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*Violent Language in Early Fifteenth-century Italy: the Emotions of Invectives*

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Almost six hundred years ago, Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) stung his fellow scholar and strong enemy Francesco Filelfo (1398-1481) with the following venom:

You stinking billy-goat, you horned monster, you malevolent vituperator, father of lies and author of chaos... May Divine vengeance destroy you as an enemy of virtue, a parricide who tries to ruin wives and decency by mendacity, slanders, and most foul, false imputations. If you must be so scornfully arrogant, write your satires against those who debauch your wife. Vomit the putrescence of your stomach.<sup>2</sup>

This is one of the many vitriolic invectives hurled by Italian humanists<sup>3</sup> at their competitors well before Martin Luther, Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More penned their theological and protestant vituperations.<sup>4</sup> Intellectuals and leaders used violent words, enacted on minds and with the intent of damaging the reputation of their opponents. Their extremely crude attacks and 'robust' language<sup>5</sup> have confounded scholars who have generally shied away from these texts.<sup>6</sup> The humanists who penned these viperous words have been accused of arrogance, lack of ethical stance, and absolute vulgarity. Fortunately, modern editions of a small but significant sample of these Latin texts reveal that behind strong words were important intellectual disputes garnished with eloquent references to classical texts. One of the most influential texts on humanistic culture is Lorenzo Valla's *Elegantiae* (1435-1444), which came out of a bitter exchange with Bracciolini. However, these

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<sup>2</sup> George Austin Test, *Satire: Spirit and Art* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991): p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> On fifteenth-century Italian humanism there is a vast literature. Most scholars agree that humanist authors were the most proficient Latin scholars who used their knowledge of classical culture to obtain distinguished political and cultural roles. Recently, this interpretation has been expanded to include non-professional, semi-Latinate readers of Latin. See Brian Maxson, *The Humanist World of Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 11-25.

<sup>4</sup> On Luther and Erasmus's invectives see Constance M. Furey, 'Invective and Discernment on Martin Luther, D. Erasmus, and Thomas More', *Harvard Theological Review* 98 (2005), pp. 469-488.

<sup>5</sup> I refer here to Vittorio Rossi's short but enlightening discussion of humanistic invectives in his 'Il Quattrocento', *Storia Letteraria d'Italia* (Milan: Vallardi, 1933): pp. 99-101.

<sup>6</sup> See Lucia Cesarini Martinelli, 'Note sulla Polemica Poggio-Valla e sulla fortuna delle *Elegantiae*', *Interpres*, 3 (1980), pp. 29-79.

few editions of invectives have focused on the content of the dispute and context,<sup>7</sup> while their scurrilous and emotional language remains largely uncharted. And yet it is the violent language and emotions that were meant to stir strong reactions in the victims and audiences. In this chapter I use ‘emotions’ in the sense described by Eric Shouse: emotions are a social and cultural construct, feelings are personal and biographical, and affects are pre-personal, uncontrollable and non-conscious.<sup>8</sup> As cultural constructs, written texts from the distant past—such as these elaborate Neo-Latin rewritings of the ancient Roman vituperations and satire—reveal socially and culturally fabricated emotions, in which lived emotions are filtered.

Did these invectives really hurt their victims and entertain their audiences? Were these texts really violent? It is practically impossible for us today to tell what personal and lived feelings were stirred by these literary invectives: embarrassment or anger, sadness or elation. In these Latin texts (as in ancient Roman invectives), a victim is charged of blind, realistic, or hyperbolic accusations such as incest, homosexual prostitution and consorting with whores.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, it is also difficult to assess whether the language used in these literary texts was effectively seen as violent as it appears to be today. Here I follow John Carter Wood’s view that ‘violence is a phenomenon in the eye of the beholder, a historically defined notion dependent not only on physically aggressive acts but also views of justice, attitudes towards cruelty and notions of public and private space, among other things’.<sup>10</sup> It is however possible to understand the emotional qualities with the source of the message by studying the

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<sup>7</sup> See Martinelli, ‘Note’; Salvatore I. Camporeale, *Lorenzo Valla. Umanesimo e Teologia* (Florence: Istituto nazionale di studi sul Rinascimento, 1972): this book contains an edition of Valla’s *Apologus* against Bracciolini; Bartolomeo Facio, *Invective in Laurentium Valla*, ed. Ennio I. Rao (Naples: SEN, 1978); Lorenzo Valla, *Antidotum in Facium*, ed. Mariangela Regoliosi (Padua: Antenore, 1981); David Rutherford, *The Early Renaissance Invective and Controversies of Antonio da Rho* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 2005); Francesco Filelfo, *Satyrae I (Decadi I-V)*, ed. Silvia Fiaschi (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2005); Antonio Lanza, *Polemiche e berte letterarie nella Firenze del primo Rinascimento (1375-1449)* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1989); John Monfasani, ‘In Praise of Ognibene and Blame of Guarino: Andronicus Contoblanca’s Invective Against Niccolò Botano and the Citizens of Brescia’, *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 52, 2 (1990), pp. 309-321, and Poggio Bracciolini, *Facezie*, ed. M. Ciccuto (Milan: Rizzoli, 1984). Several invectives are embedded in several collections of letters by humanists such as Bruni, Filelfo, Guarini, etc.

