La Penna 409-39; Skinner, "The Vocabulary of Renaissance Republicanism"; Osmond, "'Princeps Historiae Romanae'"; Ead., "Catiline in Fiesole and Florence."

[8] This and the other passages of the *Commentarium* in this article are quoted from the most recent edition of the text: Poliziano, *Coniurationis commentarium*, with an indication of the paragraph number. All translations are mine.

[9] All passages of the *Porcaria coniuratio* are quoted from the edition by Regoliosi in Alberti 1265-81 (with the indication of the the paragraph number). All translations are mine.

[10] All passages of the *Porcaria* are quoted from Orazio Romano. All translations are mine.

(Of him who plotted threats against the fatherland and wars against his father, you father, sing, and if Rome had fallen in an infamous conspiracy, and the tumult shakes the breezes, the Curia would have to fear again the rapes of Romulus.)

The same angle subtends also to Pontano's longer work, where, for example, the infamous attack planned by the rebel nobleman Marino Marzano against king Ferdinando in Teano, in May 1460, is described as an "atrocious and hideous crime" ("facinus indignum et atrox").[11] This episode was often recalled in the Aragonese propaganda as one of the crucial events in the conflict. It also acquired a symbolical connotation and was frequently evoked as an *exemplum* of both the viciousness of the plotters and Ferrante's physical and intellectual virtues, demonstrated in his ability to detect the ambush, flee from his enemies and fight them. Although Pontano's work covers a long chronology and numerous episodes (and consequently it may appear more fragmented in giving a precise characterization of the intricate historical events) the description of the conspiracy as an outrageous political action continually surfaces in the unfolding of the story.

Besides this general and idiosyncratic characterisation of the political plot as a brutal offence, in all works the stress is continuously put on images conveying the idea of violence, in particular in the portrayals of the conspirators and in the description of their plans and actions. The organisers and perpetrators of the attacks against the rulers are depicted in dark shades as immoral and vicious figures, whose traits are mainly drawn from the model of the Sallust's Catiline, the classical and traditional prototype of conspirators. Among the most distinctive vices and negative qualities ascribed to them — moral corruption, ambition, envy, greed and yearning for power — it is a general violent and fierce attitude that often surfaces as their main feature and is seen as playing a prominent role in their misdeeds. The work where the portrayals of the plotters are sketched with the most intensely negative colours is Poliziano's *Commentarium*, where the author often relies on anecdotal episodes to put emphasis on the cruel and aggressive natures of the Medici's enemies. For example, he depicts Iacopo Pazzi, the leader of the plot, as driven by an innate and uncontainable anger even in his usual activities, such as gambling (which is also considered another typical vice of plotters in the classical tradition, such as in Cicero's *In Catilinam* 2, 23).[12] In particular, he describes Iacopo throwing the gambling table against whoever is in front of him whenever he loses the game:

[...] sicubi male iactus caderet, Deos atque homines diris agere, non nunquam et alveolum tessararium, aut quod aliud irato offerretur, temere in proximum quemque iaculari. (§ 4)
([...] whenever he lost in throwing dice he swore at gods and men, and sometimes flung

[11] Monti Sabia 92. On Marino Marzano see Sardina in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*.
[12] See Poliziano, *Coniurationis commentarium* 73.

the gaming table, or whatever he could grasp driven by his anger, at anyone in the vicinity.)

Another emphatic representation of the inconsiderate and self-destructive violence that drives the conspirator to attack the Medici brothers appears in the metaphorical image of the fire that Iacopo Pazzi would set in order to destroy not just the state but also himself (a portrayal influenced by a famous passage in Sallust's *De coniuratione Catilinae*, 31, 9):

Non enim sperabat homo insolens et ambitiosus decoctoris ignominiam aequo animo ferre posse: studebat itaque uno incendio sese suamque omnem patriam concremare. (§ 8) (This insolent and ambitious man had no hope of tolerating with calm spirit the ignominy of the bankrupt: thus he aimed to burn in one fire both himself and his fatherland.)

The tendency to behave violently, therefore, is seen as a distinctive feature of the plotter, who, consequently, becomes a negative exemplar, a vicious man who put into action his harmful plans by carrying out the conspiracy.

