Francesco Sforza's Friends and Foes. Techniques of Characterization in Filelfo's *Sphortias**

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This article analyzes techniques of character portrayal and its functionality in the humanist Francesco Filelfo's Sphortias, a Neo-Latin epic poem about the conquest of the Duchy of Milan (1447-1450) by Francesco Sforza, who subsequently became the author's major patron. The article focuses on two clusters of characters who have an obvious relationship to the eponymous hero of the poem: Sforza's personal lieutenants on the one hand, and the leaders of Venice, Sforza's major adversary during the war, on the other. By means of intratextual and intertextual allusions, as well as by reworking historical data, Filelfo portrays some members of the first group in a negative way, while others in the second group are cast in a favourable light. The reason for such unexpected characterization of the individuals in question is not their actual behaviour during the conflict, but their relationship with Sforza at the time of the poem's composition.

1. Introduction

When Filippo Maria Visconti, the duke of Milan, passed away in August 1447 without a male heir, the Milanese seized the opportunity to found a republic (*Aurea Repubblica Ambrosiana*) and hired the *condottiero* Francesco Sforza (1401-1466) to defend it against other parties who had their eyes on the former duchy, such as France and above all Venice.¹ To regain the cities that had defected, a siege war against the *Serenissima* arose; key moments in this war included Sforza's conquest of San Colombano (September 1447), the conquest of Piacenza (October-November 1447), the annihilation of the Venetian fleet at Casalmaggiore (July 1448), and the defeat of the Venetian army at Caravaggio (August-September 1448). When the Milanese republic got too suspicious about Sforza and his rising power in Lombardy, Sforza sided with Venice for a

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¹ On this three-year period, see F. Cognasso, "La Repubblica di S. Ambrogio", in G. Treccani (ed.), *Storia di Milano. Vol. 6. Il ducato visconteo e la Repubblica Ambrosiana (1392-1450)* (Milano, 1955), 380-448.

while, only to take possession of Milan himself (February-March 1450). Soon after the installation of the new duke, the humanist Francesco Filelfo (1398-1481),² who had resided in Milan as a protégé of the last Visconti duke from 1439 onwards, started working on the *Sphortias*, an epic poem loosely modelled on Virgil's *Aeneid*, celebrating the conquest of the duchy by Filelfo's new patron.

At least partially as a logical consequence of fifteenth-century social structures of patronage and the tendency to treat the deeds of contemporary, living people,³ Neo-Latin epic is of a more epideictic nature than its classical model.⁴ This greater emphasis on, simply put, praising the good and criticizing the bad, has not, in the case of the *Sphortias*, resulted in a unanimous reading of the poem's main character in our own day. Nevertheless, arguments for the presence of a critical, "second" voice in the poem, in the manner of the "Harvard School" interpretations of the *Aeneid*, and for a similar reception of the *Aeneid* by Quattrocento humanists,⁵ have been convincingly refuted by Torsten Burkard and, much more

² See P. Viti, "Filelfo, Francesco", *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* [henceforth *DBI*] vol. 47 (Roma, 1997), 613-626. On Filelfo's literary production, see E. Garin, "L'opera di Francesco Filelfo", in G. Treccani (ed.), *Storia di Milano. Vol. 7. L'età sforzesca dal 1450 al 1500* (Milano, 1956), 541-561. On Filelfo's years in Milan, see R.G. Adam, *Francesco Filelfo at the court of Milan. A Contribution to the Study of Humanism in Northern Italy* (Oxford, 1974).

³ Apart from heroic poems on contemporary history, which is by far the largest category, Neo-Latin epic also comprises poems on a remote historical, a mythological or a biblical subject; see H. Hofmann, "Von Africa über Bethlehem nach America: Das Epos in der neulateinischen Literatur", in J. Rüpké (ed.), *Von Göttern und Menschen erzählen. Formkonstanzen und Funktionswandel vormoderner Epik* (Stuttgart, 2001), 130-182.

⁴ Even though the *Aeneid* is the reference text par excellence for Neo-Latin epic poets, their panegyric style in many ways resembles Claudian and Corippus; see Hofmann 2001 (as in n. 3), 146. Since late antiquity and through the Middle Ages, the approach to poetry in general was strongly rhetorical; see O.B. Hardison, *The Enduring Moment. A Study of the Idea of Praise in Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1962), 32-42; C. Kallendorf, *In Praise of Aeneas. Virgil and Epideictic Rhetoric in the Early Italian Renaissance* (Hannover – London, 1989), 1-18.

⁵ D. Robin, *Filelfo in Milan* (Princeton, NJ, 1991), 56-81, discerns a critique of Francesco Sforza in the depiction of the sack of Piacenza in *Sphortias* 3. Robin's thesis is further elaborated in C. Kallendorf, *The other Virgil. Pessimistic Readings of the Aeneid in Early Modern Culture* (Oxford, 2007), 50-66.

thoroughly, by Jeroen De Keyser.⁶ Even though Neo-Latin epic in the northern Italian Renaissance was “never motivated or well nurtured by courtly patronage”,⁷ classifying Filelfo’s poem as a veiled critique of his patron is hardly tenable. Since the *editio princeps* of the *Sphortias* was issued only recently, analyses of minor characters of the poem are all but absent, and at the same time little has been written about its allusive engagement.⁸ The aim of this article is to showcase the image that Filelfo wants to draw of some of Sforza’s friends and foes and to describe some of the techniques he adopts to achieve this goal. In the first section, Sforza’s lieutenants, mostly close friends or pupils whom the historical sources often refer to as “domestic”, are considered; the second section focuses on the leading figures of Venice, Sforza’s major adversary. Whether Filelfo casts these characters in a favourable light is not determined by the side they stood on during the 1447-1450 Milanese War, which is the poem’s subject, but by their relationship with Francesco Sforza at the moment Filelfo was writing his epic (1450-1466). Sforza’s lieutenants who defected to Venice at some point after the war are pictured as greedy, cowardly, or wicked. By contrast, captains who opposed Sforza during the war, but allied themselves with him afterwards, are marked by bravery or wisdom. These portrayals are achieved by reworking the

⁶ T. Burkard, “Kannte der Humanismus ‘den anderen Vergil’? Zur two voices-Theorie in der lateinischen Literatur der frühen Neuzeit”, in T. Burkard, M. Schauer, C. Wiener (ed.), *Vestigia Vergiliana. Vergil-Rezeption in der Neuzeit* (Berlin, 2010), 31-50; J. De Keyser, “Picturing the Perfect Patron? Francesco Filelfo’s Image of Francesco Sforza”, in P. Baker, J. Helmuth, R. Kaiser, M. Priesterjahn (ed.), *Portraying the Prince in the Renaissance: The Humanist Depiction of Rulers in Historiographical and Biographical Texts* (Berlin, 2016), 391-414; see also H. Hofmann, “Brill’s *Encyclopaedia of the Neo-Latin World*. Edited by Philip Ford, Jan Bloemendal and Charles Fantazzi. Vol. 1. *Macropaedia*. Vol. 2. *Micropaedia*”, *Gnomon* 90 (2018), 22-48, at 44-46.

⁷ K. Lippincott, “The Neo-Latin Historical Epics of the North Italian Courts”, *Renaissance Studies* 3.4 (1989), 415-428, at 427. For a survey of the most important fifteenth-century Neo-Latin epic poems and their main characteristics, see C. Peters, “Narrative structures in Neo-Latin epic from 1440 to 1500”, in C. Reitz, S. Finkmann (ed.), *Structures of Epic Poetry. Vol. 3. Continuity* (Berlin – Boston, MA, 2019), 257-300, and Hofmann 2001 (as in n. 3), especially 143-144, 146-150.

⁸ J. De Keyser (ed.), *Francesco Filelfo and Francesco Sforza. Critical Edition of Filelfo’s Sphortias, De Genuensium deditione, Oratio parentalis and his Polemical Exchange with Galeotto Marzio* (Hildesheim – Zürich – New York, 2015); for a summary but dense analysis of the whole poem, see G. Bottari, “La *Sphortias*”, in R. Avesani, G. Billanovich, M. Ferrari, G. Pozzi (ed.), *Francesco Filelfo nel quinto centenario della morte. Atti del XVII Convegno di studi maceratesi (Tolentino, 27-30 settembre 1981)* (Padua, 1986), 459-493.

historical *données* and by evoking associations between characters through the use of verbal reminiscence, both intratextual and intertextual.

As the argument in this article leans partly on a comparison with the treatment of the events in the contemporary historiography, I will now give a brief survey of the most important historiographical sources referred to. Porcellio Pandoni's *Commentaria Comitum Jacobi Picinini* describes the 1452-1453 war between Milan and Venice.⁹ Pandoni was sent to the Venetian camp as ambassador of Alfonso of Naples, who supported Venice, and he was present at the scene throughout the conflict. In 1456 Pandoni resided in Milan and must have been close with Filelfo at some point, until both humanists had a falling out later in the same year. Pandoni's work is used in this article as a source for biographical information on some rather obscure characters that appear in the *Sphortias*. As to the historical sources for the 1447-1448 conflict between Milan and Venice, one has to consider the fact that these sources were produced relatively late and thus do not necessarily provide the picture of history that prevailed during the war itself. Cristoforo da Soldo, a citizen of Brescia, treats the conflicts in Lombardy that took place between 1437 and 1468 in his *Cronaca*, written somewhere before 1470, the year of the author's

⁹ The books treating the first year of the war (1452), dedicated to Alfonso of Naples, are published by Porcellio Pandoni: *Commentaria comitis Jacobi Picinini vocati Scipionis Aemiliani edita per P. Porcelium Historicum clarissimum et missa Alphonso regi Aragonum*, in L.A. Muratori (ed.), *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores* [henceforth *RIS*]. *Tomus XX* (Mediolani, 1731), 69-156; the books treating the second year of the war (1453), dedicated to the Venetian doge Francesco Foscari, are published by Porcellio Pandoni: *Commentaria rerum gestarum a Iacobo Picinino anno MCCCCLIII, qui fuit secundus belli inter Venetos, et Franciscum Sfortiam Mediol. ducem, auctore Porcellio poeta, et scriba Alphonsi I utriusque Siciliae regis, nunc primum in lucem prodeunt ex manuscripto codice membranaceo excellentissimi viri Marci Fuscarenis equitis, et procuratoris S. Marci*, in L.A. Muratori (ed.), *RIS. Tomus XXV* (Mediolani, 1751), 1-66; Pandoni systematically refers to the leader of the Venetian troops, Jacopo Piccinino, as "Scipio", and to Francesco Sforza as "Hannibal". On Pandoni, see G. Cappelli, "Pandone, Porcelio", *DBI*, vol. 80 (Roma, 2014), 736-740; A. Iacono, *Porcelio de' Pandoni: l'umanista e i suoi mecenati. Momenti di storia e di poesia* (Napoli, 2017); on Pandoni's *Commentaria*, see A. Iacono, "Commentarii e biografia nella produzione storiografica di Porcelio de' Pandoni: scrivere in onore del re e del suo condottiero", in G. Alfano, V. Caputo (ed.), "Scrivere la vita altrui." *Le forme della biografia nella letteratura italiana tra medioevo ed età moderna* (Milano, 2020), 43-72.