<sup>8</sup> See Ruth Leys, ‘The Turn to Affect: A Critique’, *Critical Inquiry* 37, 3 (2011), pp. 434-472: p. 442. See also the semi-constructionist approach summarized by William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 35-47.

<sup>9</sup> Arena, ‘Roman Oratorical’, p. 157.

<sup>10</sup> John Carter Wood, ‘Conceptualizing Cultures of Violence and Cultural Change’, in *Cultures of Violence: Interpersonal Violence in Historical Perspective*, ed. Stuart Carroll (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 79-96: p. 85.

social and cultural system of insult.<sup>11</sup> Extrapolating from Shouse's argument that literary texts 'independent of content and meaning',<sup>12</sup> then studying humanistic invectives beyond their literary system might shed light on their ability to evoke lived emotions and involve a broader spectrum of society that understood and participated in the social performance of insult.

The literary sophistication of these Latin invectives could only be appreciated by the restricted circle of Latin humanists, but the emotions elicited by these texts could (and probably were meant to) reach beyond this group. The emotional effect of this seemingly violent language is what concerns this chapter. Early fifteenth-century humanists adopted the poisonous language of classical sources such as Catullus, Ovid, Martial and Pliny.<sup>13</sup> In particular, Cicero's forensic oratory provided a powerful lexicon for verbal assault and character assassination: the key feature of the ancient invective was the manipulation of the audience's emotions and not just the strength and validity of the argument.<sup>14</sup> That humanists adopted and reinvented classical models and culture is hardly surprising given their interest in reviving classical Latin. What has not been considered by scholarship—and this is the central argument of this chapter—is that humanists also exploited a strong vernacular culture of insult and mockery that characterized late medieval and early modern Italian, Spanish and French communities.<sup>15</sup> Social historians have shown that all levels of society understood and practiced the 'game of insult', which had strict rules based on gender, social status, and socio-political context.<sup>16</sup> The performance of verbal and written insult encompassed a wide range of genres that were often mixed with one another:

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<sup>11</sup> See Burke, *Social History*, and Peter Burke, 'The Art of Insult in Early Modern Italy', *Culture and History* 2 (1987), pp. 68-79.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Shouse, 'Feeling, Emotion, Affect,' *M/C Journal* 8 (2005): quote taken from Leys, 'The Turn', p. 435.

<sup>13</sup> See Rutherford, *The Early Renaissance*, for the use of these sources in Antonio da Rho and Panormita's exchange of invectives.

<sup>14</sup> Valentina Arena, 'Roman Oratorical Invective', in *A Companion to Roman Rhetoric*, eds. William Dominik with Jon Hall (Malden, USA, and London, UK: Blackwell 2007), pp. 149-160: pp. 150-151. See also Brian A. Krostenko, *Cicero, Catullus, and the Language of Social Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> For France see Lazar Sainéan, *Les sources de l'argot ancien* (Paris: Champion, 1912), 2 vols.. For Spain see Frère Claude de Bronseval, *Peregrinatio hispanica: voyage de Dom Edme de Saulieu, abbé de Clairvaux, en Espagne et au Portugal, 1531-1533* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970). I have found these last two sources from Trevor Dean's study of insults in Bologna. See note 16 below.

<sup>16</sup> See Guido Ruggiero, *Violence in Early Renaissance Venice* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1980); Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds.), *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge, New York, New Rochelle, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Lauro Martines, *Strong Words: Writing and Social Strain in the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Trevor Dean, 'Gender and Insult in an Italian City: Bologna in the Later Middle Ages', *Social History* 29, 2 (2004): pp. 217-231, and Elizabeth Horodowich, *Language and Statecraft in Early Modern Venice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

slur, curse, scorn, hyperbolic jokes, derisive sermons, satirical poems, epigrams, scathing epistles, incendiary letters, comic dialogues, and so on. They all contained elements of invective.

The authors of these inflammatory texts walked a fine line between game and defamation, reality and hyperbole which only the addressees could grasp fully.<sup>17</sup> These connections between verbal and literary insults established a complicity between the early modern Italian learned elite (the humanists) and its community (the literate and non-literate audiences). The strong language used in the texts under examination here was mostly adapted from literary sources and therefore validated by classical and authoritative texts: nothing like the vernacular swearing and cursing that took place on the street. And yet, as I show in this chapter, the Latin lexicon of invective connected with the violent verbal abuse that was so commonly heard in the streets of early modern cities.

I argue here that it is possible to answer the questions about the emotional potential and violent nature of the invectives only by bringing together scholarship on early modern literary invectives and the social history of insult. When studied comparatively and within a socio-historical framework, literary texts can illuminate the emotional values and codes of their receiving community. By connecting the literary and social history of insult it is possible to understand the similarities between literary and verbal slander and qualify the type of violence unleashed by these texts.

