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Journal

California Italian Studies, 13(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.5070/C313162134

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Apocalypse at the Gate: Marching Toward the 1527 Sack of Rome¹

Jessica Goethals

In 1528 the *poligrafo* Eustachio Celebrino—known theretofore for his cheap texts on topics ranging from curing the plague to throwing dinner parties, as well as for his work on calligraphy volumes—composed what would become the most commercially successful publication on the 1527 Sack of Rome.² *La presa di Roma* is a narrative poem in *ottava rima*, an example of the *poemetto bellico* genre particularly popular during the Italian Wars in which poets and *saltimbanchi* recounted contemporary political-military events within a chivalric frame.³ Celebrino's work saw eighteen editions over twenty years; it also was likely performed publicly in abbreviated form prior to its first publication. Surely responsible for *La presa di Roma*'s appeal was the animated fashion in which such poems presented recent history to audiences keen to hear tell of Rome's grim ordeal. As this essay will demonstrate, a variety of texts wrestled with the causes and consequences of the Sack.

In the spring of 1527, the Spanish, German, and Italian troops of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V advanced through the Italian peninsula and up to the walls of Rome.⁴ Italy had been the scene of near constant war since the French king Charles VIII broke the floodgates with his 1494 invasion.⁵ Now another Charles, the Holy Roman emperor and king of Spain, had assembled his soldiers south of the Alps as the War of the League of Cognac pitted him against the Papal States, France, Venice, and Florence, among others. Despite the threat posed by the presence of enemy forces, Pope Clement VII signed a truce with the imperialists against the express wishes of his allies and dismissed his mercenaries. But the imperial troops, underpaid and dissatisfied, were growing ever more restless, and Charles V himself was not entirely averse to seizing a bigger trophy in Rome.⁶ His general, Charles de Bourbon, led the armies southward. Celebrino dramatizes this march toward the gates of the Eternal City. Across forty-seven octaves (nearly half the poem's length), the narrator plots their movements by listing the cities and small towns through which they passed: from Milan to Parma, Santa Sofia, Galeata, Città della Pieve, Arezzo, Siena, Viterbo,

¹ This essay was written with the assistance of a long-term fellowship from the Newberry Library.

² Eustachio Celebrino, *La presa di Roma*, in *'La guerra di Camollia' e 'La presa di Roma': rime del sec. XVI*, ed. Francesco Mango (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1886), 119–60. On Celebrino's poem, see Donatella Diamanti, "La presa di Roma di Eustachio Celebrino da Udine," *Italianistica* 19 (1990): 331–49; Jessica Goethals, "Performance, Print, and the Italian Wars: *Poemetti bellici* and the Case of Eustachio Celebrino's *La presa di Roma*," in *Interactions between Orality and Writing in Early Modern Italian Culture*, ed. Luca Degl'Innocenti, Brian Richardson, and Chiara Sbordoni (New York: Routledge, 2016), 49–66.

³ Marina Beer and Cristina Ivaldi, "Poemetti bellici del rinascimento italiano: trecento testimoni per una ricerca," *Schifanoia* 1 (1986): 91–99.

⁴ On the Sack and its repercussions, see André Chastel, *The Sack of Rome 1527*, trans. Beth Archer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Judith Hook, *The Sack of Rome 1527*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Massimo Miglio et al., *Il Sacco di Roma del 1527 e l'immaginario collettivo* (Rome: Istituto nazionale di studi romani, 1986).

⁵ See Michael Mallett and Christine Shaw, *The Italian Wars 1494–1559: War, State and Society in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁶ Hook, *Sack of Rome*.

and the communes circling Rome, to give but a partial list. The soldiers often burned, looted, and raped in the towns and cities in their path as they progressed toward their greatest prize.

On the foggy morning of May 6th, the imperial forces began their assault on Rome. They easily broke through the walls and sacked the city. Although contemporaries almost universally lamented that the city's defenses proved so humiliatingly inept beyond an early fatal shot that felled Bourbon, Celebrino's poem would instead cast the battle as hard fought and suspenseful. But even he would have to acknowledge that Rome's citizens, sacred spaces, libraries, artworks, reliquaries, and coffers were all violated with a ferocity that shocked the rest of Europe when word quickly spread. As murder, rape, theft, torture, and destruction filled the streets and homes, the pope and members of the Curia fled to safety in Castel Sant'Angelo. From that perch they would watch the continued miseries of occupation for seven months, until Clement escaped to Orvieto; the armies would only definitively leave several months after that. In the meantime, Rome suffered drastic losses of life and capital.

Modern historians have shown some grace to Clement and the other League leaders when assessing their culpability, in one case noting that "it is from the perspective of hindsight that their failings loom so large; they could not anticipate that the great city of Rome would fall to the assault of a mutinous army, in a single day."⁷ Contemporary commentators were not so generous. Nor were they likely to agree that Rome's destruction was an unforeseeable catastrophe. On the one hand, expectations about the coming ruin of the city ran high in this period, thanks to the circulation of dire prophecies and a general air of concern regarding the ongoing wars. In the Sack's immediate aftermath, many pointed to the various signs that devastation was in fact nigh. Even Celebrino memorably declares in his poem that neither strength nor wealth could have prevented the brutal invasion since "da che fondò Roma i due germani / fu destinato il sacco ai Tramontani" (from the time the two brothers founded Rome, this sack by the ultramontanes was destined [to occur]).⁸ This allusion to Romulus and Remus implicitly places the 1527 sack in the company of the destroyed cities of myth, epic, and history.