death.¹⁰ Platina's history of Mantua and the Gonzaga dynasty, written in the years 1466-1469 for his patron, cardinal Francesco Gonzaga, furnishes details on Ludovico Gonzaga's role in the Milanese War.¹¹ The most important historical source for the 1447-1450 Milanese War is Giovanni Simonetta's official Sforza history, written in 1473-1476, well after Filelfo's effort on the *Sphortias*.¹² Some elements and formulations in Simonetta's *Commentarii* may have been suggested by the *Sphortias*, but on the whole both accounts diverge substantially.¹³ Apart from leaning on information supplied by eyewitness reports, however, Simonetta and Filelfo probably both used the same chancery documents as a source.¹⁴

2. Wickedness and Impending Doom

Contrary to the political and military leaders of Venice, Francesco Sforza's personal captains are rather obscure figures who have left only scarce traces in the historical sources. In the *Sphortias* they appear no more than two or three times each and mostly in the elaborate account of

¹⁰ G. Brizzolara (ed.), *La Cronaca di Cristoforo da Soldo* (Bologna, 1938-1942); M. Zabbia, "Soldo, Cristoforo da", *DBI*, vol. 93 (Roma, 2018); on the *Cronaca*, see P. Tomasoni, "La *Cronaca* di Cristoforo Soldo. Aspetti della scrittura", in M. Piotti (ed.), *Dalla "scripta" all'italiano. Aspetti, momenti, figure di storia linguistica bresciana* (Brescia, 2015), 51-73.

¹¹ *Historia Urbis Mantuae, ab eius origine usque ad annum MCCCCLXIV, scripta a Bartholomeo Saccho Cremonensi, e Vico Platina, vulgo appellato Platina. Primum edita in lucem a Petro Lambecio v. cl., nunc autem in commodum eruditorum recusa*, in Muratori 1731 (as in n. 9), 609-862; S. Bauer, "Sacchi, Bartolomeo, detto il Platina", *DBI*, vol. 89 (Roma, 2017), 472-475.

¹² G. Soranzo (ed.), *Johannis Simonetae Rerum gestarum Francisci Sfortiae Mediolanensium ducis commentarii* (Bologna, 1932-1959) [henceforth *Simonetae commentarii*]; see G. Ianziti, *Humanistic Historiography under the Sforzas: Politics and Propaganda in Fifteenth-century Milan* (Oxford, 1988).

¹³ On resemblances between the *Commentarii* and the *Sphortias*, see Bottari 1986 (as in n. 8), 473-474; on divergencies, see e.g. n. 16.

¹⁴ See G. Ianziti, "Filelfo and the Writing of History", in J. De Keyser (ed.), *Francesco Filelfo. Man of Letters* (Leiden – Boston, MA, 2019), 97-126. For examples of Filelfo's requesting detailed information on the Milanese War in his correspondence, see Bottari 1986 (as in n. 8), 469-470.

the siege of Caravaggio that fills up books 6 to 10.¹⁵ Filelfo dedicates five large sections to battle scenes (the main battle of Caravaggio, which took place on 15 September 1448, never being treated)¹⁶ and intersperses them with deliberations and with games organized by Sforza, in which all of his *familiares domestici* participate. Donato del Conte (*Donatus*), Sasso (*Saxus*), and Antonello da Corneto (*Antonellus Corniger*) compete in the horse race; Bernardo da Orvieto (*Berardinus Titignanus*) and Angelo di Caposelvi (*Angelus Silvius*) duel with the flail.¹⁷ Some captains are pictured as trustworthy and loyal, and should get our sympathy by their bravery in battle and by a foreshadowing of their heroic death on the field of honour. The unfavourable portrayal of other lieutenants as wicked and self-interested is most visible in the horse race, for, as in Virgil's regatta (*Aen.* 5. 114-285), the result of the race is to a large extent determined by the character of the contenders.

The Horse Race

Sasso appears only twice in the *Sphortias* and does not show up in any of the historical sources concerning the years 1447-1450 or in Simonetta's *Commentarii* as a whole. He is mentioned seven times, however, in Porcellio Pandoni's *Commentaria Comitis Jacobi Picinini*, in chapters

¹⁵ Filelfo most likely intended the description of the one-and-a-half-month siege of Caravaggio to fill all of books 6-10, the latter two of which remained unfinished: 372 verses of book 9 have come down to us, while book 10 counts only eighteen verses, describing part of a troops' catalogue and suggesting that Filelfo planned to treat the decisive battle in this book. All told, this distribution makes more or less three and a half books that deal with the Caravaggio siege (out of the eight and a half completed books, roughly counting).

¹⁶ *Sphort.* 6.245-800, 7.151-249, 7.624-800, 8.549-800 and 9.93-166. Comparison learns that Filelfo's epic treatment of the siege diverges significantly from the historical accounts: of four substantial battles (including the decisive one) that emerge from the sources, only the first encounter of 31 July 1448 has some resemblances with the first battle scene in the *Sphortias*.

¹⁷ Filelfo dedicates, in total, 373 verses to the games, but contrary to his epic forerunners (Hom. *Il.* 23.262-797, Verg. *Aen.* 5.104-603, Stat. *Theb.* 6.249-946, and Sil. *Pun.* 16.277-591; see H. Lovatt, "Epic Games: Structure and Composition", in C. Reitz, S. Finkmann (ed.), *Structures of Epic Poetry. Vol. 2.1. Configuration* [Berlin – Boston, 2019], 409-446), he divides them in three separate passages: 7.344-481 (running and wrestling), 8.349-507 (horse racing and a duel with the flail), and 9.167-245 (a battle with spear and club); on the games in the *Sphortias*, see also V. Zabughin, *Vergilio nel Rinascimento italiano da Dante a Torquato Tasso. Fortuna – studi – imitazioni – traduzioni e parodie – iconografia* (Bologna, 1921), 335-336, available in a reprinted edition: S. Carrai, A. Cavarzere (ed.) (Trento, 2000).

concerning the year 1452, where he is called “an outstanding soldier and captain in Sforza’s personal troops”.¹⁸ Pandoni’s positive assessment is reflected in book 7 of the *Sphortias*, where a small passage is dedicated to him (7.232-249). Sasso slaughters foe upon foe and is compared to a wolf that butchers sheep after having broken into the fold (7.232-237):

Quid memorem quantos cumularit funere luctus
Saxus? In hastatum qui postquam coeperat agmen
mittere se peditum, fractum ceu saevus ovile
nocte sub obscura gregibus lupus undique fusis 235
caede replet, nullo satiat sanguine rictus,
sic furit ense minax, nulli sua vulnera parcens.

Need I recall how many victims Sasso has piled up in death? When he has begun to assail a unit of halberdiers, he rages, dreadful with his sword, and denies his blows to nobody, as a fierce wolf on a gloomy night disperses the herd and fills the broken sheepfold with gore, his maw unsated by any blood.¹⁹

The comparison is a variation on *Aeneid* 9.59-61, where Turnus, who tries to find an entrance to the Trojan camp, is compared to a wolf trying in vain to get into the sheepfold:²⁰

Ac veluti pleno lupus insidiatus ovili
cum fremit ad caulas ventos perpessus et imbris 60
nocte super media;²¹

And as when a wolf, lying in wait about a crowded fold, roars beside the pens at midnight, enduring winds and rains;²²

The image of a wolf slaughtering sheep seems to point to Sasso’s value on the battlefield (cf. the association with Turnus in the portrayal of

¹⁸ Muratori 1731 (as in n. 9), 69-154, at 118; Sasso is also mentioned at 102, 114, 115, 119, 138, 139.

¹⁹ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

²⁰ Quotations from the *Aeneid* are taken from R.A.B. Mynors (ed.), *P. Vergili Maronis Opera* (Oxford, 1969).

²¹ For “nocte super media” cf. *Il.* 11.551 and 17.660; J. Dingel, *Kommentar zum 9. Buch der Aeneis Vergils* (Heidelberg, 1997), 61.

²² Adapted from H.R. Fairclough (ed., tr.), *Virgil*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA – London, 1954).

Fugit insanae similis procellae,
 ocior nubes glomerante Coro,
ocior cursum rapiente flamma,
 stella cum ventis agitata longos
 porrigit ignes.

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He fled like a raging tempest, swifter than cloud-collecting Corus,
 swifter than a flame which speeds on its way when a star, driven by the
 winds, extends its long-trailing fire.²⁵

By likening Sasso to Hippolytus (Greek for “Destroyed by horses”), Filelfo is predicting Sasso’s fate in the race. As a punishment for his alleged sin, Hippolytus’ horses will be terror-stricken by a monster sent by Neptune. Hippolytus loses control over his panicking steeds and is dragged along until he dies.

The portrayal of Sasso as self-interested is underscored by an association with Bartolomeo Colleoni, the famous *condottiero* who defected to the Venetians in the middle of the conflict and who is presented in the *Sphortias* as the ultimate incarnation of avarice and wickedness.²⁶ Greed is the driving force of Colleoni’s defection (5.222-224):

Ast hic Bergomeus sitis arida flexilis auri
 fecit ut ad Venetos tenebras per noctis opacae
 transfugeret, famam temnens iusque omne piumque.

But now arid thirst for bending gold made the captain from Bergamo
 flee to the Venetians through the darkness of shadowy night, scorning
 glory and all that is just and good.

The image of Colleoni’s thirst of gold (cf. *Sphort.* 5.196; 5.227-228; 5.296) – gold, which is “flexilis” in the active sense of “capable of bending something or someone” –, is embellished with an allusion to Virgil’s picture of the Gallic attack on the Capitoline Hill in the *ekphrasis* on the shield of Vulcan in *Aeneid* 8.657-661:

²⁵ Adapted from F.J. Miller’s translation in G.P. Goold (ed.), *Seneca, Tragedies* (Cambridge, MA – London, 1917).

