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THROUGH THE EYES OF A RENAISSANCE PROPHET: FRA GIROLAMO
SAVONAROLA AND THE *COMPENDIUM OF REVELATIONS*

by

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B.S. University of Central Florida, 2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides the historiographical background and historical context necessary to undertake an examination of Savonarola's *Compendium of Revelations* and evaluate it as a work of the Italian Renaissance. It conducts such an examination and reaches the conclusion that Savonarola should be used as an example of a figure who, like the age of the Renaissance itself, represented a significant break with the medieval world while still being influenced by it. His political, social, and religious views all show both the influence of the medieval world and the underpinnings of the modern. The analysis is influenced by intellectual, religious, and micro history.

This Thesis is dedicated to Nancy Rauscher. Her advice and constant friendship came at a time when they were most definitely needed.

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars have expressed many different opinions regarding the nature of the Renaissance and, more specifically, regarding the role played by Fra Girolamo Savonarola in shaping Florence in the last decade of the fifteenth century. Some scholars have seen the Renaissance as the relative beginning of the modern age, a period that represents a sharp break with the medieval world that came before it. Others emphasize that for most Europeans, lives lived during the Renaissance were no different from those lived during the Middle Ages and bore no resemblance to our modern existence. There are also scholars who have portrayed Savonarola as a thoroughly puritanical medieval figure and those who see him as insightful and attempting to reconcile Christianity with the emerging modern world. All of these views hold at least some truth and are useful depending on the point of view from which one is examining history. This work, however, advocates viewing the Renaissance as a sharp break from the medieval world in which the underpinnings of modern world are visible, and offers the thoughts of Savonarola from his *Compendium of Revelations* as an example of this.

Chapter one of this work attempts to give the reader a sense of the development of Renaissance historiography in America, highlighting the influence of German scholars and the rise and fall of the popularity of the Renaissance in American Universities. By examining the historiography and the views of recent scholars we can see the ways in which the Renaissance, and Savonarola himself, are currently being conceptualized. Chapter two offers the reader a discussion of Florence, the center of the Renaissance, during its height in the fifteenth century. In this discussion the city itself seems to be caught between older medieval values and newly

emerging ideas. Both of these chapters should give readers with no real knowledge of the Renaissance enough information to comprehend, analyze, and follow the arguments presented in chapter three.

The third and final chapter of this study focuses on Savonarola's *Compendium of Revelations*, Savonarola's most autobiographical and overlooked work. The *Compendium* has been chosen because it perfectly exemplifies the contradictions in Savonarola's character. This work combines complex philosophical thought with autobiographical information and dramatic mystical sequences that leave the reader wondering exactly how all of them could fit together. Throughout the paper, the conflicted nature of the Renaissance as a time between the oppressively religious medieval world and the newly emerging modern one, will be highlighted and exemplified through Savonarola's own dual nature. Up to now scholars have only given brief descriptions of the *Compendium* in their works, although every Savonarola scholar has consulted it. The more modern scholars like Donald Weinstein and Rachel Erlanger make greater use of it in their texts while more venerable scholarship, like that of Pasquale Villari and Roberto Ridolfi, quote the work but do not even list it in their indices. Of all the scholars, Weinstein has treated the work most thoroughly. He built on Ridolfi's brief discussions of the reliability of Savonarola's chronological recollections. Even Weinstein's discussion, however, falls drastically short of a complete examination of the text.

This work will go beyond that of other scholars and provide a detailed analysis of Savonarola's *Compendium*. In order to achieve this, a microhistorical approach is used. Although this study analyzes an infamous figure, certainly not a member of the non-descript masses that are usually the subject of a microhistory, the same general methodology has been followed. In the same way that Carlo Ginzburg used inquisition records to construct the world-

view of a sixteenth-century Italian miller in *The Cheese and the Worms*, and that Robert Darnton used newly discovered letters to reexamine the loyalty of a supposed police spy who took part in the French Revolution in “The Grub Street Style of Revolution: J.P. Brissot, Police Spy,” this study uses the neglected *Compendium* to analyze the world-view of Savonarola.

The image of Savonarola that emerges from a careful study of the *Compendium* falls squarely between the positions juxtaposed above. In the *Compendium*, his ideas and perceptions make him appear to be an amalgamation of medieval and more modern ideals, while all the while attempting to live the most pious and Christian life possible. The influence of the medieval world, specifically of thinkers like Joachim of Fiore and Thomas Aquinas is unmistakable and easily identifiable. However, certain elements of his political thoughts, the ways in which he made his arguments, his style, and his company are all representative of a dramatic shift away from medieval ideals. By drawing on both the world of the past and certain elements of the world that was to come, the Savonarola of the *Compendium* shows himself to be a decidedly Renaissance figure.

CHAPTER ONE

TRADITIONAL STUDIES AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

The Evolution of Renaissance Studies In America

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, much of the work on the Renaissance has come either from American historians or expatriate Europeans working in America. In his article entitled “The Italian Renaissance in America,” Edward Muir remarks that, “In the United States, there are probably more specialists in the history of Renaissance Florence and Venice than there are in any other country, including Italy itself.”¹ Since this study ultimately deals with English secondary sources and with primary sources that, while written in Italian, have been translated into English, we will concern ourselves with English language historiography. The American historians’ time spent studying the Renaissance has been a tumultuous one. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the process of change seen in the discipline was the subject of much scholarly debate. In addition to Edward Muir’s article, William J. Bouwsma’s “The Renaissance and the Drama of Western History”² and Anthony Molho’s “The Italian Renaissance, Made in the USA”³ also offer revealing insights into the changing nature of Renaissance studies. The

¹ Edward Muir, “The Italian Renaissance in America,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol.100, No.4 (Oct, 1995): 1095-1118.

² William J. Bouwsma, “The Renaissance and the Drama of Western History” *The American Historical Review*, Vol.84, No.1 (Feb.,1979): 1-15.

³ Anthony Molho, “The Italian Renaissance, Made in the USA” in *Imagined Histories: American historians interpret the past* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998): 263-294..

works of these three historians provide a narrative guide that allows readers to trace the advance of the discipline as practiced in America in the twentieth century.

In their articles, Molho and Muir highlight the idea that the path of Renaissance studies ran parallel to the evolution of the Western Civilization course. It was a uniquely American course, and it projected itself into the field of Renaissance studies. The authors both argue that the Western Civilization course developed during the World War I era out of Americans' desire to see the treasured elements of their own culture reflected in the past. They identify the Western Civilization course as being an amalgamation of the select portions of European history that were considered relevant to Americans by its positivist creators. Muir and Molho emphasize the early twentieth-century American fascination with Jacob Burckhardt's idea that the Renaissance and Reformation were the beginnings of modern Europe and therefore of America.⁴ Molho writes: "For this reason, they [Americans] have identified in the Renaissance a historical moment which is especially akin – in its tastes, values, and seemingly endless willingness to challenge the moral priorities of the past – to their own society and ideology. This view still holds true for many non-academic Americans today."⁵

In the early part of the twentieth-century, interest in the Renaissance was found mostly among the general public, which shared Burckhardt's romanticized view. As Muir points out, there was little academic interest in Italy, and the interest that did exist was purely literary, focusing on Dante and Petrarch.⁶ Academic interest in the Renaissance was later cultivated by an influx of German scholars into American academia in the 1930s. These German historians,

⁴ For more on Jacob Burckhardt's ideas of the Renaissance, see the cultural history of the period that he wrote in 1856. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of Renaissance Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (London: Penguin, 1990).

⁵ Molho, 264.

⁶ Muir, 1097.

including Hans Baron and Paul Oskar Kristeller, brought with them a desire to look past the traditional limits of historical study and past the intellectual, military, and political boundaries that had previously limited the discipline in order to create a more intellectually, culturally and socially inclusive interdisciplinary history.

After World War II, as Americans enjoyed great prosperity and entered the Cold War, they began to look to and emphasize the aspects of their society that they believed were the most noble and important, namely individuality, republican government, and intellectual freedom, as opposed to the stifling and collectivist communist ideology. The desire to emphasize and search for the origins of these traits provided the perfect opportunity for the German scholars now working in America to put their characteristic fastidious German diligence to work, and to shape the course of Renaissance studies in America. Although the new German scholars were not specialists in the Renaissance, they all commented on it from perspectives that were molded by their older German instructors. Molho articulates the views of these instructors, explaining that,

For Dilthey, the Renaissance was an important chapter in the human struggle toward intellectual freedom, the beginnings of modern religious, political, and historical thought. For Troeltsch, the Renaissance represented a reaction against Christian asceticism; for Cassirer, it witnessed the beginnings of the modern scientific world view; for Goetz, it signified the advance of the bourgeoisie, and all the consequences of this phenomenon.⁷

These perspectives were similar to the idealized version of the Renaissance coming to prominence in America.

Many American college professors and administrators were not as willing as their students to embrace the new German scholars. These Germans did not have firsthand contact with most of the newer American students immediately following their arrival in the American

⁷ Molho, 274.

system. They were not able influence the students directly, but their ideas were nevertheless disseminated throughout the academic ranks due to their voluminous publishing.⁸ In this way, the German scholars both exercised influence on and were influenced by American academic trends. Molho identifies Hans Baron's *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* and Paul O. Kristeller's *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* as the two most influential of these works.⁹ Another work that certainly belongs on this list is Ernest Cassirer's *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, an edited compilation of humanist philosophical writing.¹⁰ These works led to an interest in humanistic studies on the part of the new American historians in and around the 1970s. Muir identifies the two most influential ideas generated during this time as Hans Baron's concept of civic Humanism and Felix Gilbert's theory on the origin of modern political thought. Baron's concept of civic Humanism asserted that citizens should be concerned with and participate in a meaningful and honest way in the functions of their government. He traced its origin to the turn of the fifteenth-century in Florence, pointing out that it was the result of attempts by outsiders to conquer the Republic. Felix Gilbert's theory argued that modern political thought was born of the efforts of thinkers like Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini, who attempted to theorize ways to maintain republican government after the fall of the Medici.¹¹ These works and ideas inspired many young students to travel eastward to the Florentine Archives in the latter half of the twentieth-century.

⁸ For a more complete discussion on the trials faced by German immigrant scholars, see Mohlo, pages 281-283 and his "Italian History in American Universities," *Italia e Stati Uniti: Concordanze e dissonanze*, A. Bartole and A. Dell'Omodarme, eds. (Rome, 1981).

⁹ Mohlo, 277.

¹⁰ Ernest Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. ed., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

¹¹ Muir, 1110.

The Americans who left to study in Italy were able to focus intently on the inner workings of cities like Florence because, at the time, Italian scholars were largely focusing on the rural countryside. Here again we see what happens when a particular scholarly group has very specific ideas about what should be studied, creating opportunities elsewhere for scholarly outsiders. Once they arrived, Americans set up shop in the *Archivio di Stato* and produced numerous works of inestimable value on the social aspects of the Renaissance. The works include, but are not limited to: Lauro Martines' *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists* (1963), which provides a broad study of social and political customs, Gene Brucker's *Renaissance Florence* (1969), which examines all facets of Florentine life between the years of 1380-1450 from the economic and social to the political and religious, Donald Weinstein's *Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (1970), which examines Savonarola and the affect that the city of Florence had on him, and Marvin Becker's *Florence in Transition vol.1* (1967), a study of Florence that was followed by a second volume some twenty years later.

In the 1970s and 1980s, however, other new ideas and intellectual movements emerged concurrent with the increasing democratization of the American educational system that would alter the ways in which the Renaissance was perceived.

Traditional Renaissance Studies, Their Failures, and the Emergence of a New Social History

The traditional view of the Renaissance as a movement – separate from the medieval period and linked to the resurgence of interest in Greek and Roman classics – met with powerful opposition in the latter part of the twentieth century. The idea that American democracy was rooted in a Renaissance past became problematic. Muir recognizes this, pointing out that, “the strongest trend in erecting grand historical schemes, however, had American democratic institutions built on the foundations of ancient and Renaissance Italy, and so overwhelming is the complacency in some of these pieces that it is hard to tell whether America or Italy is gaining luster from the association.”¹² Of course, history should not only be about contemporary benefits or gaining luster for your country. However, this raises the question: what should history be about? Over time, the focus of historical inquiry has changed from a cold hard examination of institutions and elites to a more comprehensive and inclusive methodology, focusing more and more on themes, areas, and individuals that were previously overlooked.

After World War I, the president of the AHA, William Thayer, openly opposed German historians and the German historical method that would later influence American studies of the Renaissance. Although he objected to the German historical method on the grounds that it stood for “complicity in the diabolical plan of German imperialism,” his most vehement protest was

¹² Muir, 1100.

against its “dehumanizing attributes.”¹³ It is doubtful that he foresaw or intended to facilitate the development of social history, though it did eventually emerge from similar objections concerning the importance of humanizing the study of history and placing emphasis on the average people of a given time. As the era of new social history dawned, the days of the Renaissance’s privileged position waned, and the words of Harvey Robinson, identified by Muir as the foremost proponent of the American conception of the Renaissance, would no longer hold true. Muir quoted Robinson as writing, “Only those considerations would properly find a place which clearly served to forward the main purpose of seeing more and more distinctly how this, our present Western civilization, in which we have been born and are now immersed, has come about.”¹⁴ Clearly this was no longer the case. This bold nationalistic focus was gone from the new practitioners of Renaissance studies. Here is where new history and new historians have pointed out the failures of past historical methodology. Chief among them is the final realization of the collapse of the teleological conceptualization of progress. As noted above, for many years Americans saw their society as the end product of a long intellectual and political tradition of thought that began in classical antiquity and experienced resurgence in the time of the Renaissance. William Bouwsma describes how this idea was attacked by those who were unable to clearly define modernity as the end product of a long chain of progress.¹⁵ He also discusses the idea of the Renaissance as an age of transition between the medieval and the modern. For this idea to be defended, one must be able to identify the periods before and after the Renaissance and show how it connected them. He describes a careful process of compromise

¹³ Ibid., 1103.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1105-1106.

¹⁵ Bouwsma, 4-9.

with medievalists in order to achieve a mutual understanding, and then asserts that no similar efforts have been undertaken to bridge the gap with the modern.

Bouwsma, citing Max Weber along with Clifford Geertz's *Interpretation of Culture*, identifies one possible defining characteristic of modern and post-modern thought to be the consciousness that human beings not only interact with, but also shape, the world around them, so that historians have come to recognize that they can never recover the past. While this has led to several philosophical and epistemological crises – chiefly the idea that we shape everything through the language that we use to describe it – it is also a powerful argument for the Renaissance as a moment in history from which modern thought emerged. Indeed, what is Renaissance Humanism if not the belief in the ability of human beings to determine truth and come to knowledge on their own, thereby shaping and controlling the world around them? Here we can certainly discern a connection between the Renaissance and the present, supporting the idea that the Renaissance is indeed connected, and is possibly a transition between, the medieval and the modern.

The problem of conceptualizing the Renaissance as an entirely separate age was further complicated by the introduction of the *Annales* in the 1970s. Bouwsma describes this problem in terms of the writings of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and his article “*L’histoire immobile*.”¹⁶ Le Roy Ladurie saw the period from the eleventh to nineteenth-century as one *longue durée* in which most aspects of life, influenced by agricultural and material limitations, remained largely the same. In this analysis, Bouwsma rightly points out that, “At most, the Renaissance is a

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

conjunction that is intelligible only in a far larger temporal context.”¹⁷ He goes on to describe the full implications of Le Roy Ladurie’s argument, citing passages and explaining that, to Le Roy Ladurie, what was important were the experiences and evolution of the common folk. The accomplishments of the elite, the previous focus of Renaissance studies, were significant only in terms of their interactions with other segments of society. Through Bouwsma’s analysis we can see the problems faced by the discipline of Renaissance studies, and can begin to imagine the ways in which the discipline would change.

The emergence of the *Annales* school and subsequent focus on the history of the disenfranchised, through civic records, brought about a decline in the study of the Renaissance by historians as the accomplishments of its elites were devalued. This happened as the status of the age itself as a separate and distinct entity was brought into question. The introduction of the *Annales* school and other versions of social history can be seen, in part, as a reaction against the historical practices of the past. Muir comments on this new way of approaching Renaissance history, saying, “A second renaissance of the Renaissance materialized during the 1970s, a[n] [extensive] resurgence in interest.”¹⁸ It is this resurgence in popularity among scholars that brought about the dilemmas faced by the discipline today.

New generations of historians would not overlook information that did not lend itself to tracing the origins of the modern West. Indeed, social historians brought with them many new concerns, and seemed to have forgotten the old. They were interested neither in elites nor in ideas that shaped their world. They were primarily concerned with areas of study previously neglected by the earlier historians: the histories of the poor, of women, of homosexuals, of

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

children, of the disenfranchised and their interactions with each other. These historians produced many inspired and enlightening works. Among them are Guido Ruggiero's microhistories and investigations into the crime, violence, sex, and superstitions of the Renaissance, and Richard Trexler's works on public life, children, social behavior, and identity.¹⁹ Carlo Ginzburg's cultural history has even attempted to extrapolate the worldview of Renaissance peasants and their popular culture from the diary of a miller placed on trial by the Inquisition.²⁰ The works of Joan Kelly-Godol in particular are shining examples of new social history. With one question she articulated much of what was motivating the new historians – “Did women have a Renaissance?”²¹ The answer she gave to her question was no.

It became clear to many younger historians that the majority of the people who lived in Europe during the time traditionally referred to as the “Renaissance” – roughly the late thirteenth through the late sixteenth century – did not have the same experience as the elite figures previously studied. As Le Roy Ladurie implied through his idea of the Renaissance as a *longue durée*, the life of most people changed very little throughout the period from the eleventh to the nineteenth century. What followed Le Roy Ladurie's conceptualization was the emergence of three general trends that signaled the death knell of traditional Renaissance studies.

¹⁸ Muir, 1099.

¹⁹ Guido Ruggiero's works include *Violence in Early Renaissance Venice*, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice*, and *Binding Passions: Tales of Magic, Marriage, and Power at the End of the Renaissance*, as well as a series of compilations edited by himself and Edward Muir including *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*, and *History from Crime*. Richard Trexler's works include *Dependence in Context in Renaissance Florence*, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, *The Women of Renaissance Florence*, and *Persons in Groups: Social Behavior as Identity Formation in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*.

²⁰ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

²¹ Joan Kelley-Godol, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, eds. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1977).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the first of these trends saw social historians turn their attention away from large-scale inquiries and unifying theories in pursuit of much smaller and more specialized studies. These microhistories focused on a single event, individual, or item and often provided insights that were undiscoverable by those pursuing studies that were larger in scope.²² Historians also reexamined their ideas about the government of Florence during the Renaissance. It became clear that, while there was significant republican thought on the parts of figures such as Machiavelli and Guicciardini, the government of fifteenth-century Florence was largely a veiled dictatorship or an oligarchy, which might not have been the true and direct source of our modern American republic. This led to the realization that Florence was an anomaly in Italy, and that other contemporary city-states did not follow its model closely.²³ Finally, as a result of this disillusionment regarding Florence, historians began to abandon the city.²⁴

These changes in thought among Renaissance historians constituted a crisis for traditional Renaissance studies. When the Renaissance was no longer viewed as the beginning of the modern age, Florence lost its status as the model of republican government, and the Renaissance lost its privileged position in American historical studies, as did the Western Civilization course. This is not to say that Renaissance studies themselves have declined. In truth, it is quite the contrary. Thanks to the efforts of a new generation of historians discussed above, we have a picture of the past that is more full and complete than ever before. It is a conceptualization that

²² On microhistory see *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

²³ For examples of works focusing on areas outside of Florence, see the works of William M. Bowsky, John A. Marino, David Herlihy, and Edward Muir on Sienna, Naples, Pisa, and Venice respectively.

²⁴ See J.R. Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, (London: Phoenix, 1977) for an examination of the Florentine government and the family that dominated it.

allows us to know much more about the people of the time. What we have lost, however, is the textual basis of our studies, and with it the interest of the general public. The non-idealistic version of the Renaissance, practiced by social historians, does not capture the imagination of the general public in the same way.²⁵ This has led to a decrease in the popularity of Renaissance studies among historians, students, and the public. Studies concerning the diet of the average Renaissance peasant or the daily routine of a Tuscan farmer are not as likely to capture the rapt attention of an audience as are tales of towering figures like the Medici or Michelangelo. These changes in subject matter and their consequences are what prompted the writings of William Bouwsma, Anthony Molho, and Edward Muir that are discussed above. They are the cause of the challenge issued by Muir to,

...emulate the ingenuity of our predecessors if not their conclusions, to rid ourselves, finally, of the battered and scratched Anglo-German-American spectacles of the republican and civic constructs, to envision grand sweeps of history without slipping on the blinkers of anachronistic models, to replace narrow parochialism with comparative methods...²⁶

They are also the cause of these statements and questions posed by Molho,

Fragmentation and erudition, not the search for an age's spirit, define current studies on the Renaissance...What is the future of Renaissance historiography in America? Will American scholars be able to imagine a concept comparable to that of modernity, in all its positive and negative valences, with which to root American culture in a past as distant as that of late medieval and early modern Italy?²⁷

Here Muir argues for the advancement of social and cultural history while Molho criticizes it and questions its ability to provide a future for the discipline. With these two somewhat conflicting

²⁵ Here it should be noted that the difficulty associated with learning the languages necessary to study the texts has also contributed to the retardation of the development of text-based studies of the Renaissance.

