

Italy in Crisis

1494

Edited by Jane Everson
and Diego Zancani



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1494

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EDITED BY
JANE EVERSON AND DIEGO ZANCANI



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INTRODUCTION



Jane Everson and Diego Zancani

1494 18 ottobre, ha fato intrata in Piacentia de note el Re de Franza [Charles VIII] con gran baldoria et tapeti et populo che cridava viva. Se crede che farà giustitia, se sarà patrono perché ha fato bone promissioni, ma za sarà lo steso gloria se ghe sarà mutatione de Stato, et me ricordo de tute le promissioni del duca de Milano et poi le cose andarono pezo de prima et el popolo ge crede sempre.¹

The words of the anonymous Piacentine writer neatly encapsulate the twin poles on which the essays of this volume focus, crisis and continuity. Like his more famous compatriots, Machiavelli and Guicciardini, the anonymous writer clearly considered the year 1494 to be both significant, marking change and crisis, and yet at the same time part of a well-established pattern of historical and political events in Italy in the later fifteenth century. This latter point, coming from an ordinary contemporary observer, also provides a nice justification for the commemoration of the whole decade rather than a single year. Unlike the anonymous diarist, however, the scope of this volume extends to a consideration of crisis and continuity not only from a historical perspective, but especially from a cultural one, and seeks to provide answers to questions such as how we define crisis and continuity, and how these phenomena manifest themselves in particular in the realm of culture. Some of the essays are devoted to an examination of the political and economic history of Florence at the end of the fifteenth century and to a discussion of currents of intellectual debate and fashionable ideas in the same period. These essays set the broader cultural context for those essays which are devoted to an examination of the work of individual authors, especially Pulci and Poliziano in Florence, and Boiardo in Ferrara. The long-term effects of some consequences of the year 1494 on one of these authors, Boiardo, is the subject of the last essay.

From the beginning of the sixteenth century the year 1494 and the

2 INTRODUCTION

invasion of Charles VIII were perceived by Italians as a watershed in their history. The point is made strongly by Francesco Guicciardini in the opening chapters of the *Storia d'Italia*:

Ma le calamità d'Italia [. . .] cominciorono con tanto maggiore dispiacere e spavento negli animi degli uomini quanto le cose universali erano allora più liete e più felici [. . .] non aveva giammai sentito Italia tanta prosperità, né provato stato tanto desiderabile quanto era quello nel quale sicuramente si riposava l'anno della salute cristiana mille quattrocento novanta, e gli anni che a quello e prima e poi furono congiunti [. . .] (*Storia d'Italia* I, 1)

but it is echoed by other political observers, and equally strongly from within the world of literature and humanist culture. Matteo Maria Boiardo attributes the interruption of his major work, the *Orlando innamorato*, to the events of 1494, the beginning of the wars of Italy, in lines that are frequently quoted as emblematic of reactions to those events:

Mentre che io canto, o Iddio redentore,
Vedo la Italia tutta a fiamma e a foco
Per questi Galli, che con gran valore
Vengon per disertar non so che loco [. . .] (*O.I.* III, ix, 26)

but a similar trauma is evident in the works of other writers who, unlike Boiardo, who died in December 1494, struggled to continue their cultural activities against a background of warfare and depredations:

Tanto n'offende la gallica nebbia
ch'è scesa giù dell'Alpi aspre e maligne
che il Tanaro, il Tesin, l'Adda e la Trebbia
mostrano l'acque lor tutte sanguigne
e ognor detto mi vien che cantar debbia
d'arme e d'amore, cose vaghe e benigne
ma la stagione è sì contraria al canto
che ogni mio verso si risolve in pianto.²

Although the deaths in the autumn of 1494 of a number of important cultural figures cannot be causally linked to the French invasions, the sense of psychological trauma, of crisis—personal, political, and cultural—should not be underplayed. One of the chief reasons for the depth of reactions (especially by non-combatants) must surely be the fact that Charles's invasion occurred after many decades in which the Italian peninsula had been effectively free from foreign invasions and

aggression, while, internally, endemic conflicts between states had been kept under control by the maintenance of the agreements of the Peace of Lodi. Indeed as Guicciardini's words stress, to Italians of his generation the period before 1494 seemed like a Golden Age when viewed from the perspective of the 1530s, after thirty years of warfare and increasing loss of autonomy.