²⁶ Bartolomeo Colleoni would be appointed captain-general of Venice in 1455 and remained in this capacity until his death in 1475; see M. Mallet, “Colleoni, Bartolomeo”, *DBI*, vol. 27 (Roma, 1982), 9-19. Even in his victory over the French at Bosco Marengo (*Sphort.* 2.372-605), for which he was most renowned, Filelfo pictures him as a coward.

Galli per dumos aderant arcemque tenebant,
 defensi tenebris et dono noctis opacae.
Aurea caesaries ollis atque aurea vestis,
 virgatis lucent sagulis, tum lactea colla
auro innectuntur. 660

The Gauls were near amid the thickets, laying hold of the fort, shielded by darkness, and the boon of shadowy night. Golden are their locks and golden their beards; they glitter in striped cloaks, and their milk-white necks are entwined with gold.²⁷

After their futile attack the Gauls were bought off by the Romans to leave the city, according to Livy with a ransom of thousand pounds of gold.²⁸ The actual transaction is not described by Virgil but hinted at with a triple repetition of (derivations of) *aurum*. Colleoni's greed is furthermore illustrated by a cynical reversal of the *topos* of the worrying general awake at night:²⁹ when *provveditore* Jacopo Antonio Marcello,³⁰ who is compared to Priam seeking Achilles, manages to enter the captain's tent at night (5.229-237), Marcello finds Colleoni complaining in his sleep about his poverty and asking "on what rock he will finally rest, poor as he is" (5.241). Apart from being cowardly and greedy, Colleoni's unreliability is characterized by cruelty towards horses: when duelling with Francesco Piccinino, another exponent of doubtful morality, the rage of each captain eventually results in their butchering each other's horse (7.777-782).

In book 9 we find Colleoni duelling with Bartolomeo Quarterio and, when the latter manages to deprive him of his sword, Colleoni leaves his comrades and flees (9.115-118):

²⁷ Adapted from Fairclough 1954 (as in n. 22). As to "vestis" meaning "beard" instead of Fairclough's "raiment", see G. Ramires, "'In barba' a Virgilio: un problema di interpretazione e traduzione a *Aen.* 8, 659", *Giornale Italiano di Filologia* 65 (2013), 221-228.

²⁸ Liv. *AUC* 5.48.

²⁹ On the commonplace of the lonely vigil and its Homeric roots, see A.D. Leeman, "The lonely vigil. A 'topos' in ancient literature", in J. den Boeft, A.H.M. Kessels (ed.), *Actus. Studies in honour of H.L.W. Nelson* (Utrecht, 1982), 189-201.

³⁰ Jacopo Antonio Marcello became a friend of Filelfo's, probably somewhere in 1460; see I. François, "Good things come in threes. Francesco Filelfo's three consolations to Jacopo Antonio Marcello", *Studi e problemi di critica testuale* 99.2 (2019), 71-102, at 74. Filelfo addressed a *consolatio* to Marcello when the latter's son Valerio died in 1461; see I. François, *Francesco Filelfo's Consolatio ad Iacobum Antonium Marcellum de obitu Valerii filii. Text and Context* (Leuven, 2019).

Ense vacans convertit equum sociisque relictis 115
ocior Euxini Borea stellaque volanti
sole sub aestivo fugiens in castra recurrit
 Bergomeus. [my punctuation]

After losing his sword, the captain from Bergamo turns his horse, leaves his comrades, and, fleeing swifter than the North Wind on the Black Sea and than a shooting star under a summer sun, he runs back to his camp.

The description of Colleoni's flight, which is also faster than a shooting star, this time under a summer sun ("sole sub aestivo"), contains a clear allusion to Sasso's speed in the horse race. The verbal link between Bartolomeo Colleoni and Sasso underscores their characterization as greedy and longing for material possessions; their moral depravity is further manifested by the maltreatment of their destrier.

This last characteristic is also shared by Antonello da Corneto (? -1475), who, like Donato del Conte and Sasso, is called "domesticæ Annibalis [= Sforza] militiæ praefectus" by Porcellio Pandoni.³¹ Simonetta tells us that Antonello was short in stature but nonetheless very visible on the battlefield because of the two golden horns he wore on his helmet instead of a crest (*Simonetae commentarii*, 196), a peculiarity which gave Filelfo the opportunity to name him with the epic-style composite *Corniger* (Pandoni calls him *Corneus*, Simonetta *Cornetanus*). Even though Simonetta praises him explicitly for his bravery in the battles that took place on 14 and 30 August (*Simonetae commentarii*, 230 and 232), Antonello da Corneto shows up in the *Sphortias* only as a competitor in the horse race. As was the case with Sasso, Antonello's main trait is cruelty towards his steed, a vice which is stressed by a repetition of forms of *indignari* and *ira*. When his horse rears in the middle of the race, Antonello da Corneto violently hits it on the head (8.372-374):

[...] Tunc indignatus et ira
 sessor virus agens, quanto valet impete pugnum
 infligens capiti cogit se reddere cursu.

Then, annoyed and venomous, with all his might the angry rider rains his fists down on its head and forces it to start running again.

³¹ Muratori 1731 (as in n. 9), 104 and 114.

When trying to pass Donato del Conte in the race, Antonello da Corneto again beats his steed (8.422-423):

Hic autem secum nimia stimulatus ab ira
indignatur, equum non uno verbere caedens.

But annoyed and excited with outrageous anger, he hits his horse with more than one blow.

Eventually Antonello's horse is kicked in the head by Donato del Conte's horse, and overcome with pain it starts wheeling around, "heedless of the violence of the blows" ("Ille dolore gravis dum retro vertitur ictus / seque rotat circum, nec vim nec verbera curans" 8.427-428).

Donato del Conte (*Donatus*; ? - 1478), "an excellent young man with an acquaintance of warfare" (*Simonetae commentarii*, 296), starts the first skirmishes at Caravaggio at the head of a squadron of *galuppi* (*calippi*), light cavalry consisting of young men whose horses belonged to the ducal stalls (6.401-491).³² Later on, we find Donato and his *calippi* dripping with blood and attacking the enemy's cavalry (7.224-231): with his sword he wounds a certain Alexis from Pavia in the face and defeats a man called Clearchus. His most prominent appearance, however, is his triumph in the horse race (8.349-431) over Sasso, Antonello da Corneto, and a certain Crispus ("Curly-headed").³³ Riding on a white horse, initially Donato is in the last position, together with Crispus, but after the latter has tripped over the tent cables, Donato overtakes both Sasso, who slips in a ditch, and Antonello da Corneto, who loses control over his horse. During the race the narrator praises his ability – Donato's horse-riding skills are compared to the steering competence of Tiphys, the mythical helmsman of the Argo – and cunning, and states that Donato's qualities are no surprise, because he learned everything about warfare and horse riding from the great Sforza himself (8.396-399). Donato's flattering appearance in the horse race appears to be related to this life-long

³² On the *galuppi*, see M.N. Covini, *L'esercito del duca. Organizzazione militare e istituzioni al tempo degli Sforza (1450-1480)* (Roma, 1998), 67.

³³ The last one is probably a fictional character. As in other contemporary Neo-Latin epic poems, Filelfo's characters often have speaking names; see Peters 2009 (as in n. 7), 279-280.

loyalty to Sforza.³⁴ According to Antonio Gallo,³⁵ Donato del Conte even received his name because he was very dear to Sforza (who was count at the time). The stress on Donato's riding skills may be prompted by a key role of his in the decisive battle of Caravaggio. According to Simonetta, it was Donato del Conte who informed Sforza of an unexpected attack on a marshy part of the town: riding at full speed and out of breath, he intercepted Sforza who, on his way elsewhere, immediately changed his strategy and eventually won the battle.³⁶

Impending Doom

According to the historiographers Bernardo da Orvieto showed his loyalty to Sforza by dying on the battlefield. Even though his actual demise is not treated in the finished part of the *Sphortias*, the reader's sympathy is aroused by the anticipation of his imminent heroic death. Bernardo da Orvieto features twice in the poem and appears as head of a squadron of crossbowmen in the first battle scene at Caravaggio, fighting in the forefront together with Donato del Conte and his *galuppi* (6.399-457). When Bernardo is lured into an ambush but is unshaken and kills many an opponent, his rage is compared to that of a mad Spanish dog (6.449-457):

Ille autem postquam caput obiecisse periclis tot tantisque videt, <u>solam superesse saluti</u> <u>spem sentit sperare nihil</u> . Proin fertur in omnes.	450
Ut canis Hispanus, rabies quem dira furemtem corripuit, nunc hunc, nunc illum <u>dentibus</u> amens occupat et nullo terretur <u>cuspidis</u> ictu, sic ferit intrepidus nullo discrimine passim	455
vulnus agens, quencunque tulit fortuna furorve, morte Berardinus mulctatum mittit ad Horchum.	

³⁴ Simonetta also mentions the young age of Donato when the latter started to serve under Sforza (*Simonetae commentarii*, 296).

³⁵ E. Pandiani (ed.), *Antonii Galli Commentarii de rebus Genuensibus et de navigatione Columbi* (Città di Castello, 1910-1911), 45; see also F. Petrucci, "Del Conte, Donato", *DBI*, vol. 36 (Roma, 1988), 459-462.

³⁶ "Ipse dein equum inermis ascendit et dum cum paucis Forum Novum versus petit, ecce, amisso equo, fit ei Donatus obviam et anhelans: 'Quo pergis,' inquit, 'imperator? Hostes totis adsunt viribus iamque peditatus totam hanc complevit viam.'" (*Simonetae commentarii*, 236). It seems not unlikely that Filelfo planned to treat Donato's crucial role at Caravaggio in the unfinished book 10.

But when he sees that his head is exposed to so many and such enormous perils, he feels that the only hope of salvation is to hope for nothing. Therefore he rushes at everyone. As a Spanish dog, raging and seized by cruel rabies, with his teeth attacks now this assailant, now another, and is frightened by no blow of the spear, so does Bernardo fearlessly hit and wound here and there indiscriminately and whomever fortune or rage brings before him, he punishes with death and sends to Hades.

The hopelessness of Bernardo's situation is illustrated with an allusion to Aeneas' famous *sententia* addressed to his fellow citizens on Troy's fatal night (*Aen.* 2.353-354):

[...] Moriamur et in media arma ruamus.

Una salus victis nullam sperare salutem.

Let us die and rush into the midst of arms. One safety the vanquished have, to hope for none.³⁷

The "dira rabies" must be taken in the English sense of rabies,³⁸ which explains why the huntsmen assail their own hunting dog, the "canis Hispanus" possibly referring to the Spanish greyhound. The hunter Bernardo da Orvieto, who, like a greyhound, "flies swifter than the wind" ("Volat ocior aura", 6.438), is ambushed and becomes the hunted. In a battle context, rage is not necessarily a negative feature. In this case it is connected with the despair of the situation and may be suggested by a simile in *Aeneid* 2. Right after the cited verses, Aeneas and his men are compared to enraged wolves, driven by hunger (*Aen.* 2.355-360).³⁹

³⁷ Adapted from H.R. Fairclough (ed., tr.), *Virgil*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA – London, 1954).