²⁶ Molho, 1118.

²⁷ Molho, 289.

visions, the future of Renaissance studies is uncertain. One possible, sensible, and appealing vision of the future has been given by a relatively young and new scholar, Chris Celenza.

Bridging the Gap between Social and Intellectual History and Reviving Renaissance Studies in America

In his recently-published work, *The Lost Italian Renaissance: Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy*, Chris Celenza has set himself to the task of reviving the vigorous intellectual debate that occurred among Renaissance historians in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁸ He identifies a major problem with the current state of Renaissance studies and offers some thoughts on how it might be fixed. At the core of the problem is the seemingly troubled relationship between social and intellectual history. Celenza discusses the problem in terms of misunderstandings. He points out, like others before him, that it is clear that the majority of the masses in Europe did not experience a Renaissance during the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries. But, unlike many others, he does not believe that this means that the intellectual musings and achievements of Europe's elite are somehow less valuable. He states,

My central presupposition is that intellectuals are important if we want to understand society; as a group they are no more important than other segments, but no less either. They frequently serve as linchpins in understanding fundamental societal concerns, such as the development of religious orthodoxy...Or they will often function themselves as proto-social historians, giving exacting and interesting observations of their own and surrounding social milieus...²⁹

²⁸ Christopher S. Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance: Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

²⁹ Celenza, xviii.

Here we see how social historians can make good use of intellectual historical practices, but the reverse holds true as well. Why then is there still such a rift between the two? The answer lies far in the past, according to Celenza, with a fundamental error in judgment made by the German immigrant historians who had such a profound impact on the study of the Renaissance in America. These historians, following the paths laid before them by their earlier nineteenth-century predecessors, considered the Latin writings of Renaissance humanists to be lacking merit sufficient to warrant true intellectual consideration. They ignored Latin texts while vigorously pursuing those written in contemporary vernacular languages, believing that only texts written in vernacular languages could truly express the spirit of the humanist philosophers.³⁰ Their oversight, however, has left the historians of this generation with a wealth of previously overlooked primary source material.

Latin works were produced by men such as Lapo da Castiglionchio the Younger, Marcilio Ficino, Leon Batista Alberti, Lorenzo Valla, Coluccio Salutati, Petrarch, Leonardo Bruni, Francesco Guicciardini, and their lesser-known contemporaries, could quite probably provide information of great value to social and intellectual historians alike.³¹ In the case of Lapo, he deals extensively with gender and the concepts of honor in society, subjects that certainly fall within the purview of new social and cultural history.

By examining and translating more of these sources, Renaissance historians can come together in the same way that ancient and medieval historians have in the past. Celenza points out that interest in Classical studies was waning in the early part of the 1970s, but was saved by

³⁰ Ibid., xiii.

³¹ For an in-depth discussion of the story of Lapo da Castiglionchio the Younger and his contemporaries, see Celenza, 123-133.

the decision to teach ancient Greek and Roman history and literature in translation.³² While both ancient and medieval historians have the luxury of turning to a large body of translated works – thanks to the efforts of their European predecessors – historians of the Italian Renaissance have no such luxury with regard to Latin writings. The translation and subsequent issuing of critically edited collections and textbooks would provide a great deal of information to existing historians, whatever their research interests may be, and also serve to recruit many new students to the discipline by offering them the same chance to sample the products of the Renaissance in their own language that is enjoyed by classicists and medievalists.

The ideas of this project were inspired largely by the thoughts of Christopher Celenza. This study focuses chiefly on the primary document written by Savonarola in both Latin and the Vernacular Italian. Although any student of Savonarola should be familiar with the *Compendium of Revelations*, historians have generally overlooked the work and failed to extract all possible information from it. In that regard, let us now turn to the historiography of Savonarola, a leading figure in late fifteenth-century Florence.

³² Ibid., 152.

The Historiography of Savonarola

The historiography specific to Savonarola, one of the most prominent figures of the Florentine Renaissance, followed a path similar to that of Renaissance studies as a whole, with periods of high and low interest and with the focus alternating between his role as a political or religious reformer.³³ Savonarola was the Dominican Friar who, with the power of his keen intellect, fiery oratory skills, and prophetic sermons alone, usurped control of Florence in 1494. Although he was eventually excommunicated and executed by Pope Alexander VI, even his enemies remembered him as a man piously devoted to his faith and to the city of Florence. For many, Savonarola was responsible for the truest period of liberty and piety experienced by Renaissance Florence, from the death of Lorenzo de Medici in 1494 to his execution in 1498.

Contemporaries of Savonarola such as Guicciardini, Benivieni, Machiavelli and an anonymous biographer known to scholars as pseudo-Burlamacchi, wrote about him while he was alive and continued to do so after his death. After his followers were finally crushed and the Medicis' rule was firmly re-established in 1545, the memory of Savonarola's political reforms was suppressed by the Medici principate. Meanwhile, his status as a religious reformer had been eclipsed by that of Martin Luther. In the mid to late nineteenth century, due to the

³³ For a supplementary discussion of Savonarolan historiography pre-1990 see Donald Weinstein, "Hagiography, Demonography, Biography: Savonarola Studies Today," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Sep., 1991):483-503.

prevailing anti-Catholic sentiment, Savonarolan studies experienced a period of resurgence similar to that of the discipline of Renaissance studies. It was at this time that he started to be seen as a forerunner of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. In 1863 George Eliot published her novel *Romola*, centered on Florence and the life of Savonarola, and in 1885 Professor Pasquale Villari's *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola* was published.³⁴ Although this work is still regarded by scholars as the seminal Savonarolan study, it met with harsh criticism not long after it was published. In 1889 Villari was the subject of a negative review by Edward Armstrong in *The English Historical Review*, which accused Professor Villari of being overly kind to Savonarola, arguing that,

He was, in Professor Villari's language, one of the Italians who initiated the true renaissance: he discovered the paths of the soul, as Columbus the paths of the sea. To him was due the only good government ever possessed by Florence. He was a master of statesmanship in all its details, the merits of the republican administration were due to him alone; its abuses were due to his retirement from political life, or to opposition to his will. His foreign policy was above criticism; he had for him the virtuous court of Ferrara, and against him the vicious court of Milan...He was an unswerving catholic, and his disobedience to papal discipline was within the lines any catholic might justifiably lay down for himself. His enemies within and without the state were prompted by the meanest and most malevolent motives, and their evidence is unworthy of credit.³⁵

After this slightly hyperbolic list, Armstrong continues by claiming that, "The time, however, has come in which this conception should fairly be reconsidered...much new evidence has been unearthed."³⁶ According to Armstrong, "The result of this research has been that a crowd of doubts and questions has been forced upon the minds of those who have to any extent watched

³⁴George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. Andrew Brown (London: Oxford University Press, 1998). Pasquale Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola*, 2 vols., trans. Linda Villari (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2004).

³⁵Edward Armstrong, "Recent Criticisms on the Life of Savonarola," *The English Historical Review*, Vol.4, No.15 (Jul., 1889): 443. This article is an excellent source of bibliographical information pertaining to the English, German, and Italian historiography of Savonarola prior to 1889.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

the development of this subject.”³⁷ The questions pertain to all aspects of Savonarola’s life. Chief among them were doubts about how much of the success of the Florentine republic could be attributed to him, and whether his downfall was really the result of nefarious enemy plotting or just the result of historical circumstance and the vicissitudes of Florentine political life.

Despite the criticism, Professor Villari’s work still stands as the most comprehensive and often-cited biography of Savonarola. It was no coincidence that it was published so soon after the revival of Renaissance studies by Burckhardt, or that Savonarolan studies continued to mirror the vicissitudes of Renaissance studies. The next important work, *Savonarola*, by Joseph Schnitzer, was written in 1931, around the same time that German scholars were bringing Renaissance studies to America.³⁸ Only a single major work was produced during the lull in Renaissance studies between the late 1950s and 1960s, an English translation of Roberto Ridolfi’s *Life of Savonarola*, in 1959.³⁹ Apart from it, new studies on Savonarola only appeared in 1970s and 1980s, with Donald Weinstein’s *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* in 1970, followed by Richard Trexler’s article “Lorenzo de’Medici and Savonarola: Martyrs for Florence” in 1978, and Rachel Erlanger’s 1987 *The Unarmed Prophet: Savonarola in Florence*.⁴⁰

Several influential books, both fictional and academic, were published in the 1990s and the early part of the twenty-first-century. In 2004 Sarah Dunant produced her novel *The Birth of*

³⁷ Ibid., 444.

³⁸ Joseph Schnitzer, *Savonarola* (2 vols.; Milan, 1931).

³⁹ Roberto Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, trans. Cecil Grayson (New York: Knopf, 1959).

⁴⁰ Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1970). Richard Trexler, “Lorenzo de’Medici and Savonarola: Martyrs for Florence,” *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 31., No.3 (Autumn, 1978), 293-308. Rachel Erlanger, *The Unarmed Prophet: Savonarola in Florence* (New York: MacGraw-Hill, 1987).

Venus, centered on Sandro Boticelli and young Alessandra Cecchi in Savonarolan Florence.⁴¹ In 2000 a collection of papers was published, titled *The World of Savonarola: Italian elites and the perceptions of crisis*, which was the result of presentations from the 1998 conference held at the University of Warwick to commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of Savonarola's death.⁴² The papers addressed religious, governmental, and artistic issues, both foreign and domestic, that concerned Florence during Savonarola's time. The contributors include most of the authors discussed in this chapter. Chief among the recent academic works, however, is Lorenzo Polizzotto's *The Elect Nation: The Savonarola Movement in Florence 1494-1545*.⁴³ Published in 1994, Polizzotto's work provided a great deal of inspiration for this study. In *The Elect Nation* Polizzotto discusses the ways in which Savonarola and his followers, the *Piagnoni*, faced their opposition. This examination allows a greater understanding of their influence on both the Florentine Republic and the Medicean Principate of the late 15th and early 16th centuries. The Savonarolan movement directly affected the political, religious, and social lives of the Florentines and the *Piagnoni* who were responsible for the movement after Savonarola was executed. Polizzotto's study focuses on the various methods employed by the *Piagnoni* as they sought reform, rather than Savonarola himself or his many high-profile persecutors. This focus provides a new perspective on an oft-studied period of Florentine history. The author's main sources on the efforts of the *Piagnoni* are the various works produced during the "Pamphlet War" between Savonarola's followers and his detractors. Works such as Giovanni Nesi's *De Moribus*, Domenico Benivieni's many *Epistolas*, Giovanfrancesco Pico's *Vita Reverendi Patris*

⁴¹ Sarah Dunant, *The Birth of Venus* (New York: Random House, 2003).

⁴² Sarah Fletcher and Christine Shaw, eds., *The World of Savonarola: Italian Elites and Perceptions of Crisis*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

F. Hieronymi Savonarolae, and Fra Simone's *Expositione Sopra el Psalmo 'Verba Mea Auribus Percipe'* are all used to show how the different members of the *Piagnoni* approached the task of carrying out Savonarola's visions of reform in different ways. They sought reforms via political pressure and religious pressure, in secret and in the open, through writing and through sermons. Polizzotto attributes the duration of their influence and success to their diversity and adaptability.

Polizzotto does not attempt to go beyond a study of the *Piagnoni* or to draw any larger conclusions. He sees early sixteenth-century Florence as a battleground for the followers of Savonarola and their opponents. This battle was over the political and religious future of the city and took place via a protracted series of writings, put forth by both sides. He provides an in-depth analysis of this 'pamphlet war' from the side of the *Piagnoni*. While he does not go into detail about the works produced in opposition to Savonarola and his followers, he does name their authors, the most prominent of which is Giovanni Caroli, and informs the readers where the works can be found. Here we can identify another existing gap in Renaissance studies. While the writings of the *Piagnoni* have been discussed in detail, many documents produced in opposition to them remain unexamined; these documents are the focus of this study. However, Polizzotto's book provides an excellent starting point for anyone wishing to look further into the complexities of religious and political life in and immediately after Savonarolan Florence.

The year 2006 saw two new additions to the field of Savonarolan studies: Donald Beebe's edited collection of *The Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*⁴⁴ and Lauro Martines' *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for the*

⁴³ Lorenzo Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation: The Savonarolan Movement in Florence 1494-1545* (New York: Oxford, 1994).

⁴⁴ Donald Beebe, ed, *The Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Politics and Religion, 1490-1498*, trans. Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

Soul of Renaissance Florence.⁴⁵ Beebe's compilation includes many of Savonarola's most important sermons and letters, as well as sources from his contemporaries, which are translated into English for the first time. It is an example of a translated work that will make Renaissance studies more accessible to the public, as called for by Chris Celenza. Lauro Martines' work does not add any significant insights regarding Savonarola or late fifteenth-century Florence but it does seek to explain many complicated matters, such as the nature of his preaching, the ramifications of the French invasion, the manipulation of the *fanciulli*, and the vicissitudes of the Florentine public, in terms that are easier for the lay public to understand than many of the previous scholarly works. This is not always accomplished, however, because of his refusal to move smoothly through a chronological analysis of the events. His main point of contention with previous scholars, if there is one, is with those who thought that the various political groups in Savonarolan Florence constituted political parties. He asserts emphatically that they did not.

Scholars and biographers of Savonarola have generally focused either on his role as a political or religious reformer. Lately, more social investigations have taken place regarding the reciprocal nature of Savonarola's relationship with Florence and its people. Earlier biographers and some more recent scholars have primarily used his sermons and letters to evaluate the man, coming to the conclusion that he was either a pious believer or a villainous deceiver. This study uses the relatively understudied work, the *Compendium of Revelations*, to determine how Savonarola saw himself and his role in Florence or, at least, how he wanted to be seen by his contemporaries. Before this can be accomplished, however, we must first develop an understanding of the intricacies of the time in which Savonarola acted.

⁴⁵ Lauro Martines, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Renaissance Florence* (New York:

CHAPTER TWO

THE STATE OF FLORENTINE AFFAIRS AT THE TIME OF SAVONAROLA

Changing Political Climates

During the fifteenth century, Florence became the most powerful city-state in Italy. This century saw Florence change from its old familiar oligarchic government to a mock-republic dominated by the Medici family. This mock-republic would experience several periods of time in which true republican ideals flourished, but the controls of government would eventually fall back into the hands of the Medici family and their supporters. The turmoil experienced during the fifteenth century had its roots in the events of the two previous centuries and continued well into the sixteenth century until the Medici family's position was solidified with the crowning of Alessandro as Duke of Florence in 1532. The political flux of fifteenth-century Florence ultimately contributed to the production of the prophet and political reformer, Savonarola, whose message offered answers and comfort to the Florentines in those uncertain times.

In the thirteenth century, Florence had endured the prolonged conflict that had spilled over from the lands of Germany between the Guelfs, who supported the authority of the Pope, and the Ghibellines, who supported the authority of the Holy Roman Emperor. In 1302, the schism between the "Black" and "White" familial factions of the Guelfs resulted in the poet

Dante's exile. The Florentines suffered two periods of dictatorship in the fourteenth century by Charles of Calabria from 1326-1328, and later by Walter of Brienne, Duke of Athens from 1342-1343. Shortly after, in 1348, the Black Death ravaged Europe. The plague had cut the city's population in half from around 90,000 to around 45,000. Even in their weakened state, however, the people of Florence did not return to the tyranny of Charles or Walter. By 1382, the leaders of the major guilds of the *Arti Maggiori* had established their own power in Florence and would maintain it until the rise of Cosimo 'il vecchio' di Medici. The fifteenth century brought many drastic changes to Florence.⁴⁶ The city resisted attempts by Milan to take it over and expanded its holdings to include Arezzo, Cortona, Pisa, and Livorno. Plagues in 1400 and 1417 had reduced the city's population to around 40,000 in the early part of the century, although it would grow to around 65,000 by the year 1500. The Tuscan countryside and its dominant city also experienced extreme political upheaval. This was largely the result of efforts by the Medici family to transform the republican government into a principate. The traditional Florentine republic began its collapse in 1434, when Cosimo insidiously came to dominate the city. In 1532, the goal of a Medici principate was realized when Alessandro was crowned Duke of Tuscany. The Medicis' constant attempts to consolidate power caused political infighting and led Florence to a century of revolving governments.

The Florentines had enjoyed a form of republican government for almost a century when Cosimo came to power. They had a constitution in place that was designed to prevent the formation of political parties and to prevent power from being concentrated in the hands of one man or group for too long a time, though it obviously failed to do so in the case of Cosimo.

⁴⁶ For a complete discussion of the Florentine government before 1434 see Gene A. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*

Through the constitution, the city was divided into four districts, which were each subdivided into four smaller areas. Each of the sixteen sub-districts had their own banner, giving them their name, *gonfalons*. The government was comprised of several councils whose members, elected from each of the *gonfalons*, served for very short periods of time.

The three most powerful bodies were collectively known as the *tre maggiore*. They were the *Signoria*, the *dodici buonomini*, and the *sedici gonfalonieri*. The *Signoria* was the highest ranking group of officials and it was comprised of eight priors, two from each of the gonfalons, and one chairman, the *gonfaloniere di justizia*. All members of the *Signoria* served for two months. The nine priors of the ruling council could impose fines, remove citizens from office, condemn citizens to death, and otherwise impose their will on the city through a two-thirds majority vote commonly referred to as “the Six Beans” because they voted by dropping beans colored to signify a yes or a no into an official container. This was their most feared power. In addition to the vote of the Six Beans, the *Signoria* originated all legislation. It was then approved by the two lesser bodies, the “twelve good men” of the *dodici buonomini*, who served for three months and the sixteen standard bearers of the *sedici gonfalonieri*, who served for four.

Two other councils also played a role in the legislative process. The *Consiglio del Popolo* and *Consiglio del Commune* had to approve legislation by a two-thirds majority. The *Consiglio del Popolo* had three hundred members and the *Consiglio del Commune* had two hundred. The members of both councils served four-month terms. In addition to these two councils, there were several other commissions that existed that made specific decisions, like the *Dieci di Balìa*, the ten-man warfare committee and the *Otto di Guardia*, the eight-man committee

(Berkeley: Bristol, 1983). For information post 1434 see J.R. Hale, *Florence and the Medici* (London: Phoenix,

devoted to preventing and prosecuting crimes against the state. Aside from these constant institutions, there were several other governing bodies that could be convened when needed. Various emergency *Balias* could be created at almost any time to deal with any issue. A *Consulte* could be called, assembling large groups of citizens to assist the councils in their decision making process. A *Parlamento* summoned all of Florence's male citizens to a meeting designed to produce a majority consensus to guide the councils. These emergency gatherings gave a voice to a surprisingly large number of male citizens in times of crisis.

The permanent positions in the Florentine government were theoretically available to any citizen who met certain qualifications. To participate, a male citizen had to be in good financial standing and a member of one of the seven major or fourteen minor guilds. He must not have served in the *Signoria* for three years, and must not have had any relative in the *Signoria* in the past year. All positions were filled by eligible citizens whose names had been drawn by lot. This system was supposed to insure randomness. The element of chance, however, was undermined by the *accoppiatori*, a close-knit group that decided whose names would be placed in the container from which the lots were drawn. During the fourteenth century there were somewhere between 5000 and 6000 thousand citizens eligible for office, with around 3000 positions coming open annually. This meant that at any given time, roughly ten percent of the population was eligible to hold office and that in any one year, around five percent of the total population could conceivably participate in government at a significant level.

There were various other qualifications, however, which ensured that political offices would reflect social status. The *gonfaloniere di giustizia* could only be from one of the major

1977) and Nicolai Rubenstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966).

guilds, as could the majority of the priors on the *Signoria*. Given these limitations and the ability of the *accoppiatori* to determine whose name would be included in the drawings for offices, the system was open to corruption and exploitation. In fact, the Florentine government more strongly resembled an oligarchy than a republic, and individual families could often exert a powerful influence over all governmental decisions. The Albizzi, with their vast wealth, had been the dominant family in Florence for most of the early fourteenth century until Cosimo de Medici ascended in 1434.