The impact of the invasion on the political regimes of certain Italian states, including Florence, is well attested, but it was not a universal phenomenon. Ferrara, in contrast, suffered no such political revolution in 1494. From the purely political point of view, the notion of crisis is scarcely applicable to Ferrara in this decade, and it is significant that it was political writers based in or connected to Florence who promulgated the idea of crisis most vigorously. Nevertheless, not even in Florence can the political crisis of 1494 be attributed solely to the French invasion. The death of Lorenzo in 1492, the loss from Florentine and Italian politics of a consummate politician and diplomatist, and the succession of Piero, his much less gifted son, had already begun to provoke anxiety and unease in Florence well before the negotiations with Charles and rumours of his invasion. This same sense of anxiety lent itself to Savonarola's moral crusade, which in turn provoked a sense of trauma, of soul-searching among leading players in the Medici cultural elite, evident in the changing opinions and attitudes of scholars and artists, and monitored especially in their reactions to Savonarola himself. On the political front, as Alison Brown demonstrates, opposition to the Medici had been building up slowly but inexorably through the last years of Lorenzo's regime, and can, for certain aspects, be traced back even to 1478 and the aftermath of the Pazzi conspiracy. The coincidence of the first French invasion with the political and economic crisis in Florence thus is precisely that—a coincidence, an instance of *fortuna*—since, as Brown suggests, political crisis, rooted in opposition to the Medici, and Lorenzo especially, was coming to a head quite independently of international events. Moreover, the cultural changes in Florence in the 1490s had similarly been growing through the later years of Lorenzo's regime and indeed had been stimulated by Lorenzo himself, not least through his invitation to Savonarola to settle in Florence. Thus the idea of a watershed year, 1494, even for Florence, is better replaced by that of a watershed decade, the 1490s, or better still, by the concept of *fin de siècle*, expressive of a deeply felt, but as yet not fully articulated, sense of conflicting pressures in culture and

society, of culmination and conclusion, of a vague desire for change and innovation provoked by the ending of one century and the beginning of another, a mixture of celebration of the present and anxiety about the future, and the need to face new challenges, not least in the form of new discoveries and technologies.

And yet we should be wary of denying altogether the contemporary perception of this year as a year of crisis and its terrible events as liminal, dividing before from after. As early as the summer of 1495 and the immediate aftermath of the battle of Fornovo, the invasion of Charles VIII, and the subsequent campaign against him culminating in the 'victory' of Fornovo and the withdrawal of Charles were seen as decisive, a moment of crisis overcome, as is evident in the medal struck for Francesco Gonzaga and proclaiming him as the restorer of Italian liberty: *Universae Italiae Liberatori*.³ And yet though a sense of change, of a welcome of change, is evident in the quotation with which we began, the anonymous Piacentine writer, pragmatically and rather world-wearily, suggests that for most people continuity has a far greater influence in their lives, and is far more powerful than any idea of political crisis, and certainly more so than the cultural crisis provoked by the deaths of poets and philosophers.

The interpretation and presentation of an event such as the invasion of 1494 and of the culture surrounding it can, as has been suggested, be observed from many perspectives. Since the aim here is to focus on the interaction of history and culture, we might draw attention to just four of the major sources of evidence for assessing the validity of the concept of crisis, which are: eyewitness accounts and those composed at the time and as those events occurred, where we shall, when dealing with Renaissance Italy, find divergent views according to the state in which the writer lived; accounts by 'laudatores temporis acti', harking back to the good old days, in this case of Italian liberty, freedom from foreign domination; the comparisons and contrasts between history and culture, or crisis and continuity; and fourthly the distant mirror, the perspective backwards from the future. Each of these has source materials that are particularly useful and appropriate to its method: chronicles, diaries, and letters, political archives, and diplomatic correspondence for the first; contemporary historians, political thinkers and writers of the next generation reflecting the first historical reactions; the activities and products of artists of all kinds in the period under review; and finally modern studies of the same phenomena, the possibly sympathetic and objective overview.