On the other hand, recent events had made Rome's permeable defenses starkly apparent. Just eight months earlier, in September 1526, the Colonna family and their allies (including imperial representatives) had already raided the city themselves, sacking St. Peter's and the surrounding Borgo, an encounter motivated by old rivalries and divided loyalties. As he would again later that May, Clement—duped into an accord—had dismissed his armies and left his city largely defenseless, with the result that Cardinal Pompeo Colonna readily took it over. While the pillaging during this earlier event was largely limited to the Leonine City, and while the Colonna themselves pledged to keep residents safe, the pope and his advisors found themselves trapped in Castel Sant'Angelo and at the mercy of the enemy.⁹ If in October 1526 Girolamo Negri (secretary to several cardinals and an eyewitness) could describe the Colonna raid as "a new and strange occurrence" (*nuovo et strano caso*), the same could hardly be said again about the Sack the following May.¹⁰ And, indeed, the papal datary Gian Matteo Giberti described in December 1526 the ongoing sense of alarm palpable in Rome; the raid gave inhabitants a taste of things to come,

⁷ Mallett and Shaw, *Italian Wars*, 183.

⁸ Celebrino, *La presa di Roma*, 78.7–8, with a correction. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

⁹ Hook, *Sack of Rome*, 93–102.

¹⁰ Girolamo Negri to Marcantonio Micheli, October 24, 1526, in *Lettere di principi, le quali ò si scrivono da principi, ò à principi, ò ragionan di principi*, ed. Girolamo Ruscelli (Venice: Giordano Ziletti, 1562), 1:91r.

and many were already hiding their goods out of fear that the Landsknechts (German mercenaries) could arrive from one moment to the next.¹¹

We might therefore rightly ask to what degree the Sack of Rome was predicted and predictable, and what lessons could be drawn from its terrors. In other words, how did history, memory, and imagination intersect when grappling with this calamity? In his watershed cultural study of the Sack, art historian André Chastel memorably argues that not only did the Sack prompt self-censorship in Italian artists (an explanation for the paucity of visual representations of the event, especially in Italy) but that in its wake there was “a vast anxious silence broken only by the moans of ruined scholars and the laments of poets.”¹² Yet even while he considers a spectrum of texts about the event, Chastel underestimates their quantity and variety. Celebrino provides a key example. Even the numerous editions of his *poemetto bellico* do not earn it a space in Chastel’s survey, but the composition of a poem intended to narrate the movements of the imperial army and the stages of their invasion in a manner as engaging as possible for contemporary readers and, possibly, the general public gathered in piazzas, renders the picture of Sack writing far more complex than mere “moans” and “laments.”

Subsequent scholarship has begun to delve more fully into how early modern writers used their pens to examine the prelude to, experience of, and fallout from the cataclysmic Sack of Rome. Notable in this regard is the analysis of Vincenzo De Caprio, who observed that a system of signs operates across many Sack texts, creating commonplaces that facilitate a shared understanding of the event and position it within broader historical, literary, and sacred arcs.¹³ These consist of a collection of key details—such as the fog that enveloped the city on the morning of the assault—that could be both anecdotal and symbolic. Others such as Kenneth Gouwens have reflected on how the city’s Latin humanists used various genres, from orations to letters, to present the event as something akin to the end of an era.¹⁴

Interest in the complexities of Sack writing surely will only deepen as the five-hundredth anniversary of the event approaches in 2027. That anniversary reminds us that the eternity of the supposedly Eternal City has never been particularly assured. The present essay asks how writers coming to terms with the Sack grappled with the arrival of a seemingly apocalyptic threat at the gates of Rome in the form of Charles V’s army. It first argues that the ruin of Rome—in some form or another—was widely anticipated due not only to providence but also to the city’s continued poor leadership. It then traces varied ways in which contemporaries explained that fall once such fears were realized. Exploring four different (but not exhaustive) approaches to interpreting how the imperial march toward Rome and its dire consequences came about—diagnostic, didactic, carnivalesque, and satirical—in the works of Francesco Guicciardini, Luigi Guicciardini, Benvenuto Cellini, and Lorenzo Venier, respectively, my essay argues that the Sack served as a spectacle from which readers could varyingly draw important historical-military lessons, experience awe, and even encounter pleasurable or unexpected entertainment.

¹¹ Gian Matteo Giberti to Uberto Gambarà (papal nuncio to England), December 7, 1526, in Ruscelli, *Lettere di principi*, 1:99v.

¹² Chastel, *Sack of Rome*, 44, 132.

¹³ Vincenzo De Caprio, “‘Hor qui mi fa mestier lingua di ferro’: note sull’immaginario poetico,” in Miglio et al., *Il Sacco di Roma del 1527*, 18–42.

¹⁴ Kenneth Gouwens, *Remembering the Renaissance: Humanist Narratives of the Sack of Rome* (Boston: Brill, 1998).

Foreseeing the Sack

The fall and destruction of Rome was widely anticipated.¹⁵ Alongside the famous images from Dante and Petrarch in the fourteenth century that personified Italy as an enslaved woman (*Purg.* VI.76) or as covered in bloody wounds (*RVF* 128), we can consider the production and circulation of texts during the Italian Wars leading up to the Sack. Of particular visibility were printed prophecies. Intended for as wide an audience as possible, these were works composed in verse with readily identifiable performative elements. These anonymous and pseudonymous works attracted a vast audience, from the casual spectators who saw them recited in the piazzas by *cantastorie* to learned readers who examined diverse versions of apocalyptic works. Printed prophecies experienced a boom during the Italian Wars, with at least fifty existent texts datable to the period.¹⁶ This “consistent literary current,” in the words of Ottavia Niccoli, accelerated up to the Sack of Rome.¹⁷ A notable early example is found in the so-called Second Charlemagne prophecy, a medieval text revived under Charles VIII and cited as justification for his 1494 invasion of Italy. According to this succinct but striking work, a new monarch would restore the empire and spread Christianity before finally arriving in Jerusalem to surrender his crown at the Mount of Olives. While he would subdue a variety of populaces across Europe and the Mediterranean, he would crush two specific cities: “he will destroy and burn with fire both Rome and Florence.”¹⁸ The prophecy began circulating once more upon the election of Charles V as emperor in 1519.¹⁹ For nearly a decade before the Sack, in other words, his very identity piqued fervor and concern.