When Cosimo returned from the brief exile in Padua forced upon him by Albizzi sympathizers in 1434, the Medici, an extraordinarily wealthy family of doctors turned bankers, and their supporters began a long and gradual campaign to take control of the Republic by making gradual changes to governmental structures.⁴⁷ While Cosimo was returning from exile, the pro-Medici *gonfaloniere* and *Balia* burned the old list of *accoppiatori* names from which election ballots were drawn and created new ones. Whereas the old list had only one Medici name, the new one had nineteen. In 1458, after two decades of relatively prosperous Medici rule, minor economic troubles and disagreements over taxation levels made it clear that a change had to be made. Following much deliberation, a *Parlamento* was called and new reforms were instituted. Chief among these reforms was the creation of a new legislative body called the *Cento*. This body had one hundred members and could initiate legislation on war, taxation and similar matters. Those in power made one great concession to the people however; any legislation formulated in the *Cento* had to be ratified by the Councils of the People and Commune before they were enacted. New election lists were drawn up that were even more

favorable to the Medici and the other powerful families, like the Capponi and the Ridolfi. These changes, along with Cosimo's enormous and ever-growing personal wealth, allowed him to strongly influence the government without appearing to be a prince or a tyrant to the people he quietly controlled. This veiled dominance gave a certain verisimilitude to Florence's republican claims.

The one aspect of government that even those who were not fond of the Medici seemed content to leave to the family was the establishment and handling of foreign policy. Although this was most evident during the time of Lorenzo '*il Magnifico*', it began during the time of Cosimo. During his subtle reign, Cosimo received many personal communications and requests from the Papacy that directly concerned the government of Florence. He also hosted two emperors, John Paleologus of Byzantium and Frederick III of Germany. In addition to his role as a host to temporary guests, foreign ambassadors were usually housed in the Medici palace. Despite his efforts to further his control, Cosimo's time as the *de facto* ruler of Florence was a peaceful and prosperous one for the city.

When Cosimo died in 1464, his son Piero inherited his father's station and was well aware of the positive situation his city was in. Upon his election to his first term as *gonfaloniere di giustizia* in 1461, Piero said, "The state finds itself in such peace and happiness as not only the present citizens, but also their ancestors, had never witnessed or recalled. Business and public revenue are constantly growing, and bestowing greater glory and dignity upon the city."⁴⁸ Given their lack of opposition we can assume that the people were also aware that this prosperity was due to the efforts of Cosimo and his supporters. However, the greatest benefits were reserved for

⁴⁷ For more on how the Medici amassed their vast wealth see Raymond De Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the*

the Medici and their supporters. Alessandro Strozzi, a businessman from a rival family, remarked in a letter to an exiled brother that, “Whoever keeps in with the Medici does well for themselves.”⁴⁹ It was a time of prosperity for Florence and the architects of that prosperity profited the most.

This period of prosperity did not last through Piero’s short reign. In 1465-1466, there was a general economic scare that prompted an increase in republican sentiment among those families and members of government who were not firmly behind the Medici. During this time there was a movement to abolish the controls held by the reigning members of government over the elections to the *Signoria*, and one to abolish the *Cento* altogether. Many government officials signed official oaths against a government controlled by Medici interests, and eventually a *Parlamento* was called. Here again the people saw fit to establish a *Balia* that eventually reaffirmed the constitution as it was in 1464 under Cosimo and further suspended elections to the *Signoria* for twenty more years. Piero’s success in weathering the constitutional crisis of 1465 was witnessed by his son Lorenzo, who took over for his father upon his death in 1469.

Lorenzo solidified the Medici’s hold on the government and by way of his brilliant foreign policy and patronage, managed to increase the family’s prestige in Florence and throughout Europe.⁵⁰ It was during this time, in two stages of reforms, that liberty and the ability to participate in their government were taken from the citizens of Florence. With his

Medici Bank, 1397-1494 (Washington: Beard Books, 1963).

⁴⁸ Hale, 39.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ For an excellent examination of Florentine foreign policy leading up to the ascension of Lorenzo de’Medici and the ways in which he changed it, see Riccardo Fubini, “The Italian League and the Policy of the Balance of Power at

father barely dead, the Medici supporters pushed through legislation that waived the age limits for office, allowing the twenty-year-old Lorenzo to effectively take control of the family and the city. They also added a body of forty pro-Medici men to the *Cento*, canceled the right of the Councils of the People and Commune to vote on tax legislation, and reformed the *accoppiatori* so that they were elected yearly by the current members of the *accoppiatori* and *Signoria*. This effectively ensured the repeated election of Medici supporters to the high political offices.

The second round of constitutional reform under Lorenzo came after his return from peace negotiations with Naples in 1480. A *Balia* was called to evaluate the current tax situation and to reform the constitution. They created a new council of seventy men, staffed with Medici supporters, that would not rotate and would give their approval to legislation regarding all state matters before it was passed down to the Councils of the People and Commune. The addition of two new commissions, the *Otto di Pratica* who oversaw foreign affairs and the *Dodici Procuratore* who oversaw domestic affairs, magnified the power of the new council. These commissions were attached to the *Signoria*, and their members were to be selected every six months from the members of the *Consiglio di Settanta*. These drastic reforms weighed heavily on many Florentines, so heavily that the many festivals thrown by Lorenzo and the monumental artistic achievements of the city's favorite sons were barely enough to pacify them. When Lorenzo died in 1492 and his son Piero 'il giovane' took over, Savonarola had redoubled his anti-Medici, anti-secular preaching, and the people of Florence were beginning to yearn for their lost liberty.

the Accession of Lorenzo de' Medici," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol.67, Supplement: The Origins of the State in Italy, 1300-1600 (Dec, 1995): S166-S199.

Piero utterly lacked his father's political savvy. Although he was begrudgingly awarded his father's position after his death, within two years he and the entire Medici family were exiled from Florence. Since the time of Cosimo, the Medici had been steadfast allies of Milan and Lorenzo had worked to maintain a triple alliance between Florence, Venice, and Milan. Naples, however, even after Lorenzo's 1480 visit, remained squarely at odds with Milan. The nefarious Lodovico Sforza of Milan continued to petition Charles VIII of France to activate his long dormant claim to the territory of Naples. In 1494, Charles VIII did exactly that and crossed into Italy at the head of some 30,000 troops.⁵¹ When he reached Pisa and threatened to advance into Florence, Piero went out to meet him. Piero instantly capitulated to Charles' demands, giving him the keys to the major Florentine fortresses and control of the port cities Pisa and Leghorn. Following this, Piero was summoned to the *Signoria* and a riot broke out when he arrived with a cadre of armed men. Piero and the other Medici were forced to flee the city.

After the expulsion of the Medici, the Florentines moved to regain much of the liberty they had lost under the regimes of Cosimo and Lorenzo. Rival families and their supporters began to retake lost land and to restructure their government. The people then called for a more open constitution, as it was before 1434 when Cosimo came to power. By this time, Savonarola had gained tremendous influence over the people of Florence by correctly prophesying an imminent and terrible calamity – a prophecy that was fulfilled by the coming of Charles VIII of France – and because the people of Florence believed him to be responsible for keeping Charles VIII from occupying Florence. Due to his great influence, his desire to create a more pious Florence, and his distaste for Medici tyranny, Savonarola was undoubtedly at least partially

⁵¹ For a complete discussion of the French foray into Italy see David Abulafia ed., *The French Descent into*

responsible for the formation of the new constitution of 1494. The extent of this influence, however, is a matter of debate. Regarding his role in the constitution's creation, Burckhardt tells us that, "On the third Sunday in Advent, 1494, Savonarola preached as follows on the method of bringing about a new constitution: the sixteen companies of the city were each to work out a plan, the Gonfalonieri to choose the four best of these, and the *Signoria* to name the best of all on the reduced list."⁵² J.R. Hale speaks more modestly of Savonarola's influence, writing,

The constitution that emerged towards the end of December has been dubbed 'Savonarolan'. Had it been only that, it would have collapsed as his influence dwindled in 1497 or with his execution (for heresy and treason) in 1498. He affected the degree of support it gained, possibly its timing; he was, for the last years of his life, its supreme propagandist; but he was not its originator.⁵³

The constitution that was produced in 1434 provided the citizens of Florence with a much greater level of liberty and a greater chance of being heard by their government. New *accoppiatori* were appointed and new lists were drawn up for a return to the practice of elections by lot. A new council was created, the Great Council, which consisted of 3,000 members, who were eligible based on the fact that their fathers or grandfathers had been eligible for one of the three major offices. The restrictions on eligibility for office were lessened, roughly twenty-five percent of males became eligible for office, and the Great Council became the symbol of the new Florentine Republic.

It was during troubled political times that Savonarola came to power in Florence. It was also during this time that the people of Florence were producing some of the greatest works of art and philosophy in the history of western civilization. Having discussed their government, we will now look at the accomplishments and lives of the Florentine people, so that we understand

Renaissance Italy: Antecedents and Effects (Great Britain: Variorum, 1995).

⁵² Burckhardt, 357.

the people who lived in the city that Savonarola came to dominate almost as thoroughly as the Medici had before him.

The Welfare and Culture of Florentine Citizens

In any attempt to discuss the overall welfare and culture of the entire group of citizens in a city, it is necessary to divide such a discussion into at least two parts. In the case of Florence during the Renaissance, one must almost certainly view the sudden outpouring of artistic masterworks from men like Michelangelo Buonarroti and Leonardo da Vinci as well as the intellectual achievements of Galileo and the philosophical musings of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola with wide-eyed wonder. These were the achievements that inspired Jacob Burckhardt's idealistic portrayal of the age. In order to fully comprehend these figures, their works, and the circumstances in which they were produced, since a full and complete understanding should be the ultimate goal of any historical endeavor, one must also look to the anonymous masses and to the society and culture which produced such great and timeless achievements. An initial understanding of the general welfare and culture of the citizens of Florence can be achieved first through a discussion of the wealthiest statesmen, clergymen, and intellectuals. This is followed by a description of what life was like for the vast majority of people: the workers, the lower class, the women, and the children. However, it is first necessary

⁵³ Hale, 88.

to look at the economy of Florence in the fifteenth century so that we may understand how the rich got rich and why the poor did not.

In 1472, the Florentine Benedetto Dei wrote a letter to a Venetian merchant extolling the economic virtues of his city. In it he identified some of the most important economic industries and gave many interesting statistics. He wrote, “We have two trades greater than any four of yours in Venice put together – the trades of wool and silk.”⁵⁴ He goes on to state that Florence contains two-hundred-seventy shops belonging to the wool merchant’s guild and another eighty-three warehouses that belong to the silk merchants. In addition to these two trades, Dei identifies thirty-three banks, eighty-four carpentry shops, fifty-four shops in which stone and marble are worked, forty-four jeweler’s shops, thirty goldsmiths, sixty-six apothecaries’ and grocer shops, seventy-eight butcher shops, and a thriving wine industry that “would awaken the dead in its praise.”⁵⁵ Dei was correct in highlighting the prominence of the cloth industries in Florence; they were responsible for much of the city’s prosperity. In addition to the woolen cloth industry, many families, like the Medici, made their fortune in banking. There was also, of course, a large portion of the population that performed agricultural labor in the rural Tuscan countryside.

The conquest of Pisa in 1406 allowed Florence first-hand access to the sea, and the port-city became a vital part of the Tuscan economy. During the first part of the century, the emergence of a shipping industry allowed other parts of the Florentine economy to boom. As the banking families were opening branches in England, France, Spain, Germany, and all over Italy, they were soon able to reinvest their money into the Florentine economy by participating in

⁵⁴ Benedetto Dei, “The Prosperity of Florence,” in *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, ed. James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin (New York: Penguin, 1981):166.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

maritime trading. The addition of Pisa also allowed the cloth makers quicker access to remote marketplaces throughout Western Europe. The merchants and craftsmen of Florence took advantage of their newfound prosperity by using the freedom brought with the booming economy to improve their respective crafts until the goods that they produced became some of the most highly sought after and well made products in Europe. The combination of the quality of their goods and the relative ease with which they could be transported created an especially high demand for Florentine goods in France. Over time, this would create a dependence on the consumers of France that was so strong that it often kept Florence in league with the French crown against the wishes of the other states of Italy and the Pope. The loss of Pisa was a great blow to the morale of the Florentine people and the promise of its return was one of the ways in which Savonarola was able to gain hold over them. These economic trends continued throughout the fifteenth century until Florence became one of the wealthiest cities in Europe.

In addition to enriching themselves, the great families of Florence also sought to enrich their culture. Although many scholars of the Renaissance no longer see the patronage of the Medici and the other high-profile families of Florence as the sole cause of the artistic explosion that occurred in the city during the late fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries, these families were indeed directly responsible for enabling many of the great artists and thinkers of the time to practice their crafts without concern for their financial well-being. Without the indulgence and patronage of families like the Medici, it would have been impossible to elevate the painting, sculpting, and pursuit of Greek philosophy to the level of prestige enjoyed by true liberal arts of the time, rhetoric and mathematics.

In a letter to Paul of Middelburg in 1492, Marsilio Ficino wrote the following,
...If then we are to call any age golden, it is beyond doubt that age which brings forth golden talents in different places. That such is true of our age he who wishes to consider

the illustrious discoveries of this century will hardly doubt. For this century, like a golden age, has restored to light the liberal arts, which were almost extinct: grammar, poetry, rhetoric, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, the ancient singing of songs to the Orphic lyre, and all this in Florence. Achieving what had been honoured among the ancients, but almost forgotten since...⁵⁶

The upper class culture of fourteenth-century Florence was dominated by two figures, Cosimo and Lorenzo de Medici. Jacob Burckhardt, as he gazed back at the Florentine Renaissance with admiration, in his book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, identified this and wrote, “If we seek to analyze the charm which the Medici of the fifteenth century, especially Cosimo the Elder (d. 1464) and Lorenzo the Magnificent (d. 1492) exercised over Florence and over all their contemporaries, we shall find that it lay less in their political capacity than in their leadership of the culture of that age.⁵⁷ These two men are certainly the most famous examples of the Florentine upper class and, thanks to their fame in their own time and in ours, much has been written about their lives and lifestyles. Although there were many wealthy families other than the Medici, such as the Alberti, Albizzi, Capponi, Guicciardini, Pazzi, Soderini, Strozzi, Tournabuoni, and the Valori to name a few, we will confine our discussion here to the two foremost patriarchs of the Medici, as they were the first family of Renaissance Florence.

Regarding Cosimo the Elder, Burckhardt argued that,

A man in Cosimo’s position – a great merchant and party leader, who also had on his side all the thinkers, writers and investigators, a man who was the first of the Florentines by birth and the first of the Italians by culture – such a man was to all intents and purposes already a prince. To Cosimo belongs the special glory of recognizing in the Platonic philosophy the fairest flower of the ancient world of thought, of inspiring his friends with the same belief, and thus fostering within humanistic circles themselves another and higher resuscitation of antiquity.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Marsilio Ficino, ‘The Golden Age in Florence,’ *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, ed. James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin (New York: Penguin, 1981): 79-80.

⁵⁷ Burckhardt, 145.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Both Cosimo and Lorenzo immersed themselves in the patronage of both philosophical and artistic endeavors.⁵⁹ The arrival of Byzantine scholars like Manuel Chrysoloras and Giovanni Argiropoulos introduced the study of ancient Greek to the Florentines in the first part of the fifteenth century. The influx of ancient philosophical thought produced the first generation of Florentine Humanists; among them were men like the Chancellors Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni and the widely talented Leon Battista Alberti. These men were the first great thinkers of the Florentine Humanism, and they laid the foundation for the erudite and elitist intellectual Humanists that followed. As these men began to fade, the new generation of humanists was coming to prominence under the patronage of Cosimo after his ascendancy to power in 1434. After years of collecting manuscripts, many of them received after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Cosimo, with the help of Marsilio Ficino, founded the 'Platonic Academy of Florence' at his villa at Careggi. Here, under the guidance of the Neo-Platonist Ficino, many of Florence's greatest thinkers gathered for decades.

Although the rebirth of classical philosophy was monumentally important, the general public is far more familiar with the artistic developments of the fifteenth century. There were far too many great artists working at this time to do justice to, or even list here. Therefore, this section will focus on the most influential men working during the time of Cosimo and on their accomplishments. Foremost among the artists of the first half of the fifteenth century was Filippo Brunelleschi. He dabbled in all of the arts and made tremendous contributions to the artistic history of the Western world. He trained the influential painter Masaccio and, although

⁵⁹ For more on civic Humanism and the Medicis as its patrons see Mark Jurdjevic, "Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici," *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol.52, No.4 (Winter, 1999): 994-1020.

he lost the competition for the commission to sculpt the baptistery doors of the Cathedral of Florence, he was also an excellent sculptor and architect who trained Donatello.⁶⁰ In 1436, with the financial support of the government and Cosimo himself, Brunelleschi unveiled his greatest accomplishment, the dome of the Cathedral of Florence. Many before him had had tried and failed to dome the gigantic church. It was the single greatest feat of engineering since the days of ancient Rome, and at the time it was the largest dome that had ever been constructed in the Western world. Slightly less acclaimed but monumentally more important was Brunelleschi's contribution to the field of painting, which he had made some twenty-three years prior. Around 1413 he developed the idea of linear perspective, a painting technique that created the illusion of a third dimension on a two dimensional surface. With this one idea, a concept that seems so simple and that today is so easily taken for granted, he revolutionized painting, ushering in a modern era of painting that would achieve levels of realism that were previously unimagined.

Following the teachings of Brunelleschi, the painter Masaccio lived a short life but had a brilliant career. While Brunelleschi had invented the technique, it was his pupil Masaccio that put it to full use in his fresco *The Trinity* (c. 1425, Santa Maria Novella, Florence), using full perspective for the first time in the history of art. His other works, *The Tribute Money* and *The Expulsion From Paradise* (c.1427, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence), both found in the fresco series he painted in the Brancacci Chapel, revolutionized the way painters used light. He had the figures in his paintings illuminated from a single source of light, the actual chapel windows, foreshadowing the development of the technique of *chiaroscuro*, later put to such beautiful use by the Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci. Masaccio ushered in a new era of painting,

⁶⁰ For more on the lives of Filippo Brunelleschi, Masaccio, and Donatello see Leon Battista Alberti's *On Painting*

thanks to Brunelleschi's ideas of mathematical proportion and false perspective and perhaps some inspiration from the fourteenth-century master, Giotto.

What Masaccio did for painting, Donatello did for sculpture. The great master also owed a large debt to the teachings of Brunelleschi. Like Brunelleschi, Donatello spent significant time studying the ancient sculptural and architectural ruins of ancient Rome. It was Brunelleschi's influence that brought Donatello out of the Gothic style and allowed him to create something wholly new. Although Donatello would later go on to abandon Brunelleschi's style of sharply distinguished architectural and sculptural elements (possibly due to the influence of his partnership with Michelozzo) causing a great rift to develop between the two, Brunelleschi's classical influence can still be seen in works like his marble statues of *St. Mark* and *St. George* (c. 1415, Or San Michele, Florence). Donatello's other master, Lorenzo Ghiberti, who defeated Brunelleschi in the 1401 competition to design the baptistery doors, also exercised great influence over his style. This can be seen in his marble *David* (c.1405), which stood outside the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence as a symbol of Florentine patriotism until it was replaced by Michaelangelo's colossal masterpiece. Donatello surpassed the talents of Ghiberti just as he had Brunelleschi, and this can be seen in the marble panel *St. George Killing the Dragon* (c.1417, Or San Michele, Florence) in which he utilized an entirely new style of relief sculpting known as *schacciato*, which utilized much more shallow relief and was incorporated by Ghiberti himself during his creation of the baptistery doors. Donatello is most famous for his bronze *David* (c.1440's, Bargello, Florence) which was completed during the time in which he was renovating San Lorenzo for Cosimo. Perhaps his most extraordinary figure was produced outside of

and On Sculpture, trans. Cecil Grayson, ed. Martin Kemp (New York: Penguin, 1991) and Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of*

Florence, in between his stints with Cosimo. Donatello's wooden *Mary Magdalen* (c.1450's, Museo del Duomo, Florence) exhibits a level of psychological and emotional expression that has hardly been equaled before or since. Donatello died while sculpting the pulpits of San Lorenzo for Cosimo and was buried near his patron in that cathedral.

These three men, Filippo Brunelleschi, Masaccio, and Donatello were responsible for ushering in a new era of art in which the rich classical heritage of the West was reborn. In their art can be seen the first great steps towards realism. Despite the religious subject matter, the portrayals of the human figures in the paintings of Masaccio and the sculptures of Donatello are alive with a confidence and an inner sense of self-importance that mirrors the philosophical development of humanism that was occurring at that time among the great intellectuals of Florence. This group of artists and intellectuals most certainly had contact with one another, thanks to the patronage of Cosimo and the wealthy families of Florence.