³⁸ Cf. *Sphort.* 9.367-372.

³⁹ "Sic animis iuvenum furor aditus. Inde, lupi ceu / raptos atra in nebula, quos improba ventris / exegit caecos rabies catulique relict / faucibus expectant siccis, per tela, per hostis / vadimus haud dubiam in mortem mediaeque tenemus / urbis iter." ("Thus their young spirits were spurred to fury. Then, like ravening wolves in black mist, when the belly's lawless rage has driven them blindly forth, and their welps at home await them with thirsty jaws; through swords, through foes we pass to certain death, and hold our way to the city's heart." Adapted from Fairclough 1954 [as in n. 37].) See also Horsfall's positive interpretation of the simile: "Both Trojans and wolves are seized by desperate bravery", Horsfall 2018 (as in n. 23), ad 355-358.

In book 8 Bernardo loses a duel with the flail (8.432-507) against Angelo di Caposelvi, another captain in Francesco Sforza's service. Little is known about Angelo di Caposelvi for the years 1447-1450, and in Simonetta's account he does not show up until years later (*Simonetae commentarii*, 360 and 393, where he is called *Angelus Camposilvius*). The reason, however, why Filelfo chose Angelo di Caposelvi as Bernardo da Orvieto's opponent can be found in a missive from Sforza to the former, dated 1 October 1451; the letter shows that, just like Bernardo, Angelo led a unit of crossbowmen.⁴⁰ Rivalry between both commanders may have suggested the elaborate imagery of two lions fighting in spring-time over an onlooking lioness, a metaphor for Sforza watching the fight (8.450-456).⁴¹ While in difficulty, Bernardo da Orvieto thinks twice about retreating, "whether out of fear of death, or because he was ashamed in front of his general", and is compared to a fleeing wild boar that turns around and attacks its assailant (8.478-480):

Sicut aper fugiens postquam prope sentit adesse
qui venator agens intentat cuspidē mortem,
vertitur atque ultro venabula dente lacessit. 480

As a fleeing wild boar, when it senses that the pursuing huntsman is close by and intent on killing with his spear, turns around and voluntarily charges the javelin with his teeth.

Both similes involving Bernardo da Orvieto, the Spanish dog and the wild boar, linked with the chiasmic repetition of the key terms "teeth" and "spear" (*dentibus – cuspidis; cuspidē – dente*), remind of Turnus being compared to a lion wounded by a hunter at the beginning of *Aeneid* 12, a

⁴⁰ "Havimo ricevuto le toe lettere, ale quale rispondendo, et primo, che tu haby posto tali ordini che *quelli balestreri* non se moverano a desordine veruno contra quelli de Camayragho, molto ne piace et te ne commendiamo." Milano, Archivio di Stato, *Sforzesco*, Registri Missive 6, f. 209r. Italics are mine.

⁴¹ Cf. *Georg.* 3.219-223 (two bulls fighting over a cow), and *Aen.* 12.715-722 (Aeneas and Turnus being compared to two fighting bulls).

simile which forebodes his death at the end of the book.⁴² The image of the Spanish dog and the wild boar depict brave, but pointless resistance and eventual defeat. For even though both animals are heedless of the spears that assail them, it is clear that they are bound to die in the end. This is exactly what will happen to Bernardo da Orvieto in the third battle of Caravaggio (14 August 1448): while fighting in the front line once more and attempting to prevent the enemy from digging another ditch, he will be struck in the forehead by an arrow and die a couple of days later.⁴³ Sforza was very distressed by Bernardo da Orvieto's demise, because he was very fond of him and "confided in him in private matters as well as in public ones" (*Simonetae commentarii*, 232).⁴⁴

In summary, Filelfo highlights the loyalty of Bernardo da Orvieto by alluding to his upcoming heroic death on the battlefield, a death which places him in the ranks of Virgilian characters such as Nisus and Euryalus, or Pandarus and Bitias. Donato del Conte is found fighting more than once on the front lines, but his most telling feat in the finished part of the poem is his triumph in the horse race, a victory which is prompted by his long-standing loyalty to Sforza and possibly also by his horse-riding

⁴² "Poenorum qualis in arvis / saucius ille gravi venantum vulnere pectus / tum demum movet arma leo, gaudetque comantis / excutiens cervice toros fixumque latronis / impavidus frangit telum et fremit ore cruento: / haud secus accenso gliscit violentia Turno." (*Aen.* 12.4-9; "As in Punic fields a lion, when wounded, Io! with grieves stroke of huntsmen in the breast, then only wakes to war, joyously tosses from his neck his shaggy main, and snaps, undaunted, the robber's implanted dart, roaring with blood-stained mouth: even so in Turnus' kindling soul the fury swells." Adapted from Fairclough 1954 [as in n. 22].)

⁴³ The association of imminent doom may also be shared by the *condottiero* Dolce Anguillara (1401-1450), who will be fatally wounded during the siege of Monza and die in Pavia somewhat later, according to Simonetta as a result of muscular convulsions (*Simone-tae commentarii*, 277). When Anguillara saves Sasso, who is hit and about to be abducted by the enemy, Anguillara is compared to a lion attacking calves (7.244-247): "Non sinit id Dulcis, medios qui missus in hostes, / ut leo Marmaricus campo spatiaturo aperto / in vitulos agitante fame passimque trucidat / efferus, ense necat casus quencunque tulisset. ("Dolce does not allow it; sent into the midst of the enemy, he kills whomever chance has brought before him, as a Marmarican lion, wandering about in open fields, is driven by hunger towards calves and savagely butchers them everywhere.")). A lion from Marmarica appears in Seneca's *Agamemnon* (737-740), where Cassandra prophesies the murder of Agamemnon and compares him to a "Marmaricus leo", slain by a bold lioness (Clytaemnestra).

⁴⁴ Since it is unlikely that the death of Sforza's close friend would be absent from the poem, Filelfo may have planned to honour Bernardo da Orvieto by having him perish in the decisive battle of Caravaggio, instead of in a preliminary one. Possibly he was to be pictured for a third time in a similarly precarious situation which ultimately proved to be fatal, the similes in his first two appearances thus foreshadowing and paving the way for a dramatic death scene in the unfinished book 10.

skills, which play a historical role in the decisive battle of Caravaggio. The anti-heroes of the race, Sasso and Antonello da Corneto, who are characterized respectively by greed and anger, recall the losers in Virgil's boat race: Sasso's slipping in a ditch and Antonello da Corneto's losing control over his steed mirror Virgil's Gyas, who hurls his helmsman overboard in a fit of anger, and Sergestus, the fictional ancestor of Catiline, who in madness wrecks his ship on the rocks.

3. Picturing the Perfect Opponent?

Just as not all of Sforza's lieutenants are pictured in an unequivocally flattering manner, the image of Sforza's enemies is not entirely negative. Filelfo had many contacts in Venice and, as has been noted already,⁴⁵ he states in his correspondence that the overall picture of the Venetians in the *Sphortias* is rather positive: in a letter from 1465, he defends himself against the accusations made by Lodrisio Crivelli of not sufficiently praising Venice in his letter to Pope Paul II; Filelfo states that in the *Sphortias* he did not shy away from hiding, changing, and ignoring many things related to the republic of Venice.⁴⁶ Moreover, he suggests that, despite the favourable picture he drew of the Venetians, the praise was subtle. In 1463 he writes to his Venetian friend Michele Orsini, prior of the monastery of Saint Anthony Abbot, that he had tried to praise Sforza in such a manner that the dignity of the Venetian senate would remain intact.⁴⁷ Since this treatment of the *Serenissima* in his poem is not very visible on the surface, he asks Orsini to make sure his work would not fall into the hands of uneducated but powerful people who might misinterpret it. Even if the general *Darstellung* of Venice in the poem is rather flatter-

⁴⁵ Bottari 1986 (as in n. 8), 481-482; De Keyser 2016 (as in n. 6), 402-403.

⁴⁶ "Quaeratur igitur diligenter quid ego semper de amplissima republica Venetorum et senserim et scripserim, cum ne veritus quidem sim in ipsa *Sphortiae* quod de hostibus non dissimulare licebat, multa subtescere, multa invertere, multa praeterire, et quae omnino ad historiae veritatem dicenda essent, ea plerisque in locis extenuare." J. De Keyser (ed.), *Francesco Filelfo. Collected Letters (Epistolarum Libri XLVIII)* (Alessandria, 2015) [henceforth *PhE*], vol. 3, 391-395 (letter no. 26.01).

⁴⁷ "[...] unum illud ut cogites velim: ne in manus cuiuspiam indocti hominis incident. Nam doctorum hominum iudicium haud vereor, sed eorum qui, cum nulla eruditione pollent, omnia in deteriore partem interpretantur. Ego enim Franciscum Sphortiam ita laudatum iri a me cupio, ut florentissimi Venetorum senatus dignitas ab me servata videatur. Id autem magis intus (ut aiunt) quam in cute apparebit. Itaque rogo te ut huius rei diligentem habeas rationem. Tu autem expendes omnia diligenter et mihi gravissimum tuum hac de re iudicium (scio) non invitus ostendes." *PhE* 18.51, 4-11.

ing and at times embellished, a clear distinction can be made between individual characters. Some of Sforza's antagonists are presented as overcome by anger or cowardice, others as brave or wise. The Venetian leaders under consideration in this section are Doge Francesco Foscari (*Franciscus Foscarus*), Senator Ermolao Donato (*Hermolaus Donatus*; who will be sent as *provveditore* to Caravaggio), Micheleetto Attendolo (*Michael Attendulus*), captain-general of the Venetian army, and the *condottieri* Tiberto Brandolini (*Tibertus Brandolus*) and Ludovico III Gonzaga (*Ludovicus Gonzaga*), the marquis of Mantova.

Venetian Political Leaders

At the outset of the poem, the Venetians, tired of the lasting conflict with the duchy and willing to make peace, are praised by the narrator for their unity and their culture of consultation (1.44-48). Jupiter, however, sees that things are not going according the will of fate and instructs Mercury to summon Discord from Tartarus to throw a spanner in the works. Discord heads for the Venetian senate and sows dissension amongst the senators, "instilling some with fire, others with venom" (1.103). Immediately a dichotomy is formed between senators in favour of war and those advocating peace (1.270-274):

[...] Aliter sentire iuventus	270
atque senes aliter. Bellum fremit illa foveatque	
assensu atque animo; seniores, iuris et aequi	
partibus adiuti, contra venerabilis aetas	
nituntur.	