After a brief discussion of the nature and performativity of fifteenth-century humanistic invectives and the culture of insult that characterized early modern societies, the discussion will turn to the bitter dispute between two fifteenth-century humanists, Antonio da Rho (ca. 1395-1447) and Antonio Beccadelli (nicknamed 'Panormita' because he was from Palermo, 1394-1471): their feud erupted circa 1429 while both were working for the Milanese court and continued at least until 1433. I will show how these two scholars latched onto their society's culture of insult and dangerously blurred the confines between conventional and intentional attack, Latin and vernacular, orality and literature, personal and collective emotions.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, the humanists considered here played with fire: they used classical sources to revive the ancient art of insult and vulgar poetry and found themselves enmeshed in the

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<sup>17</sup> Claudio Griggio, 'La Tradizione dell'invettiva dal Petrarca al Poliziano', in *Bufere e molli aurette. Polemiche letterarie dallo Stilnovo alla "Voce"* (Milan: Edizioni Angelo Guerini, 1996), pp. 37-51: pp. 38-39.

<sup>18</sup> On collective emotions see Christian von Scheve and Mikko Salmela, *Collective Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): especially pp. xv-xvi.

strong vernacular culture of slur and mockery they were so keen to distinguish themselves from. Emotions transcend cultural, social, and linguistic barriers, it seems.

### **What is a humanistic invective? Between crudeness and sophistication**

The few studies of fifteenth-century Latin invectives stumble upon the same problem: how to define and describe humanistic invective.<sup>19</sup> Broadly speaking, humanistic invectives are Latin prose or verse of various length—from one page to several—in which a competitor is attacked and insulted on the written page. An invective can be an unprovoked assault or a vehement response to an opponent's slur. The Latin term *invectiva* gained currency during the fourth and fifth centuries CE, when scholiasts and grammarians used this word to describe epideictic and contumelious orations. Cicero was for humanists and early modern orators the undisputed father of these invectives. Cicero's oration *Against Verrem* has been known for centuries and informed Petrarch's own production of invectives.

The key sources of inspiration for these neo-Latin texts are the polemic and forensic orations by Cicero and the apocryphal orations attributed to Sallust and Cicero. But there are also strong connections with the early Christian invectives by Jerome who was the first to write invectives not as a deliberative but literary practice.<sup>20</sup> Jerome created a new, epistolary form of invective that drew its lexicon from the Imprecatory Psalms and 'by resorting to the Christian practice of cursing or anathematizing heretics and opponents'.<sup>21</sup> Jerome's strong language against Jovinian, Vigilantius, Helvidius, Rufinus and others was so scurrilous that some humanists thought that Jerome had lost his self-control.

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<sup>19</sup> Humanistic invectives have received relatively scant attention. On Petrarch's adaptation of the classical *vituperatio* and demonstrative rhetoric see Bausi, *Petrarca antimoderno* and Francesco Petrarca, *Invectives*, ed. David Marsh (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2003). On the invective as a complex and multiform genre see Agnès Morini (ed.), *L'invective: histoire, formes, stratégies: actes du colloque international des 24 et 25 novembre 2005, Saint-Etienne*, (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2006); Robert Eisenhauer, *Archeologies of Invective* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); Marc Laureys, 'Per una storia dell'invettiva umanistica', *Studi Umanistici Piceni* 23 (2003), pp. 9-30; Pier Giorgio Ricci, 'La tradizione dell'invettiva tra il medioevo e l'umanesimo', in Pier Giorgio Ricci, *Miscellanea petrarchesca*, ed. Monica Berté (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1999), pp. 189-200; Martinelli, 'Note'; Martin Charles Davies, 'An Emperor without Clothes? Niccolò Niccoli under Attack', in *Maistor. Classical, Byzantine and Renaissance Studies for Robert Browning*, ed. Ann Moffatt (Canberra: The Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1984), pp. 269-208. On violent language and patronage see Martines, *Strong Words*.

<sup>20</sup> Rutherford, *Early Renaissance*, pp. 20-22.

<sup>21</sup> Rutherford, *Early Renaissance*, p. 21.

The incendiary prose continued to be used, although it was revamped by Petrarch in his numerous invectives,<sup>22</sup> and then elaborated further by fifteenth-century intellectuals such as Leonardo Bruni, Antonio Loschi, Coluccio Salutati, Lorenzo Valla, and Bartolomeo Fonzio amongst others. The verse satire and invective were emulated by Panormita in his *Hermaphrodite*, Francesco Filelfo in his *Satyrae*, and Poggio Bracciolini in his *Facetiae*.

In 1417, the discovery of another oration by Cicero, *Against Piso*, fuelled the interest and production of invectives throughout the Italian Renaissance. A recent study shows the humanistic invectives grew exponentially after the first two decades of the fifteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Invectives were the ground on which budding scholars would train their linguistic and rhetorical proficiency. But they also offered great opportunity for stinging opponents and asserting superiority. Bracciolini's attack on Filelfo—with which this chapter opens—is representative of the aggressiveness used in these texts.