Slightly less well-known but still very important were the philosophers in the Medici circle. At no time was there such a gathering of great intellectuals and artists as that sponsored by Cosimo's grandson, Lorenzo de Medici. In the case of Lorenzo and his group of assembled scholars, Jacob Burckhardt says,

The famous band of scholars which surrounded Lorenzo was united together, and distinguished from all other circles of the kind...But perhaps the best thing that can be said about it is that, with all this worship of antiquity, Italian poetry found here a sacred refuge, and of all the rays of light which streamed from the circle of which Lorenzo was the center, none was more powerful than this...of all the great men who have striven to favour and promote spiritual interests, few certainly have been so many sided, and in none probably was the inward need to do so equally deep.⁶¹

the Painters, Sculptors and Architects, 2 vols., trans. Gaston de Vere (New York: Random House, 1996).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

Lorenzo himself was an extremely learned man who wrote poetry and engaged in philosophical discussions with the greatest minds of his age. He was also considered by many to be one of the foremost art connoisseurs of his time. It was primarily under his reign that the liberty of the citizens of Florence was eroded, and it was due largely to his efforts and the enormous respect afforded to him by the leaders of the other Italian states that Italy remained relatively balanced and peaceful until after his death in 1492. Despite his central role in Florentine and Italian politics during the latter half of the fifteenth century, his first love was learning and spending time with the philosophers and artists of Florence.

Lorenzo had many great men brought to Florence while also nurturing the city's indigenous talent. It was his reputation and close relationship with Marsilio Ficino that brought the young Giovanni Pico della Mirandola to Florence, and because of Pico's influence that Savonarola was transferred to the monastery of San Marco. At home he nurtured the talents of the scholar Agnolo Poliziano, who became a worshipper of Lorenzo and the tutor of his children. He also looked after the painter, Sandro Botticelli, and the teenage *uomo universale*, Michelangelo Buonarroti.

Pico della Mirandola was one of the most educated men of his day. He could read Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew as well as the more basic languages Italian, French, and German. In addition to studying ancient philosophy and Catholic theology, he dabbled in Kabbala, Hermeticism, and mysticism. He was the second son of the tremendously wealthy Count of Mirandola, and as such was destined for the priesthood. Before the time came to become a man of the cloth, Pico decided that his love of worldly things and of learning should be nurtured and not stifled by a pious monastic life. He studied under Ficino at the villa at Careggi and after spending time in Rome, composed one of the foremost works of humanist thought.

Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* was originally written to be the opening address at a large gathering of scholars, philosophers, and theologians in Rome. They were to gather there to participate in Pico's defense of his nine hundred theses, a work containing philosophical propositions and ideas inspired by Pico's vast knowledge of many philosophical schools of thought. Unfortunately, the *Oration* was never given because the disputation never took place. Pope Innocent VIII and a specially appointed commission deemed many of his theses heretical. Pico's *Oration* warrants a lengthy quote here because, with the aid of a few clarifying words, it serves to explain intellectual Renaissance Humanism almost single-handedly.

For why should we not admire more the angels and the blessed choirs of Heaven? At last it seems to me that I have come to understand why man is the most fortunate of creatures and consequently worthy of all admiration and what precisely is that rank which is his lot in the universal chain of Being – a rank to be envied not only by brutes but even by the stars and by minds beyond this world. It is a matter past faith and a wondrous one. Why should it not be? For it is on this very account that man is rightly called and judged a great miracle and a wonderful creature indeed.⁶²

In this excerpt, one can notice Pico's invocation of the humanist theme concerning the importance of human beings in the scheme of the universe and their central place in it. It is also important to note that, despite his humanist ideas, he is also making a Biblical argument here. He also exhibits the internal conflicts between medieval religion and the emerging humanist philosophy seen in Savonarola and throughout the Renaissance. He also goes on to say that, "The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hands we have placed thee, shall ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature."⁶³ This passage reveals

⁶² Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, "Oration on the Dignity of Man," in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, trans. Elizabeth Livermore Forbes, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948): 223.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 225.

exactly what humanists believed was so special about humanity – the ability to make choices and better oneself. Near the end of his oration he asserts that,

On man when he came to life the Father conferred the seeds of all kinds and the germs of every way of life. Whatever seeds each man cultivates will grow to maturity and bear in him their own fruit. If they be vegetable, he will be like a plant. If sensitive, he will become brutish. If rational, he will grow into a Heavenly being. If intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God. And if, happy in the lot of no created thing, he withdraws into the center of his own unity, his spirit, made one with God, in the solitary darkness of God, who is set above all things, shall surpass them all.⁶⁴

Finally, Pico points out the possible fates that await mankind as they put their will to use. Anything from atrophy to oneness with God awaits humankind at the end of their journey, depending on how they chose to live. We can also see here a great admiration for intellectual pursuits and a strong Neo-Platonic strain of thought. In these three passages, the soul of Florentine Humanism is laid bare. A deep and abiding respect for both the potential of mankind and for the realization of that potential through philosophy and the study of the classics were at the core of Humanist thought.⁶⁵

In Lorenzo's time, as in Cosimo's, the Humanist thinkers were outdone by their artistic contemporaries. Chief among the artists in Lorenzo's circle was the daring Sandro Botticelli. Just as the Humanists were shifting the focus of philosophy away from the church, Botticelli emerged to do the same thing for painting. Under the patronage of Lorenzo, Botticelli completed the first two masterpieces of the Renaissance whose theme was not Christian. His *Primavera* (c.1478, Medici villa, Florence) and *Birth of Venus* (c.1482, Medici villa, Florence) both deal

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ For more on Italian Renaissance Humanism see Hans Baron, *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism: Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought*. 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance," *Byzantion*, XVII (1944-1945): 346-374, and Charles G. Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

with mythological subjects, and they are layered with allegorical symbolism. They have not completely been deciphered or explained but many think that they illustrate the attempt to reconcile the Christian and classical ideas. As his career progressed, however, he became increasingly more pious and devout. In 1481, he went to Rome to paint the walls of the Sistine Chapel. In the later stages of his life, he developed an intense religious devotion to Savonarola.

Both Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Sandro Botticelli became devout followers of Savonarola. Lorenzo can be seen as the patron of all three, having brought Savonarola to Florence to gain prestige for his family's token monastery of San Marco and having funded Pico and Botticelli. After the death of Lorenzo and the exile of Piero, most of Florence fell under the spell of Savonarola. Pico joined his monastery and died shortly afterwards, and many other artists and philosophers turned back to the Church without their worldly patron to control the city and champion the liberal arts.

The wealthy citizens and artists were not the only ones to succumb to Savonarola's preaching or the only participants in the culture that the friar was trying to conquer. The majority of Florentine citizens became enamored with the fiery Dominican as well. These were people who had very little wealth and almost no time to contemplate art and philosophy. In order to properly understand both the significance of the accomplishments of the upper class and the ease with which the general population was converted from a worldly Renaissance city to a piously devout theocratic republic, we must also look at what day-to-day life was like for an average person in Florence.

The vast majority of Florentines lived a life that was significantly less glamorous than the great figures discussed above.⁶⁶ Very few of the artistic and philosophical breakthroughs achieved in Florence ever filtered down to the men and women of the lower classes. Day-to-day life was one mundane routine repeated over and over until death (usually before forty years of age). Let us examine, in as close of an approximation as possible, what life was like for the majority of the Florentines.

There was a developing merchant class in Florence, comprised of various artisans and guild workers. The work of these men in industries like clothmaking and goldsmithing produced the bulk of the revenue for the Florentine economy. Most of Florence developed around these emerging craftsmen, who made up something like a middle class. In fact, the development of the city itself was highly influenced by them. Florence was originally built on an old Roman plan, however, as the population grew the city expanded to accommodate the swelling numbers of workers. A great wall was built in the early fourteenth century and the city grew to reach it in less than a hundred years. Houses very often had workshops attached to them and were situated almost directly off the street in order to facilitate easy trade and business. Most of the workers' homes were situated with their fellow forming streets or districts that came to be centers for their respective trade. The homes of the very wealthy were not often segregated from the masses; usually they were built right alongside of more average homes, the one exception being the rather wealthy *Via Maggio*.

The typical home was usually sparsely furnished. The furniture was usually wooden, and the eating utensils were earthenware. Most homes had beds with straw mattresses, wardrobes for

⁶⁶ For more on the life of the average person during the Renaissance see Gene Brucker, Carlo Ginzburg, J.R. Hale,

clothes, and a marriage chest that contained the family linens. The home also usually contained a wooden cradle, which was often the centerpiece, and was an object that many families were very proud of. The children generally slept together, and the parents slept in a separate room when space allowed. Generally, the only light source for the homes was windows, lanterns were very smoky and candles were not very bright, so this meant that families had to rise and retire with the sun.

When the family awoke, they ate a small and frugal breakfast at the main table. There was no formal dining area set apart in most homes, only a main table situated in whatever way allowed the most free space. After breakfast the husband would go to work, often accompanied by sons old enough to do the labor, and the daughters would see the mother for the division of household chores. Here we can see how men and women lived very different lives. The men were expected to work and provide money for the family, supervising the family's business, securing its advancement and planning the education of the male children. The mother was expected to stay home and run the household. Her duties included cooking, cleaning, tending to the children, sewing clothes and linens, and directing any domestic servants or slaves that the family might have had. If the husband could make it home for lunch, the family enjoyed a large midday meal together. The typical Florentine diet was comprised of bread, beans, millet porridge, soup, chestnuts, macaroni, and salad. Bacon for the bread or pork or fowl for stews were considered great luxuries. Spices from the east were also highly sought after by Florentine diners. The poor generally only enjoyed diluted garlic sauces but wealthier folks often used saffron, cinnamon, pepper, ginger, nutmeg and the like to season their foods. After the midday

Edward Muir, Guido Ruggiero, and Richard Trexler, along with many others too numerous to list here.

meal, the family would resume their labors and gather together again before sundown for a supper that was usually only half as large as their previous meal. There was very little time for recreation or enjoyment considering the average family retired to sleep soon after the daylight faded.

There was not much that could happen that would break the routine of most of the Florentine working class. Sundays were free days and nearly everyone attended a church service (during the time of Savonarola, many thousands would flock to see him preach for two hours or more). The people also enjoyed occasional raucous celebrations during their festivals and carnivals that took place on the various days dedicated to the Catholic saints. On June twenty-fourth, the day of the patron saint of Florence St. John the Baptist, particularly large celebrations would be held. The people would often use their Sundays and festival days to celebrate important family events such as weddings and christenings. Christenings were incredibly important to Florentine families because they were the recognition and celebration of a new member whose labor would be a very valuable resource to the family.

The constant recognition of these religious holidays shows how important religion was to the Florentines. In fifteenth-century Florence, there were two distinct religions: the religion of the people and the religion of educated men like Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. The people went to church on Sundays, observed the holidays, and followed church teachings as they were taught by friars like Savonarola. The upper class Florentines questioned and reinvented their religion on a regular basis, often prompting charges of blasphemy and heresy. Eventually, in the time of Cosimo, these men were able to achieve a high degree of respect and control over the education of upper-class youths. Whereas the normal Florentine children only learned trades,

the children of the wealthy often received high quality educations from some of the greatest thinkers and philosophers of their time.

These educations were, of course, reserved primarily for male children. The average woman was even more limited than her male counterpart when it came to choices.⁶⁷ For the most part, women were daughters serving their father's house, wives serving their husband's house, widows provided for by their family's generosity or the state, prostitutes enjoying slightly more freedom but enduring great scorn, or nuns serving God rather than a husband or father. The life of a noble woman was, of course, significantly easier than that of the average woman. A noble woman had a higher chance of being able to make many of her own decisions and to receive an education or practice the arts, but this was the exception in Florence, not the rule. In Florence, especially during the time of Savonarola, women were also forced to attend separate church services and were forbidden to influence political or religious affairs.

Now that we have examined the political, cultural, and social lives of the Florentines, we will examine the history of the Catholic Church so that we may better understand the religious environment in which Savonarola acted.

⁶⁷ For more on women in the Renaissance see Richard Trexler, *The Women of Renaissance Florence* (Ashville: Pegasus, 1998) and Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

Disturbances in the Catholic Church and the Emergence of Savonarola

The fifteenth century was a brief period of relative stability for the Catholic Church. It was a time sandwiched between the great controversies of the French Popes in the fourteenth century and the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth. It was during this time that the Church became more involved with the secular affairs of other European nations and that it began its descent, fueled by the secular ambitions of its leaders and the varying demands of the other European heads of state. The echoes of the tribulations of the fourteenth century were felt long afterwards. The memories of the Babylonian Captivity, The Great Schism, and the ideas of reform-minded theologians like Jan Hus and John Wycliffe inspired men like Savonarola and Luther after him.⁶⁸

The Babylonian Captivity began in 1305 with the election of a French Pope, Clement V. He was elected to his office due to tremendous pressure put on the College of Cardinals by the French King Philip IV. In 1307, Clement V moved the office of the Papacy to the French town of Avignon. There the Popes worked closely with the French government but were put under

⁶⁸ For more information on these events see Joseph Lynch, *The Medieval Church: Brief History* (New York: Longman, 1992), James MacCaffrey, *History of the Catholic Church from the Renaissance to the French Revolution*

great pressure to raise money to maintain control of and make up for the revenue losses of the Papal States. This, in turn, led to a massive increase in the practices of simony and the selling of indulgences. The practice became so commonplace that one of Clement V successors, Clement VI, was heard to say, "I would sell a bishopric to a donkey if the donkey had enough money."⁶⁹ This trend of greed within the Church led to the reformative movements of men like Jan Hus, Savonarola, and Martin Luther. Although the Papacy eventually returned to Rome in 1376 with Pope Gregory XI, the practices of selling Church offices and indulgences did not stop. In fact, the reformative efforts of his successor, Urban VI, led to an even greater catastrophe.

In 1378, the French members of the College of Cardinals voted Urban VI's election invalid, claiming that the Italian Pope was elected under pressure exerted by Roman mobs. They then elected their own French Pope and moved him back to Avignon. This, once again, led to great strife and confusion as the rival Popes excommunicated one another and denounced their rival's followers. Europe eventually divided into two camps, split along the lines of the sundered Papacy. The French Popes rallied all of France, Aragon, Naples, Navarre, Portugal, Scotland, and Sicily to their cause while the Italians were backed by England (which was locked in the Hundred Years War with France), Flanders, The Holy Roman Empire, Ireland, and most of Northern and Central Italy. With the nations of Europe so clearly divided, The Great Schism could have caused them to engage in a continental war or drawn them into the conflict between England and France. This possibility was averted, however, by the election of a third Pope in Pisa.

(New York: Ayer Company, 1970), and Francis Oakley, *The Western Church in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979).

⁶⁹ Lynch, 176.

The Pisan Council voted to depose both Popes and elected a third. Although this allowed Europe to avoid a great conflict, it nearly destroyed the Catholic Church. For five years chaos reigned as three Popes presided over the Catholic faithful. The Schism was finally mended in 1414 when the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund of Luxemburg summoned the Council of Constance. After much debate all three Popes were deposed and a new Pope, Martin V, was named head of the Church. This ended the Great Western Schism. However, it ushered in the beginning of a new century in which reformers like Savonarola and Martin Luther would formulate their ideas and positions.

One of the early reformers who was present at the Council of Constance and whose ideas were consulted and adopted by both Savonarola and Martin Luther was Jan Hus. Hus was an extremely learned and devout Bohemian cleric. He had served as rector of the University at Leipzig and was a respected intellectual and theologian. He was a passionate believer in many ideas of the Oxford theologian John Wycliffe (c. 1325-1384). The two most radical ideas that the pair shared were their beliefs that each individual had a direct relationship with God, and that the selling of indulgences was wrong. Their idea of personal relationships with God directly threatened the power of the priesthood in their role as intercessors. The selling of indulgences, popularized while the Papacy was in France, was also abhorrent to the would-be reformers. They saw it as a blatant attempt to exploit the masses and to make money that was devoid of any actual spiritual significance or power. These ideas, along with Hus' insistence that the Church act on them and immediately institute reforms, eventually earned him the wrath of the Papacy.

In 1410-1411, the Catholic Church attacked Hus in much the same way as they would Savonarola in the 1490s. They ordered him to stop preaching, excommunicated him, and eventually threatened his city with the same sanctions. In 1414, he was summoned to the

Council of Constance. He was tried and executed by the Council in 1415. In this way, the Catholic Church set the precedent for dealing with troublesome reformers.

The trials and tribulations faced by the Roman Catholic Church during the Renaissance ultimately led to the sundering of the Western European faithful in 1517 by Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. However, there were many clergymen who sought, like Hus, to reform the Church before the time of Luther. Among these would-be reformers was the Dominican monk Fra Girolamo Savonarola.

The boy who would become Fra Girolamo Savonarola and who would turn Renaissance Florence, a city at the height of its decadence, into a pious and religious place, was born in Ferrara in 1452. He was born into a middle class family of physicians. His biographers tell us that he was also studying medicine at the University of Ferrara when he came to his life's great turning point.⁷⁰ His love for one of the illegitimate daughters of the Strozzi family was rudely rebuked. This spurning of his love played a key role in his decision to abandon his studies and to seek the priesthood, to become a healer of souls rather than bodies. He entered the priesthood at the age of twenty and spent many years wandering, studying, and preaching in various northern and central Italian cities. He even stayed for a brief while in Florence during the 1480s. By all accounts, his preaching was considered to be tremendously unsuccessful during this time. It was not until he was called back to Florence in 1490, through the influence of Lorenzo de' Medici and probably due to the influence of their mutual acquaintance Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, that his sermons became popular and took on the fiery, prophetic, and millenarian tone for which they became famous.

Savonarola's calls for a more ascetic existence and a stricter following of the Bible's guidance, along with his fiery prophecies of Florence's coming calamities somehow endeared him to the Florentine public, and he was made prior of San Marco in 1491. Shortly afterwards, in 1492, Lorenzo de' Medici died and his son Piero became head of the family. Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia was also elected to the papacy in this year. Piero did not possess the political support of his father. His lack of political capital enabled Savonarola to redouble his attacks on the ostentatious lives led by the Medici and the other leading families of Florence. Rodrigo Borgia, as Pope Alexander VI, quickly surpassed the extravagances of the families of Florence and fathered numerous illegitimate children, whom he doted on. This was, of course, offensive to the religious sensibilities of men like Savonarola who clung to traditional Catholic beliefs that priests should remain celibate and certainly not flaunt their indiscretions. As prior of San Marco, Savonarola was intimately involved with these events, and they directly inspired his fiery orations. As prior, he began the prophetic and denunciatory preaching that would eventually enthrall the Florentine public and earn the enmity of the Catholic Church.

In 1494, Piero's political ineptness resulted in a French invasion, the expulsion of the Medici from Florence, and the drafting of the new republican constitution that was heavily influenced by Savonarola. At the time Charles VIII of France invaded Italy and threatened Florence, Savonarola had been prophesizing imminent disaster for more than a year. The timely arrival of the French gave Savonarola's prophecies a certain amount of legitimacy in the eyes of the public. This, combined with the public's perception of Savonarola as the one responsible for protecting them from the French, gave him tremendous credibility and prestige among the people

⁷⁰ For information on the primary biographies of Savonarola see the discussion of the historiography of the

of Florence. The *Signoria* itself repeatedly turned to him, appointed him head of the negotiating team that was sent to Charles VIII, and routinely called on him to convince Charles to end the occupation of Florence. Savonarola won over Charles and achieved these goals in the same manner in which he had captured the hearts and minds of the people of Florence: he used his prophetic rhetoric. He reminded Charles of his holy mission to aid in the cleansing of the faith and what would happen should he ignore his calling. He told him that he was the new Cyrus, the new sword of God, sent to strike down his enemies in Italy. Savonarola managed to convince Charles to leave the city and to consider giving back Pisa, while still maintaining the Florence's traditional pro-French political stance. This so ingratiated him to the Florentine government and public, that afterwards his hold on them became almost complete. Indeed, his influence was so great that he convinced the masses of Florentines to abandon the artistic, philosophical, and mercantile achievements that were their pride and joy in favor of a more simple and pious life.

Savonarola used his newfound influence to call for more stringent moral guidelines in the city and even to help push through a more republican constitution. He called for a reform of the Church and of the entire city of Florence itself, saying that Florence had been chosen by God. Perhaps the most astonishing and interesting of Savonarola's achievements was the manner in which he so totally transformed the nature of the city and its people. These were people who were well aware of their own place in Europe as the center of new artistic and intellectual achievements and who viewed the achievements, along with their economic successes, as being of paramount importance. During the span of just a few years Savonarola was able to turn many of the people away from the humanist philosophies, the new works of art, and the 'decadent'

celebrations of prosperity, and create in them a fervent passion for a more Christ-like and spiritual life.