A parallel descriptive approach appears in Pontano's *De bello Neapolitiano*, where the leaders of the rebellion against the king are ascribed similar negative traits and are sketched as inclined to violent behaviour. In particular, in portraying Giovani Antonio Orsini, the prince of Taranto and the head of the seditious barons, Pontano mentions the man's impatience for political subversion and upheaval, the lack of any eagerness or respect for anything holy and honest, and the urge to do whatever his mind could plan (Monti Sabia 85). Moreover, as Monti Sabia has pointed out, Pontano draws from Sallust's portrayal of Catiline the attributes of the ambivalent and contradictory nature of the leader of the plot. The humanist indeed, besides assigning a few good qualities to Orsini, narrates some episodes in which the character proves to be both ruthless and thoughtful, such as during the siege of Minervino, when he left for many days a hanged corpse to be seen by his niece, who was imprisoned in the castle's jail, but he still provided her every day with good food (Monti Sabia 14). This cruel image conveys the idea of pointless violence that is an end in itself. But most significantly it unveils the humanist's general bent to indulge in portraying macabre and morbid pictures with an expressive style. This stylistic nuance, as we shall see, often underlies humanist works on conspiracies and contributes to building up the general overtone of brutality that imbues the ideological viewpoint of the texts.

Nevertheless, a more unspoken and veiled type of violence comes to light in the depiction of the conspirators' habits, attitudes and gestures, and in the illustration of the thoughtless and inconsiderate reasons that lead them to perpetrate their crime (once again, following the classical model of Sallust's *De coniuratione Catilinae*). These descriptive elements clearly characterise Poliziano's work, for example the description of Iacopo Pazzi, who is portrayed as a volatile man on the verge of indulging in unreasonable actions:

Ipse pallidus atque exanguis caput iactare semper et, quod levitatis maximum foret argumentum, nunquam ore, nunquam oculis, nunquam manibus consistere. (§ 3)
(He, pale and wan, always used to shake his head and never kept his mouth, eyes and hand still: which is the clearest sign of inconstancy.)

Also Francesco Salviati, the archbishop of Pisa, and Francesco Pazzi, two other leading figures in the plot, are ascribed a vicious attitude and are implicitly accused as guilty of hideous misdeeds, in contempt of any religious or human law:

Is Franciscus [*scil*. Salviati] homo fuit, id quod Dii atque homines sciunt, omnis divini atque humani iuris ignarus et contemptor, omnibus flagitiis et facinoribus coopertus, luxuria perditus et lenociniis infamis. (§10)
(This Francesco Salviati was ignorant and scornful of any human or religious law — both god and men know that — guilty of any baseness and crime, lost in lust and procuring.)

Sanguinarius praeterea homo [*scil*. Francesco Pazzi] erat et qui, dum rem quamcunque is animo volveret expeditum iret, nullo honestatis, nullo religionis, nullo famae aut nominis respectu detineretur. (§ 15)
(He was a bloodthirsty man and, as long as he could put into action anything he was planning, he was not restrained by any respect for honesty, religion, honour or reputation.)

As for Leon Battista Alberti's work — the more balanced and unbiased account of Stefano Porcari's abortive conspiracy — it is noteworthy that the plotter is depicted in more unspoken and tenuous negative shades, but the violent inclination of the rebel is still highlighted in the representation of his attempts to urge the common people to rise up against the pope (an episode that took place before the actual conspiracy):

Stephanus Porcarius eques romanus [...] per eos dies, quibus Eugenii pontificis maximi funus celebrabatur, suos ad concives pro concione orationem habere instituit, non minus vehementem, quam turbulentam. Quoad enim in se fuit, hortari aggressus est ut, captis armis, veteris romani populi et nominis et libertatis meminissent. […] Cum vero ex magistratu rediisset, quod videre licuit, non posita animi pristina protervia, sed aucta ambitione, iterato se turbulentissimum exhibuit. Nam per eum quidem diem, quo, pro vetere consuetudine, ludi agonales celebrabantur, orta inter nonnullos adolescentulos rixa et studiis partium plusculis circum tumultuantibus, presto affuit Porcarius vultu, gestu, manu, verbis, clamore omnia tentans, quibus insanum vulgus ad odium eorum, qui rebus preessent, incenderet atque ad arma concitaret. (§§ 3; 7).
(Stefano Porcari, a Roman knight [...] in the days when the celebration of Eugene IV's funeral was held he decided to deliver a speech to his fellow citizens who were gathered in an assembly: a speech that was not less vehement and turbulent than effective in urging people to rise up. As far as he was concerned, he started to encourage them to take up arms and remember ancient Rome's noble name and liberty. [...] When the office he was appointed to by the pope ended, it was evident that the old insolence had not abandoned his spirit; on the contrary, his ambition was even higher and he was again ready to provoke uprising. The day when, in respect of ancient tradition, Agone's games

were celebrated, after a fight between young men began and several groups of people rioted, Porcari arrived there immediately and tried with his facial expression, gesturing, words, shouts to inflame the foolish mass and call the common people to arms, fomenting their hatred for the rulers.)