Invectives emphasize passionate discussions over literary, linguistic, or philosophical matters. The most famous exchange of invectives is the one between Lorenzo Valla and Poggio Bracciolini (1452-1453) concerning Latin proficiency and the *raison d'être* of the humanistic movement. Another humanist, George of Trebisond (1395- ca.1472), recounts that the exchange between the two scholars was so passionate that Bracciolini even considered employing a killer to eliminate his opponent. But other Latin works such as Panormita's *Hermaphrodite*, Filelfo's *Satyrae* and Bracciolini's *Facetiae* can also be described as invectives for these texts also contain slanderous attacks and mockery. Marc Laureys shows how difficult it is to circumscribe the humanist invectives. The first problem is that 'invectiva' is used interchangeably with other terms including letter, speech, apologue, defence, and sermon.<sup>24</sup> There are also cases in which prose and verse are mixed within the same text, as in the case of Bracciolini's *Orationes* against Valla.

Humanist invectives are the expression of various ancient literary productions: pastoral poems (Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius, and Martialis), verse satire (Horace), comedy (Plautus), and epideictic oratory (Cicero). Vittorio Rossi and Claudio Griggio

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<sup>22</sup> See Bausi, *Petrarca antimoderno*.

<sup>23</sup> Guido De Blasi and Amedeo De Vincentiis, 'Un'età di invettive', in *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, ed. Amedeo De Vincentiis (Turin: Einaudi, 2010), I, pp. 356-363.

<sup>24</sup> Laureys, *Per una storia*, pp. 14-15.

suggested a further influence in the thirteenth and early fourteenth-century Florentine vernacular invectives; Dante's *Comedy* being a key model.<sup>25</sup> Antonio Lanza expands on this connection by pointing towards the strong Florentine tradition of burlesque, satirical and slanderous writings in the vernacular at the turn of the fifteenth century.<sup>26</sup>

This connection with vernacular invectives and popular literary traditions of mockery and 'game of insult' exposes an incongruous side of humanistic invective. As I will discuss in the next section, fifteenth-century humanists sought to engage with the classical tradition of oratorical defamation and satire by practising verbal aggression, invoking strong emotions (*pathos*), and evoking the obscene lexicon of ancient Rome: yet by doing this they found themselves sharing the culture of insult (*vituperatio*) used by the vernacular comic poetry of fifteenth century Tuscan poets such as Giovanni Matteo di Meglio, Luigi Pulci (1432-1484) and Burchiello (1404-1449).<sup>27</sup> As the fourth section of this chapter will show, the more humanists tried to emulate the invectives and satires of their classical models, the more they aligned themselves with the culture of verbal slur and mockery that echoed through the streets of early modern Italian cities. Let us now turn to the social performance of insult that formed the context of humanistic invectives.

### **Cultures of vilification**

In the 1440s, Lorenzo Damiani from Pisa insulted a Piero di Pardino in a wrathful vernacular sonnet. The opening of this poem sets the tone: 'Smelly swine, nasty coward, envious, unjust, mindless ingrate, ugly, wretched, base, and worth nothing'.<sup>28</sup> Poetry of malediction circulated widely amongst literati and often reached vernacular audiences. The vitriolic sonnets in vernacular by Giovanni Matteo di Meglio (1445-1449) and Burchiello (1440s) contain some of the most violent literary attacks against friends, enemies, and old women.<sup>29</sup> A barber and a thief, Burchiello did not hesitate to attack humanists. In a sonnet against Poggio Bracciolini, Burchiello calls his target

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<sup>25</sup> See Rossi, *Il Quattrocento*, and Claudio Griggio, 'La Tradizione dell'invettiva'. On Dante's use of invectives see Arianna Punzi, "'Animos movere": la lingua delle invettive nella *Commedia*', *Critica del testo* 14, 2 (2011), pp. 11-42.

<sup>26</sup> Antonio Lanza, *Polemiche*.

<sup>27</sup> Paolo Orvieto and Lucia Brestolini, *La poesia comico-realistica: dalle origini al Cinquecento* (Rome: Carocci, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> 'Porco potente pessimo poltrone, / invido iniquo ingrato iscognoscente / e brutto e tristo e ville e da niente' (quote and translation taken from Martines, *Strong Words*, p. 184).