The event that most clearly epitomizes this change was the Bonfire of the Vanities in the *Piazza della Signoria* on the night of February 7, 1497. Having already won over the people with his prophecies and assisted them in creating a new constitution, Savonarola set about completely reinventing the city's moral character. Some time before, he had organized the unruly and rowdy young Florentine boys into a group of devoted followers called the *fanciulli*.⁷¹ The boys usually turned to vandalism and extortion around carnival time, and muggings were common. However, in the days approaching February 7th, under Savonarola, the boys put their skills to use for a much different purpose. He had ordered them to go about the city proclaiming the great bonfire that was to come and to collect objects for its kindling. At this great Bonfire of the Vanities, Savonarola organized the destruction of ancient books, expensive jewelry and clothes, works of art, and anything else that he might have considered ostentatious or decadent and wished to be rid of. Many of the most famous figures of the Renaissance were in attendance: Machiavelli, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Marsilio Ficino, Sandro Botticelli, and many others. Botticelli even contributed some of his own paintings to the blaze. This was an astonishing occurrence, as Burckhardt describes, "...No sooner did Savonarola come forward than he carried the people so triumphantly with him that soon all their beloved art and culture melted away in the furnace which he lighted."⁷² The Bonfire of the Vanities, more than any other single occurrence, most clearly illustrates the level of support that Savonarola had acquired

⁷¹ For an enlightening discussion of the *fanciulli* see Martines' *Fire in the City*.

⁷² Burckhardt, 297.

from the people of Florence. He was able to turn them away from celebrating their secular accomplishments, and he created through them a pious and devout republic.

Soon, however, Savonarola's cries against the corruption of the Church earned him excommunication and incarceration. His fate was further sealed by his unwillingness to turn against France and join with Pope Alexander VI in the Holy League that he was forming to oppose the French in Italy. At the request of the Pope, he was arrested and tortured. He was eventually executed in the Piazza della *Signoria*, being hanged and burned as a heretic on May 23, 1498. His remains went up in smoke as had the remnants of the vanities he burned in the same spot, little more than a year before.

As the fifteenth century drew to a close in Florence, the city was in the midst of a long period of profound change. The republic lasted until 1523, when the Medici eventually returned to dominate the city. The quick rise and even quicker fall of Savonarola illustrates just how quickly fortunes could change in the city. It was an uncertain time. Humanity was caught in a struggle between the rediscovered ideas of human potential and the waning might of the Catholic Church. Although it would have been impossible to know it at the time, Savonarola's warning of the need for reformation in the Church and his prophecies of great calamities and changes came true as the Protestant Reformation, and the discovery of the New World began to transform the old European world and culture into more recognizably modern forms.

Now that we have developed a sense of what Florence was like in the fifteenth century, we can better understand how Savonarola fit into the city and how his actions shaped and were shaped by the people of Florence. Since we have completed our basic examination of Savonarola's role in Florence, we can now turn to addressing the main objective of this study.

The following chapters will analyze how Savonarola perceived himself and his role in Florentine affairs. It will examine his most self-descriptive work: the *Compendium of Revelations*.

CHAPTER THREE

THE COMPENDIUM OF REVELATIONS: INTRODUCTION AND SAVONAROLA'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

Introduction to the *Compendium*

In an open letter to a friend written near the end of 1495 Savonarola wrote the following, “I could respond to many of your other objections, but I believe you will easily resolve them on your own, specially if you will go back and read my *Compendium of Revelations*.”⁷³ This is but one of many instances in which he referred his critics and friends alike to this particular work, emphasizing it as a collection of his own thoughts, ideas, and views.⁷⁴ In this chapter we will examine the work in detail in an attempt to ascertain exactly what his thoughts, ideas, and views were and how he fit in to *Quattrocento* Florence.

The *Compendium* was written by Savonarola in early 1495 in response to the first of many papal summons and published on August 18, 1495, by Franco Buonaccorsi. Savonarola wrote the book in the vernacular first and then in Latin. On the second page he writes, “I have taken care to publish this book in both Latin and the vernacular so that they cannot be corrupted

⁷³ Girolamo Savonarola, “Open Letter to a Friend: Florence, end of 1495,” in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, 288.

⁷⁴ Two copies on the *Compendium of Revelations* have been consulted in the production of this work. Girolamo Savonarola, *Compendium of Revelations e Trattato sul Governo della Città di Firenze*, ed. Franco Buzzi (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1996) and Girolamo Savonarola, *The Compendium of Revelations*, in Payne, Richard J. ed. *Apocalyptic Spirituality: Treatises and Letters of Lactantius, Adso of Montier-en-der, Joachim of Fiore, The Spiritual Franciscans, Savonarola*. New York: Paulist Press, 1979. All quotations from the *Compendium* will refer to the English language translation in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*.

or distorted in any way and that they may be equally available to everyone everywhere.”⁷⁵ This is especially noteworthy because it indicates to us that he intended its message concerning his revelations, prophecies, and thought processes to reach out to the average citizens of Florence and not only to the learned Church officials in Rome. The use of the vernacular, as opposed to Latin; to express ideas through the written medium is a distinctly Renaissance development and represents a serious break from medieval tradition. In the Latin and Italian versions, the *Compendium* consists of three main sections and concludes with a brief statement of warning.

Section one of the book serves as a brief introduction and recounts the development of Savonarola’s prophetic mission. Scholars, most notably Donald Weinstein, have disputed the specific chronology given by Savonarola and these discrepancies will also be discussed below. The influence of Thomistic theology and Joachite eschatology can clearly be seen in his description of revelations and prophecies. Regarding these mystical visions, Savonarola describes his prophecies of the death of Lorenzo de Medici and Pope Innocent VIII, his prophecy of the tribulations and renewal of the Church and of Italy, and his visions of the sword of God and the crosses of justice and mercy. In this early section Savonarola also discusses his role as an ambassador to King Charles VIII of France, reprints the full text of the speech he gave to the King, and discusses the merits of the bloodless ‘Florentine Revolution’ that occurred with the expulsion of Piero de Medici. Savonarola gives us great insight into his perceptions of his visions, his role as a prophet in the city of Florence, and his role in their political affairs.

⁷⁵ Savonarola, *Compendium of Revelations*, in Richard J. Payne ed., *Apocalyptic Spirituality: Treatises and Letters of Lactantius, Adso of Montier-en-der, Joachim of Fiore, The Spiritual Franciscans, Savonarola* (New York: Paulist Press) 1979, 193.

In section two Savonarola begins his journey to Heaven with his companions Simplicity, Faith, Prayer, and Patience. It is noteworthy that he specifically mentions excluding philosophy and rhetoric as the daughters of human wisdom. His preference for divine inspiration and condemnation of human wisdom is an important theme that will be developed later. Immediately after he sets out on his journey he is sidetracked by the Devil. Taking the form of a wizened old hermit, the Tempter asks Savonarola a series of thirty questions. All of these questions posed here were objections that had been raised by Savonarola's enemies in Florence. The topics of the questions include politics, prophecy, social matters, and theology. The questioning begins as a series of benign inquiries concerning the ways in which Savonarola may have been mistaken in his visions but becomes increasingly more belligerent as the Tempter eventually outright accuses Savonarola of malicious deception. It is important to recognize, however, that the Devil's questions, although harsh, are never quite as vociferous as the charges leveled by his Florentine contemporaries and are all patiently answered by Savonarola. This dialogue gave Savonarola the opportunity to assess and answer the questions of his enemies without having to contend with their enflamed passions or the judgment of a live crowd. This second portion of the *Compendium* is perhaps the most valuable of all because it provides us with Savonarola's own specially crafted responses to most of the accusations and charges made against him by his enemies. Through the Tempter's questions and Savonarola's answers we are able to analyze exactly how Savonarola perceived his enemies and how he viewed his place in their city. In his answers he attacks earthly wisdom, the Church, the wealthy princes of Italy, and all of his detractors.

The third section of the *Compendium* details the completion of Savonarola's journey to Heaven on behalf of the Florentines. Having served as the Florentines' ambassador to the King

of France in the first section, Savonarola serves as their ambassador to Mary, Queen of the Universe, in the third. He has journeyed to Heaven to present Mary with a crown of precious gems representing the prayers and virtues of the citizens of Florence, with the hope that she would beseech the Holy Trinity to grant mercy and prosperity to Florence. When he arrives in Heaven he is greeted by St. Joseph and his own guardian angel, who serve as his guides. This idea shows the clearly show the influence of Savonarola's Florentine predecessor Dante Alighieri, who was guided through Hell and Purgatory by the Latin poet Virgil and through Heaven by Beatrice. His vision of Heaven is fantastic and also shows the direct influence of Dante. As he climbs the stairs Savonarola encounters Heaven's occupants arranged on tiers according to their holiness. He begins on the first level with the pious but married souls and eventually climbs to the sixth step upon which rest the souls of the great patriarchs, such as John the Baptist (the patron saint of Florence) and King David. After reaching the sixth step his guide Joseph leaves him in the care of his guardian angel and they ascend a nine-tiered ladder. Each of the tiers consisted of a separate groups of angels, beginning with the lowest order of the angels and ending with the fiery exalted seraphim on the ninth level. At each stop along the way, on the six steps and the nine rungs, the souls and angels added their own precious gems to the crown for Mary that signified their own prayers. Upon finally reaching the top Savonarola comes face to face with Mary and the Holy Trinity, presents Mary with her crown, and through her obtains the blessings of God for the city of Florence. This vision is important because it shows the medieval side of Savonarola; it is clearly a theologically medieval vision of Heaven. However, the manner in which it is described to the audience leaves no doubt that Savonarola intended the vision to reappear in the reader's own mind as if they were seeing a Renaissance painting. Such

vivid, dramatic, and artistic descriptions indicate a keen awareness of the importance of artistic imagery to the Florence, which was, after all, the artistic center of the world at the time.

The *Compendium* closes with a summary of what Savonarola has foretold through his sermons and an exhortation to all believers to heed his words and follow him. Savonarola also adds that this work should assuage any and all doubters and that if it does not, they should seek out him or his followers out for an explanation. He warns that should any doubter fail to do this and speak against him, they will provoke the wrath of the Lord.

Savonarola uses his autobiographical discussion, his dialogue with the Devil, and his description of his mission to Heaven as devices through which he conveys important information regarding his position in the political and religious world of fifteenth-century Italy. By examining exactly how Savonarola addresses the politics of his time, his conflicts with the Church, the wealthy, the powerful, and the learned, and his perceptions of his role as a prophet in the *Compendium*, this study will paint a complicated and multifaceted picture of Savonarola. The Savonarola that emerges will likely fail to satisfy those who see him as a firmly medieval figure and those who see him a precursor to the Reformation or a figure who is more wholly modern. The image portrayed by Savonarola in the *Compendium* is that of a Renaissance figure. A man with great knowledge of the medieval and classical worlds, with a firm grounding in theology and a familiarity with Humanist philosophy, who sought Church reformation so that everyone might become more pious and better serve the Lord. He did this while simultaneously engaging in the secular political world and promoting the development of the truest republic since the days before the Roman emperors. Clearly, he was a complicated man who was the product of a changing world. In this way Savonarola stands out as an example of a Renaissance figure who represents the attempt to continue certain medieval practices while also promoting

others that led to dramatic breaks with the medieval world. The Savonarola portrayed in the *Compendium of Revelations* exemplified the Renaissance as an age of transition; he was not wholly medieval and advocated positions significantly at odds with medieval thought, yet one cannot help but feel that he would have also been dramatically out of place in the world of the Enlightenment and would have rejected much of modernity.

Savonarola's Political Thought

Over the course of his four-year period of dominance in Florence, Savonarola produced several works and speeches regarding the development and character of a proper government. The discussion of his role in the formation of the new government of Florence and his continuing influence on it constitute a crucial part of the *Compendium*. The political thought expressed in this work shows Savonarola to have been heavily influenced by the medieval political ideas of Aquinas and the classical ideas of Aristotle but, more importantly, it shows him to be aware of the workings of other contemporary governments, such as the Venetian (on which he based the idea for the Great Council) and the notions of republicanism harbored by the people of Florence.

In the initial section of the *Compendium*, Savonarola discusses his role in politics only briefly. His first mention of his political activities regards being sent as an ambassador to the invading French King, Charles VIII. He writes,

Then, when the most Christian King of France drew near, I was asked by the *Signoria* of Florence to undertake a legation to his majesty along with some other citizens. I quickly

consulted with my fellow Dominicans and other citizens and was unanimously advised to undertake the journey. I was forced to accept the burden even more by charity than by their advice, and therefore set out with the chosen ambassadors for Pisa.⁷⁶

The most striking element of this excerpt is the way in which it exemplifies notions of republican virtue, the idea that one should serve out of a sense of duty rather than a desire for personal glory. It is an idea rooted in contemporary notions of civic humanism that was later promulgated in the revolutions of the eighteenth century. Savonarola highlights the fact that others thrust upon him the burden of negotiating on behalf of the people of Florence, and that he accepted it only reluctantly. He makes it clear that he accepted the task because it was best for the people of Florence, not because he wanted to. His intent is also to make it very clear to the reader that he was primarily responsible for the relative lack of abuse suffered by the Florentine people during the French king's stay and for his departure. The fact that he mentions he travels to Pisa is significant as well. In doing so he played on the desires of the Florentines to have the city, the jewel of their empire, returned to them. Promising the return of Pisa was a tactic that he used frequently in his sermons and writings. As he kept Florence in league with the French, even against the desires of the rest of Italy, he always promised the people that, if they continued to support the French king, Pisa would be returned to them.

Later on in the initial section of the *Compendium*, Savonarola discusses his role in the Florentines' bloodless revolution. The expulsion of Piero de Medici on November ninth in 1494, after his inept handling of the Charles VIII's invasion, constituted a revolution in government and heralded the impending return of the Florentine republic. Savonarola comments on this, writing,

⁷⁶ Savonarola, *Compendium of Revelations*, in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 203.

Beloved citizens, when I saw that the revolution of state and government was near and knew that so great a change could not take place without danger and bloodshed unless divine mercy brought aid because of the penances, fasts, and prayers of good people, under God's inspiration I decided to encourage the people by constant preaching to do penance in order to obtain mercy...On November ninth by divine miracle the state and the government were changed without bloodshed or scandal.⁷⁷

This is one of the few instances where Savonarola highlights his keen political acumen. When he talks about seeing the coming revolution he is not referring to a mystical vision, rather his own keen deductive observations. This illustrates that he was a man who was well informed about the politics of Europe and that he also knew that he did not always rely on visions from God to anticipate future events. This passage also gives readers examples of two trains of thought that influence nearly all of Savonarola's own thoughts and writings. First, as one would expect from a pious monk, he insinuates that the supplication of God and the reception of his good will are necessary for success in any endeavor. More importantly, however, he emphasizes the concept of human action affecting the divine will. He believed that the people of Florence could avoid some of the coming tribulations and attain the status as God's elect through pious living. The importance that he places on the potential of human beings to affect and change not only their own world, but the will of God as well, shows a definite Humanist strain and seems to be a significant break from much medieval thought. In this passage the thoughts and actions of the people of Florence seems to be as important as the benefices of God.

He then begins to describe his role in instituting the reforms of the new government. He describes his involvement in the following way,

People of Florence, when you had assumed the new form of government I called you together in the Duomo, without the presence of women, before the *Signoria* and all the magistrates. After I spoke at length about the correct government of cities according to

⁷⁷ Ibid., 209-10.

the traditions of philosophers and theologians, I set out what should be the natural government of the Florentine people. I continued to preach on the following days, proposing four courses of action. The first was the fear of God. The second was to prefer the common good of the republic to one's private concerns. The third was to make a common and full peace with those who had shortly before governed the city. I added to this the 'Appeal against the Six Beans' so that by means of this no one could make himself head of the city in the future. The fourth was to set up a full general council like the Venetians, so that the benefits of the city could be restored to the whole people and not kept by any individual, and so that no one could make himself too powerful.⁷⁸

Here Savonarola is referring to the sermon delivered at the great cathedral of Florence, "Aggeus Sermon XIII," to be discussed at the end of this chapter.⁷⁹ While discussing politics throughout his work he builds on classical and medieval philosophers like Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, whose theories and ideas were at the root of nearly all political thought during the Renaissance. This indicates his learning and shows how Thomism influenced his political thinking, in addition to his religious thoughts. In this way he shows himself to be strongly tied to medieval thought. However, as he goes on to expound the virtues of the new Florentine government he shows himself to be very aware of the traditions of the Florentine people and of the governments of other Italian cities. Although he was certainly not the first to conceive of the idea to create a Venetian-style Great Council in Florence, as Donald Weinstein has correctly asserted, he was one of the earliest and most powerful proponents of such a reform.⁸⁰ Indeed, he seems to be most proud of this creation, which was intended to maintain a large body of citizens that would exercise some level of popular control over government.

Besides the creation of the Great council, the only other political reform that Savonarola deliberately emphasizes is the passage of the law granting an appeal to the Rule of Six Beans.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 210.

⁷⁹ This series of sermons is also referred to as the sermons on Haggai and *Prediche Sopra Aggeo*.

⁸⁰ For a complete discussion of Savonarola's role in reforming the Florentine government see Weinstein, *Prophecy and Patriotism*, 247-266.

By ensuring the right of an appeal to any condemnation voted for my at least six of the nine-member *Signoria*, he is seeking to preserve some of the liberty of the Florentines and attempting to limit the ability of a small oligarchic circle to exercise such powerful influence over the city's affairs.

In the second section of the *Compendium*, during Savonarola's dialogue with Satan, he is asked to respond to several accusations and questions regarding his role in the new Florentine government – questions that were certainly inspired by the criticisms of contemporaries. The first of which regards his aspirations to power. The Tempter asserts, “One thing mars your responses – that you are grasping at the state and government of Florence and looking to seize the highest position so that you can drag the people where you want.”⁸¹ There were many former Medici supporters and high level officials who resented the level of influence Savonarola wielded over his followers and, through them, over the city itself. Even members of his own Dominican order resented the role that Savonarola played in public affairs and this was a specific charge made against him by his fellow friars.⁸² Savonarola answered the charges in the following way.

...In this new situation and great danger of Florence it seemed to be my duty to advise how the city ought to be governed. With divine inspiration I recommended things that were necessary and useful for public safety to the citizens, but I did not compel them. After a good form of government had been adopted, everyone knows that my last message was to fear God always and above all, to pray before taking up any serious matters, and not to come to me for advice any longer...When asked, I did not cease giving advice...In things of such importance, and even those of lesser weight, many holy men have dutifully taken up the charge of political power over both lords and commons as the readers of the sacred histories know. Saint Catherine of Siena, despite her female sex, often intervened in public affairs for the common good...Therefore to treat of public affairs for the sake of universal peace and in order to lead men to justice and to good

⁸¹ Savonarola, *Compendium of Revelations*, in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 236.

⁸² Villari, vol. 1, 329.

actions for the common salvation of souls is not to be involved in secular affairs, nor are Paul's words to be understood in this way. Rather it is to gain the people the things spiritual and divine. According to Aristotle, it is just to designate each thing from its end.⁸³

Here again we see Savonarola highlighting the virtues of his reluctant service and arguing that he was compelled by others to involve himself in the affairs of government. Furthermore, he cites Church precedent on such manners, referencing the activities of St. Catherine of Siena in Florence. Equally as important is his more philosophical explanation for why his actions were virtuous. His arguments here are clearly influenced by Thomistic theology but also seem to be a roundabout way of asserting that the end justifies the means, over a decade before his fellow Florentine, Niccolò Machiavelli, would immortalize the idea in *The Prince*. Savonarola points out that it is right and necessary for holy men to involve themselves in worldly affairs when the results achieved are that the people live more holy and pious lives. He finishes his answer by invoking a principle of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, that is in itself pseudo-Machiavellian, pointing out again that it is acceptable to judge the virtue of actions by their affects. Again we see that Savonarola both echoes past ideas and foreshadows the development of those yet to come.

Savonarola then faces Satan's rebuttal, which criticizes the reforms of the new government.