In the sphere of culture, as in politics, there is some logic for the celebration of a single year, 1494, and yet it is impossible to do so without paying attention to the activities of individual writers before this date. Where 1494 is concerned, the links existing between major writers and their mutual influences on each other must also be part of the discussion. Thus while the deaths between September and December of 1494 provide the immediate justification for the selection of Pico, Poliziano, and Boiardo as the authors chiefly commemorated here, as the various contributions repeatedly demonstrate, the life and work of each of these authors has not only a 'before' involving other cultural figures, but also and perhaps more importantly an 'after'. In the world of culture, as in life, no man is an island, and here too therefore the perspective needs to be extended backwards not just to the death of Lorenzo in 1492, but to the 1480s and the intense cultural activities of that decade which saw the formation and flowering of so much of the literary talent celebrated here, of Poliziano, Pulci, Pico della Mirandola, and Ficino, as well as the arrival in Florence of the controversial Savonarola. Similarly, as Catani and Panizza show for Pico, and Dorigatti and Brand for Boiardo, these authors continued to 'live' in their works, for their immediate associates and rivals, Pico for Ficino and Savonarola, Boiardo for Degli Agostini and Ariosto, in a way which suggests that their death did not immediately spell definitive ending, but rather that their 'life' continued, in the case of Pico until the subsequent deaths of Savonarola in 1498 and Ficino in 1499, and in Boiardo's case, for much longer.

Thus far we have suggested that the twin impetus behind this volume of essays—the invasion, or cataclysm, of 1494, and the deaths of Pico, Poliziano, and Boiardo—run along parallel lines, in that both require a wider perspective than just that of a single year. But it will be abundantly apparent that there is another pairing to be considered at this juncture, one much more suggestive of dichotomy, namely the twin poles of Florence and Ferrara.⁴ From the political point of view these two states could be taken as representative of the two opposing systems of Renaissance Italy, united in one thing only, their traditional alliance with France. The apparent stability of Este rule in Ferrara, celebrated so warmly by Boiardo, is a marked contrast with the complexities of Medici control of Florence, explored here by Alison Brown, and currently the subject of a considerable body of research. The skill of Duke Ercole and his successor Alfonso in riding out the storms of the French invasions and retaining the independence of Ferrara contrasts with the fall of the Medici on the arrival of Charles

VIII and their dependence on outside powers to restore them eventually to power in 1512, while the republican traditions and passions of Florence find no counterpart in the culture of Ferrara, even if the court was frequently seen in a critical light. Culturally too there is a tendency to see the environment and productions of these two states as distinct and complementary rather than closely comparable. And yet, such a facile differentiation does not stand up even to a first scrutiny, much less to close analysis. The chivalric epic, claimed as typically belonging to the northern courts, and especially Ferrara, had its first Renaissance flowering in Florence in the work of Pulci, and arose out of the well-established Tuscan tradition of the *cantari* and the work of Andrea da Barberino. Indeed as Davie points out, it was perhaps this Florentine success in a literary domain perceived as Ferrarese that first prompted Boiardo to take up his pen on *Orlando innamorato*. The study of Greek, and consequently of Greek philosophy, had linked Ferrara and Florence from the time of the Council of 1438–9, and if under Borso the humanist culture of Ferrara took a back seat to the ‘volgare’, Ercole’s interests in both classical literature and theatre, and especially in matters of religion, re-established Ferrara’s place alongside Florence in the humanist debates of the end of the century. Before he was called to Florence, Savonarola was a friar in Ferrara, where his grandfather Ser Michele was court physician to Niccolò III d’Este and his successors.⁵ Pulci’s influence on Boiardo, the subject of very recent research, reminds us that the genre of the narrative poem, even before the mass circulation of printed versions, was always mobile; far-reaching in its influence, it travelled easily, like good wines. The *Trecento novelle* of Sacchetti, for example, record numerous travellers between Florence and Ferrara in the late fourteenth century. Good ideas, inspirational stories are not bound by geographical limits, but neither is the world of philosophy and intellectual enquiry. Pico’s correspondence with his Venetian counterpart, Barbaro, explored here by Panizza, is testimony to the internationalism of these figures, their sense of being at home wherever like minds were gathered together. Culturally therefore there are good reasons for associating these two states, for examining the reactions, on the cultural plane in each of them, to the events of the 1490s.