<sup>29</sup> On di Meglio see Giovan Matteo di Meglio, *Rime*, ed. Giuseppe Brancat (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1977). On Burchiello see Antonio Lanza, *Polemiche*: pp. 337-400.

with a nickname, ‘Bambalione’: ‘I don’t think I’ve made any mistakes, but if I have, I will stand corrected before the learned Poggio Bambalione’.<sup>30</sup> Burchiello is following the malicious pen of another humanist of his time, Francesco Filelfo, who in turn exploited the gossip and verbal accusations that floated around Florence and attacked Bracciolini as being a friend of (and therefore similar to) Niccoli: ‘Partridges are lustful animals [...] Messer Leonardo Bruni used to call Niccolò Niccoli of Pistoia and Poggio *Bambalione* from Terranuova Old Partridges.’<sup>31</sup> This example shows how invectives fed on gossip and involved a web of social agents (friends, neighbours, fellow authors, etc.). Rumours spread through oral, vernacular and Latin slur, and the socio-cultural networks used by humanists and the social humanists recently described by Brian Maxson.<sup>32</sup> Evidence of the circulation of humanistic invective beyond the social and cultural elite is minimal, but Maxson’s discussion of the dissemination of Latin humanism across a broad range of members of the early modern Florentine society is encouraging. In a recent paper, Johannes Helmraath reported that a Lorenzo Tifernate describes in a letter how Bracciolini’s venomous invective against Filelfo was read publicly in Ferrara and made the audience cheer and laugh wildly.<sup>33</sup> As we shall see below, the lexicon of the injurious Latin used by humanists was accessible also to a non-Latinate audience who possessed a knowledge of vernacular comic-realistic poetry.

Early modern Italian communities were also receptive to hearing and reading insults. Trevor Dean, Guido Ruggiero, Elizabeth Horodowich and Peter Burke—among others—have shown that early modern Italian public and semi-public spaces echoed with affronts that could potentially undermine codes of civic language and coexistence.<sup>34</sup> Violent language was often both sanctioned and feared by institutions, especially when vilification challenged their authority and power. Renaissance Venice was particularly concerned about offences against its government and elite: for instance, insulting the Doge was punished by cutting off the offender’s

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Non credo aver errato; / se pur ho errato, sto a correzione / del litterato Poggio Bambalione’ (taken from Lanza, *Polemiche*, p. 372). The translation is mine. The nickname is derived from Cicero’s second *Philippica* in which the author makes fun of Marc Anthony’s father-in-law by nicknaming him ‘Bambalionis’.

<sup>31</sup> Lanza, *Polemiche*, p. 148: translation and italics are mine.

<sup>32</sup> Brian Maxson, *The Humanist World*.

<sup>33</sup> Johannes Helmraath, *Humanist Invectives and Their Intellectual and Social Functions*, paper delivered at the Renaissance Society of America Conference, New York 27-29 March 2014.

<sup>34</sup> See note 16.

tongue.<sup>35</sup> As ‘an act of communication directed against another individual, group, or institution’,<sup>36</sup> insult had the potential to breed dissent and upheaval. At the same time, the performance of violent language was also a game in which the world could be turned upside down for a moment, allowing the poor to be rich and the subdued to be in charge.<sup>37</sup> Importantly, this game had to be allowed and accepted by all parties involved: as a fourteenth-century jurist explains, a punishable insult takes place only when it comes as a surprise and there is no agreement about how the insult should be understood or responded to.<sup>38</sup>

Medieval and early Renaissance court cases reveal that verbal injury was extremely common in early modern Italian cities. Trevor Deans’s work on gender and insult in late medieval Bologna shows that mock or ritual insults coexisted with defamatory slur. Insults against high rank members of the community took the form of threats and revenge. Insults filled the streets of medieval and early modern cities and very often these were so hyperbolic that they were clearly recognized by the community as a game of mockery.

### **Crossing boundaries, sharing emotions**

The culture of vilification presented above is the backdrop for the Latin invectives of early modern Italy. Despite the fact that insults were commonly punished in urban environments, attacking underclasses or fellow humanists with slanderous, codified, literate and Latinate words was not seen as punishable. And yet the vehemence of personal attacks suggest that at least some of these barbs must have hurt: Florentine humanist Niccolò Niccoli (1364-1437) was ridiculed by fellow scholars for not being married and for having a relationship with his maid, Benvenuta. In 1413 Guarino Guarino, one of the most successful intellectuals and teachers of fifteenth-century Italy, added fuel to the mockery: ‘It does not surprise that, once free from my control, he did not become slave of sex, gluttony, anger, fame, arrogance, envy and several other corruptions of the soul [..]; no, he became slave of this

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<sup>35</sup> Horodowich, *Language*, pp. 91-124.

<sup>36</sup> Burke, *Historical Anthropology*, p. 96.

<sup>37</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, tr. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984): pp. 164-165.