This excuse could be admitted if you had exhorted the people of Florence to some good form of government, but you advised a form of government that seems dangerous to prudent and practical men. To put something of such importance at the discretion of the people and to snatch it away from the hands of the powerful cannot be done without grave danger.⁸⁴

⁸³ Savonarola, *Compendium of Revelations*, in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 236-237.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

This undoubtedly reflects the criticism of the former power holders of Florence. Throughout the fifteenth century the nine-member *Signoria* would often call a *Parlamento* to summon all of the male citizens to vote. These mass gatherings were notoriously easy to persuade and, in truth, functioned only as a token mass-approval for whatever course of action the summoners desired. There was a long-held belief in Florence that, while the people (male citizens) should be informed and theoretically able to participate, the business of governing the city should be left to the educated elite. Savonarola responded to the Tempter, showing the influence of these Florentine traditions, in the following way,

If you look at this government correctly, it is right and natural for the people of Florence. All good government is divided by philosophers into three types. The first, when one person with full power rules the multitude, is the best if the ruler is just. The second is the administration of a few powerful and wise men, which is called aristocrat, that is, the rule of the best. The third is when a city or province is governed by the whole people; this is called a polity. This belonged to the Florentines from of old, and they call it a 'popular regime.' Ancient custom shows that one quarter of their magistrates, especially those who really govern the state, should come from the artisans. This government is not merely of the crowd, but of the whole people, that is, of all those who can hold office because they have been citizens for a fixed time. Because it is easy for the powerful to push the crowd where they want, we gave the city a style of government like a polity, or a popular one...It is not true that this government is dangerous, for it is not entrusted to the crowd at all, nor absolutely to the people or other magnates, but to whoever obtains his power and authority from the Great Council where what is to be considered will be pondered maturely. The nobles and prudent men used to governing will attend the council...In such a large gathering there can only be rare error...To corrupt so many would be difficult and in a way impossible... The citizens can remain quiet and safe at home and make the city flower with virtues and riches. No one will be compelled to foster injustice, but all will be able to embrace a life that benefits good and perfect Christians.⁸⁵

In his response, Savonarola draws on classical Aristotelian governmental philosophy, as well as showing himself knowledgeable in the ancient customs of Florence. Following his descriptions of good government, Savonarola then goes on to describe the basic principles of a republic. For

him, the Great Council served as a representative body in which the most able common citizens would sit and judge the governmental proceedings initiated by the wealthy and powerful bodies before they were enacted into law. This provided a check on the ability of one man or one group (such as the supporters of the Medici) to obtain complete control of the government. He also points out that a group as large as the Great Council is extremely unlikely to fall victim to the corruption that grew at the heart of the Medici regime like a cancer. For Savonarola, this government allowed for the maximum possible participation while still ensuring that the ready hand of the more wealthy and experienced citizens would stay the course of the government.

In the *Compendium* Savonarola sets forth those political ideas that he thought best epitomized his overall political philosophy. Much of what he writes had already been put forth in his, “Aggeus Sermon XIII,” and was later treated more thoroughly, though very little was changed, in his 1498 *Treatise on the Government of Florence*.⁸⁶ His political ideology, as expressed in all three of these works, is heavily indebted to classical and medieval philosophy, shows a keen awareness of the political situation of the other cities of Italy, and indicates the presence of many ideas that would take a few hundred years to be fully adopted by subsequent governments. Whatever his role was in originating the reforms, it is clear that he wholeheartedly believed in them and that he put all of his considerable political capital to bear on making the Great Council and the Appeal Against the Six Beans a reality and to protect the city from the French king. Although it was certainly grounded in past ideas, the citizens of Florence during the time of Savonarola enjoyed a greater level of political participation and a government

⁸⁵ Ibid., 238.

⁸⁶ Both of these works are reprinted in Donald Beebe’s *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*. The “Aggeus Sermon XIII” can be found on pages 151-162 and the *Treatise on the Government of Florence* on pages 176-206.

that more closely resembled a republic (albeit a theocratic one) than that of nearly all of the Western nations between the times of Republican Rome and the American Revolution.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE COMPENDIUM OF REVELATIONS: SAVONAORLA’S ATTACKS ON EARTHLY WISDOM, THE PRINCES OF ITALY, AND THE CHURCH

In addition to expounding his political views, Savonarola used the *Compendium* to comment upon and attack many of his enemies in Florence. Counted among the ranks of his foes were the learned elite, the ostentatiously wealthy Italian princes, and the corrupt and depraved Church officials. His condemnation of these groups was a major theme in all of Savonarola’s writings and sermons. He believed that their sins were responsible for the deplorable state of the world in which he lived.

One of the Bible verses that was constantly invoked by Savonarola was Isaiah 47:10, “For thou has trusted in thy wickedness: thou hast said, none seeth me. Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, it hath deceived thee.” Savonarola frequently warned his audiences that they should not judge what he told them with human wisdom, rather they should listen with faith. In the *Compendium* he writes, “We will speak of these things clearly and in order, first asking that you put human wisdom completely aside and in the simplicity of pure faith hear us with cleansed ears.”⁸⁷ Here we see that, for Savonarola, despite his own prodigious learning, human wisdom was a barrier to salvation and the true understanding that comes through faith. In spite of his bias, his relationship with the learned men of the time and with earthly wisdom itself seemed strange and schizophrenic. He never missed an opportunity to comment on the shortcomings of

⁸⁷ Savonarola, *Compendium of Revelations*, in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 209.

human knowledge in comparison with divine revelation, yet he himself was highly educated and knowledgeable and often spent a great deal of time with Florence's most recognized scholars. Savonarola was the grandson of the court doctor to the d'Este Dukes of Ferrara and he began his education intent on following in the footsteps of his physician grandfather. Eventually the young aspiring physician became so disgusted with the vices of mankind that he decided to become a doctor of the spirit as opposed to the body and entered the priesthood as a monk of the order of the Dominicans.⁸⁸ As a young initiate, he immersed himself in his studies, focusing most intently on classical and medieval philosophy and theology. Eventually, he gained quite a reputation for his vast knowledge and understanding of philosophy, and won over many intellectuals with his ability to relate and juxtapose scripture with philosophy.

In the *Compendium* he references his knowledge, claiming, "Since I spent a good deal of time studying philosophy, I understand well how far the natural light of reason and the power of imaginations go, and I know that they do not reach what has come to me, especially regarding future contingent acts."⁸⁹ By all estimates he was very comfortable pointing out the shortcomings of philosophers who relied too heavily on human wisdom when compared to the insights granted via revelation. Despite his frequent condemnations, it seemed as though intellectuals constantly surrounded Savonarola, perhaps because he saw their conversions as a greater accomplishment. He appeared to be quite proud of his achievements when he did win over learned men to his cause, as this passage shows: "My faithful listeners know how fittingly my expositions of the scriptures always agreed with present times. One that especially caused admiration in men of great intelligence and learning was that from 1491-1494 every Advent and

⁸⁸ For more on Savonarola's early disgust with the secular world see Ridolfi, 1-12. Note the reprinting and

Lent...Among them was Count Giovanni della Mirandola, a man unique in our times for his talent and broad learning.”⁹⁰ The admiration of Pico and the influence that Savonarola wielded over him seemed to be Savonarola’s ultimate trump card when confronted with disputations from other learned men. The friendship of the two is particularly interesting, because it shows the level of exposure and proximity of Savonarola to Humanist doctrine and thought. The two certainly reciprocally influenced each other, as Pico’s perpetual near-commitments to the Dominican order and Savonarola’s emphasis on human potential show. Despite their close friendship and the respect that Savonarola had for Pico’s vast erudition, Savonarola always saw his friend’s intellectual pursuits as inferior to his own faith-based work.

Savonarola did not always enjoy friendships with Florence’s intellectuals. In fact, there were many who despised him. In his *Apologia contra Savonarolam*, published more than a decade after the friar’s death, Marsilio Ficino subtitled his work in the following way, “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.”⁹¹ This is a rather extreme example of the criticisms leveled by some at Savonarola throughout his life and after, but it is by no means unique. He was aware of the hostility as a portion of his dialogue with Satan shows. In the *Compendium* Satan remarks, “Nevertheless I see that many very wise men of great and keen genius and impressive prudence, most skillful in all human affairs, scoffed at those visions.

translation of Savonarola’s early poems *De ruina mundi* and *De ruina ecclesiae*.

⁸⁹ Savonarola, *Compendium of Revelations*, in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 212.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁹¹ Marsilio Ficino, *Apologia contra Savonarolam*, in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, 355-359.

I am moved by their authority.”⁹² Savonarola responded in typical fashion, pointing out the superiority of God’s revelation and power, saying,

...Human wisdom is totally unequal to these matters. Rather, because of its pride, God leaves it in the darkness as unworthy of so precious a light...Let the wise men answer whether what I foretold was possible or impossible for God’s power and wisdom. If they are wise, they will confess that such things are not only possible for God, but also quite easy to do.⁹³

Ficino’s criticisms and others like it were not altogether unwarranted. Savonarola often started verbal battles or responded in kind by constantly denouncing human learning. In one passage of the *Compendium* he recounts the wickedness of wise men from one of his visions, saying, “Some accepted the gift offered and were clothed; others refused, but did not prevent others from excepting it; some both spurned it for themselves and prevented others from taking it. These last were the tepid and those puffed up with human wisdom. They made fun of the gifts and sought to persuade others not to take them.”⁹⁴ While not directly associating learned men with the Antichrist, he is accusing them of leading the faithful away and confusing them with their wisdom. This rejection of worldly learning is directly at odds with the Humanist elements of Savonarola’s thought and this contradiction is apparent throughout most of Savonarola’s work.

In the second portion of the *Compendium*, as Savonarola is setting out on his journey to Heaven, he decided to choose a set of companions. He describes this decision as follows,

On the night before the octave’s last day, as I was about to set out to receive the hoped-for response, I thought that I ought to have fit companions and the correct garb. While I was thinking about the kind and number of companions I should choose, many women presented themselves. Among them philosophy first promised her services, declaring

⁹² Ibid., 226.

⁹³ Ibid., 226-227.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 200.

that great wisdom was fitting for an embassy to such and exalted place. Rhetoric also presented herself, recommending the highest eloquence in this affair. But I responded to them and to the rest of the daughters of human wisdom that since their knowledge begins from the senses it does not surpass sensible things. Even if sensible things afford some knowledge of God, yet it is so small that it can be considered almost nothing. It is covered by three veils: the veil of accidents by which the human sciences come to know corporeal substances; the veil of corporeal substances through whose imperfect understanding we rise by intellect to a consideration of the soul and spiritual substances; and the veil of the substance of the soul and of spiritual beings through which, much more imperfectly known than bodily things, our intellect strives to rise to the knowledge of God, who infinitely surpasses everything else. Therefore, the knowledge of God gained through reason is very weak...Therefore I rejected philosophy, rhetoric, and the other human sciences as unfit for this legation, and I chose simplicity of faith, of wisdom, and of the eloquence of the sacred scriptures.⁹⁵

The message here is very clear. Salvation and knowledge of God are not to be achieved through earthly wisdom or through any reasoning based on sensory information. No human devices, however well reasoned or eloquent, are worthy of God. It is fitting that he should denounce rhetoric and eloquence because, by all accounts, he was a powerful speaker but had a foreign accent and lacked the eloquence of the great orators of his day.

At the end of the second portion of the *Compendium*, Savonarola finally equates human wisdom directly with Satan. Here again we see the contradiction in Savonarola's character. Despite his own education and the obvious influence of contemporary humanist philosophy on his own thoughts, he relegates these things to the purview of the Devil. He writes,

When I had already taken up a good deal of time in arguing like this with the Tempter, I finally looked back at my companions and saw them talking together and laughing at me. I turned to them and said. "What are you saying to each other and why are you smiling? They answered: "You do not seem to know who you are talking to." I then drew near to lady prayer and asked her to tell me who he might be. She said: "You have become involved in an argument based on human wisdom, the kind that is foolishness to God. So you have not recognized who he was who was disputing with you till now. Go join lady Simplicity, since she well knows every cunning of the Enemy. She will tell you what you want to know." When I joined the Lady my eyes were immediately opened and I knew

⁹⁵ Ibid., 211-212.

that he was not a hermit, but mankind's Tempter. Then I collected my four companions and said: "Foul Satan, the craftiness and arts by which you try to pervert the hearts of the simple and to lead them away from faith have gained you nothing. God's strong hand is with us; it makes his work grow. You and your angels have been put to confusion." When I said this he disappeared at once, filling the air with great cries.⁹⁶

This is Savonarola's ultimate attack on earthly learning. Here, he identifies knowledge based on mankind's senses and reason as an instrument of the Devil used to lead humans away from the truth of Christ. This idea and statements like it provoked the harsh attacks of men like Ficino. A careful reading of the *Compendium* will allow one to see that each man thought the other to be a tool of the Antichrist, and that Ficino's accusations of hypocrisy were well founded. Here we are confronted with yet another paradox in the life of Savonarola, begging the question: how could a man who relied so heavily on philosophical wisdom (secular and ecclesiastical) so frequently condemn it? The answer, as far as one can be given, is that Savonarola was a man of his time. In his thoughts and writings we see the injection and usage of classical and contemporary humanist thought into traditional medieval scholastic theology that characterized the Renaissance and foreshadowed the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment. One can see Savonarola straddling two worlds here; his religious sensibilities situate a large portion of his thought in the realm of the medieval while his familiarity with humanist ideas and political ideology grounds him firmly in the Renaissance.

Learned men and the purveyors of earthly wisdom were not the only targets of Savonarola's wrath. He often preached against both the Church and the wealthy and powerful men who controlled the states of Italy. When doing so, however, he was forced to be much more cautious than when attacking intellectuals. Savonarola always ran the risk of making powerful

⁹⁶ Ibid., 241.

enemies among the noblemen and clergy. Indeed, when the Pope Alexander VI finally ordered Savonarola's arrest and excommunicated him, Savonarola stood alone with only a few lowly friars to support him. He had alienated all possibly wealthy patrons or protectors by constantly condemning them and initiating reforms aimed at helping the average citizens of Florence. He had no princes to protect him from the wrath of the Church as Luther did when he began the Protestant Reformation.

Such condemnations start early and come often in the *Compendium*. In the first sections Savonarola recounts his predictions, saying,

I said that there was no remedy left for the rulers of the Church and the princes of Italy aside from penance – neither heaps of money, nor armies, nor fortified places and castles could help them. Even if they had an infinite treasure, the strongest and largest possible army, iron walls and adamantine fortresses, not only would this not be enough, but they would flee like weak women.⁹⁷

This exemplifies the themes of his most famous prophecies: those of the tribulations of Italy and the renovation of the Church. The specific nature of the prophecies and visions will be discussed below, however, it is important to note the object of these visions now. This is one of only a few overt condemnations of the rich rulers of Italy in the *Compendium*; Savonarola seemed to attack the Church much more freely. The relative weakness and infrequency of his attacks on the wealthy may suggest that he sensed trouble with the Church and did not want to fight a war on two fronts, or that he was satisfied with the level of control he held over the people of Florence and was more concerned with threats from the Church in Rome.

Savonarola expounded on his visions, again attacking the learned and the Church, The Spirit said that the hard plague and sharp sword signified the rule of evil prelates and those who preach human philosophy. They neither enter the Kingdom of Heaven nor allow others to enter. By this he indicated that the Church had fallen so far

⁹⁷ Ibid., 206.

because their spiritual attack was much worse than any corporeal tribulations that could happen. The spirit told me that I should exhort and beg the people to beseech God...to give the Church good pastors and preachers of the divine word who would feed the flock and not themselves”⁹⁸

In this passage he references a divine calling and a mission given from a Heavenly spirit to call on the Florentine people to demand changes in the way the Holy Roman Church was run. In the *Compendium* he stops short of enumerating all of the actions of the Church that had so offended him, though he nearly always mentioned them in his sermons. He does clearly reference the practice of simony, however, in response to one of the Tempter’s charges, proclaiming, “You cannot possible say that I aspire to ecclesiastical dignities, for in our times we know how they are acquired.”⁹⁹ As discussed above, Popes and other Church officials, especially Alexander VI, were known for selling appointments to Church offices or giving them out to illegitimate offspring. Savonarola was well aware of how Alexander VI doted on his bastard children and that Giuliano de Medici’s position as Cardinal had been bought and paid for by his father Lorenzo.

Savonarola also discusses one of his specific confrontations with the Church in the second section of his work. During their dialogue the Tempter says to him,

I am surprised that you would deny that there are clear external signs of your wickedness when all know that you left the Congregation of the Lombard Observance, and also withdrew from San Marco in Florence, San Domenico in Fiesole, and others places joined to them so that you would not have to remain obedient. Like a Lord you arrogated the priorate for life and thus obtained a fine state for rejoicing.¹⁰⁰

Here the Devil is making another accusation often heard from Savonarola’s non-fictional enemies. In 1493 Savonarola had removed San Marco from the Lombard Congregation and,

⁹⁸ Ibid., 201.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 233.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 234.

over time, had added several other adjacent convents and monasteries to his new Tuscan Congregation. This was done through the proper channels with the approval of the Pope; however, there are some aspersions cast upon the manner in which such permission was obtained by Florentine advocates in Rome.¹⁰¹ At the time this did not have a great effect on the average people of Florence or the wealthy, but it was used by Savonarola's enemies within the Church to substantiate their charges against him concerning his own desire for power and contempt for their rules and regulations.

Savonarola gives a very eloquent and sensible response in his own defense, arguing,

I could not have made this withdrawal alone, without the consent of the brothers of those houses. More than a hundred of them agreed (though not all at one time, since San Marco went first), as is evident from the published document. They cannot all be so foolish or evil that they would be unable to judge whether this withdrawal would be good or bad, particularly since for more than six months they gathered and prayed about the matter four or five times a day. As the result has shown, the separation was clearly not done for the sake of relaxation but for strictness...When we withdrew we were still obedient to the general...One time when the Convent of San Marco was deprived of the correct number of brothers due to a terrible plague it could not stand on its own and freely committed itself to the control of the Lombard Congregation. Now with the aid of divine grace the number of brothers is such that it is well able to govern itself and so it is suitable that it legitimately return to its proper state, because when the cause ceases so should the effect, especially when the customs of the Lombards and the Tuscans differ so much.¹⁰²

This is perhaps the clearest example of Savonarola using his dialogue with the Devil to answer the charges of his contemporaries. Here he gives a systematic response, justifying in three ways his decision to leave the Lombard Congregation. His first justification is that he certainly did not act alone and could not have created the Tuscan Congregation without the good will and cooperation of all the various monks and officials involved.

¹⁰¹ For a fuller discussion of the specifics of Savonarola's separation from the Lombard Congregation see Weinstein, *Prophecy and Patriotism*, 105-110.

¹⁰² Savonarola, *Compendium of Revelations*, in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 234-235.

His second justification is the most interesting because it is one that he used quite often and in many ways. He points out that the separation was so that his order could return to its characteristic strict observance of their vows. The Dominicans of Florence and Tuscany had prospered just as the city had and were continually becoming more lax in their observance of the order's traditions. Savonarola reasoned that since the separation renewed the strict observance of monk's holy vows, and that the strict observance of the vows made to God is good, then the separation must have been good. Again, we see him relying on the idea that actions should be judged by the fruit that they bear. We will return to this idea again later and in some detail, as Savonarola often used it to justify and defend his prophetic mission.

The third and final justification given for his separation from the Lombard Congregation was certainly the most logical and persuasive to modern readers and his contemporaries. He explains exactly why San Marco was in the Lombard Congregation to begin with and points out that they and the Tuscans had very different standards and customs. Relying again on Aristotelian logic, he reasoned that since the cause of their joining was over, the effect should be as well. There was no one in Florence who would have doubted that San Marco, under Savonarola, had grown dramatically in wealth, numbers, prestige, and influence and was perfectly able to stand on its own.

The final selection chosen regarding Savonarola's attacks on the institutions of Italy is not an attack at all, but a supplication, given in a response to the tempter's accusation of heresy. It is important to note because it is symbolic of the way in which he dealt with the Roman church at the time. Despite his frequent venomous attacks on the Church, when it came time for him to correspond with the Pope or to address one of his superiors directly, he always adopted a much more conciliatory and reverential tone as is shown here.

They are not able to justly call me a heretic. A heretic is one who has obstinately chosen to follow some teaching that is contrary to the Holy Scripture or to the teaching of the Holy Roman Church. I desire that everything I have said or written up to now, and will say or write in the future, be ever subject to the correction of the Holy Roman Church. I am prepared to receive reproof gladly from it or from any man wherever I have been in error.¹⁰³

The characteristic fiery determination and righteous indignation that seemed to define much of Savonarola's speaking and writing are nowhere to be found here. In this passage he attempts to assuage the Church officials, whom he has systematically rebuked throughout the rest of the work. This was, of course, justified in the mind of Savonarola and many of his followers by the idea that obedience and respect were due to the office, if not the man, by virtue of its Heavenly mandate. This behavior is one of the things that allowed Savonarola to continue to openly preach against and defy the Church in Rome for four years in Florence. The Pope never heard Savonarola's sermons for himself, so he was forced to rely on the conflicting reports of his eyes and ears in Florence. By not attacking Church officials personally or in direct correspondence, the Church was always forced to rely on second hand accounts of what the friar had said and this often allowed the friar to downplay the severity of his remarks.