The young think one way, the elderly another. The former murmur for war and favour it with consenting heart; the older senators, the respectable generation, leaning on what is right and fair, withstand.

At first, the younger senators dare not speak aloud, out of fear for the reputation of Venice, but when Paolo Trono stands up for an annexation of Milan, the young applaud his words, while the old despise them (1.274-292). Until the eve of the decisive battle of Caravaggio, the image of the Venetian leaders in the *Sphortias* will be marked by a split between an offensive stance and a defensive or even conciliatory one, and between generations. On the political level, both camps are embodied primarily by Francesco Foscari (1373-1457), doge of Venice from 1423 until 1457, on the one hand, and Senator Ermolao Donato (ca. 1400-1450) on the

other.⁴⁸ The stance of each is first articulated in the finale of book 4, when the Venetian senate debates about the line of conduct regarding Sforza after the latter has taken Piacenza. Doge Francesco Foscari pleads for peace with Sforza but is fiercely contradicted by Ermolao Donato (4.631-790). The younger senators are persuaded by him and lend their support for war, while the elderly are against and despise his anger (“Dixit et assensum mox omnis iunior aetas / non invita tulit, contra senioribus ipsis / multa diu questis et detestantibus iram.” 4.788-790). Anger, as is explicitly stated in his last appearance in the poem (“sed irae / ignibus Hermoleos, comitem quam semper haberet”, 9.91-92), is Donato’s most prominent trait and surfaces in his repeated interruptions of his interlocutor. At the beginning of book 6, we find the Venetians discussing the recent elimination of their fleet at Casalmaggiore (6.14-143). The doge tries once more to persuade the council to accept a treaty with Milan, but is rebuked by Donato who cannot control himself (6.51-53):

Et cum plura senex esset dicturus et omnes
praeberent facilis verbis attentius aures,
impedit Hermoleos, ira qui percitus inquit:
[...]

And even though the old man was about to say more and everyone lent willing and attentive ears, Ermolao prevented it and said, furious with anger: [...]

Book 7 presents Donato no longer in Venice, but as *provveditore* in the Venetian camp at Caravaggio, opposing the lingering Attendolo and Ludovico Gonzaga (7.1-150). When the latter asserts that only *otium* (idleness) can break Sforza and compares him with Hannibal, who supposedly lost his strength by spending the winter after Cannae in the depraved environment of Capua (7.114-116),⁴⁹ Donato is again unable to refrain from interrupting his interlocutor (7.123-125). The phrasing clearly recalls his earlier intervention:

⁴⁸ On Francesco Foscari, see G. Gullino, “Foscari, Francesco”, *DBI*, vol. 49 (Roma, 1997), 306-314; on Ermolao Donato, see P. De Peppo, “Donà, Ermolao”, *DBI*, vol. 40 (Roma, 1991), 722-724.

⁴⁹ Cf. Liv. *AUC* 23.18; Sil. *Pun.* 11.377-482.

Non tulit Hermoleos Lodovicum plura volentem
dicere Gonzagam, sed ut acri percitus ira
 semper erat, sic est verbis invectus acerbis: 125
 [...]

Ermolao did not suffer Ludovico Gonzaga to say more, but, furious as always with fierce anger, with bitter words he raged as follows: [...]

The echo “ira qui percitus” – “acri percitus ira”, which may be reminiscent of *Aeneid* 9,⁵⁰ underscores Donato’s inability to curb his anger and thus puts him in an unfavourable light. Humanist readings of the *Aeneid*, though biased by a Christian perspective, considered Aeneas’ succumbing to anger as a flaw,⁵¹ and it has been shown how this reception was materialized in character portrayal in other contemporary Neo-Latin epic poems.⁵² Intratextuality furthermore serves to underscore how both antagonists are portrayed in their direct speech. Verbal parallels associate Donato, who advocates *utilitas* (expediency), with the personification of greed, while Foscari, pleading for *honestas* (honesty) and *iustitia* (justice), is juxtaposed to greed.⁵³ In his plea for peace with Sforza after the loss of Piacenza, Francesco Foscari emphasizes the primacy of justice, comparing it to the sun (4.679-683):

⁵⁰ In *Aen.* 9.694-695, Turnus hears about Pandarus and Bitias opening the camp gates and immediately rushes thither: “Deserit inceptum atque immani concitus ira / Dardanium ruit ad portam fratresque superbos” (“He leaves what he has begun and, furious with enormous anger, storms to the Dardanian gate and the haughty brothers”). The phrase occurs in other places as well: Lucr. *DRN* 5.400, “ira tum percitus acri” (said of Jupiter in the Phaethon episode); Liv. *AUC* 6.38, “tum percitus ira Camillus”; Ov. *Hal.* 39, “acri concitus ira.” In *Sphort.* 3.406, Carlo Gonzaga is said to attack the walls of Piacenza “tristi percitus ira”.

⁵¹ Two decades after working on the *Sphortias*, Filelfo himself would marvel at Virgil’s Aeneas succumbing to anger; *Francisci Philelphi De morali disciplina libri quinque. Averrois Paraphrasis in libros de Repub. Platonis. Francisci Robortelli in libros politicos Aristotelis disputatio* (Venetiis, 1552 [USTC 829509]), 71-72. Discerning the puzzlement of late medieval readers at Aeneas’ anger is, of course, hardly an acknowledgment of a humanist two-voices reception of the *Aeneid*.

⁵² C. Peters, “*Iustus in iras?* Perspectives on Anger as a Driving Force in Neo-Latin Epic”, in K. Enenkel, A. Traninger (ed.), *Discourses of Anger in the early Modern Period* (Leiden – Boston, MA, 2015), 261-287, at 266-277.

⁵³ The choice between *honestas* and *utilitas* is a commonplace in Filelfo’s work; cf. W.S. Blanchard, “Patrician Sages and the Humanist Cynic. Francesco Filelfo and the Ethics of World Citizenship”, *Renaissance Quarterly* 60.4 (2007), 1107-1169; *PhE* 08.01, 23.22, 33.25; J. De Keyser (ed.), W. Scott Blanchard (tr.), Francesco Filelfo, *On Exile* (Cambridge, MA – London, 2013), 208; *Robortelli disputatio* (as in n. 51), 19.

Nos una virtute viros superavimus omnis
 Iusticia, reliquis quae non secus omnibus una 680
 laudibus excellit quam praestat Delius astris.
 Haec nos imperio decorat terraque marique
 mirandosque facit.

We have surpassed all men by the virtue of justice alone, which excells
 all other honourable things as the sun excells the stars. It adorns us
 with authority and makes us admirable on land and sea.

Foscari argues that even if the Venetians desire to rule the Milanese and
 “love expediency so much”, it is still preferable to achieve this end with-
 out war (4.688-693).⁵⁴ In his reply, Ermolao Donato states that *honestas*
 is not natural and exists only in human laws and practice. Echoing Paolo
 Trono,⁵⁵ he stands up for *utilitas*, claiming that even the Romans owe
 their success to it (4.772-776):

Utilitas urbes auget regnumque tuetur,
utilitas ingens fucato praestat honesto.
 Qua ratione viri quos orbis totus adorat,
 Romulidae, quondam pulchras Karthaginis arces 775
 aequavere solo et celsam vertere Corynthum.

Expediency enlarges cities and guards a reign; great expediency
 outdoes false honesty. By this reasoning the descendants of Romulus,
 whom the whole world adores, razed the once beautiful Carthaginian
 citadel to the ground and destroyed lofty Corinth.

Both men’s arguments are verbally reflected by the mouth of the clearly
 negative character Avaritia (Greed). During the first skirmishes at Cara-
 vaggio, Pluto sends her, together with Timor (Fear) and Invidia (Envy), to
 the battleground to persuade Francesco Piccinino to ignore Sforza’s
 orders and summon his brother, Jacopo Piccinino, to withdraw from the
 field. Avaritia begins her speech with a plea for *utilitas* (6.724-727):

⁵⁴ When defending himself after the loss of the fleet at Casalmaggiore, Foscari
 declares that honour and the common good had always been his concern (6.128-130).

⁵⁵ Pleading for an annexation of Milan in Book 1, Paolo Trono points to the importan-
 ce of expediency in defending or expanding a state (1.284-285): “Utilitas semper regnum
vel sola tuetur / atque auget” (“It is expediency alone that guards and enlarges a reign”).

Omnibus utilitas humanis rebus ut omni
praestat Olympiaco, quem spectas, Delius astro, 725
 haec tibi dat socios, quibus es nunc fortis et ingens.
 Haec regesque ducesque facit populosque tuetur.

Expediency excels all human things, as the sun excels every star in heaven that you look at. It gives you the allies by which you are now strong and great. It makes kings and leaders and guards nations.

The passage not only associates Avaritia with Ermolao Donato (“populosque tuetur” – “regnumque tuetur”), but also juxtaposes her to Francesco Foscari, who praises *iustitia* by means of the same sun-and-stars comparison with which Avaritia had exalted *utilitas* (“non secus [...] quam praestat Delius astris” – “ut omni praestat Olympiaco [...] Delius astro”). Apart from being unable to harness his anger, Ermolao Donato is characterized by expediency and greed. The narrator’s sympathy is clearly with Francesco Foscari and the defensive faction, which advocates honesty and peace with Sforza.

Venetian Military Leaders

On the military level, the Venetian leaders are presented in the same twofold manner, but in this case Filelfo’s preference for the defensive faction is less clear or even subverted. In the description of the siege of San Colombano (2.128-235), the first military encounter of the narrative, we are introduced to the leading figures of the Venetian army and to the tactical positions they will adopt for the rest of the completed part of the *Sphortias*. Micheletto Attendolo (ca.1370-1463), the aged captain-general of the Venetian army, is informed by Juno of Jupiter’s decisions (2.185-187) and is thus aware of the outcome of any confrontation with Sforza (“Solus Michael ventura videbat”, 2.202; “quoniam ventura videret”, 5.709).⁵⁶ Consequently, throughout the epic he invariably counsels against battle. An exponent of the opposite, warlike stance is the *condottiero* Tiberto Brandolini (ca.1410-1462), who is, according to Mars himself, “the bravest of the Venetians” (2.214) and who constantly challenges Attendolo.⁵⁷ A comparison with the Roman leaders in the

⁵⁶ On Micheletto Attendolo, see R. Capasso, “Attendolo, Micheletto”, *DBI*, vol. 4 (Roma, 1962), 542-543.