The accelerated production of apocalyptic print prophecies culminated in the Sack. After the capital of Christianity fell, Italians pointed to the portents that had announced imminent doom just days before the tragedy, such as the birth of a mule in Rome’s Cancellaria. They crafted *vaticinium ex eventu* prophecies (prophecies written in the Sack’s wake that purported to be ancient or medieval works), and they pulled out their old printed prophecies, many of which predicted that a dire fate would one day befall Rome. Exemplary of these reactions are the pages of the Modenese chronicler Tommaso Lancellotti, who throughout that May recorded and commented on the circulation of news emerging from Rome: the city’s fall itself and the ousting of the Medici from Florence that occurred shortly thereafter; the early death of Bourbon; false rumors of the pope’s escape to France; and the spectacle of Spanish and German soldiers parading about as the city’s new overlords. The historical gravity of the moment hardly escaped Lancellotti, and he noted the general belief that the Sack would finally put an end to the continuous fighting of the Italian Wars (“questa volta se finirà le guere de Italia che dal 1494 sino a questo dì ge sono sempre state”).²⁰ Lancellotti hoped to soon point the finger at those ultimately responsible for such a disastrous turn of events. While the question of culpability might still have been up in the air during these early days, he could find within his library numerous works that foretold Rome’s tragedy. On May 19th,

¹⁵ Paolo Picca, *Il sacco di Roma nel 1527: profezie, previsioni, prodigi* (Rome: Casa Editrice d’Arte Bestetti e Tumminelli, 1929); Massimo Firpo, *Il sacco di Roma del 1527 tra profezia, propaganda politica, e riforma religiosa* (Cagliari: CUEC, 1990); Chastel, *Sack of Rome*, 78–80.

¹⁶ See especially Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁸ Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 250.

¹⁹ Niccoli, *Prophecy and People*, 174–75.

²⁰ Tommasino Lancellotti, *Cronaca modenese* (Parma: Pietro Fiacadori, 1865), 2:218.

he read a prophecy attributed to St. Bridget of Sweden that “nara dela mortalità de Roma, del modo che al presente se dice essere fate del Papa che ha a essere perseguitato como è al presente de zente estranee” (tells of the mortality of Rome, of the circumstances said to presently befall the pope, who is to find himself persecuted as he presently is by foreigners).²¹ Bridget, or Birgitta, had become a voice for apocryphal political-military prophecies that envisioned a coming scourge of Italy as punishment for its immorality and malfeasance, a role that grew in visibility during the Italian Wars; even the marchioness of Mantua, Isabella d’Este, sought out copies of the saint’s writings after just barely escaping the Sack herself.²² One apocryphal prophetic poem that came to be associated with Birgitta beginning in around 1493, the year before the Italian Wars began, and that enjoyed several reprints through approximately 1525, predicts a horrifically bloody war in which Rome would become a cemetery, with its residents diced up like apples (“tagliati a pezi come poma”).²³

Similarly grim images were to be found across a spectrum of prophecies. For just one other illustrative example, we can look to Johannes Lichtenberger’s *Prognosticatio*, a 1480s Latin text first published in Germany that saw an expansive readership, including through Cinquecento Italian translations. Alongside a woodcut showing two armies facing off before a walled city, Lichtenberger’s pages assert that “Here the emperor enters Rome with cruelty. Roman clerics will run for the forests, and many will be decapitated.”²⁴ We see a version of this encounter in figure 1. In one vernacular edition, a second accompanying image shows invading soldiers scaling the city walls. By 1532, the woodcut would be transformed, with the pictured city now explicitly labeled as Rome and the army substituted with individual soldiers whose raised swords are poised to slice into a fallen figure who pleadingly lifts up his arm.²⁵

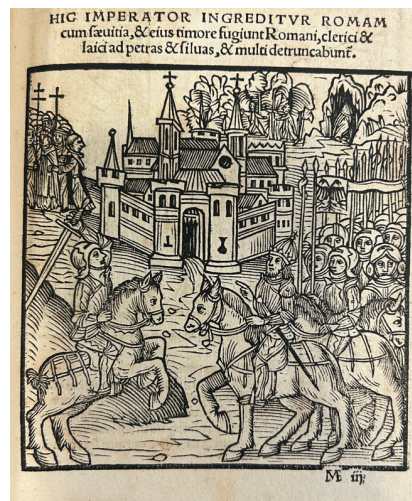


Fig 1. Johannes Lichtenberger, *Prognosticatio* (Cologne: n.p., 1526), 48. Courtesy of the Newberry Library (Case B 8635.496).

²¹ Ibid., 2:224.

²² Jessica Goethals and Anna Wainwright, “Ventriloquizing Birgitta: The Saint’s Prophetic Voice during the Italian Wars,” in *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden: Women, Politics, and Reform in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Unn Falkeid and Anna Wainwright (Brill: Leiden, 2023), 155–83. Also see Niccoli, *Prophecy and People*, 3–4 and passim. On Isabella d’Este, see Stephen J. Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d’Este* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 242–43.

²³ *Profetia de Santa Brigida, con alcune altre profetie* (Venice: Matteo Capcasa, c. 1493).

²⁴ Johannes Lichtenberger, *Pronosticatione overo iudicio vulgare, raro e più non udito...* (Venice: Paolo Danza, 1511). On the textual history of the prophecy, see Giancarlo Petrella, *La “Pronosticatio” di Johannes Lichtenberger: un testo profetico nell’Italia del Rinascimento* (Udine: Forum, 2010).