The *Compendium* has provided us with an opportunity to gain great insight into Savonarola's political thought and into the ways in which he interacted with the ideas and accusations of his contemporary enemies. This study now turns to a careful examination of the main focus of Savonarola's work, his explanation of his prophetic mission.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 224.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE COMPENDIUM OF REVELATIONS: SAVONAROLA'S PROPHETIC MISSION

Although the *Compendium* does give us insights into other aspects of Savonarola's thoughts, it is his thoughts on prophecy that are most thoroughly discussed. His prophetic nature was certainly the friar's most controversial aspect and that nature both led to and was fueled by his criticisms of the world around him. Throughout his work he describes the nature of prophecy in Thomistic terms, shows himself to be knowledgeable of and in some ways similar to Joachim of Fiore, describes in detail his most important visions, emphasizes the gradual nature of his use of prophecy, and explains the manner in which he interpreted them for the people.

Before Savonarola begins his discussion of his own prophecies, he makes it clear that his readers must understand the nature of prophecy itself. At this point, and others throughout the book, Savonarola gives a description of prophecy that is highly indebted to the medieval philosophy of Thomas Aquinas.¹⁰⁴ Savonarola borrows heavily from Aquinas throughout the *Compendium*. His discussions of prophecy as either contingent or absolute, the superiority of knowledge gained through revelation as opposed to the senses, the incompatibility of the corporeal and the incorporeal, the condemnation of astrology, God's ability to bestow gifts, and the nature of faith all are drawn directly from Thomistic doctrine. This is not surprising, given

¹⁰⁴ Aquinas' ideas on prophecy are the subject of IIaIIae qq.171-174 in *Summa Theologiae*.

that the study of Church doctors like Aquinas constituted a major part of any medieval theological curriculum.

What are more surprising, however, are the similarities between Joachim of Fiore and Savonarola. Both were apocalyptic prophets and Savonarola admitted to being familiar with Joachim's work.¹⁰⁵ The prophecies of Joachim represented a significant break with those that preceded him because of his emphasis on a third age of prosperity, after some tribulation, that would precede the apocalypse. Savonarola also emphasized a renewal for Italy and the Church and it is probable that the more positive nature of their messages was responsible for their popularity. Beyond an emphasis on renewal, both claimed to receive their divine revelations at night, while in prayer, at times of personal crisis and both were inspired to break their monasteries away from larger controlling bodies. Whereas Savonarola took San Marco from the Lombard Congregation, Joachim left the Benedictine house of Corazzo and formed a new house, San Giovanni of Fiore, which was denounced by the Cistercians. One link between the two men is the poet Dante. Joachim's visions of Heaven no doubt inspired Dante's description of Paradise, and Dante's description directly influenced Savonarola's image of Heaven as he recounted it in the *Compendium*. Although there are key differences, for instance Joachim did not see himself in the light of an Old Testament prophet and Savonarola certainly did, the similarities are striking. Joachim of Fiore established the prophetic model that Savonarola

¹⁰⁵ For more on Joachim of Fiore see Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future: A Study in Medieval Millennialism* (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1999) and a brief description accompanied by several translated works in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 97-148.

followed in the same way that Aquinas laid down the foundations of Savonarola's theological thought. The influence of both men is apparent throughout his work.

Early on in the first section of the *Compendium*, Savonarola makes it clear his prophecies are the main focus of the work. He briefly summarizes his mission in Florence, telling his readers,

As Almighty God saw the sins of Italy multiply, especially in her ecclesiastical and secular princes, he was unable to bear it any longer and decided to cleanse his Church with a great scourge. And since, as the prophet Amos says, "The Lord God will not work his word without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets," he willed that the scourge upon Italy should be foretold for the sake of the salvation of the elect, so that thus forewarned they could prepare themselves to bear it with greater firmness. Since Florence is located in the middle of Italy, like the heart of a man, God himself deigned to choose her to receive this proclamation so that from her it might be widely spread through the other parts of Italy, as we have seen fulfilled in the present. Among his other servants he chose me, unworthy and unprofitable as I am, for this task, and saw to it that I came to Florence in 1489 at the command of my superiors. That year, on Sunday, August first, I began to interpret the book of the Apocalypse in public in our Church of San Marco.¹⁰⁶ Through the whole of the same year I preached to the people of Florence and continually stressed three things: first the renovation of the Church would come in these times; second, God would send a scourge over all Italy before that renovation; and third, these two things would happen soon. I worked at proving and establishing these three conclusions by firm arguments, by figures from the Holy Scriptures, and by other likenesses or parables formed from the things that are now happening in the Church.¹⁰⁷

In this passage Savonarola sets forth the foundation of his prophetic mission, explaining to the reader that it was the wrongdoings of the Italians that brought about their calamities and that God, being merciful and kind, in accordance with the laws of Old Testament prophecy, sent Savonarola as a messenger to warn the people of Florence. Of special interest here is his explanation of why God chose Florence, instead of Rome, which would have been a more logical place for the renovation of the Church to take place in. His explanation is allegorical. He points

¹⁰⁶ Donald Weinstein points out the dates and time frames given by Savonarola are not always accurate. For more on this see *Prophecy and Patriotism* 74-117.

¹⁰⁷ Savonarola, *Compendium of Revelations*, in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*.

out that God chose Italy and, since Florence is close to the center of Italy in the same way that a man's heart is near in the center of his body, Florence was the logical choice. Symbolically, he is playing up to the long-held Florentine belief that their city, not Rome, was now the true heart of Italy. Who could blame them? Their dialect had become the dialect of Italian literature and their city was producing some of the greatest artists and thinkers the world had ever seen. Savonarola apparently saw no logical inconsistencies with praising Florence for its successes and simultaneously condemning nearly all of those responsible for them.

At the end of the first section of the *Compendium* Savonarola outlined the three major themes of his mission: that the renovation of the Church was imminent; Italy would suffer a scourge similar to the Church; and these things would happen soon. The first two themes are the products of visions that will be discussed below. His final point, that the tribulations and renovations of Italy and the Church would happen soon, is the most complicated. He uses language here as commanded by Mary, as he tells us in the third section of the book. After asking what he should tell those who ask when these things will happen, she replies only that they will definitely happen and that they will happen soon. The direction of Mary, combined with Savonarola's explanation of contingent prophecies, provides a convenient defense against those who would challenge his the validity of his prophetic mission based on the unfulfilled nature of some of his predictions. He believes that the events definitely will happen because they represent the will of God, but the time of their occurrence depends on the actions of human beings.

Savonarola goes on to discuss his specific visions and predictions in the first part of the *Compendium*. The first such discussion involves his vision of the sword of God. He tells his readers that, "In 1492 on the night preceding my last Advent address in Santa Reparta I saw a

hand in Heaven with a sword on which was written: The sword of the Lord will come upon the earth swiftly and soon.”¹⁰⁸ The vision further enumerated the justice and mercy that the Lord promised to show. The same three-faced sun that Savonarola saw above Mary in Heaven symbolizing the trinity, the angels passing out blessing that were refused by the wise men (as discussed above), the coming of great hardships and catastrophic calamity on earth, and the eventual renewal of the world for the enjoyment of the faithful elect were all components of this vision. These are the images that gave birth to Savonarola’s famous cry, “*Ecco gladius Domini super terram cito et velociter*,”¹⁰⁹ and the medallion issued by the city to commemorate it.¹¹⁰ After describing the vision itself, he goes on to explain how he gradually revealed his interpretation of it to the people of Florence. The gradual revelation of his prophecies to the people of Florence has been disputed. As Weinstein points out in *Prophecy and Patriotism*, Savonarola seemed to switch to his apocalyptic prophecies suddenly.¹¹¹ It is more likely that, as he was looking back and describing the evolution of his mission, he saw that he would appear more legitimate by saying that gradually revealed his visions because the people were not always ready for them. This would explain why he did not tell the people of his visions in their entirety at the time he claims, in the *Compendium*, to have had them.

He goes on to elaborate on his interpretation of the visions, saying, “After that, again at God’s inspiration, I predicted that someone would cross the Alps into Italy, like the Cyrus of whom Isaiah says...”¹¹² This is almost certainly a fabrication, though not necessarily a malicious one, on the part of Savonarola. Weinstein and others thoroughly proved that there is

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 198-201.

¹⁰⁹ Behold, the sword of the Lord, swift and sure over the peoples of earth.

¹¹⁰ A reproduction and description of the medal can be found in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, 147.

¹¹¹ Weinstein, *Prophecy and Patriotism*, 76.

no existing evidence to this claim. By inserting this middle stage of interpretation into his chronology, he makes himself appear to have foretold the coming of the French king in a vague manner, without naming names. He later asserts, “I also said that Italy should not trust in citadels and fortresses, since he would overcome them without any difficulty. I predicted to the Florentines, especially those who then controlled the government, that they would choose a plan and course of action contrary to their safety and profit, that is, they would join the weaker side and would be beaten.”¹¹³ Here he is referring to the actions of Piero de Medici that led to his expulsion, specifically his forfeiting of Pisa and key fortresses to supplicate the French king. Following this, he claims to predict the deaths of two of Italy’s most prominent figures and narrows his vision-based prediction even further. He writes, “...at that time I did make it known to some of my friends the time set for the deaths of Innocent VIII and Lorenzo de Medici. I also predicted the revolution in the government and state of Florence that was to come when the King of the French first approached Pisa...”¹¹⁴ Now, in the third round of his interpretation of the vision, each more specific than the last, Savonarola names the King of France as the new Cyrus and the scourge of Italy. It is likely that Savonarola’s version of these events was constructed looking backwards and tailored to specific occurrences in hindsight. It is easy to see how many of his critics claimed that he simply deduced what was likely to happen and attributed it to God. Such accusations are addressed in Savonarola’s dialogue with the Tempter in the second portion of his work and will be discussed below.

His last statement regarding the vision of the sword is much brighter. He says, “I further predicted that the city of Florence would be reformed for the better. This was God’s will and the

¹¹² Savonarola, *Compendium of Revelations*, in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 201.

Florentines would have to do it. On God's behalf, I also foretold that by this reformation the city would become more glorious, more powerful, and richer than it had been up until now. The fact itself has proven that this was God's intention."¹¹⁵ Here he has switched prophetic gears and is now predicting a time of great prosperity. This switch occurred after the realization of many of his prophecies of tribulation. He likely deduced that the people of Florence would not be held at attention for long by fearful predictions of hardship. The industrious and strong citizens of Florence who followed Savonarola likely needed something positive to look forward to if they were to stay behind their prophet. In this change of pace we see him echoing Joachim, whose prophecies of an idyllic third age set him apart from other apocalyptic prophets as discussed earlier.

The second of Savonarola's major visions, described early in the first part of the *Compendium*, was his vision of the crosses of wrath and mercy. He explains,

In 1492 during Lent when I was preaching in the Church of San Lorenzo in Florence I saw two crosses on the night of Good Friday. The first one, in the midst of Rome, was black. It touched Heaven and spread its arms through the whole world. On it were written the words "The Cross of God's wrath." When I saw it, the air at once grew dark and turbulent with swirling clouds all mixed with winds, bolts of lightning, arrows, hailstones, fire and sword. A countless multitude of people were destroyed so that very few were left on earth. Afterward I saw a peaceful and clear time come and a golden cross in the midst of Jerusalem, the same height as the other, and so shining that it lit up the whole world and filled it with new flowers and joy. Its inscription was "the cross of God's mercy." Without delay all the nations of the earth, men and women, gathered on all sides to embrace it.¹¹⁶

In this vision readers can further see the dual nature of Savonarola's prophecies. Here the earth is besieged by God's wrath, but is eventually renewed and succored by his mercy. Again, this

¹¹³ Ibid., 201.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 202.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 207.

¹¹⁶ 206-207.

vision seems specifically tailored to suit the people of Florence, for Savonarola often appealed to the Florentines' sense of patriotism and belief in the superiority of their city. He had proclaimed Florence as the New Jerusalem and in this vision seems to indicate that God was telling him that a newly salubrious Florence would emerge as the center of a renovated Italy and of the world.

After recounting this vision, Savonarola proceeds, in the second portion of the book, to address the critiques of his prophetic mission by undertaking a dialogue with the Tempter. Here he engages the critics of his prophetic mission in the same way that he addressed criticisms of his political actions and his condemnation of earthly wisdom discussed earlier. This dialogue merits discussion in several places because it constitutes the most important and telling part of the *Compendium*. Of the thirty questions asked by the Tempter, around twenty concern the nature and effects of Savonarola's prophecies.¹¹⁷ The questions and answers are discussed in detail here because they discuss in detail both Savonarola's view of his prophecies and the criticisms of his opponents.

The Tempter's initial questions suggest that Savonarola was mistaken or misled into believing in the divine nature of his visions. The Tempter observes, "...You have predicted many tribulations and at the same time promised good things as well. This is not at all permitted, because God who is Truth wishes his preachers to be completely filled with the Truth."¹¹⁸ In this question the Tempter is highlighting the dual nature of Savonarola's prophecies and wondering, like many of the simple-minded Florentines, which prophecy to look forward to, the vision of doom and despair or happiness and prosperity. The confusion caused by these

¹¹⁷ Eighteen of the Tempter's questions have been repeated, as they appear in the English translation, below. The questions were included because of their overall concision, whereas Savonarola's responses are paraphrased and elaborated on, rather than quoted at length, in the interest of brevity. Some questions are not discussed either because they are superfluous or have already been dealt with in other parts of this work.

duplicitous visions had to be addressed. Savonarola insists that he was inspired by the Holy Spirit did not speak falsely. He asserts that everything he predicted either has happened or was possible and although seemingly duplicitous, his prophecies were not contradictory. He also points out that, “It is written that: ‘Evil is not to be done so that good might come.’”¹¹⁹ This seems to be at odds with his other, more Machiavellian ideas about judging the worth of actions by their fruit but this issue is sidestepped by Savonarola as he implies that no good effect can come from a bad cause.

The Tempter then states, “Granted you did not lie about them [the visions], you still foretold unusual and unheard-of things. Many thought that you made them up and proclaimed them under the influence of a melancholic spirit. Or perhaps they came from your dreams or your wild imagination.”¹²⁰ As evidence that his visions did not simply arise out of an overactive imagination, Savonarola explains the perfectly ordered nature of his visions and prophecies and the fact that many have come to pass, which could not have been the case if they were simply imaginative. He also states that he feels only truth and light in his heart, thus precluding the possibility of the presence of an evil spirit.

The Devil next suggests an astrological cause for Savonarola’s visions, asserting, “Then some constellation under which you were born or the influence of some planet or star has caused you to meditate, propose, and predict these future events.”¹²¹ Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, astrology was heavily debated but also generally accepted. In Savonarola’s

¹¹⁸ Savonarola, *Compendium of Revelations*, in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 213.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* Savonarola is referencing the Bible, Ps 5:7.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

response he references Albert the Great and biblical passages from Isaiah and Jeremiah, providing a scathing denunciation of astrology as Aquinas had before him.

Moving past astrology, the Tempter then puts forth the idea that Savonarola's vision could be inspired by the Devil. He posits, "This could be done by the power and work of the Devil, for he is able to fashion artificial things and to make something that is superior to bodily nature. Therefore you have surely been deceived by diabolical fraud."¹²² Here Savonarola shows his intelligence and craftiness as a writer, it is his vision, yet the Devil is suggesting his own agency. This charge and rebuttal are the very essence of the second part of the *Compendium*. As seen in contemporary accusations and in Ficino's scathing denial published after Savonarola's death, his successes were often attributed to the influence of the Devil. This played on the typical medieval and Renaissance superstitions of the general populace, who were always fearful of evil spirits. To answer this accusation Savonarola resorts to his tried and true response, that the positive transformation of Florence could not have been grounded in the machinations of the Devil.

The tone of the discussion then shifts and the Tempters seems to be attempting to trap Savonarola by using scripture and Church doctrine against him, stating that, "Whatever you say, my son, I will never be persuaded that Christ has spoken to any mortal after his Ascension to Heaven."¹²³ Savonarola's response refers to both Paul's letter to the Corinthians and the testimony of St. Francis, himself a figure between the medieval and the Renaissance. Savonarola noted that Christ appeared to many of his followers after his ascension, and argues that if Christ

¹²² Ibid., 215.

¹²³ Ibid., 216.

had the power to achieve salvation for sinners, then he certainly has the power to speak with or through them.

The Tempter then puts forth a question often used in the medieval world to dispute prophecy. He asks, “How can you know the time of the renovation of the Church when it is written: It is not yours to know the times nor the dates which the Father has placed in his own power?”¹²⁴ Savonarola’s response is not dramatically different than one would expect from a man familiar with medieval theology. He argues that the question shows a lack of attention to detail. He points out that only the knowledge of times specifically relegated to the power of the Father are unknowable and that other times, such as the Flood, the captivity of Israel, and the coming of Christ were revealed by God to his prophets. For Savonarola, the renovation of Italy and Church fall into this second group of times that are not solely under the purview of the Father.

The Tempter then resorts to his third line of assault and attacks Savonarola personally. He questions, “Why did God choose you for this task rather than another, since there are men better than you are in the Church?”¹²⁵ Savonarola again replies from within a predictable medieval framework pointing out that God has a history of choosing the unworthy, such as the apostles Peter and Paul. He also states that all are unworthy in the eyes of God and asks the Tempter who he is to question the judgment of the Lord. The Tempter then recounts a rumor he heard, telling Savonarola that, “I have heard that you depend on the visions of some women and preach what they dictate to you?”¹²⁶ Savonarola fervently denies this claim. He points out that everyone knows how reluctantly he visits women, that he rarely preaches to them, and that

¹²⁴ Ibid., 218. The Tempter references the Bible, Acts 1:7.

he never hears their confession. He advocates a position held by most men of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, that women were vain, weak, and undependable. For these reasons, he says that he would never allow himself to be influenced by them in any way, and fervently denies that they had anything to do with his prophetic mission.

The Tempter then criticizes Savonarola by suggesting that his prophecies came from knowledge gained through his contact with government officials. The Tempter makes three specific charges, “Some say that you have used your friendship with rulers and knowledge of their secrets to preach what they have decided to do?”¹²⁷ Then, “Others say that many citizens have told you the secrets of the government of Florence, and thus you know many hidden matters and the intentions of other rulers. You then put these things together to guess the future through clever reasoning.”¹²⁸ And finally, “Others think that you invented these predictions with the deepest connivance and cunning of public officials and magistrates. You then announced them with such craftiness that when they did not happen you would still have an excuse.”¹²⁹ There are two noteworthy components to these accusations: that Savonarola made his prophecies based on knowledge gained from government officials, and that he crafted them in such a way that he would not appear to have been incorrect should they not come to pass.

Savonarola certainly had to respond to the charge of making prophecy out of secret government information, because many high-ranking government officials were among his followers. Men like Francesco Valori, one of the most powerful politicians in Florence, and Paolantonio Soderini and Giovanbattista Ridolfi, both from high-ranking families and powerful

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 219.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 220.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

politicians in their own right, were all firmly in the friar's camp. Savonarola responded rather weakly to the charges, saying that only God could know what will happen and that only small-minded people would make such criticisms. He emphasizes the manner in which his critics have gone from accusing him of being simple and stupid to lauding his intelligence and cunning, grasping at whatever insults suit their position at the time. It is likely that these charges held some degree of truth and that Savonarola was well aware of it. So, he dismissed them quickly but did not draw attention to them with an overly strong rebuttal. It is also worth noting that these were charges that attributed a Machiavellian cunning to Savonarola and that he could not directly refute them through theological or logical arguments.

Not content with suggesting Savonarola's reliance on Renaissance lords, the Tempter then points out Savonarola's relationships with prophets past and present, taking a sly jab at the fact that many learned men of the Church were counted among Savonarola's enemies. He observes, "I understand that you have the revelations of Saint Bridget, Abbot Joachim, and many others from which you foretell coming events by divination."¹³⁰ Augustinians, Franciscans, and even other Dominicans resented his successes. Giovanni Caroli, the Dominican Prior of Santa Maria Novella, led them in attacking Savonarola's prophecies in every way they could conceive of. In response, Savonarola tells the Tempter that he did view the prophets as equals to the Holy Scripture and did not delight in reading them. He argues that if his prophecies are in some way similar to others that came before, it is enough for him that they are true, as current events are proving them to be. Such an answer was certainly directed to his critics within religious circles

¹²⁹ Ibid.,

¹³⁰ Ibid., 221.

and was meant to stifle talk of the obvious similarities between Savonarola and Joachim of Fiore discussed above.

The Tempter then continues on with this line of theological opposition. He tells Savonarola, “Son, the things you say should be kept in secret, this is what the writings of the holy fathers advise.”¹³¹ To which Savonarola replies that if that were true then Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and a host of Saints should not have spoken as they did, despite the good that they worked in the name of God. For Savonarola this could not be. He also adds that he only spoke as directed to by God and that God’s directions supersede all others. Here he seems to be equating his work to that of the Biblical patriarchs, highlighting the fact that he is working as God’s mouthpiece for the coming tribulations and renovations.