⁵⁷ On Tiberto Brandolini, see P. Partner, “Brandolini, Tiberto”, *DBI*, vol. 14 (Roma, 1972), 14.

Second Punic War enriches the opposition between both captains: Venetian envoys at San Colombano support Tiberto Brandolini and exalt the latter “as a Scipio above the golden stars” (2.201).⁵⁸ At Casalmaggiore, Micheletto Attendolo is called “cunctator” (5.122) and is explicitly compared to Fabius Maximus, the famous Roman general who tried to overcome Hannibal by avoiding battle (5.125). During the assembly of generals at Caravaggio, Attendolo justifies his defensive tactics by likening himself to Fabius (7.38-39). Except for Second-Punic-War *topoi*, there is an intertextual and contextual bond, mainly with the *Aeneid*, that adorns the juxtaposed stances of Attendolo and Brandolini. When the Venetian army arrives at San Colombano, Attendolo pretends that the area is not suited for battle; for the first time, he is fiercely contradicted by Brandolini, who reproaches the council for exhibiting fear and cowardice and assures him that he, Brandolini, will be the first to rush at the foe (2.194-198):

[...] “Oh, quae nos tenet, inquit, tanta prementis
causa metus? Quae tanta potest vaecordia nobis
sollicitare animos? Ego sim qui primus in hostes
victor signa feram, qui prima pericula dextro
eventu facturus eam.” 195

“O, what is the great cause of this fear that oppresses and binds us?
Whence this great cowardice that stirs our minds? Let me be the one
who first victoriously carries our standards against the foe and who
faces the first dangers with propitious outcome.”

Three books later, when Sforza has surrounded the Venetian fleet at Casalmaggiore, almost exactly the same discussion arises between the two commanders. Attendolo warns the council of Sforza’s strength and tries to gain time, but is rebuked by Brandolini along lines very similar to those used at San Colombano (5.723-726):

[...] “O Michael, quae nos ignavia demum
cum duce Francisco, caelo quem laudibus aequas,
conseruisse manum prohibet? Ferar ipse nec ullas
detrectabo vices, iubeas modo, primus in hostes.” 725

⁵⁸ With a wink to Petrarch, who calls Scipio “iuvenis sidereus” in *Afr.* 1.115, *Ecl.* 1.113 and *Fam.* 10.4.33. See L.G.J. ter Haar, *Petrarca’s Africa boek I en II. Een commentaar* (Nijmegen, 1999), *ad loc.*

“O, what is this fear that keeps us from engaging in battle with general Francesco, whom you praise and equate with heaven? I myself will rush first at the foe and avoid not a single danger, if you would only command it.”

Brandolini’s second intervention is dense with allusions stressing his bravery: (1) “Ferar ipse”; (2) “conseruisse manum” – “nec ullas detrectabo vices”; (3) “primus in hostes”; (4) “caelo quem laudibus aequas”.

(1) “Ferar ipse” recalls another spearhead in the Roman struggle against the Carthaginians: in Silius Italicus, Marcus Marcellus, who defends Nola against Hannibal, assures his men that he will fight in the first ranks when they open the city gates (*Pun.* 12.177-178):

[...] Ferar ipse revulsa
in medios equitumque traham certamina porta.

I myself, when the gate is opened, shall charge into their midst and the squadrons of cavalry will follow me.⁵⁹

(2) The phrase “nec ulla detrectabo vices” (“I will not avoid a single danger”) brings us once more to the heat of battle during Troy’s final night. Relating the many Trojan casualties, Aeneas justifies his departure from the burning city by pointing to the will of fate (*Aen.* 2.431-434):

Iliaci cineres et flamma extrema meorum,
testor, in occasu vestro nec tela nec ullas
vitavisse vices, Danaum et, si fata fuissent
ut caderem, meruisse manu.

Ashes of Troy and ultimate pyre of my fellow citizens, I swear that in your downfall I did shun neither wounds nor dangers and, if fate would have had it, I deserved to fall by Greek hand.

The allusion is marked by the additional parallel “conseruisse manum” – “meruisse manu”, and by the presence of a conditional clause (“si fata fuissent” and “iubeas modo”): in their desire to show their courage, Aeneas and Tiberto Brandolini are both hampered by a higher authority, fate and the captain-general Micheletto Attendolo (who is conscious of

⁵⁹ Adapted from J.D. Duff (ed., tr.), *Silius Italicus, Punica*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA – London, 1934).

what fate has in store), respectively. The Aeneas allusion is taken up in the description of the first day of the battle at Caravaggio in *Sphortias* 6, where Brandolini has been granted what he had asked for at Casalmaggiore (6.413-418):

Huic et enim, quoniam calleret et idem
fortiter invadens summis se offerre periclis
auderet magna semper cum laude nec ullas
detrectare vices, cura est commissa diei 416
illius ut castris caperet loca tuta futuris
consereretve manum, potius si id forte probasset.

He was cunning and at the same time had the courage to attack bravely and to expose himself to the greatest dangers without avoiding a single peril, ever with the greatest glory. Therefore, on that day he was commissioned to find a safe spot for a future camp and to engage in battle if he would deem it appropriate.

(3) The same internal cohesion is attested in the repetition of the tag “*primus in hostes*”, a reminiscence of Brandolini’s earlier attack on Attendolo (2.196) and an allusion to Turnus exhorting his men to charge the Trojan camp in *Aeneid* 9.51:

“Ecquis erit, mecum, iuvenes, qui primus in hostem?”⁶⁰

“Is there anyone, young men, who will rush first at the foe with me?”

(4) The Turnus allusion must be read in the light of the Latin council of war in *Aeneid* 11.336-444, which evolves around an argument between Turnus and the old orator Drances: when Latinus has proposed giving the Trojans land and considering them as allies, Drances, who bears a grudge against Turnus, takes the floor and supports Latinus’ peace proposal, to the rage of Turnus. Apart from reflecting the importance of rhetoric in the late Roman Republic – Drances is seen as a representation of Cicero or even Catiline –, the quarrel, essentially an opposition between reconciliation and war and between words and deeds, has roots in Homer’s *Ther-*

⁶⁰ The phrase is also echoed in Sil. *Pun.* 4.134-135: “Tum dictis comitem contorquet primus in hostes / ceu suadente deo et fatorum conscius hastam.”

sites confronting Agamemnon.⁶¹ Filelfo alludes to Drances' first appearance, earlier on in *Aeneid* 11, as leader of an embassy to the Trojans, asking for an armistice to bury the dead. When Aeneas has granted the Latins' wish and has added that he would be in favour of peace altogether, Drances addresses the Trojan king (*Aen.* 11.122-125):

Tum senior semperque odiis et crimine Drances
infensus iuvēni Turno sic ore vicissim
orsa refert: "O fama ingens, ingentior armis,
vir Troiane, quibus caelo te laudibus aequem?" 125

Then Drances, old and ever hostile towards young Turnus with hateful accusations, thus answers in turn: "O Trojan man, great by fame, greater by deeds, with what praises shall I equate you with heaven?"

By rebuking Micheletto Attendolo for equating Sforza with heaven ("caelo quem laudibus aequas"), Brandolini likens Attendolo to Drances, who exalts Aeneas and pleads for peace, an identification which is, apart from the contextual similarity, reinforced by an analogous age difference. In Filelfo's intertextual strategy, Tiberto Brandolini, "Scipio" (and "Marcus Marcellus"), is characterized by Turnus' bravery and eagerness for battle and is associated with Aeneas in Troy's ultimate struggle. Micheletto Attendolo, "Fabius Maximus", is, through Drances (and Thersites), portrayed as "better with his tongue, but with an arm slow in war" (*Aen.* 11.338-339).

⁶¹ On Drances as Cicero, see W.C. McDermott, "Drances – Cicero", *Vergilius* 26 (1980), 34-38; on Drances as Catiline, see A. La Penna, "Spunti sociologici per l'interpretazione dell'*Eneide*", *Fra teatro, poesia e politica romana* (Torino, 1979), 153-165; on the importance of rhetoric in the council passage, see Ph. Hardie, "Fame and defamation in the *Aeneid*: the council of Latins. *Aeneid* 11. 225-467", in H.-P. Stahl (ed.), *Vergil's Aeneid. Augustan epic and political context* (London, 1998), 243-270; on the Homeric parallels for Drances and Turnus, see P.F. Burke, "Drances Infensus. A Study in Vergilian Character Portrayal", *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 108 (1978), 15-20. The quarrel goes back to the debate between Thersites and Odysseus (*Il.* 2.225-264), but also to the debates between Polydamas and Hector (*Il.* 12.211-250 and 18.254-309) and between Antenor and Paris (*Il.* 7.348-364).

Ludovico Gonzaga

Filelfo's statements about his favourable fashioning of the Venetians must be all the more valid in the case of Ludovico III Gonzaga, the marquis of Mantova, who was a generous patron of Filelfo's and, unlike Francesco Sforza, a man of letters himself: educated by Vittorino da Feltre, he was an avid collector and reader of books who had intense contacts with the Florentine bookseller Vespasiano da Bisticci and with humanists such as Guarino Veronese, Platina, and Ognibene da Lonigo.⁶² Gonzaga's patronage can furthermore be connected directly to the *Sphortias*: on 22 June 1453, Filelfo asked Gonzaga for 50 ducats because he was 250 ducats short on his daughter's dowry and explicitly promised compensation in the form of praise for Gonzaga in the *Sphortias*.⁶³ In the poem Gonzaga belongs to the Venetians' defensive faction (as is corroborated by *Simonetae commentarii*, 234-235) and is associated with the wisdom and authority of the doge: in book 7 Gonzaga supports Micheletto Attendolo and the tactic adopted by Fabius Maximus against Hannibal (7.80-122), but, as shown above, Gonzaga is interrupted by Ermolao Donato and thus linked with Francesco Foscari, who is equally cut short by Donato. Yet the portrayal of the margrave is more sophisticated than that of the aforementioned Venetians, for, apart from the wisdom and thoughtfulness in counsel that he shares with the Venetian *éminences grises*, in the *Sphortias* Gonzaga also exhibits great courage and fierceness on the battlefield, thereby taking up the part of Tiberto Brandolini and Virgil's Turnus. In book 8 we find the margrave, who

⁶² On Ludovico Gonzaga, see I. Lazzarini, "Ludovico III Gonzaga", *DBI*, vol. 66 (Roma, 2006), 417-426. On Gonzaga's humanist interests, see A. Luzio, R. Renier, "I Filelfo e l'umanesimo alla corte dei Gonzaga", *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 16 (1890), 119-217. Filelfo's friend and former student Gian Pietro Arrivabene wrote an epic poem in four books on Gonzaga, the *Gonzagis*, see J. De Keyser, "Ben arrivati a Mantova! Dalla *Sphortias* alla *Gonzagis*", *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 61 (2020), 373-381. Ludovico's brother Carlo Gonzaga, with whom Ludovico had a troubled relationship, fought on Francesco Sforza's side in 1447-1448 and was also a patron of Filelfo's, see Id., "*Quid non cogat amor?* Carlo Gonzaga and Lyda's Love Story in Filelfo's *Sphortias*", in J. De Landsheer, F. Della Schiava, T. Van Houdt (ed.), '*Dulces ante omnia Musae*'. *Essays on Neo-Latin Poetry in Honour of Dirk Sacré* (Turnhout, 2021), 155-166 (I wish to thank Jeroen De Keyser for sharing with me these articles before publication).