The terminology used by the author suggests the idea of overflowing aggressiveness and, at the same time, represents Porcari's oratorical ability to move people to follow his criminal plans, by means of his rhetorical skills, eloquence, and gestures, which are recurrently mentioned throughout the text. In doing so, Alberti insists on conveying the image of verbal violence, a slighter but no less effective and dangerous kind of coercion that may lead to unpredictable and tragic political consequences. It is no accident that the humanist's epistle includes the lengthy oration that the leader of the conspiracy delivered to his accomplices the day before the planned attack: a well-crafted speech shaped after the model of Catiline's harangue in Sallust's work and perfectly framed as a classical *oratio*, in accordance with classical rhetorical tenets and Ciceronian *partitiones*. More generally, in Alberti's output political oratory is often represented as a device through which eloquent men (or personifications of men, as in some *Intercenales*) can persuade the common people to hideous actions, such as upheavals and violent rebellions, which are considered by the humanist the most dangerous threats to the *concordia* in societies.[13] In the epistle on the conspiracy, in particular, Porcari's rhetorical tools are often ascribed the purpose of manipulating and moving popular masses to action by raising hatred and evil impulses. This bitter viewpoint reflects Alberti's unsettled and pessimistic political thought. Despite his recurrent caustic criticism of the most hideous traits of power,[14] the humanist never shows sympathy for subversive plans and attempts to overthrow the political *status quo*, as the *Porcaria coniuratio* reveals.[15] This decisive disapproval for any violent uprising subtends the whole text, although it is concealed in the epistle's complex and evasive ideological framing.

Images of brutal cruelty are predictably one of the main ingredients in most narratives of the actual attacks perpetrated against the rules, or in the descriptions of the plans organised by the plotters. In Poliziano's text the description of the assault against the Medici brothers in the church of Santa

[13] For this element in the *Intercenales* see Rossi.

[14] This criticism is articulated in many passages of his works, such as the *Momus*, the earlier work *Theogenius*, and some *Intercenales*. On the *Momus* see in particular Fubini, "Leon Battista Alberti, Niccolò V e il tema della 'infelicità del principe'"; on the *Theogenius*, see Boschetto.

[15] Some scholars have connected Alberti's disapproval of Nicholas V's papacy with his implied understanding for Porcari: see in particular, Cassani; Tafuri, "'Cives non esse licere'" 44-45. On the other hand, other scholars do not see in Alberti sympathy for the conspirator, but a more complex attitude: Grafton 311; Furlan 267; Borsi, *Introduzione alla* "*Porcaria coniuratio*" 211-12.

Maria del Fiore represents the tragic peak in the unfolding of events. In particular, the assassination of Giuliano de' Medici, Lorenzo il Magnifico's youngest brother, is pictured with dramatic and vivid colours in order to convey the idea of the savage violence undergone by the victim. This depiction encapsulates the tragic poignancy of the whole episode: a result that is fulfilled also by the sophisticated and flowing intertwining of references to the major classical poets, in particular Virgil and Ovid (Poliziano, *Coniurationis commentarium* 80). Poliziano also insists in underscoring the cruelty of the assault by representing the attackers as chasing the survivor, Lorenzo, murdering the innocent emissary of the Medici's bank, Francesco Pazzi, and giving a vivid picture of the general chaotic excitement in the background of the scene:

Ibi primum peracta sacerdotis communicatione, signo dato, Bernardus Bandinus, Franciscus Pactius aliique ex coniuratis, orbe facto, Iulianum circumdant. Princeps Bandinus, ense per pectus adacto, iuvenem transverberat. Ille moribundus aliquot passus fugitare, insequi illi. Iuvenis, deficiente spiritu, terrae concidit; iacentem Franciscus, repetito saepe ictu, pugione traiicit. Ita pium iuvenem neci dedunt. […] Videre erat tumultuantem populum, viros mulieresque, sacerdotes, pueros, fugitantes passim quo pedes vocarent. Omnia fremitu plena et gemitu, nihil exaudiri tamen expressae vocis: fuere et qui crederent templum corruere. Qui Iulianum trucidarat, Bernardus Bandinus, non contentus suis partibus, ad Laurentium contendit. Ille se commodum cum paucis in sacrarium coniecerat. Bandinus ob iter Franciscum Norium, prudentem virum et mercaturis Medicae familiae praefectum, ense per stomachum adacto, uno vulnere perimit.. (§§ 34; 37-38)
(As soon as the priest received the Eucharist, Bernardo Bandini, Francesco Pazzi and the other conspirators, after giving the signal, place themselves in a circle and surround Giuliano. First Bandini sticks the sword in the young man's chest and pierces him. He, mortally wounded, tries to flee and take a few steps but they chase him. Giuliano, breathless, breaks down, and, while he lies on the ground, Francesco strikes him violently with a dagger many times. In this way they murder the pious young man. [...] You could see people acting tumultuously, and men, women, priests, children fleeing wherever they could. Everywhere you could hear clamour and cries, but nobody was able to understand anything of the words uttered. Some people even believed that the church was about to collapse. Bernardo Bandini, who had murdered Giuliano, still not satisfied with what he had already done, tried to seize Lorenzo. But he had just escaped with a few of his men into the sacristy. Bandini, having bumped into Francesco Nori, wise man and trade agent of the Medici family, pierces his stomach with his sword and murders him with just one strike.)

Descriptions of brutal actions perpetrated by the conspirators are also frequent in Pontano's *De bello Neapolitano*, where, because of the length and heterogeneity of the text, the narration is built up by the juxtaposition of several single episodes that trace the development of the war between the rebel barons, allies of the Angevin pretender to the throne, John of Anjou, and Ferdinando of Aragon. Pontano often indulges in portraying scenes of fierce violence, emphasising, in so doing, not only the viciousness of the conspiracy, but also, more generally, the savagery of military conflict. Thus, in this specific case, the

accent is on a particular kind of violence: the brutality of war, the cause of grief and death. This image, therefore, epitomises a broader and universal idea of violence, which, at the same time, is seen as a direct consequence of the political plot. Thus, the blame for the conflict is implicitly laid on the insurgent noblemen, who are responsible for the conspiracy and, consequently, for people's suffering. It is indeed noteworthy that Pontano often portrays scenes of callous military actions: plundering, gory murders, rapes. These crimes, according to the humanist's view, were mainly committed by the plotters' troops and only occasionally by the Aragonese soldiers; nevertheless, in the latter case, the responsibility for these actions is usually implicitly ascribed to the atrocity and violence endemic to any war, or, in the case of plundering, to the army's urgent need for money.[16] In the light of Pontano's tendency to home in on the most ferocious aspects of political conflict, it is not surprising that he devoted his very last treatise, the *De immanitate* (1502), to the topic of savagery and to categorising this degeneration of human instinct.[17] The *immanitas* is regarded as the most hideous human behaviour that leads the individual to lose his status of human being and to become a beast. The choice of this unusual subject as the topic of a theoretical exposition (the other treatises by Pontanto were all devoted to human virtues) proves the humanist's deep interest in both cruelty as a human component, although blameworthy, and the inconsiderate use of violence (which is what, literally, *immanitas* is).

In the descriptions of the plotters' attacks on rulers in the literary accounts of abortive conspiracies (which were never carried out because of their early discovery), the conspirators' plan is illustrated at length, such as in Alberti's epistle (§§ 21-23) and Orazio Romano's *Porcaria*.[18] In both works, once again, the accent is put on the plotter's violent intentions. Stefano Porcari had planned to attack the papal curia with armed men, carry out a slaughter (Alberti adopts the strong term *caede*, § 23, "slaughter"), tie up the pope and murder him. The aim of killing the pope is openly mentioned in the *Porcaria*, while Leon Battista, despite saying that Porcari wanted to kill all religious men in the curia ("omnem pontificiam turbam funditus extinguere" § 23), seems to leave the issue vague: he contends that the plotter planned to abduct Nicholas V tied in

[16] This approach informs the narration of the dishonorable sacking of the temple of San Michele (on which see Monti Sabia 41n20), where the humanist dwells on the soldiers' brutal raids, but explains that the king's choice of seizing the riches of the temple is due to the urgent need for money for the war, and he adds that, after the final victory, Ferdinando would give all the gold and silver back to the holy sanctuary (Monti Sabia 114-15).