The Tempter then proclaims the charge that would ultimately lead to Savonarola undoing when Fra Gregorio da Perugia, a preacher from Santo Spirito, repeated it as he challenged Savonarola to a trial by fire in 1496. Although the trial never came to pass, Gregorio’s challenge led many of the citizens of Florence, who were anxious to see such a spectacle, to turn against Savonarola’s cause. In the *Compendium*, the Tempter proclaims,

Whosoever prophesies future things ought to confirm them with miracles in order to be believed. Otherwise, heretics could do the same. So the Canon ‘*Cum ex iniuncto extra de haereticis*’ can be invoked against you, the one that seems to indicate that those who preach such things confirm them by some sign or miracle. Some sat that in not doing this you have acted in a heretical manner and are to be judged as a heretic.¹³²

Savonarola responds by pointing out that many prophets and saints, chief among them St. John the Baptist, patron of Florence, lacked miracles. He argues that such doctrine cannot be found anywhere in the Holy Scripture and that those who accuse him of heresy are themselves evil

¹³¹ Ibid., 222.

men, as their other deeds show. It is worth noting here that Savonarola seemed to take this accusation very seriously, even before it prompted the trial by fire. He knew full well the power held in the charge of heresy and likely thought that he would be unable to produce a miracle on command, as his eventual reluctance to enter the fire shows. It is the only charge that prompted him to attempt to assuage the Church, as explained above, by proclaiming himself and his work to be open to examination and revision by the Church. Here again we can see Savonarola caught between the medieval and the emerging modernity of the Renaissance. There was great conflict at the time between the emerging secularly inclined humanists and the traditional medieval church. Savonarola seems to stand between the two groups, exposing the weaknesses of both groups by joining with each group in attacking the other. He realized however, that this would ultimately turn both groups against him and that he would be forced to fight a war on two fronts. The fact that he had great successes in gaining the admiration of humanists like Pico della Mirandola caused him to see a greater threat from powerful Church officials. This is surely what led him to scale back his attacks and attempt to placate the Church when facing the charge of heresy.

Abandoning religious criticisms, the Tempter then comments on the low number of Savonarola's followers, saying, "Those who believe in you are quite rare compared with those who ridicule these predictions. It seems hard to follow the judgment of so few."¹³³ This is an accurate observation. Although Savonarola had followers in sufficient numbers to allow him to effectively dominate the city, many more people were undecided than were firmly behind him. In his rebuttal Savonarola admits this and compares himself to Christ and the Old Testament

¹³² Ibid., 223.

prophets, pointing out that very few true prophets had followers in any great number. His response is important also because it shows him to be fully aware of the power of his voice and his sermons. He remarks that it is no wonder that those who have only heard tales of his preaching do not flock to the ranks of his followers with those who have heard it first hand. Here he invites all those who are relatively neutral to come and listen for themselves, confident that they will be won over to his cause. This shows that he was aware of his ability to blend old familiar theology with the emerging logic and philosophy of the humanists and that this mixture, when combined with his powerful prophecies, left the average listener awestruck and the more intelligent audience members intrigued and convinced. That is, of course, unless they had more to gain from his failure than his success.

From criticizing the number of Savonarola's followers, the Tempter then returns to his starting point, addressing the relatively small number of prophecies that have been fulfilled. He states, "Many claim that a number of things you have foretold have not happened, and for this reason they do not believe the other things that you have predicted."¹³⁴ This was also a very valid criticism leveled by many of Savonarola's enemies. In reality, the prophecy of impending tribulation, fulfilled by the coming of Charles VIII, was the only one of Savonarola's public prophecies to be realized. This, along with his leading role in reforming Florentine politics were enough to keep him in the good graces of the citizens of Florence for several years, but as time went on and his more positive prophecies of better times went unfulfilled, people became skeptical and turned against Savonarola. To this accusation Savonarola replies that everything he publicly preached either had or certainly would come to pass. He equated those who doubt

¹³³ Ibid., 228.

that with those people who foolishly believe that since he is a prophet he should be able to read their minds and know every possible hidden secret. He also suggested that the prophecies that have come true and the obvious change for the good in Florence should be enough to satisfy all but the most heard-hearted wicked critics.

The Tempter then draws together his great personal attack on Savonarola:

I know quite well that you do not sin from ignorance or from foolish simplicity, because you have answered my objections in a way that shows you are seriously moved to make these predictions. Although a host of other objections could be advanced, you would easily be able to refute them since you have answered many more difficult ones. Therefore, if you do not preach those things from ignorance, it follows that you make them up with deceit in order to gain glory, dignity, and wealth, as many hold. That, my son, is detestable.¹³⁵

Savonarola has used his own vision, speaking with the voice of the Devil, to summarize the chief opposition arguments to his ministry and he certainly needed to address such charges. In doing so he gives a brief description of the three kinds of temporal goods. He points out, again drawing on Aristotle and Aquinas, that there are bodily goods, such as strength or pleasure, intellectual goods such as the prideful acquisition of human wisdom, and abstract goods, such as glory, honor, and power. Savonarola summarily refutes any notion that he is trying to attain any of these, pointing out his simple and humble existence, his refusal of higher Church offices, and his lack of any official political responsibilities.

Near the end of the Tempter's assault, he remarks to Savonarola that, "In summary, your excuses do not square with many people because hypocrisy has learned how to conceal its ideas with care."¹³⁶ In response, building on all of his past replies, Savonarola summarizes his overall

¹³⁴ Ibid., 229.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 232.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 239.

defense of his mission. He points out first that even Christ had more detractors than followers and that no servant is greater than his master. He also restates his earlier arguments that his prophecy of the coming of the scourge of Italy was fulfilled and, through it, Florence has been made a more pious and more holy place. He reasons that this could not have happened through malicious cunning or any other way but through the will of God.

Other works detailing Savonarola's prophetic mission include, but are not limited to, his "Psalms Sermon III," the famous "Renovation Sermon," and his 1497 work, *Dialogue Concerning the Prophetic Truth*.¹³⁷ *The Compendium*, however, was the first of his works designed to specifically address his critics and thoroughly explain his own points of view. The views, on political, social, philosophical, and theological issues show him to be an intriguing figure who embodies the great spirit and conflicting ideas of the Renaissance.

¹³⁷ These works are also reprinted in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*. The "Psalms Sermon III" can be found on pages 59-76 and the *Dialogue Concerning the Prophetic Truth* on pages 77-136.

CONCLUSION

This work begins with an examination of the historiography of the Renaissance so that readers might come to understand how other scholars have conceptualized the Renaissance and how this work should best be situated in the larger body of scholarship. Clearly, this work advocates viewing the Renaissance as a dramatic, though not a complete, break from the medieval world. Despite current debates regarding the collapse of or inability to adequately define the notion of modernity, certain ways of thought and actions that were not prevalent in the medieval world have easily visible since the Renaissance. The work then turns to a discussion of the actual history of Florence around the time of Savonarola. This is done so that the reader could situate Savonarola's life and works within the overall history in the same manner that they situated this work among the larger body of scholarship. Once those two goals have been completed, the work turns to an examination of Savonarola's most informative work.

It is the *Compendium of Revelations* allows readers to understand Savonarola in a way that is rare among historical Renaissance figures. He has given us his own view on politics, religion, prophecy, and his perception of himself and how he fit into Florence. As an outsider from Ferrara, he detailed how he came to the city and was inspired by God to prophesy its coming trials and ultimate renovation. His work gives us a unique insight into the debates taking place in Florence during the years of his ministry and allows us to better perceive the ways in which he viewed his critics and himself. In his own words, perhaps without being aware of it, he has characterized himself as an extremely complicated man with very diverse views. His political stances seem grounded in medieval reason but significantly more progressive than

anything seen in the medieval times. His religious ideas, again heavily influenced by his Dominican predecessor Thomas Aquinas and Joachim of Fiore, also seem to exhibit certain traits that distinctly not medieval. He did indeed call for a renovation of the Church before Luther and, also like Luther, he thought it needed to return to a more strict and pious medieval form. Also, like many medieval Church figures before him, he openly condemned human learning. However, the structure of his work, his close relationship with many great thinkers, and simply the nature of his arguments show him to be a man of his time and to have been heavily influenced by secular thought. As for his status as a prophet, he seemed to certainly believe he was one. He saw himself as responsible by proxy through God for the conversion of Florence to a more Holy place. His prophecies themselves shared much in common with those of Joachim of Fiore, including his emphasis on a third age of grace before the apocalypse. The way in which he outlined his visions, however, with nearly everything hinging on the actions of human beings and, in some cases individuals, shows a respect for the human potential reminiscent of the sentiment put forth by Pico della Mirandola in his famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, in both its Biblical and philosophical arguments. The influence of contemporary civic and philosophical Humanism, combined with a thoroughly medieval education and theological background, came together in Savonarola to produce a man of the Renaissance. Not wholly modern or wholly medieval, Savonarola seems to bridge the two, representing a significant break with the medieval past while still standing somewhere outside the world that was to develop in the coming centuries.

**APPENDIX: TIMELINES CONCERNING THE HISTORY OF THE
FLORENCE, THE CHURCH, AND SAVONAROLA IN THE FIFTEENTH
CENTURY**

RULERSHIP OF FLORENCE 1400-1500

1400-1434	Republican Oligarchic Councils
1434-1464	Cosimo, <i>il vecchio</i> , <i>Pater Patriae</i>
1464-1469	Piero di Cosimo
1469-1492	Lorenzo <i>il Magnifico</i>
1492-1492	Piero <i>il giovane</i>
1494-1498	Savonarolan Theocratic Republic
1498-1512	Republic of Florence (Piero Soderini)

GENERAL HISTORY OF FLORENCE 1400-1500

- 1400** The government of Florence is dominated by the major guilds and Florence suffers attacks from Milan. Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici lays the foundations of the Medici banking empire. A plague hits Florence.
- 1402** The campaigns of Gian Galeazzo Visconti of Milan end.
- 1403** Lorenzo Ghiberti wins a competition to design the doors of the Baptistery of San Giovanni.
- 1404** Florence attacks Pisa. Leon Battista Alberti is born.
- 1406** Florence captures Pisa.
- 1408** King Ladislao of Naples campaigns against Florence until 1414. Donatello sculpts his David.
- 1413** Filippo Brunelleschi develops systems of linear perspective and proportions.
- 1415** Death of Manuel Chrysoloras (born c. 1350) who came to teach the Florentines Greek in 1397.
- 1417** A plague hits Florence.
- 1418** The Council of Constance ends the Great Schism of the Western Church. Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici finances the rebuilding of San Lorenzo.
- 1424** Gian Galeazzo Visconti's successor, Filippo Maria, campaigns against Florence until 1428.
- 1429** Giovanni di Bicci, father of Cosimo *il vecchio*, dies and Cosimo becomes head of the Medici family.
- 1429-1433** Florence unsuccessfully campaigns against Lucca.
- 1433** Albizzi supporters in the government arrest and exile Cosimo to Padua for ten years. Marsilio Ficino is born.

- 1434** Elections produce a pro-Medici government and Cosimo returns to Florence. Cosimo expands his banking empire and invests in rebuilding and stimulating the economy Florence and patronizing its artists. Pro-Medici party factions in the government begin to consolidate power over the republic.
- 1435** Andrea del Verrochio is born and later creates the workshop in which he trained Leonardo da Vinci and Sandro Botticelli among others.
- 1436** Brunelleschi completes the Dome of the cathedral of Florence.
- 1439** The Ecclesiastical Council brings Pope Eugenius IV, Emperor Johannis Palaeologus, Cardinal Bessarione, Tomasso Parentucelli, and Gemisto to Florence
- 1440** Johannes Gutenberg begins the process that will lead to the printing press.
- 1445** Sandro Botticelli is born; he becomes a follower of Savonarola in the 1490's and dies in 1510.
- 1446** Filippo Brunelleschi dies (born in 1377).
- 1450** Cosimo financially supports Francesco Sforza, who becomes Duke of Milan, securing strong military support for Florence.
- 1452** Leonardo da Vinci is born in Tuscany, he travels throughout Italy and Europe before dying in Amboise, France, in 1512. Savonarola is born in Ferrara. Ghiberti unveils the Baptistery doors.
- 1453** The Turks take Constantinople.
- 1454** Italian cities sign the Treaty of Lodi, bringing a brief period of peace to Italy.
- 1455** Lorenzo Ghiberti dies (born in 1381).
- 1462** Cosimo, with the help of Masilio Ficino, turns the villa at Carregio into the Platonic Academy of Florence, promoting Humanism and the revival of Platonism.
- 1463** Giovanni Pico della Mirandola is born.

- 1464** Cosimo dies and is posthumously named *Pater Patriae*. Piero di Cosimo inherits the wealth and political status of his father. The Florentine government, in the absence of a strong leader, takes steps to regain some of the republic.
- 1466** Donatello dies (Born in 1386).
- 1469** After the death of Piero, Lorenzo '*il magnifico*' de' Medici becomes head of the Medici family. He continues to patronize artists and becomes a renowned statesman. His court included: Sandro Botticelli, Michelangelo, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Marsilio Ficino, and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Nicolo Machiavelli is born (dies 1527).
- 1470** Volterra threatens to revolt against Florence. Lorenzo musters support and the Duke of Urbino sacks the city. Lorenzo helps finance its repair.
- 1472** Leon Battista Alberti dies.
- 1474** Florence enters into a league with Milan and Venice, the league is opposed by Pope Sixtus IV and by King Ferrante of Naples.
- 1475** Sixtus IV elected Pope. Michelangelo is born, he later resides with the Medici from 1490-1492 before leaving when they are exiled in 1494, he dies in 1564. Giovanni de' Medici, son of Lorenzo and later Pope Leo X, is born.
- 1478** The Pazzi and perhaps Pope Sixtus IV and the Duke of Urbino attempt to have Lorenzo assassinated. Lorenzo's brother, Giuliano, is killed and Lorenzo escapes unharmed. He subsequently has all of the conspirators, the Archbishop of Pisa, and over seventy other people killed. Giulio, later Pope Clement VII, the illegitimate son of Giuliano, is born. Botticelli completes *La Primavera*.
- 1480** As the Pope's troops close on Florence, Lorenzo negotiates peace with Naples and saves the city.
- 1481** After another attempt on Lorenzo's life, the government of Florence passes a law making it a crime against the state to attempt to assassinate him.
- 1482** Botticelli completes *The Birth of Venus*. Savonarola begins his preaching against the Medici.
- 1484** Now allied with Naples, Florence opposes Papal and Venetian expansion. Innocent VIII elected Pope.

- 1486** Lorenzo urges peace between Pope Innocent VIII's armies and the forces of King Ferdinand of Naples.
- 1488** Andrea del Verrochio dies in Venice.
- 1489** Giovanni de' Medici is made Cardinal.
- 1491** Savonarola is made prior of San Marco and increases his preaching.
- 1492** Lorenzo dies and is succeeded by his son Piero di Lorenzo, *il giovane*, who was not as politically gifted as his father. Rodrigo Borgia elected Pope Alexander VI. Columbus sails to the Americas.
- 1494** Without Lorenzo to hold the alliance between Florence, Milan and Naples together, Lodovico of Milan continues to urge Charles VIII of France to assert his rightful claim to Naples. Charles VIII comes to Italy with an army of around 30,000. Piero appeases him with the key to several Florentine fortresses and the port cities of Pisa and Leghorn. Piero and the Medici are exiled. Savonarola helps institute a new republic. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola dies. Michaelangelo goes to Rome.
- 1497** Savonarola organizes the Bonfire of the Vanities. He is excommunicated by Alexander VI. Piero *il giovane* attempts to storm Florence but is repulsed.
- 1498** Savonarola is arrested, tortured, and executed. The republic continues without its prophetic dictator or its Medici tyrants. Leonardo da Vinci completes The Last Supper in Milan. Piero Soderini revives the Republic of Florence. Machievelli begins working for the *Signoria*.
- 1499** Marsilio Ficino dies. Michelangelo sculpts the Pieta.
- 1500** Florence remains a republic, with Soderini being named *gonfaloniere* for life in 1502, until the Spanish troops reinstalled Giovanni de' Medici in 1512. Leonardo returns from two decades in Milan to study engineering, mathematics and topography. Benvenuto Cellini born (Dies 1571).

GOVERNMENTAL CHANGES IN FLORENCE 1400-1500

- 1400** The *Signoria*, the *dodici buomini*, and the *seidici gonfaloniere* are the highest government bodies. The Councils of the People and Commune approve the legislation and decisions. Positions open up as often as every two months and are filled by random lot drawing from among a list of qualified names.
- 1434** The list of qualified names is remade to include more Medici supporters. The *Cento* is formed from among those who are already in power and those loyal to them, they can control elections and formulate legislation before sending it to the lower councils.
- 1465** A large group of anti-Medici officials and families push for a more open constitution, they sign oaths and demand that elections by lot be restored and attempt to abolish the *Cento*. They are unsuccessful and the constitution of 1464 is upheld and election by lot for the *Signoria* is further suspended for twenty years.
- 1469** The age exemption is waved so Lorenzo can take office. The right of the Councils of the People and Commune to vote on tax legislation is abolished. A new body of forty pro-Medici men is added to the *Cento*. The *accoppiatori* is now elected yearly by reigning members of the *accoppiatori* and the *Signoria*.
- 1480** The *Consiglio di Settanta* is created to approve legislation before it goes to the lower Councils, it has no rotation. The *Otto di Pratica* is created to govern foreign affairs for the *Signoria* and the *Dodici Procuratorie* is created to govern domestic affairs, membership on both commissions is for six months and members must be from the *Consiglio di Settanta*
- 1494** The Medici are exiled from Florence; New *accoppiatori* are appointed to draft new lists for a return to elections by lot. Savonarola supports a return to a more open constitution similar to those prior to 1434 and it is passed with the addition of a Great Council as the central governing body with some 3,000 members.

1498

Savonarola is executed and the government of Florence splits into two factions, the *bianchi* who favor the new constitution and the Great Council and the *Bigi* who favor a Medicean government.

1500

The unstable republic continued until Piero Soderini was named *gonfaloniere* for life in 1502. The Medici were returned to power by Papal and Spanish armies in 1512.

CATHOLIC POPES 1400-1500

1389-1404	Boniface IX
1404-1406	Innocent VII
1406-1417	Gregory XII
1417-1431	Martin V
1431-1447	Eugenius IV
1447-1455	Nicholas V
1455-1458	Callistus III
1458-1464	Pius II
1464-1471	Paul II
1471-1484	Sixtus IV
1484-1492	Innocent VIII
1492-1503	Alexander VI

THE LIFE OF FRA GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA

- 1452** Savonarola is born in Ferrara.
- 1469** Savonarola begins studying medicine at the University of Ferrara.
- 1471** Savonarola experiences the rejection of his love Laodamia and decides to join the priesthood to the dismay of his family. He goes to San Domenico in Bologna.
- 1483** Savonarola studies theology further in Ferrara where he meets and impresses Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.
- 1484** Savonarola makes his first trip to Florence as a lecturer at San Marco. The trip is a failure, his sermons were not popular and he is considered a poor speaker.
- 1485** Savonarola's father dies while he is away in Bologna. He then travels Tuscany as a wandering preacher.
- 1490** Pico prevails on Lorenzo de' Medici to bring Savonarola to San Marco permanently.
- 1491** Savonarola's lecturing goes over quite well with the learned academics and monks of Florence and his early prophetic preaching builds him a great following. He is elected to the office of prior of San Marco. Once in office he begins preaching against the corruption of the church, the Pope, and of the Medici government.
- 1492** Lorenzo de' Medici dies. Savonarola becomes more vehement in his denunciations of the tyrannical Medici government and the corrupt Papacy.
- 1493** Savonarola removes San Marco and several other monasteries from the Lombard Congregation into a new Tuscan congregation over which he has full authority.
- 1494** Piero de' Medici is expelled from Florence and Savonarola negotiates with the French King Charles VIII for the

welfare of Florence. Savonarola gives his great political sermon, advising Florence on how to create their new government in a more republican manner.

1495

Savonarola publishes the fantastic and quasi-autobiographical *Compendium of Revelations*.

1497

Savonarola organizes the Bonfire of the Vanities, burning many precious jewels, items of clothing, paintings, and books. Savonarola is excommunicated by Alexander VI but continues preaching. Savonarola articulates his theological positions in *The Triumph of the Cross*.

1498

Savonarola completes his *Treatise on the Government of Florence* and conducts a second Bonfire of the Vanities. He is arrested for heresy, tortured, and confesses (although he later recants). He is hung and burned in the Piazza della *Signoria* and his body is thrown into the Arno river.

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