²⁵ Petrella, *La “Pronosticatio,”* 82.

Even secular writers found ready material in projections of imminent Roman suffering. Notable examples are found in *pasquinate*, satirical poems attached to Pasquino, Rome's infamous "talking" statue. Our chronicler Lancellotti mentions several such texts. Describing the continued imprisonment of the pope in the weeks following the Sack, he recalls having read a *pasquinata* just after Clement had fallen prisoner to the Colonna family that warned the pope that he could easily find himself in such a predicament once more: "Papa, guardate che li Colonesi e Spagnoli te ne hano fato una, ma te ne farano una altra, se tu non te atendi" (Look, pope, the Colonna and the Spaniards already dealt it to you once, but they'll do it again if you're not careful).²⁶ Just a few weeks earlier, in late April, Lancellotti had also noted the circulation of a prophetic *pasquinata* which he believed to contain dire predictions against the pope and others, though he had not yet read it himself.²⁷ He was likely referring to a notorious text published less than a year earlier by Pietro Aretino in Venice, to which the writer had fled after a 1525 attempt on his life necessitated his departure from Rome. This satirical work, *Iudicio over pronostico de mastro Pasquino quinto evangelista de l'anno 1527*, provocatively blends prophecy with the authorial voice of Pasquino. Its prediction that Rome would fall to foreign hands in the year 1527 proved spot-on. While only a fragment of the text survives, we get a taste of the tone struck in these predictions: "L'aere sarà molto disposto a corompersi per la fetida materia de i piedi et fiato de' Todeschi tracananti in vino italico" (The air will grow foul from the fetid feet and breath of Germans quaffing Italian wine).²⁸ The *Iudicio* circulated widely, as Lancellotti's note in Modena attests. It likely caught the attention of even the Vatican; according to the Gonzaga ambassador to Rome, the pope's own confessor lamented just days prior to the invasion that "era venuto in luce qui in Roma un libretto di Pietro Aretino, quale è pieno di maledicentia, et tocca precipuamente il Papa et Cardinali et altri prelati di questa corte... cosa che essendo stata vista qui ha fatto scandalizzare molto le brigate" (there had come to light here in Rome a pamphlet of Pietro Aretino's that is full of slander and deals primarily with the pope and cardinals and other prelates of this court... something that, since it was seen here, greatly scandalized the brigades).²⁹

If Clement VII was disturbed by the irreverent predictions of Aretino, so too was he displeased by the well-noted presence of a Siense itinerant preacher, known as Brandano, who brought the warnings of an imminent scourge of Rome right within the city walls themselves. Already the preacher's dire public warnings, shouted threateningly, had rankled the pope, but when the former tore apart his robes while crying that "Roma, Roma, innanzi che sia il 14 di maggio sarai doma" (Rome, Rome, you shall be dominated before the 14th of May), Clement responded by having him tossed into jail.³⁰ The introduction to a later Settecento poem on the hermit's life, Girolamo Gigli's *La Brandaneide*, amplifies his role: according to Gigli, the hermit "predisse il Sacco a tutti i secoli lagrimevole del 1527" (predicted the 1527 Sack [of Rome], lamentable to all centuries), a warning to which the city had merely responded with dismissive laughter.³¹

²⁶ Lancellotti, *Cronaca modenese*, 2:223.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:213.

²⁸ Pietro Aretino, *Scritti di Pietro Aretino nel Codice Marciano It. XI 66 (=6730)*, ed. Danilo Romei (Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 1987), 55.

²⁹ Ambassador Francesco Gonzaga to Federico Gonzaga, April 26, 1527, transcribed in *ibid.*, 54.

³⁰ A seventeenth-century life of Brandano was written by Camillo Turi, available in several manuscript copies; I consulted Turi, *Vita di Bartolomeo Carosi da Petroio chiamato il Brandano*, 1626, MS 4049, Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome.

³¹ Girolamo Gigli, *La Brandaneide, poesia fanatica* (Lucca: J. Giusti, 1757), vi, 1.

In short, apocalypse had been at the gates of Rome in the collective imagination since the beginning of the Italian Wars, and arguably well before that. But the pope, cardinals, generals, and commentators did not need to rely solely on their imaginations to picture Rome's vulnerability. As noted above, the pope had found himself in the hands of the Colonna as a result of their nearly effortless uprising not a year earlier, in the fall of 1526. The lessons of the very recent raid were evidently lost since Clement and his cardinals replicated many of the exact same blunders. Even while the pope sought to convince himself in the spring that a repeat event was unthinkable and that Bourbon would turn back after he reached Tuscany, his datary and trusted advisor, Gian Matteo Giberti, and Francesco Guicciardini, then the lieutenant of the papal armies, exchanged worried letters. Of particular note is a missive by Giberti dated April 26th, ten days before the Sack. The enemy armies were intent not just on the pillaging of the peninsula, he laments, but on the very ruin of Italy, the destruction of the Church, and the trampling of the Christian faith. He decries the atrocities being already perpetrated at the hands of the imperial forces, from the murder of women and young children to acts of sacrilege—acts, Giberti stresses, that were horrifying to even contemplate (“sceleraggini che mi mettino horror a pensarle”).³² There is no need to enumerate these terrors in greater detail, he closes, because Guicciardini can find them already partially narrated in histories of Rome's other earlier sacks:

Imaginisì tutto quello che ha o letto o udito mai di crudeltà de Gotti, de Vandali, di Turchi, e d'ogni barbarissima gente, e creda che tutta la impietà di quelle insieme non arriva ad una parte della di costoro. Si legge che [i] Gotti haveano qualche pietà, e che essi stessi conducevano li christiani alle Chiese dove erano salvi, da costoro nessun loco è manco sicuro ch'el tempio di Dio. Attila hebbe riverenza a qualche vescovo, Borbon reputa una somma gloria di haver esso l'honore di levare il papa di fede e del mondo e ruinare quanto è in lui la fede e la sede apostolica, ma par bene che io habbi poco che fare ad entrar hora nelle historie che sono a V. S. molto più note che a me.