⁶³ "Itaque abs te peto ac etiam, si pateris, rogo ut huic meo adolescenti, qui tibi litteras reddidit, aureos quinquaginta dono ad me des ea lege condicioneque, ut, nisi in *Sphortiae* tibi conflatum aes omne pro dignitate dissolvero, ego tibi fiam pro debitore creditor. Nam si recte mihi es cognitus, nunquam beneficium foenerari didicisti, quin quo es in conferendo alacrior, eo te magis id debere putas. Ipse autem, si bene me novi, nihil est quod minus velim quam iudicari ingratus." *PhE* 11.31, 25-31.

leads his troops into battle, as the protagonist of a full blown *aristeia* (8.549-679), which will be further examined below. Gonzaga is not only compared to Jupiter, who hurls down lightning on oak trees in the Alps (8.579-581), but also linked to Tiberto Brandolini (and Turnus) by a verbal reminiscence:

Tum brevibus socios hortatus fortis in hostes
fertur, ut in quercus Alpinas fulminat ardens 580
 Iupiter horrisono prosternens cuncta fragore.

Then he briefly exhorts his comrades and rushes bravely at the foe, just as Jupiter ardently hurls down lightning bolts at oaks in the Alps and overthrows everything in fearsome thunder.

“Fortis in hostes” recalls the repeated allusion to Turnus “primus in hostes” (2.196 and 5.726), while “fertur” may even be reminiscent of the Silius Italicus echo “ferar ipse” (5.725). And in direct speech, when reproaching his opponents for their cowardice, Gonzaga echoes Tiberto Brandolini (“Quae tanta ignavia vestrum / pectus habet?”, 8.613-614; cf. “Oh, quae nos tenet, inquit, tanta prementis / causa metus?”, 2.194-195, and “O Michael, quae nos ignavia demum / [...] / [...] prohibet?”, 5.723-725). The true hero in fifteenth-century epic in general combines martial abilities with leniency and the will to avoid violence if possible.⁶⁴ The two-sided image of the marquis of Mantova relies on the same two pillars as the long letter sent by Ognibene da Lonigo to Gonzaga’s oldest son, Federico, in 1449; the letter exhorted Federico to imitate the example of his father and praised the latter both for his gentle spirit and his great prowess in war.⁶⁵ In *Odes* 5.9, the only poem in the *Odes* in which Gonzaga is addressed, Filelfo states that the margrave is as brave as Achilles or Hector, and praises him at the same time explicitly for his wisdom in

⁶⁴ See D. Pulina, “The Impact of Violence as Heroization Technique in Basini’s *Hesperis*, Naldi’s *Volaterrais* and Filelfo’s *Sphortias*”, in J. Luggin, S. Fink (ed.), *Battle Descriptions as Literary Texts. A Comparative Approach* (Wiesbaden, 2020), 247-268.

⁶⁵ R. Sabbadini, *Lettere inedite di Ognibene da Lonigo con una breve biografia* (Lonigo, 1880), 41-54.

supporting the strategy of Fabius Maximus at Caravaggio.⁶⁶ This mixed image of Gonzaga is perfectly synthesized in the following distichs (*Odes* 5.9, 105-108):

Qui nomen, Gonzaga, tuum non laudibus effert
rusticus est. Omni nam bonitate viges;
consilio polles; tu fortiter effera Martis
inter fulmineas arma subis acies.

That man is ignorant who fails to extol your name, Gonzaga, with praise. For you flourish in every goodness. You are powerful in counsel. You enter the thundering battlefields and savage fray of Mars courageously.⁶⁷

The Venetians in the Historical Sources

Contrary to what is known about Sforza's lieutenants, the contemporary historiography is generous with information on the role of the Venetian leaders during the events, and some remarks can be made about their characterization in the *Sphortias* in this respect. Even if Filelfo's portrayal of Tiberto Brandolini seems to be consonant with his character as it emerges from the historical sources,⁶⁸ none of them mentions any discussion between him and Micheletto Attendolo at San Colombano or at

⁶⁶ “Qui Caravaginos ubi cingit milite muros / et parat obsessis auxilium Venetus, / mox ades, et pugnam Fabii consulta secutus / detrectas, certa Palladis usus ope.” *Odes* 5.9, 185-188, “And when Sforza surrounds the walls of Caravaggio with his army and the Venetians prepare to come to the assistance of the besieged townspeople, you are soon there. Yet you refuse to go into battle and following the stratagems of Fabius, you rely instead on the sure power of Pallas.” “Tu non Aeaciden non Priamo satum / horrescas acie.” *Odes* 5.9, 85-86, “Nor in battle would you fear Aeacides or Priam’s son.” Text and translation adapted from D. Robin (ed., tr.), Francesco Filelfo, *Odes* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

⁶⁷ Adapted from Robin 2009 (as in n. 66).

⁶⁸ “Tibertus Brandolinus, ex iis unus audax in primis et ingenio versutus callensque longo usu” (*Simonetae commentarii*, 233); “Fuit enim Tibertus ingenio acri callidoque et animo insuper feroci et corpore robusto et longo etiam rerum bellicarum usu peritus; sed nulla ei fides, nulla pietas, nulla religio, nullus Dei metus et dira in primis crudelitas, varius quoque et mutabilis, gloriae divitiarumque appetens et rerum novarum cupidus” (*Simonetae commentarii*, 453). Brandolini defected to Sforza in late 1452, but would be incarcerated in 1462 for conspiracy against his general and die in his cell, officially by his own hand. Antonio da Ripalta, *Annales Placentini*, in Muratori 1731 (as in n. 9), 869-978, at 932: “Die 12 dicti mensis, Dominus Tibertus Brandolinus, magnus armorum capitaneus, vir omnium atrox et crudelis, sibi ipsi mortem intulit gladio obtuso sibi guttur incidendo, dum esset in carceribus detentus, et in eius funere, ut aiunt, apparuit canis niger inflans interdum more bovis.”

Casalmaggiore. Simonetta relates, however, how at Caravaggio the Venetian commanders did not agree on the course of action and all wrote down their viewpoint so the senate could decide on it (*Simonetae commentarii*, 234-235).⁶⁹ Attendolo, supported by Ludovico Gonzaga and Bartolomeo Colleoni, was reluctant to engage in battle and preferred to wait for Caravaggio to surrender, since the eagerness for booty would sow confusion in Sforza's troops and give opportunity for a sure victory. Tiberto Brandolini, on the other hand, had explored the surroundings of the enemy camp during the night and had proposed an attack on an unprotected, marshy part of the camp. Seven other captains, who together with Brandolini were called *Marciani* because of their extraordinary dedication to the Republic of Venice, supported Brandolini and chose him as their spokesman (*Simonetae commentarii*, 235). The Venetian senate adopted the viewpoint of Brandolini and instructed the *provveditori* Ermolao Donato and Gherardo Dandolo to consult with the *Marciani* on a plan of attack. The dispute between Attendolo and Brandolini on the eve of the decisive battle at Caravaggio is absent from the poem, but it is not unlikely that this disagreement was to be repeated or even to form the dramatic high note of the unfinished second part of book 9. Filelfo has taken the attested difference of opinion between Attendolo and Brandolini before the decisive battle of Caravaggio and applied it to the earlier conflicts at San Colombano and Casalmaggiore, thus creating a "council of war" based on a historical nucleus, but dividing the scene over different episodes (as he has done in his treatment of the games). The same conclusion can be drawn about the Donato-Foscari quarrel. A discussion between the two about the line of conduct regarding Sforza in the years 1447-1448 is unknown in the contemporary historiography, and again Filelfo seems to have found inspiration in the broader circumstances. Ermolao Donato was married to a daughter of Francesco Foscari's lifelong nemesis, the Venetian nobleman Pietro Loredan (1372-1438). In 1450 the Council of Ten arrested and exiled Jacopo Foscari, the doge's son, on suspicion of having murdered Ermolao Donato. Jacopo died in

⁶⁹ Platina also mentions the disagreement: Muratori 1731 (as in n. 11), 641-862, at 846.

exile in January 1457, and his father passed away later in the same year, only a couple of days after being obliged to resign from the ducal office.⁷⁰

A fact which led directly to the plan of attack during the decisive battle and which is accounted for in almost all of the historical sources is a nightly expedition undertaken by Tiberto Brandolini in order to spy on the enemy camp. Simonetta describes how Brandolini managed to explore the area in the guise of a peasant and find that the south-east side of Sforza's camp was only protected by bushes and marshes and would furnish an easy way in for enemy troops (*Simonetae commentarii*, 233). The one thing Brandolini did not notice and which would turn out to be crucial was a ditch which Sforza had constructed to fortify his camp on the "unprotected" side. Although he relates Brandolini's effort in 8.784-800, Filelfo makes Ermolao Donato the instigator of the expedition, a detail which is absent from all of the historical sources: Somnus, god of sleep, informs Donato of a wooded, marshy area where the Milanese camp is less protected and has him order his men to explore the area and search for possible entries (8.508-543). Thus Filelfo links both exponents of the offensive faction by inventing a storyline which exonerates Brandolini and makes Ermolao Donato responsible for the ultimate disaster at Caravaggio. In book 9 Gonzaga acknowledges that on the marshy side Sforza's camp is not protected with a wall, but explicitly warns the council about the presence of a ditch (9.23-24). This is another invention of Filelfo's, which merely serves to show that the margrave's opinion was the better one and that the Venetian debacle can almost be blamed on ignoring Gonzaga's wisdom in counsel.