In considering this period, contributors started from the perspective already outlined, namely that of crisis, watershed, fundamental change, but all with the aim of asking how accurate this view

was of the history, politics, and culture of the 1490s. The deaths of important political figures, rulers of major Italian states, Lorenzo de' Medici, Ferrante of Naples, Innocent VIII, and Gian Galeazzo Sforza, together with the invasion of 1494, are undeniable aspects of change, but whether they were perceived also as crisis by contemporaries is more questionable. Guicciardini's concept of the watershed of 1494, the year in which Italy lost her liberty, dates from some thirty years after the event, and inevitably reflects all that happened subsequently. Boiardo's final stanza seems to confirm Guicciardini's idea, but as Neil Harris has shown,⁶ and as Dorigatti reminds us here, Boiardo had interrupted each of his previous books at a moment of political and military crisis, but no claim is made on that basis for either 1478 or 1482 as watershed years. We have alluded above to the fact that political and cultural change may not go hand in hand, but both are affected by economic factors and change in the economic climate. War is undoubtedly a costly business, and thus a potent economic force on culture. Predatory troops of invading, and even allied, armies laying waste the countryside may depress the poetic 'inspiration', but the expanding world consequent upon the discoveries of Columbus and his successors, also dating from 1492, the diary accounts and maps that made their way rapidly precisely to Florence, home of Amerigo Vespucci, and Ferrara, on account of Ercole's personal interests, excited the imagination of writer and reader alike and provided welcome distraction from events closer to home. Indeed Francesco Cieco in his narrative poem, *Il Mambriano*, written during the decade of the 1490s, repeatedly refers to pressure on him to write, to provide entertainment and escape from the depressing environment nearer home. But even this superficial tendency, when talking of cultural crisis, of seeing such an environment as negative and gloomy, productive only of 'serious' writing, may be misplaced, as both Brand and Panizza remind us, since the humanist idea of 'serio ludere', the outrageous humour of Lucian, does not lose its element of play, comedy, and humour just because it also transmits a serious message.

Above all the notion of crisis is susceptible of many meanings, not just political and cultural, but equally between the individual and society, and may concern financial matters and intellectual inspiration, ideas, and fashions. So, as Catani suggests, the fashionable enquiry into astrology of the 1490s may be both a symptom and a cause of crisis in one sphere of intellectual engagement, a transference of external elements of crisis into the inner forum of the psyche, revealing itself

in turn in the shifting and ambiguous emphases of prominent thinkers like Ficino. Crisis may relate to what the Renaissance might have termed *fortuna*, simple, coincidental facts such as the failure of a work, or an author's whole oeuvre, to reach the medium of print, which constituted for Piero della Francesca a crisis which lasted for almost 500 years.

But as these comments begin to suggest and as the essays collected here repeatedly confirm, out of this double perspective, of cultural and political history, comes the revelation of a paradox, that of simultaneous continuity and crisis in both history and culture, and in both of the states principally under consideration here, Florence and Ferrara. Continuity and crisis, as Dorigatti shows, are frequently linked to precise historical, but also personal, experiences; crisis, as McLaughlin argues, may reside in the very structure and aims of the text, fragile and fragmented, but which in the skilful hands of Poliziano turns not only into a virtue, echoing his linguistic eclecticism, but in its open-endedness, its multiple links to other genres and texts, also testifies to a continuity in literary culture that stretches almost to infinity—crisis then in one area which is supported and complemented by continuity in the other.