Picture everything that you have read or heard about the Goths, the Vandals, the Turks, and all other savage peoples and know that all their cruelties put together do not rival those of these men. We read that the Goths showed some mercy and conducted Christians to safety in their churches, but with these men no place is less safe than God's temple. Attila respected some of the bishops, but Bourbon considers it his great glory to have the honor of removing the pope from the faith and from the world, and of ruining the faith and the Apostolic See entrusted to him. But perhaps I ought not delve into those histories which Your Lord knows better than I.³³

In short, if past is prologue, the Romans could anticipate cataclysmic destruction, as demonstrated by both history and the evidence of the imperial forces' depravity already on display. Comparisons to the sacks of earlier centuries would become commonplace after Rome fell; Giberti's letter demonstrates that even *ante eventum* the city's military and political leaders anticipated a

³² Gian Matteo Giberti to Francesco Guicciardini, April 26, 1527, transcribed in a nineteenth-century compendium of letters. “Lettere del Guicciardini e di altri al medesimo,” 471r, MS 1311, Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome.

³³ *Ibid.*, 471r–72r. Giberti would himself fall into enemy hands during the Sack and only narrowly escape with his life.

catastrophe of epic proportions. The army's acts that would so horrify contemporaries across Europe, including the spilling of blood within Christian churches, were clearly visible right on the horizon.

Residents of Rome were also acutely aware of the threat posed by Bourbon's approach. Marcello Alberini, an eyewitness whose *libro di famiglia* describes the Sack at length, notes that "cresceva ogni di il romore et la fama maggiore che l'esercito inimico se avvicinava" (every day rumors and reports that the enemy army was approaching mounted).³⁴ So obvious were the possible repercussions of their unchecked momentum that, he insists, it was pure folly, a "gran sciocchezza," to not take any and all preventative measures.³⁵ Not only did Clement dismiss his armies, forbid anyone to escape from the city, and fail to properly arm the people, he also rejected the pleas of Rome's exiles that they be allowed back into the city in order to help protect it.³⁶ In the absence of willing and able fighters, the city's defenders floundered in their inexpedient attempts to prepare for the contest at the city's walls. They guarded the least vulnerable zones, abandoned their stations because they had been provided insufficient food rations, and engaged in useless pageantry: "in cambio de stare alli lochi assignati, ognun veniva a farsi veder per Roma, chi a cavallo et chi a piede, come eran belli et dispose, estimando che così se difendesse la patria" (instead of staying at their assigned posts, they all came, on horseback or on foot, to show themselves off across Rome, how handsome and dashing they were, believing that in this way one defends one's homeland).³⁷ Similar criticisms would later appear in Aretino's narration of the Sack found in his *Dialogo* (1536). The transformation of the Eternal City from *caput mundi* to *coda mundi*, in Aretino's notorious reversal of Rome's traditional epithet, was attributable in no small part to the "traitorous" (traditore) proclamation that forbid residents from escaping the city to safety under penalty of death while her defenders merely paraded about in their military garb: "andavano zanzeando co le fila dei fanti: e certo se la valenteria fosse stata nei bei giubboni, ne le belle calze e ne le spade indorate, gli Spagnardi e i Todeschi erano i malvenuti" (they were sauntering up and down with their files of soldiers; and surely if courage could be measured in fine doublets, elegant breeches, and gilt swords, the Spaniards and the Germans would have had a rough time of it).³⁸

The Romans would soon tremble in that fine garb as the city fell virtually without a fight. Trapped in Castel Sant'Angelo alongside advisors who had led him astray, cardinals who sought to save their own skin, and prominent men who had fled the fight at the wall, Clement VII would watch and hope in vain for the arrival of other armies at their gates—French troops or the forces of Francesco Maria della Rovere—who could drive out the city's assailants. Such help never came, and the repercussions of Rome's unmitigated fall would become the subject of numerous historiographical and literary texts composed thereafter.

Rome, Coda Mundi

While sacks occurred with some regularity during the Italian Wars, the sheer violence and destructiveness waged by the imperial soldiers, coupled with the targeting of Christian bodies and

³⁴ Marcello Alberini, *Il sacco di Roma: l'edizione Orano de "I ricordi" di Marcello Alberini*, ed. Paola Farenga and Domenico Orano (Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 1997), 237.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 257.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 258. On the exiles' request, see 256.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

³⁸ Pietro Aretino, *Sei giornate*, ed. Giovanni Aquilecchia (Bari: Laterza, 1969), 221. Translation adapted from Aretino, *Aretino's Dialogues*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), 243.

spaces, rocked Europe. Word of the city's gruesome fate circulated by word of mouth as well as in manuscript and, very soon after, in published texts. Comparisons with the great falls of antiquity, rather than the more "pedestrian" ruin of contemporary cities, would become commonplace: Troy, Carthage, Jerusalem, and, as we have just seen, ancient Rome itself.³⁹ Lancellotti, for instance, claimed in early June that destruction at such levels had never been seen since the time of the Goths.⁴⁰ Predisposed to look toward metaphysical explanations, he suggested that the immorality prevalent in Rome (observable in its over 18,000 prostitutes, its tolerance of sodomy, and its ostentatious displays of wealth) was largely to blame, such that "ogni homo profetava che l'andarebe in ruina, e ben è stato vero" (every man prophesied that it would come to ruin, and so it has).⁴¹