[17] On the description of violent actions caused by war in the *De bello Neapolitano* see Monti Sabia 67-68. The *De immanitate* is published in *Ioannis Ioviani Pontani De immanitate liber*.

[18] Alberti 1267-68 (§§ 21-23); *Porcaria* I, vv. 235-319.

chains, but says that they perhaps did not predetermine to murder him.[19] Nevertheless, in Alberti's epistle, an even more emphatic description of the conspirators' evil intentions is put into the mouth of the foreign religious men who are part of the curia, the "barbari": the humanist depicts them as being deeply shocked by the plot and blaming all Roman people for the crime.[20] However, although Leon Battista admits to sharing the traumatic condition of terror in which all Roman clerics live, he seems to implicitly distance himself from the radical position of the curial foreign men. Indeed, in the second half of his work, he offers us a portrayal of the contrasting opinions that the different religious groups in Rome have on the conspiracy, but shapes it as a complex and unresolved comparison of conflicting perspectives, among which the author's viewpoint remains veiled. Nonetheless, the crucial role played by the idea of violence in the text (as an element that informs the plotter's words, nature, gestures and intentions) still surfaces and betrays Alberti's decisive disapproval of the conspiracy. This standpoint is also revealed by the extensive and studied use of the model of Sallust and, more generally, by the overall ideological overtone that permeates the work, which proves to be in complete opposition to any subversive attempt to overthrow established powers. [21]

In Orazio Romano's *Porcaria*, instead, it is Porcari himself who, after descending into a fantastic and morbid hell, tells all the tragic events and his evil plans to the infernal judge, Minos (and also quotes the speech he delivered to his fellow citizens):

Tunc ego mentis inops furiali concitus ira | Multa parans animo leges et foedera rupi | Exilii et furtim Latiam sum vectus ad urbem, | Infensus patriae dominoque parentibus et diis. | [...] Mox alios furto implicitos vel sanguine mecum | Ad mea tecta voco iuvenes, quibus omnis edendi | Gloria et aeterno vitam consumere ludo, | Pollicitis duxi variis, sermone furentes | Inflammavi animos [...].
Ipse ego iam dudum auratis vincire catenis | Aut ante ora deum sacrum mactare parentem | Constitui atque omnes in praedam vertere cives, | Extirpare genus, totas rescindere gentes. (I, 241-44; 247-51; 268-71).
(Devoid of judgement and overexcited by furious anger, I plotted plans in my mind, fled from the exile and furtively came back to the city in Lazio, as an enemy of the fatherland, ruler, ancestors and gods. [...] I call to my home many young men, entangled in deceit and blood, devoured by yearning for glory; I drove them with several promises to consume their life in eternal deception and with a speech inflamed their furious spirits [...]. I myself planned to tie with gold chains the pope and murder him in front of the holy gods and drive all citizens to plunder, eradicate ancestry and destroy the noble families.)

The sophisticated and vigorous epic style framed by Orazio Romano

[19] Alberti 1268 (§ 24). On the different plans, according to Porcari's confession, see Modigliani 42-45.
[20] Alberti 1268-69 (§§ 27-29).
[21] On the model of Sallust in the *Porcaria coniuratio* see Borsi 157-63; Grafton 307; and Osmond, "Catiline in Renaissance Conspiracy Histories" (209-13).

emphasises the dramatic undertones of the poetic narration. These stylistic effects are achieved by the employment of verbal references, *iuncturae* and wording drawn from the most eminent classical epic *auctoritates* (Virgil, Lucan and Statius), and, most significantly, by the use of a lively and expressive vocabulary that continuously recalls the semantic fields of violence and crime. This poetic technique is extensively used throughout the poem and ends up enhancing the dramatic tone of the narrative. In this and other sections, the role played by mordant images of violence is not only thematic or ideological, as in most of the passages previously analysed; conversely, in the *Porcaria* this factor is enlisted also as a stylistic component which, together with other rhetorical and thematic elements, builds up the overall texture of the work: its meaning, its political overtones, and its sophisticated poetic architecture. We may say, more precisely, that the refined stylistic texture of the *Porcaria* and its poetic intensity are produced also by picturing colourful and expressive scenes that represent and convey the idea of violence, by means of specific motifs, expressions, wording, and images which are embedded in the whole poem.