<sup>38</sup> Trevor Dean, ‘Gender and Insult in an Italian City: Bologna in the Later Middle Ages’. *Social History*, 29, 2 (2004), pp. 217-231.

ignorant woman and her judgment. [...] I am retelling well-known facts that are shared around the neighbourhood with much hilarity, mockery and contempt.’<sup>39</sup>

As with verbal injury in the streets, the risk of going too far with literary scurrility and mockery was omnipresent. Panormita’s *Hermaphrodite* (1425-6) attracted almost unanimous contempt from fellow humanists and rulers, including an embarrassed Cosimo de’ Medici (1389-1464), to whom the poem is dedicated. In his *Philippic against Antonio Panormita*, Franciscan Antonio da Rho scolds Panormita:

But I do not want you to think, my Candido [ie. Pier Candido Decembrio], that I am going to tarry long in his scum and slime. Why? No, not because I fear that he can somehow pollute or disfigure me or that I can engage directly in his swinish way of life, but rather because I recoil instinctively from a debauched and filthy person like him [...].<sup>40</sup>

This excerpt—addressed to fellow humanist Pier Candido Decembrio (1399-1477) but also indirectly to the Milanese court and beyond—represents the culmination of a conflict that raged for almost a year and saw the toing and froing of scurrilous poems (some of which are anonymous).<sup>41</sup> Echoes of this violent exchange can be seen in an anonymous poem of seventy-two lines (*Prostitutes of Pavia*), in which Panormita is mocked by all the prostitutes and pimps of Pavia telling the city of Milan to welcome Panormita as ‘a very well-hung Hermaphrodite who wiggles his ass like a woman.’<sup>42</sup> This was followed by another anonymous poem in which Joan of Arc writes to the Senators of Milan complaining that Milan has sent her Antonio da Rho, ‘this stupid, filthy, demonic, monstrous priest masked as a human’.<sup>43</sup> Regardless of who penned these anonymous invectives, these poems show that the personal struggle between da Rho, Panormita, and competing intellectuals was not limited to their circle of Latinate friends. Short, poetic texts accompanied the exchange between the two humanists and were copied, read, and disseminated at court. The invectives called for laughter and derision from a whole community: da Rho tells us that Panormita’s *Oration of the*

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<sup>39</sup> Text from Guarino da Verona, *Epistolario*, ed. Remigio Sabbadini (Venice: Regia Deputazione Veneta di Storia Patria, 1915 (reprinted 1959)), p. 42: ‘Nec vero mirandum est ut me liberum ignoret qui se mancipium esse nesciat non dico libidinum, ventris, iracundiae, inanis gloriae, arrogantiae, invidiae ceterarumque animi turpitudinum [...]; sed nequissimae ancillae et sordidissimae mulierculae [...]. Nota renarro, quae in tota sunt vicinia cum risu ioco et contemptione fabulamenta’.

<sup>40</sup> Rutherford, *Early Renaissance*, pp. 55-57: ‘Nolo tamen putes, mi Candide, me faecibus sordidisque suis diutius immoraturum. Quid hoc est? Non equidem quo sperem olim quasi nouus pugil pro maledictis iterum responsurus insurgere, aut quo timeam ex illo pollui aut deturpari me quoquo pacto posse, seu in mores illius suillos ulla e regione commigrare, uerum potius quod ab huiuscemodi corruptissimo inquinatissimoque hominum genere meapte natura longe abhorream [...]’.

<sup>41</sup> See Rutherford, *Early Renaissance*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>42</sup> Rutherford, *Early Renaissance*, p. 31. The description of Panormita as a hermaphrodite is a clear reference to his controversial collection of Latin epigrams called *Hermaphrodite*. See note 44 and discussion below.

<sup>43</sup> Rutherford, *Early Renaissance*, pp. 31 and 270: ‘Dicite io, Patres, quae sententia uestra est, / ecquis honos in me, tu, turpe ad me mittere monstrum, / Raudensem et uere humana sub imagine monstrum?’.

*Imagery of the Sun* (probably delivered in June 1432 for the anniversary of Filippo Maria Visconti's rule) was delivered publicly in the Duomo of Milan and everyone 'made sport, smiled, and joked about it. Everyone immediately began to make him a laughing stock, and he was hissed off stage for his ignorance'.<sup>44</sup>

The acerbic altercation between Antonio da Rho and Panormita reveals two important features of humanistic agon: on the one hand the invectives are highly literary, cloaked with Latin sources and models that make the invective appear non-intentional; on the other hand these literary invectives weave a highly accessible obscene lexicon of vituperation that would have drawn in both the learned community of Latin scholars and a non-Latinate audience.

In order to demonstrate this I shall examine Panormita's *Hermaphrodite* in greater depth.<sup>45</sup> This text shows that mastery of classical Latin authenticated scurrility and violent insults. As a literary effort, the *Hermaphrodite* owes much to Martial's epigrams, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Catullus's poems. The work is a collection of epigrams containing several attacks against detractors and hypocrites: some of the targets are Mattia Lupi of San Gimignano (I, 1 and 10-11, and 16-17), Antonio Roselli (I, 19) and an unidentified Oddo (I, 20 and II, 11). Particularly interesting is Panormita's attack against the latter: he rebuffs Oddo's accusation that he lacked chastity because of his lascivious poetry. If this is so, Panormita argues, then he is in good company, as Latin poets such as Martial, Marsus and Pedo also wrote similar poems.<sup>46</sup> Panormita dispatches his critic by telling him to 'believe what you like with the crowd, Oddo'.<sup>47</sup> Even if we are not familiar with this character, Oddo must have existed, as with all other figures mentioned in these Latin epigrams.