Numerous individuals could have figured in this examination of the cross-currents of culture and history in the 1490s in Italy, for the decade was notable for the deaths of many eminent figures and the birth of others whose life and works touched both their own times and significantly coloured later perceptions of the Renaissance in Italy. Among the deaths, on the political front we have referred already to those of Lorenzo de' Medici, Ferrante of Naples, and Gian Galeazzo Sforza; upon writers and artists the 'flagellum' of Savonarola's apocalyptic vision fell with a terrifying force, significantly influencing some of the most gifted intellects of the day, whom death would carry off, in some cases while still young: Poliziano, Pico, Boiardo, Piero della Francesca, Ghirlandaio, Ermolao Barbaro, Cristoforo Landino, Carlo Crivelli, Cosmè Tura, Ercole de' Roberti, and Melozzo da Forlì, and in the last few years, from 1497 Benozzo Gozzoli, Antonio Pollaiuolo, Savonarola, and Ficino, together with the principal patron of the arts in Milan, Beatrice d'Este. So many deaths, and especially, as Brown shows, those of 1494, cannot but seem like a cultural watershed, a definitive ending, a closure.

More interesting, however, especially for the thesis that in this decade culture provided at least as much an element of continuity as

a sharing in the sense of crisis, is the examination of the activities and achievements of those who reached maturity in the 1490s, who lived through the 'annus horribilis' and its aftermath. The voyages of Columbus were followed by those of Vespucci almost yearly from 1497, radically altering the contemporary world view and spelling the end of Italy's central position in the 'Middle Sea'. 1495 marks the real start of Aldus Manutius' printing press in Venice, the date of the full launch of his business and of his innovative Greek type, the result of experiments with founts begun probably in about 1490 and culminating in the series of octavo editions of the classics which began in 1501.⁷ In this decade too Venice became the dominant centre of printing, with all the concomitant changes produced by the shift to a reading culture (so that we might perhaps be tempted to call this an aspect of crisis in culture), while the 1490s also saw the printing of the first books by the Florentine dynasty of the Giunti. But the element of continuity is most striking if one turns to examine the careers in this period of those who came to political and cultural maturity in the 1490s. In the case of both Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, though they were frequently on the move, Leonardo in particular, these years saw the production of Leonardo's most famous works, for Lodovico Sforza in Milan, and the first Roman period of Michelangelo. This is the decade in which Isabella d'Este began her patronage of the arts in Mantua, which was to continue until her death in 1539, and in which Ariosto first entered Este service in Ferrara. For all these, crisis brought development and innovation, and in the long term cultural domination if not continuity.

What these essays reveal is precisely the strange mixture of continuity and crisis that characterized the culture of the 1490s in Italy. As Alison Brown points out, this paradox of crisis and continuity is present in the conflict evident between the language used to describe events, which is suggestive of crisis, and the actions and reactions of those involved, which are indicative much more of a sense of continuity. The culture of the early 1490s can be seen, on many fronts, as vibrant, forging ahead, typified by a lively interplay of humanist ideas and texts and the explorations and developments of vernacular literature, evident already in Boiardo's *Timone* (1490), and sustained by a strong and dynamic sense of continuity with the immediate cultural past, which Davie reveals in Pulci's sense of handing on the torch to Poliziano, and which clearly underpins Boiardo's engagement with the romance epic. Continuity in this area,