Even the scurrilous Aretino saw self-evident parallels between the fate of Rome and that of epically razed cities, writing in a letter to Federico Gonzaga that accompanied two of his poems on the subject that, in comparison, "la ruina di Cartagine et di Ierusalem et quella di Troia devette essere minore" (the ruin of Carthage, Jerusalem, and Troy must have been less).⁴² Luigi Guicciardini concurred, surveying these sites of destruction—including ancient Rome—in the proem to book one of his *Historia del Sacco di Roma*; yet to his eye what distinguished Renaissance Rome was the unmatched shamefulness of its defense. Never before had a great city been so quickly and easily sacked ("non mai...con tanta facilità, nè brevità di tempo, nè con sì poche forze presa e saccheggiata").⁴³ How could sense be made of the fall, and of the carnage that ensued, once—in Alberini's words—Rome fell "in preda dell'ira et del furore di quei barbari" (prey to the wrath and furor of those barbarians)?⁴⁴ In this section, we turn to diagnostic, didactic, carnivalesque, and satirical means of narrating the inauspicious arrival of the imperial armies and the breach of Rome's walls.

Grappling with the Sack became a core component of Francesco Guicciardini's authorial endeavors, beginning first with a series of private texts (*Consolatoria*, *Oratio accusatoria*, and *Oratio defensoria*) dating to the event's immediate aftermath in which the former lieutenant rhetorically accused and defended himself of culpability, and culminating in his voluminous *Storia d'Italia*.⁴⁵ Guicciardini's subsequent plans to compose a history spanning from the 1525 Battle of Pavia to the Sack stalled when it came time for him to tackle the events of 1527. Starting anew with the objective of getting at the root of what led to such a disaster, Guicciardini went back to the invasion of Charles VIII that had initiated the Italian Wars. What makes the work so successful—aside from Guicciardini's skill in weaving together the threads of a complex and expansive narrative—is the clarity this retrospective glance finally throws upon the Sack as the most dramatic event in a long stretch of political-military instability. The Sack motivates the project itself, and from the first pages it looms before the reader as the inevitable point of arrival.

³⁹ De Caprio, "Hor qui mi fa mestier lingua di ferro," 32–39.

⁴⁰ Lancellotti, *Cronaca modenese*, 2:106.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2:107.

⁴² Pietro Aretino to Federico Gonzaga, July 7, 1527, in Aretino, *Scritti*, 58–59.

⁴³ Luigi Guicciardini, *Il sacco di Roma*, in *Il sacco di Roma del MDXXVII: narrazioni di contemporanei*, ed. Carlo Milanese (Florence: G. Barbèra, 1867), 18.

⁴⁴ Alberini, *Il sacco di Roma*, 268.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965); Mark Phillips, *Francesco Guicciardini: The Historian's Craft* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); Emanuella Lugnani Scarano, *Guicciardini e la crisi del Rinascimento* (Bari: Laterza, 1973); Roberto Ridolfi, *Studi guicciardiniani* (Florence: Olschki, 1978), 79–130.

All roads lead to Rome, so to speak. The travesty, especially for Guicciardini personally, was the inability to fully anticipate the disastrous route that the Italian Wars would take.

As such, Guicciardini is more interested in the decisions and circumstances that prompted Rome's fall than in the many gruesome stories produced by three decades of war. That said, he grants the narration of Rome's tragedy more scrutiny than the other sacks of the Italian Wars. The year 1527 holds special thematic and structural prominence in the *Storia*, a moment whose historical uniqueness and disastrousness is only approached by that of 1494, when the French invasion first proved the vulnerability of Italy. "Sarà l'anno mille cinquecento ventisette pieno di atrocissimi," he begins, "e già per più secoli non uditi accidenti: mutazioni di stati, cattività di principi, sacchi spaventosissimi di città, carestia grande di vettovaglie, peste quasi per tutta Italia grandissima; piena ogni cosa di morte di fuga e di rapine" (The year 1527 would be full of most atrocious events unheard of in recent centuries: the overthrow of governments, the wickedness of princes, terrifying sacks of cities, great famine, plagues all across Italy—everything full of death, of flight, and of plunder).⁴⁶ A crippling factor, Guicciardini suggests, was Clement's inability to foresee the Sack. Even though Bourbon's armies had reached his native Tuscany from the north, the pope's worries about their arrival at his own gate lessened daily ("gli diminuise ogni dì il timore") under the misplaced faith that the imperialists' empty coffers and their ability to receive needed foodstuffs in friendly Siena would halt their progress.⁴⁷ Instead, Bourbon dropped his heaviest equipment and sped southward. In Guicciardini's eyes, the alacrity of Bourbon's movements—which brought him to Rome before the pope had scarcely realized he was coming ("si appropinquò a Roma in tempo che appena il pontefice avesse certa la sua venuta")—contrasted with Clement's sluggish leadership.⁴⁸ Acting slowly ("lentamente"), the pope belatedly sought remedies that, had he only enacted them in time ("in tempo"), might have staved off the threat. Nearly equally perplexing as Clement's failure to act and shortsightedness in dismissing his forces, in Guicciardini's assessment, was his decision to entrust a man he little esteemed, Renzo da Ceri, with the city's defenses. Overly confident in his own preparations, Renzo insufficiently fortified strategically key sections of the walls and neglected to cut the bridges—failures so grave that it was as though he served the enemy ("quasi procuratore degli inimici").⁴⁹