Panormita's provocative and haughty verses contain the seeds of invective: they involve real people such as Leon Battista Alberti and Mattia Lupi into the literary world of classical satire and obscene poetry. Everything is allowed because this is a learned game that follows the wit and language of the ancients. Panormita is at pains to impress upon the dedicatee of his work, Cosimo de' Medici, that the

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<sup>44</sup> Rutherford, pp. 134-135. Here is the Latin text written by da Rho: 'Vidistine [...] quae ludificationes, qui risus, qui ioci applausu omnium habiti sint? Ludibrio statim prae ignoratione philosophiae astrologiaeque et in sibilum omnibus haberi coepit'.

<sup>45</sup> See Antonio Beccadelli, *The Hermaphrodite*, ed. and tr. Holt Parker (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2010), and Michael Roche, *Forbidden Friends* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): pp. 43-44.

<sup>46</sup> See Beccadelli, *Hermaphrodite*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>47</sup> Beccadelli, *Hermaphrodite*, pp. 26-27: 'Et tu cum vulgo crede quid, Hode, velis'.

ultimate purpose of this text is to ‘follow with me the men who live forever’.<sup>48</sup> This text was aimed to rouse laughter (‘cachinnos’) from anyone (‘cuique’), even if he or she is sad or unyielding (‘rigido’) and it contains trifles that will be reproached by ignoramuses and appreciated by the learned. Similarly, in the preface to his *Facetiae*, Bracciolini makes it very clear that the intended readership for this learned joke-book is not just the humanist community but also the vernacular and rustic:

I wish indeed to be read also by humanists with a facetious inclination as Lucilius was by the Cosentines and Tarentines, but if [the readers] will be more rustic readers I do not deny them the right to feel what they want, so long as they do not blame the author, who wrote these things for the elevation of his spirit and the exercise of his natural disposition<sup>49</sup>

In this collection of saucy, witty and often plainly obscene anecdotes—which also include a few invectives, for instance against Francesco Filelfo—Bracciolini enmeshes classical Latin with bawdy situations and language from every day life. Bracciolini’s *facetia* on the painter who took revenge on the friars who wasted his time pondering for a whole day the iconography of Sain Francis tells of the painter retaliating by painting the Saint playing the *fistula* (a pastoral wind instrument) or depicting him hanging by the neck.<sup>50</sup> Patricia Simons has argued *fistula* here refers simultaneously to the phallus (a common trope in vernacular authors such as Burchiello and Aretino), the painful pipelike ulcer (‘fistola’ in vernacular) that afflicted so many horse riders, and the post mortem erection of hanged men (‘impiccare’ often referred to penile sodomitic penetration).<sup>51</sup> This allusion to several well-known vernacular expressions shows how a Latin term could be underpinned by a rich vernacular lexicon and slur. In some cases, humanists stretch the boundaries of classical Latin: as Holt Parker has indicated,<sup>52</sup> Panormita’s poems share some of the tone and material of the vernacular comic-realistic poets: Luigi Pulci, Bernardo Bellincioni (1452-1492) and Burchiello. These vernacular authors ‘were not afraid to

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<sup>48</sup> Beccadelli, *Hermaphrodite*, pp. 33 and 129.

<sup>49</sup> Eisenhauer, *Archeologies*, p. 15: ‘A facetis enim et humanis, sicut Lucilius a Cosentinis et Tarentinis legi cupio. Quod si rusticiores erunt, non recuso quin sentiant quod volunt, modo scriptorem ne culpent, qui a levationem animi haec et ad ingenii exercitum scripsi’.

<sup>50</sup> See Poggio Bracciolini, *Facezie*, ed. Marcello Ciccuto (Milan: Rizzoli, 1983), pp. 273-275.

<sup>51</sup> Patricia Simons, ‘Visual Humor in a Tale by Poggio Bracciolini: Another View’, *Source: Notes in the History of Art*, 28, 3 (2009), pp. 1-3.

<sup>52</sup> Beccadelli, *Hermaphrodite*, pp. xxiv-xxv.

visit the rougher parts of town: the market, the tavern, the brothel'<sup>53</sup> and translate the violent language of the street into verse. This is where Panormita's work became unacceptable to most of his fellow scholars and patrons, to the extent that he was forced to recant his work by writing to Cosimo de' Medici himself in 1435, ten years after his *Hermaphrodite* came out.<sup>54</sup> Panormita tread the fine line of indulging in the classical world of pungent satire and uncompromisingly crude sexual imagery, while at the same time paying lip service to the vernacular tradition of the comic-realistic poetry of fourteenth and fifteenth-century Italy. Between 1428 and 1432 Burchiello and Leon Battista Alberti engaged in a playful and aggressive exchange of vernacular poems and, similarly, Luigi Pulci and Matteo Franco fired poisonous and vernacular barbs between each other between 1473 and 1476. In this vernacular poetry, the same sophisticated play with words, obscene lexicon, and precarious balance between literature and anti-literature is performed. The same game of insults and elicitation of emotions happened in both vernacular and Latin and involved broad and diverse readers and audiences.