the romance epic, seems broken by the death of Boiardo, yet from the point of view of the genre 1494 is no more than a hiccough almost completely obscured by the simple continuity represented by Niccolò degli Agostini and the complex continuity of Ariosto, and most significantly of all, in a consideration focusing on the 1490s, by the tenacity and individualism of Francesco Cieco evident in *Il Mambriano*, revealing within its forty-five canti both a strong sense of continuity with the cultural past of the genre and the historical past in which the composition was initiated and a repeated sense of crisis to be faced and overcome. And if crisis is often the term more appropriate when speaking of individuals, represented by changes of emphasis (Ficino), death (Boiardo and Pico), or definitive loss of a homeland (Sannazaro in Naples), in the realm of literature and thought continuity is triumphantly demonstrated by the incessant production of printed books in all genres and for a suddenly much wider public, a point from which the Renaissance never looked back.

The anniversary conference on Italy in the 1490s, from which these essays originate, formed one in a whole series of international celebrations and commemorations of particular events and individuals connected with this decade in Italy. These celebrations included those commemorating the death of Lorenzo il Magnifico in 1492, the 'discovery' of the New World by Columbus—perhaps the most extensive exercise in revisionism in the recent history of such commemorations—the beginning of the Wars of Italy, and the deaths of Poliziano, Boiardo, Pico della Mirandola, Piero della Francesca, and most recently Savonarola and Ficino, a rash of commemorations which cannot be divorced from the preoccupations of the 1990s and the impending millennium. These preoccupations have created a climate of revisionism downwards, of a loss of confidence in the 'great achievements' of Western culture, a calling into question of what constitutes greatness in culture, producing paradoxically but usefully the re-examination of the works both of major figures like Poliziano and of previously neglected or unfashionable artists, and of the narrow focus which too often in the past has lead to a facile division of events into before and after, cause and effect, the allocation of authors to the status of major or minor, or to certain genres and not others.

Some of the figures of Italian culture commemorated here could be seen, and in some cases until fairly recently were seen, as 'the defeated', those wiped off the stage, often quite literally by the events

of 1494, those who became as a result the subject of neglect, dead both historically and culturally. The most significant case is surely that of Boiardo, removed by death in 1494 from controlling the 'fortuna' of his great poem, traduced and disfigured by the efforts, more or less well meaning, of continuators, editors, printers, and revisers, as Harris has memorably shown on several occasions.⁸ Only centuries later, in the nineteenth century, in the movement towards Italian unification and the related (though again paradoxical) treasuring of local heroes, cultural as much as anything, were they brought back to full critical attention and a new revisionism, upwards, as Reidy brings out in the examination of the role played by the political exile and cultural giant Antonio Panizzi. Through Panizzi's work and his own sense of cultural and geographical association with his fellow Emilian, Boiardo became a key figure of Italian culture for British Italianists, since, as Reidy shows, it was largely as a result of Sir Anthony Panizzi's interest in Boiardo and the romance epic that the British Library acquired its outstanding collection of early editions of the genre, and it is fitting therefore that Boiardo should also have his English centenary volume.

Pico, Poliziano, and Boiardo, whose deaths coincided with the watershed year, are the central focus of the volume and throughout the concentration is on literature and thought rather than the other arts, and the interaction of such artists with the events of history. Moreover, since no individual functions in a vacuum, cultural or political, the creation of a *Zeitgeist* through the concatenation of events and the development of fashionable ideas and practices, such as the pursuit of irrational solutions in the realms of astrology and the attractions of millenarianism, serve to set a context, through Catani's study, for a troubled decade dealing with issues which affect not just a famous few but the generality of the populace, and forming a potent link with our own *fin de siècle* and its fashions of thought.

Again and again as contributors grappled with the notion of crisis, whether historical or cultural or both, they found themselves independently and inexorably driven to admit the force of continuity in this decade; in the survival of states, political systems, and rulers, or in the clear evidence that the crisis had been so long in preparation that it could only be seen as a continuation of an existing trend; in the determination of surviving friends and relatives to ensure the publication and dissemination of a writer's work, however inadequately, and in the recognition that ideas, concepts, narrative structures, and poetic inspiration, in this period perhaps more than