This stylistic trait clearly comes to light in the most imaginative and macabre scenes of the poem, which take place in an imaginary and ghoulish hell, inhabited by the typical infernal figures of classical literature, including Dante's *Commedia*: Charon, Cerberus and Minos. Violence proves to be the thematic and stylistic element on which the ghastly atmosphere of most descriptions rotates. In particular, the vivid representations of the infernal punishment inflicted on the conspirators are fashioned by means of images of great expressiveness, in a morbid style. Two of the most gruesome depictions in the poem describe the deaths of Stefano Porcari's accomplices: Angelo di Maso, Porcari's brother-in-law, falls off Charon's boat into the Acheron and is devoured by green snakes; his son Clemente, witness to that death, tears his eyes from their sockets with his fingernails and, once disembarked, falls down a cliff into the mouth of Cerberus, who devours him (I, 163-85; 205-16). Similar intense and horrific representations recur throughout the poem and construct both its sophisticated stylistic veneer and its ideological perspective, surrounding the whole narration of the conspiracy with a vicious undertone. It is not only the imaginary death of the plotters in the hell that is couched in emphatic and striking images, but also the depiction of the actual punishment inflicted on them by the pope. Orazio Romano, indeed, alludes to the conspirators' hanged bodies, placing them in a dark and gloomy setting and underlining the torment they suffered (I, 370-73). Moreover, the expressive image of plotters' leader who goes down into the hell in his dead body, with black bruises on his broken neck due to hanging, and meets the infernal ferryman Charon, encapsulates the idea of unforgiving violence which backfires on the guilty man (I, 154-55).

Violence is also enlisted as a stylistic ingredient in other humanist accounts of conspiracies, where the colourful and vivid narration of the events unfolds

through the caustic representations of ferocious scenes of inhuman brutality. In Poliziano's *Commentarium*, in particular, these images are shaped by an expressionistic tone that informs the portrayals of crucial events. If in Orazio Romano's poem the intense gruesome style created by images of violence permeates diffusely the entire text, in the *Commentarium*, the most emphatic and horrific scenes concentrate on the narration of the vengeance against the evil plotters. For example, Poliziano sketches the macabre and ghoulish depiction of the Florentine people who, in order to show their closeness to the Medici and support their revenge against the state's enemies, carry their spears around the city with pieces of corpses on the top (an image that is inspired by Suetonius *Vita Divi Iuli* 85, 1):

Omnia direpta, cadavera ipsa foede lacerata: iam ante Laurentii fores caput humanum lanceae praefixum, iam humeri partem attulerant. (§ 54)
(Everything is plundered, corpses are brutally torn apart: people carried along a human head or a piece of a shoulder on top of their spears and brought them in front of Lorenzo's gate.)

But probably the most intense and expressionistic image appears in the representation of the execution of the archbishop Salviati, who, hanged from the same window from which Francesco Pazzi had been strung up, in an out of control impetus before dying, bit his accomplice's chest, popping his eyes out of his head:

Mox et Pisanus praesul ex eadem, qua et Franciscus Pactius fenestra pendebat, supra ipsum exanimum corpus suspenditur. Cum deiiceretur (id quod mirum quidem omnibus visum iri arbitror, nemini tamen ignotum eo tempore extiterit), sive id casus aliquis sive rabies dederit, ipsum illud Francisci cadaver dentibus invadit alteramque eius mamillam, vel cum laqueo suffocatus est, apertis furialiter oculis, mordicus detinebat. (§ 58)
(Then also the archbishop of Pisa was hanged from the same window from which Francesco Pazzi had been hanged, right on top of his lifeless body. While Salviati was thrown down (I surmise that what happened will be considered extraordinary by anyone, nevertheless in my time it was certainly well known) — it might have happened by chance or because of anger — he stuck his teeth into Francesco's corpse and, as he was strangled by the noose, his eyes ferociously wide, he held onto the man's chest with a bite.)

These passages offer an emblematic example of the interplay between the stylistic and ideological functions played by violence as a literary element. As we have seen, in these humanist works, the political message conveyed by the comprehensive representation of the historical events is not only built by means of thematic and narrative motifs, but also by stylistic and rhetorical tools: the idea of violence, in this case, is the main constituent of both these literary aspects, thematic and stylistic. These elements are perfectly balanced and intermingled, so as to produce and put forward effectively a precise political view, which is aimed at condemning the plotters.