The crisis with Panormita's *Hermaphrodite*, I argue, is that the transposition of the ancient satire and epigram resembles too closely the vernacular poetry and the verbal slander that could be heard and read on the streets of Florence and other Italian cities. It elicited collective emotions such as laughter that damaged the reputability of the cultural elite. The learned and idealized world of classical Latin enlivened by the humanists is in the *Hermaphrodite* blurred and enmeshed with the Florentine sonnets describing the same lowly characters, the same infamous brothels, the stinky markets, and the insults that were being hurled around the piazzas. Paradoxically, the highly classical Latin language employed by Panormita in his invectives ultimately sound the closest to the Florentine vernacular he seeks to proudly deny and be superior to.<sup>55</sup> Take for instance the last verse of poem XXXVII from book two of the *Hermaphrodite*. The explicit Latin used here follows Martial's eighty-fifth epigram loosely:<sup>56</sup> 'quantum vis futues et futuere, liber!' (you will fuck and be fucked as much as you want, book). Fifteenth-century non-Latinate readers would have immediately

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<sup>53</sup> Beccadelli, *Hermaphrodite*, p. xxv. On Burchiello see note 25. See also Orvieto and Brestolini, *La poesia*. On Rustico di Filippi see Sylvain Trousselard, 'Le *Vituperium* comme forme inversée de la *Lauda* chez Cenne de La Chitarra d'Arezzo et Rustico Filippi', in Agnès Morini, *L'invective*, pp. 21-36.

<sup>54</sup> This *recantatio* is published in the Beccadelli, *Hermaphrodite*, pp. 124-127.

<sup>55</sup> See Beccadelli, *Hermaphrodite*, pp. 110-111:

<sup>56</sup> 'Sidere percussa est subito tibi, Zoile, lingua, / Dum lingis. Certe, Zoile, nunc futues' (Martial, *Epigrammata*, ed. Jacobus Borovskij (Leipzig: Teubner 1976).

understood the content of this verse, as they would have also grasped the gist of the anonymous 1429 poem in which the prostitutes of Pavia write to Milan about Panormita. Take for example the following passage: ‘Dic tales socios qualem iam diximus illum: / sic merda est ano quam bene iuncta suo’ (You may say his friends are just like I said he is: they stick like shit perfectly to his asshole).<sup>57</sup> These examples are lexically and semantically close to early modern Italian vernaculars and allow therefore non-Latinate audiences to follow and react to the sexual references. The strong censorship Panormita’s juvenile exercise in Latin satire encountered may therefore be explained in terms of a blurring of the boundaries between Latin and vernacular cultures and languages. Yet Panormita’s work exposes a similar zest for the obscene<sup>58</sup> and the invective that was shared across the social strata of fifteenth-century Italy.

### **Conclusion**

Around 1435 Panormita eventually retracted his juvenile literary effort in the attempt to save his career and adapt to the changed political circumstances in Florence and Milan. In the dedication to Cosimo de’ Medici, Panormita had scolded the illiterates for the ‘lazy crowd fails to notice’ that the greatest authors of antiquity also wrote obscene jokes: the illiterates ‘have no care to look to the ancients’.<sup>59</sup> Ten years later though, in his recantation Panormita is forced to admit that he had tried to elevate his reputation by competing with the ancients (‘by seeing if I could smash the temple of the goddess Vesta’).<sup>60</sup> Instead, the scabrous poetry of Catullus and his followers (Pliny, Martial and Ovid) became in his hands a close version of the hyperbolic and comic-realistic poetry in vernacular that could be appreciated and followed by the illiterate. Whether anger or laughter, the game of insult and the emotions stirred by the invective generated a ‘fluid interchange of material between social agents and contexts’<sup>61</sup> and effectively broke down the social and cultural barriers between elites and populace. The system of insult and the dangerous but widespread game of violent language knew no barriers. Whether Latin or vernacular, the language’s emotional lexicon used for the invectives was accessible to different

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<sup>57</sup> Beccadelli, *Hermaphrodite*, pp. 152-153.

<sup>58</sup> See Horodowich, *Language*, p. 208.

<sup>59</sup> Beccadelli, *Hermaphrodite*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>60</sup> On this defense see also Eugene O’Connor, ‘Panormita’s Reply to His Critics: The *Hermaphroditus* and the Literary Defense’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 50, 4 (1997), pp. 985-1010.

<sup>61</sup> Ian Ruffell ‘Beyond Satire: Horace, Popular Invective and the Segregation of Literature’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 93 (2003), pp. 35–65: p. 52.

social groups and went far beyond the intellectual elite of the time.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps this is what scandalized Panormita's fellow humanists.

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<sup>62</sup> On the concept of emotional lexicon and the practices that follow from it see the discussion in Reddy, *Navigation*, pp. 36-37.