If we look at the details of Gonzaga's *aristeia*, it becomes clear that the poet's fantasy has taken the upper hand. During his attack, Gonzaga hears a spear, thrown by Luigi dal Verme, coming from afar, awaits its arrival and simply bars it with his sword to the amazement of all (8.597-602). When Luigi dal Verme and Anguillara have succeeded in making their men turn back to the battle, the boastful Ascus ("Wine sac" in Greek) tries to hit Gonzaga on the helmet; Ascus has his fingers cut off but is spared. Then Amerigo Sanseverino endeavours to bash the margrave on the head with an axe, but once more the latter escapes un-

⁷⁰ For a detailed account of the facts, see D. Romano, "The Limits of Kinship. Family Politics, Vendetta, and the State in Fifteenth-Century Venice", in M. Knapton, J.E. Law, A.A. Smith (ed.), *Venice and the Veneto during the Renaissance. The Legacy of Benjamin Kohl* (Firenze, 2014), 87-102. These dramatic events were later immortalized in Lord Byron's play *The Two Foscari* (1821) and in the Verdi opera *I due Foscari* (1844).

harmed: this time the armour of Vulcan saves the hero (8.658-661). Gonzaga then takes his club and gives Sanseverino a blow on the head which completely knocks him out. Sanseverino could barely be rescued in time by his brothers Francesco and Bernabò (8.662-668). Both Cristoforo da Soldo and Platina relate one feat of Gonzaga before the decisive battle at Caravaggio: on 14 August 1448, Gonzaga and his men executed an attack, but Gonzaga was soon surrounded by opponents and hit several times on the head by their swords and clubs. Knocked unconscious and slightly wounded in the neck, he was saved in the nick of time by his men but was forced to stay inside the camp to recover, since his whole head became swollen.⁷¹ The poet is therefore turning black into white: not only is he silent about Gonzaga being knocked down and wounded, he makes his patron the perpetrator of the same successful strike he was the victim of according to the sources.⁷² Filelfo ironically comments on the episode in a letter to the marquis from January 1460 (when the first eight books of the *Sphortias* were finished). Filelfo claims to share Gonzaga's predilection for poets who do not compromise the truth and refers to the passage

⁷¹ "Lo illustrissimo Marchese de Mantua, il qual haveva com la Signoria cavalli milli seicento e fu lo primo di suoi chi rupe la lanza et trovossi meschiato fra li inimici; e uno familio dil Conte Francesco li dete tanto de una maza de ferro sul elmetto che tutto lo stornì et gli fu amachato tutti li ochii; venne uno altro com la lanza restata et gli sfalsò lo camaio del elmetto, et fu ferito ne la gola ma puocha cosa; venne uno altro che li amazò sotto lo cavallo, e cascò per terra; tamen fu riscosso, ma com grande fatica. Tutta la sua familia rimase a pede perché li cavalli li fumo morti sotto a quella meschia." Brizzolara 1938-1942 (as in n. 10), 82; "Ecce, dum per orbem pugnandi fors Ludovico Gonziaci evenit, cum quibusdam turmis suorum in campum procedens, pulchritudine laudis excitus, in medios repente infesta lancea provolat hostes, equo, armis, ephippiis, deaurata galea, cono et crista insignis. Venientem hostes facto globo circumveniunt; circumventum, et quidem solum, tot simul omnes gladiis, ferrea clava, circa tempora atque humeros exstantes diverberant, ut paulum abfuerit, quin tot simul ictibus consternatus caperetur. Accurrunt ex suis propere aliquot, receptum ex hoste dimicando aegre in castra reducunt, ubi tamdiu quievit, quoad tumor oculorum ac totius capitis cura medicorum resideret." Muratori 1731 (as in n. 11), 845-846; Simonetta remains silent about the episode. In the decisive battle of 15 September, Gonzaga would lose his seals and manage to escape with only two companions, see A. Portioli, "La giornata di Caravaggio ed i sigilli di Lodovico III Gonzaga", *Periodico di numismatica e sfragistica per la storia d'Italia* 3 (1871), 125-136; E.W. Swain, "The wages of peace. The condotte of Ludovico Gonzaga, 1436-1478", *Renaissance Studies* 3 (1989), 442-452.

⁷² We see the same mechanism at work in Filelfo's reports about the disfigurement of his face, which Filelfo suffered on 18 May 1433 in Florence, a dishonour he embellished and even turned to a victory in his letters; see Robin 1991 (as in n. 5), 17-21.

as “concise but authentic”.⁷³ If the marquis, therefore, is disappointed by Filelfo’s somewhat “dry and brief treatment” of his achievements, he continues, then Gonzaga has to blame it on his own love of truth. It is hard to interpret Filelfo’s comment in any other way than as a complicit wink to the margrave. The truth, as it emerges from the historians, is literally inverted, in order to put his patron in a favourable light.

4. Conclusion

Apart from selectively using and reworking the historical data, Filelfo employs verbal echoes to create associations with other characters both inside and outside the *Sphortias*. Intratextual reminiscences link different appearances of a given actor, sometimes involving keywords to denote character, and connect actors who belong to the same moral category. Sforza’s lieutenant Sasso is verbally linked with Bartolomeo Colleoni because they are both cast as greedy and morally depraved. The same can be said about Antonello da Corneto, who shares with both of them the character trait of being brutal with his horse.

By creating associations with well-known literary figures, intertextual engagement enriches the characters of the *Sphortias* and sometimes accentuates their further trials and tribulations. Thus allusions to the *Aeneid* and Seneca’s tragedies foretell and highlight, for example, Sasso’s defeat in the horse race or Bernardo da Orvieto’s heroic demise. The portrait of the divided Venetian leaders (the old and wise versus the young and rash) refers to the protagonists of the Second Punic War and to Virgil’s council of war. Captain-general Micheletto Attendolo (Fabius Maximus, Drances, Thersites) is more a man of words than a man of deeds and is contrasted with the brave Tiberto Brandolini (Scipio, Marcus Marcellus, Turnus). On the political level, Senator Ermolao Donato, overcome by anger and connected with expediency and greed, is juxtaposed with the temperate and decent Doge Francesco Foscari. Even though the allusive strategy adds a certain depth to the characters, the overall picture that emerges is a static one. This static nature of the actors transcends the mere building of

⁷³ “Consuesti persaepe, Lodovice princeps, eos poetas non mediocriter laudare, qui ita res vero gestas figurationibus quibusdam effingerent, ut a veritate nusquam discederent. Qua tua gravi sapientique sententia quam ego fuerim delectatus, ex iis poteris non obscure animadvertere, quae in octavo *Sphortiadis* nostrae libro non vero minus quam breviter percucurrimus. Itaque si res tuas praeclaras et magnas arida sum quadam et pertenui oratione complexus, te ipsum accusa, qui in audiendo de tuis laudibus perdifficilis esse soleas.” *PhE* 15.47, 2-8.

character and also pertains to the situations in which they find themselves. Filelfo's exploiting and antedating single historical situations results, for instance, in the Venetian leaders appearing in similar passages and repeating the same stance time and again.⁷⁴ If we look for a common thread in Filelfo's casting, it becomes clear that the determining factor is the characters' connection to Francesco Sforza, not during the Milanese War, but at the time when Filelfo was writing these pages. Donato del Conte, the hero of the horse race, remained loyal to Sforza throughout his life, as was the case with Bernardo da Orvieto, who perished during the conflict while in Sforza's service. As to Sforza's personal lieutenants who are pictured as morally depraved, it turns out that Antonello da Corneto defected to Venice in 1452, according to Porcellio Pandoni because he was bribed.⁷⁵ The Sforza archives suggest as much in relation to Sasso: in a letter from 9 May 1453, Sforza informs count Ludovico da Lugo that Sasso was arrested when he was trying to flee with some others.⁷⁶ The exact circumstances cannot be deduced from the documents in the archives, but it is highly likely that the incident was somehow related to financial issues. Vice versa, the same mechanism can be discerned in Filelfo's portrayal of the Venetian heroes. In 1452 Tiberto Brandolini felt unappreciated by the Venetians and wrote to Sforza that he would not decline the latter's conditions, if Sforza would accept Brandolini among his troops.⁷⁷ After ten years in Sforza's

⁷⁴ Given this repetitive and static image, some conjectures can be made about the unfinished part of the *Sphortias*. The disagreement between Micheletto Attendolo and Tiberto Brandolini may very well have been an important element of book 9 (where it historically belongs), while both Donato del Conte and Bernardo da Orvieto are likely to have figured in the account of the decisive battle of Caravaggio in book 10, with Donato del Conte as saviour of the day and Bernardo da Orvieto as protagonist in a pathetic death scene.

⁷⁵ "Is effugisse iram Annibalis [i.e. Sforza] et furorem equi celeritate se aiebat; sed varia est de homine sententia, propterea quod a nonnullis ex Venetorum patriciis fuerat eius adventus antedictus: quod ita esse exitus apertissime patefecit. Habuit enim, ut fama erat, fugae suae mercedem et sexcentorum equitum factus est dux, si modo eius nomine vel ab Annibale ad castra nostra transfugiunt, vel primo mense cohortes in exercitum venturae militari more colliguntur." Muratori 1731 (as in n. 9), 75. Simonetta is silent about Antonello da Corneto's defection.

⁷⁶ "Ve avisamo como nuy havemo facto pigliare Sasso, quale se voleva fugire da noy, et questo facto lo habiamo saputo da uno de quelli che se doveva andare con luy. Et perché esso dice che Andrea da Spello se ne doveva fugire insieme con luy, ve dicemo, et comandiamo, per quanto haveti ad caro la gratia nostra, che subito, havuta questa, debiati destenere dicto Andrea, et poi lo fati mettere in presone et che non sia liberato se non haverete littera sottoscritta de nostra propria mano [...]" Milano, Archivio di Stato, *Sforzesco*, Registri Missive 12, f. 402v; the incident is also mentioned in a letter dated 16 May 1453 at f. 413r. Italics are mine.

⁷⁷ *Simonetae commentarii*, 366-367; Partner 1972 (as in n. 57).

service, Brandolini would be incarcerated by the duke on accusation of conspiracy in 1462, but this was after Filelfo had completed the passages on Brandolini. The marquis of Mantova had already changed sides in 1448, right after the Venetian debacle at Caravaggio, but apart from his alliance with Sforza at the time the *Sphortias* was composed, Ludovico Gonzaga had become a generous patron of Filelfo's in his own right. Filelfo kept his promise of rewarding his patron's generosity by praising him in the *Sphortias*. Gonzaga combines the best qualities of both Venetian factions: with a historically inverted *aristeia*, he embodies Tiberto Brandolini's courage on the battlefield, and at the same time he shares with the doge pacifist wisdom and dignity in counsel. Filelfo's correspondence informs us that Gonzaga immediately complied with his protégé's request of 50 ducats for his daughter's dowry (*PhE* 11.33). Cast as the most accomplished hero of the *Serenissima*, it appears that Gonzaga got his money's worth.

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