In particular, the passages aforementioned introduce another pivotal ideological factor which is framed and put forward by recalling the concept of violence: it is the harsh revenge inflicted on the enemies of the fatherland. This kind of viciousness proves to be parallel, although opposed, to the cruel actions perpetrated by the conspirators. For example, in the narration in the *Commentarium*, once the conspiracy fails, the whole city becomes the scene of ferocious reprisal against the plotters, who are captured and brutally killed. As we have seen, Poliziano indulges in the depiction of macabre images that represent the savage vengeance waged against the traitors of the state, such as the lengthy description of the torture inflicted on Iacopo Pazzi's corpse, which was unearthed twice, dragged around the city, abused by a group of young boys, and finally thrown into the river Arno.[22] In these representations, the plotters' viciousness is reflected, in a kind of mirror-like correspondence, in the violence performed by rulers, who, after managing to survive and protecting their government, react harshly to defeat their antagonists with the active support of their people. It is noteworthy that in Orazio Romano's epic poem, as we have seen, this vengeful violence characterises both the "infernal" and "earthly" punishment, underlying both the images of the plotters' hanged corpses and the description of torment they undergo in the underworld. So, in these humanist works, in light of the emphasis put on the picture of the cruel attack against the government, the unmerciful punishment inflicted on the conspirators turns out to be the emblem of a fair revenge.

From this point of view, the idea of violence that surfaces in these texts reveals its dual nature. The condemnation of the plotters, decisively stated through the denunciation of the heinous crimes they committed, is combined with the sympathetic representation of the violent vengeance they suffer as a fit punishment. This unspoken idea of *contrapasso* underlies the political perspective of most texts.[23] In these works the plot is depicted as a fierce subversive attack against the whole civic community and therefore as a threat that can jeopardise the common people's life. In view of this political perspective, the pitiless revenge inflicted on plotters coincides with the justified reaction of the entire state. Thus the two overlapping images of violence, which belong respectively to the crime and the punishment, coexist and foster the same propagandistic view. Consequently, it is not a coincidence that in most texts the common people play an active role in the reprisal carried out against the plotters and appear bonded and allied with their rulers. For example, in the *Porcaria* the poet represents some men as walking nearby the hanged bodies and mocking

[22] Poliziano, *Coniurationis commentarium*, §§ 82-85, pp. 66-68.

[23] Violent forms of political repression were already considered legitimate by the civic community in the previous century, as Ricciardelli writes: "Every form of repression implies the mutual acceptance, by members of a community, of the legitimization of the office which is doing the repressing" (66).

them with sarcastic disapproval (*Porcaria* I, 369-83). But it is in the *Commentarium* where the citizens take the most active part in the revenge against the attackers. As already mentioned, Poliziano indulges in depicting the Florentine people as raging against the conspirators' corpses, carrying pieces of dead bodies around the city, or abusing Iacopo Pazzi's cadaver for days. This element, as well as the whole narrative perspective of the text, corresponds completely to Lorenzo de' Medici's political strategy after the conspiracy, which was aimed at legitimising and consolidating his authority in Florence.[24] In the *Commentarium*, this goal is achieved by underlining both the isolation of the plotters and the strong mutual relationship between Lorenzo, who survives the attack, and the Florentine people, who back him and react to the brutal assault with the same violence displayed by the conspirators.

But in the complex representation of crime and punishment that characterises these works, another crucial element must be considered, which is opposite to the revenge: it is the concept of clemency. This is one of the most important princely virtues traditionally ascribed to monarchs in both classical and fifteenth-century political literature.[25] It is significant that in humanist texts on political plots clemency is regarded as a distinctive trait of political leaders in dealing with enemies, and, in some cases, it is evoked by the author in order to urge the ruler to be merciful with the conspirators. From this perspective, clemency proves to be the counterpart of reprisal. Thus, paradoxically, in works where violence is a cornerstone, its political antithesis, clemency, appears as a key factor within the same propagandistic perspective. *Clementia* is, indeed, the fundamental virtue of a just political power, which is violent and revengeful with the most blameful adversaries, but is merciful with people who deserve mercy. This narrative element also shows that the ruler's decision about the destiny of the traitors is totally dependent on his judgement.