The army's speed in arriving beneath the walls of Rome is mirrored in the rapidity with which they swarmed through the streets once those walls were breached with such little resistance. In Guicciardini's eyes, this rush crossed the boundaries not only of the city itself but of any semblance of civility: "Entrati dentro, cominciò ciascuno a discorrere tumultuosamente alla preda, non avendo rispetto non solo al nome degli amici né all'autorità e dignità de' prelati, ma eziandio a' templi a' monasteri alle reliquie onorate dal concorso di tutto il mondo, e alle cose sagre" (Upon entering [the walls], they all began to race frantically about in search of plunder, with no respect for either friends or the authority and dignity of the prelates, or even for the churches, monasteries, relics revered throughout the world, or sacred things).⁵⁰ It would be impossible, Guicciardini

⁴⁶ Francesco Guicciardini, *Storia d'Italia*, ed. Emanuella Lugnani Scarano, in *Opere* (Turin: UTET, 1970), vol. 3, 18.1, 1719.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 18. 8, 1753.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.8, 1754. Guicciardini neglects to mention that he himself had doubted that Bourbon would travel south, writing to Giberti on April 29th, a week before the Sack, that "per li avisi che s'hanno insino a hora non pare che li inimici siano per venire sì presto alla via di Roma, ma per travagliare [*sic*] le cose di Thoscana. Dove se forse trovassino difficoltà, potrebbero voltarsi di costà." In *Carteggi*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci (Rome, Bari: Istituto storico italiano per l'età moderna e contemporanea, 1969), 14:12.

⁴⁹ Guicciardini, *Storia d'Italia*, 18.8, 1756.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.8, 1758.

declares—as would many of his contemporaries—to imagine, let alone articulate, the calamity that befell the city (“però sarebbe impossibile non solo narrare ma quasi immaginarsi le calamità di quella città”).⁵¹

Framed within his interests in political and military action (or inaction, as the case may be), Francesco Guicciardini’s narration of the experience of the Sack itself is fairly concise in a way that differs notably from the history of the event written by his brother Luigi, as we shall see below. Francesco surveys the violence succinctly: the pillaging, kidnapping, and ransoming to obtain booty; the humiliation of the clergy; the torture, often fatal, of citizens; the ransacking of palaces and churches; and the desecration of spiritual items, with additional insults inflicted by the German Lutherans. Perhaps as is to be expected from an historian known for his ability to reconstruct the causes and consequences of war rather than to delve into them as lived experiences, Guicciardini tends to consider the era’s sacks from an aerial, distanced vantage point that focuses on the quantifiable: 4,000 deaths and one million ducats lost. As such, he evades describing the torments and deaths of the Romans in detailed, visual terms. Yet the ghastliness of the Sack (and conceivably his own personal connection to it) prompts him to insert a brief, but illustrative, acknowledgment of the suffering experienced during the invasion: “Sentivansi i gridi e urla miserabili delle donne romane e delle monache, condotte a torme da’ soldati per saziare la loro libidine... Udivansi per tutto infiniti lamenti di quegli che erano miserabilmente tormentati, parte per astrignergli a fare la taglia parte per manifestare le robe ascoste” (One could hear the wretched shouts and cries of the Roman women and nuns, who were taken en masse by the soldiers to satisfy their lust... Everywhere could be heard the infinite laments of those who were cruelly tormented, either to force them to pay their ransoms or to reveal the possessions they had hidden).⁵² Packed into two sentences, Guicciardini’s depiction of anguish is through a solely auditory language. The reader hears rather than sees. On the one hand, this distances the body itself from Guicciardini’s narrative. On the other hand, however, it also recalls the manner in which Dante approaches corporeal torment in the *Inferno*, where the pilgrim’s first introduction to the suffering that lies beyond Limbo is not visual but aural: “quivi sospiri, pianti e alti guai / risonavan per l’aere senza stelle” (Now sighs, loud wailing, lamentation / resounded through the starless air).⁵³

Francesco’s brother, Luigi Guicciardini, would take a diametrically opposite approach to narrating the tragedy. Known today more as a Tuscan politician than a man of letters, despite having authored several philosophical and literary texts of diverse genres, Luigi wrote what would prove one of the most influential historical accounts of the Sack, one that circulated in a number of manuscript copies for well over a century before eventually coming to print in 1664.⁵⁴ As Luigi himself emphasizes, his history is far more circumscribed in chronological scope than that of his brother.⁵⁵ Rather than an attempt to map the ups and downs of the Italian Wars writ large, he endeavors to use the Sack to illustrate the effects of bad leadership for the benefit of his dedicatee,

⁵¹ Ibid., 18.8, 1759.

⁵² Ibid. De Caprio argues that here there is a “shortening of the distance between narrator and the object of his narration” that is otherwise uncharacteristic of Guicciardini. Vincenzo De Caprio, *La tradizione e il trauma: idee del Rinascimento romano* (Manziana: Vecchiarelli, 1991), 327. While this may be partially true, Guicciardini shows a notable distance from the event and the narration of the fate of the populace in comparison to his contemporaries.

⁵³ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), III.22–23.

⁵⁴ Paola Farenga, “Nuovi tormenti e nuovi tormentati”: *l’Historia del Sacco di Roma* di Luigi Guicciardini,” in *Sylva: Studi in onore di Nino Borsellino*, ed. Giorgio Patrizi (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2002), 281–305.

⁵⁵ In an effort to prevent confusion between the two brothers, I will refer to Luigi Guicciardini by his forename.

seventeen-year-old Cosimo I de' Medici, the new duke of Florence.⁵⁶ The history therefore becomes a *speculum principis* of sorts. Book one follows the imperial armies as they march down through the Italian peninsula into Tuscany and, for the first half of book two, up to the walls of Rome. Following common historiographic practice, he inserts imagined military harangues, including one by Bourbon the night before the assault. Assuming correctly that the pope did not anticipate their arrival and so was poorly prepared, the general in this speech urges his troops toward an immediate attack. They had endured hunger and exhaustion with admirable virility, he declares, and now they have an easy, rich prize right before them. Their victory is guaranteed not only by the support of the Colonna and other imperialists within the city but by the failures of the imagination that led the pope and his advisors to discount the very notion that any modern army would be so audacious as to invade Rome. But this army suffers no such limitations and can picture an empire to surpass that of Alexander, one stretching under Charles from the New World to Asia. Victory is guaranteed, he concludes, if his men do not shy away from doing what is now necessary.