In particular, clemency emerges as a crucial political matter in the texts on Porcari's conspiracy. In both Alberti's epistle and Orazio Romano's poem the papacy is regarded as a secular state and the pope is seen as a ruler who has to deal with threats to his government. It is no accident that Alberti ascribes to the pope attributes typical of monarchs, in particular the virtue of *clementia*. The humanist underlines the pope's merciful attitude in many passages:

> […] pontifex, cum per ipsa pontificatus initia instituisset quam posset plurimos sibi omnis conditionis homines conciliare omni qua posset beneficentia et facilitate, hunc alioquin honestum et presertim romanum civem beneficio devinciendum atque a turbidis consiliis ad spem honesti otii revocandum statuit mansuetudine. [...] ne quid pro suscepto instituto aggrederetur, quod non piissimi et misericordis esset, non extinguendam duxit

[24] On the political perspective of the text see Celati, "Introduction" 12-18.

[25] On this virtue in humanist literature *de principe*, see Cappelli LXXIX-LXXXI. Moreover, for the pivotal role of the idea of clemency in the process of centralisation of political power in the fifteenth century see Skinner, *Visions of Politics* II, 122-25.

hominis temeritatem, sed paulo cohercendam. (§§ 6; 8)
Numquam ferme inventum a veterum memoria, ut qui pontifex arma odisset, in arma incideret. Hunc pacis esse studiosum, in principes plus satis facilem, ut extrinsecos impulsores non multum verear, et perinde intestina quidem malorum contagia non multum momenti habitura censeam. (§ 35)
(The pope, who was just initiating his pontificate, was disposed to show mercy and try to reconcile all sorts of people to himself by acts of benevolence and tolerance. He wanted, therefore, to persuade this otherwise honest and certainly very Roman citizen, hoping he would abandon his criminal intentions for the hope of honourable peace. [...] As a man of great piety and mercy, in order not to do anything different from what he had planned, he decided not to punish the man for his dangerous behaviour, but to restrain him gently.
[...] Never since antiquity has a pope who hated arms had to fight a war. This pope is eager for peace, and more than willing to deal with princes. Hence, I am not much afraid of external threats and I think the plague of internal evils will subside.)

The idea of mercy is evoked as a fundamental princely virtue also in Orazio Romano's poem. In the *Porcaria*, as well as in other texts on Porcari's plot, such as Giuseppe Brivio's *Conformatio Curiae Romanae*, the allusion to clemency is directly associated with both the image of the just government of Nicholas V and the architectural restoration of Rome planned by the pope, aimed at reconstructing the city and renovating its buildings, fortifications, streets and aqueducts.[26] This ambitious plan is frequently celebrated in the literary works devoted to Nicholas V. But what is most remarkable is that in both Brivio and Orazio Romano's works the most powerful defense against subversive attacks is not only the massive fortification of the city but also the virtue of the pope, above all his clemency. In the *Porcaria*, in particular, the image of a compassionate and just ruler is recurrently recalled in the most eulogistic section of the poem. Although this element appears to be in contrast with the numerous pictures of the violent punishment inflicted on the plotters, the well-rounded figure of the fair ruler is shaped by means of these conflicting but complementary components: his right to revenge and to forgive.

In the intricate fifteenth-century political and cultural scenario, a considerable contribution to conceiving and spreading a new theory of rulership was made by humanist literature. In particular, as we have seen, in the most famous accounts of political plots the narrative perspective of the texts is aimed at conveying a specific political ideology and is framed by means of a complex and accurate employment of the idea of violence: a polyvalent element which plays a stylistic, thematic, and ideological function in all works. But the multifunctional role that images of violence play in this literary output also reveals the ambiguous character of this multifaceted concept, which is not easily

[26] On this architectonic plan see Westfall. Other important studies on Nicholas V's plan and the uncertain role that Leon Battista Alberti could have had in it are: Tafuri; Grafton; Burrough, *From Signs to Design* and "Alberti e Roma". Brivio's text is published in Tommasini 111-23.

classifiable in fixed categories. This ambiguity emerges clearly in the interconnected meanings and overtones that the opposed representations of reprisal of and clemency convey. Nevertheless, the employment of this multiform element proves to adhere to the centralised political thought that underlies all these works and that dominated in the historical background in which they were composed. So violence, as a polymorphic literary component, becomes the expression of the complex cultural and political horizon of the humanist age itself: an age of historical transitions, political evolutions and contradictory perspectives, which had a deep influence on the growth of sixteenth-century political thought.

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