Confronted with the enemy at their gate, many in Rome remained in denial while Clement attempted to belatedly arm his untrained residents and rued his decision to dismiss his mercenaries. A key turning point for Luigi's narrative is the localized image of the city's walls, specifically a spot near Santo Spirito where the enemy armies easily discovered a poorly disguised basement window and a section of inexcusably thin stone. As soon as this vulnerable spot is inevitably breached and the imperial soldiers pour into Rome, the city's secular and spiritual leaders turn tail and run for their own safety. From this point forward, the linear nature of Luigi's history devolves into a purposefully chaotic race through the city that follows the terrified crowds. He places the repercussions of bad leadership before the eyes of the reader and, as we shall see, the pope, through his description of scenes of torture.

Luigi justifies this approach to history writing in his proem, linking the graphic and detailed narration of bodily violence to the political lessons to be drawn from the event:

mi son messo a scriverla particolarmente... acciò che per questo unico e miserabile esempio facilmente si conosca, quanto sia gravissimo e dannosissimo errore non stimare il nimico; persuadersi, un popolo non unito, non consueto all'armi, privo di proprio capitano, nudrito nell'ozio e nelle lascive delizie, possa resistere alli ostinati, esperti e necessitati eserciti: oppenione falsissima, ed al presente potissima causa d'aver fatto provare all'antichissima e bellissima Roma quello che non mai tanto vilmente niun'altra città sopportò.

I opted to describe it in great detail... so that through this unique and wretched example one can easily recognize how very grave and ruinous an error it is to underestimate your enemy and to persuade yourself that a populace that is disunified, unaccustomed to arms, without a captain, and raised on leisure and lascivious delights can possibly hold out against determined, trained, and necessitous armies. A most false opinion, and at present the chief reason why the ancient and beautiful city of Rome has been made to disgracefully endure what no other city has before her.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ While Luigi presents the history as one written in the Sack's immediate aftermath, it dates to 1537, when Cosimo I rose to power.

⁵⁷ Guicciardini, *Il sacco di Roma*, 16–17. On Luigi's use of vivid narration, see Jessica Goethals, "Spectators of the Sack: Rhetorical 'Particularity' and Graphic Violence in Luigi Guicciardini's *Historia del Sacco di Roma*," *Italian*

In a departure from his brother and others, the author's "particular" narration of violence for instructive aims not only involved detailing grotesque mistreatments of the body—assaults, hangings and the *strappado* (wherein one is lifted and dropped by one's arms bound behind the back), beatings, burnings, sleep deprivation, water deprivation, the pulling of teeth, the removal and forced self-consumption of ears, noses, or testicles—the screams from which punctured the air day and night.⁵⁸ Luigi also details the cases of specific, named individuals. An illustrative example is that of the Florentine Giovanni Ansaldi who, despite having already paid a sizeable sum following his torture, was seized and tormented once more; no longer able to endure the pain, he grabbed his captor's dagger and killed himself.⁵⁹

We can rightly ask what role such disturbing scenes play. Even though he composed the history a decade after the fact, when the details of the truce and Clement's escape were firmly established, Luigi ends his text *in medias res* with the pope still trapped within Castel Sant'Angelo. Looking down from the ramparts at the carnage that has befallen the city due to his failures—"sentendo e vedendo continuamente tanto flagello sopra di sè e sopra la sua Roma" (continuously seeing and hearing such a scourge befall him and his Rome)—Clement turns to the heavens with tears in his eyes and, in the history's final line, quotes from the Book of Job. "Oh that I had died," he cries, "and no eye had seen me."⁶⁰ Luigi's history concludes with the pope compelled to view and lament the tragic evidence of his ineptitude. If he failed to recognize the threat posed by an armed enemy, he now observes the power of that same enemy as inflicted on the bodies of his citizens—and within worryingly close proximity to his own.

If Luigi Guicciardini for political-pedagogical aims moves his reader from outside the walls into the streets of Rome in order to bear witness to the torments endured by the citizenry, others focused on the Sack as a perverse spectacle. One of the most widely known accounts of the Sack is indubitably that of artist Benvenuto Cellini. In his characteristic swashbuckling manner, Cellini famously credited himself in his *Vita* with taking the shot that killed Bourbon. Indeed, he describes himself as a valiant defender of, if not the city itself, of those sites possessed by his paying benefactors: Alessandro del Bene's palace and the pope's refuge in Castel Sant'Angelo. Despite the degree to which Cellini presents himself as right at the heart of the historical event, his readers almost do not see the Sack coming, so to speak, as the narrative of it erupts quite suddenly into his autobiography. As was the artist's wont, the larger affairs of state and arms become important in the text when they impact his own life and adventures. Immediately preceding his narration of the Sack are not the details of the War of the League of Cognac but rather an escapade involving the young Florentine Luigi Pulci (grandson of the Quattrocento poet of the same name). Cellini helps cure him of syphilis, but in return Pulci betrays him with the artist's favored prostitute and a lecherous old man. Tempers and swords rise, but ultimately Cellini emerges the victor while Pulci dies after falling from a horse. Cellini concludes by giving the moral of the story: "Così si vede che Idio tien conto de' buoni e de' tristi, e a ciascun dà il suo merito" (Thus we see how God takes into account the good and the wretched, and gives everyone what he deserves).⁶¹ It hardly seems

Studies 68, no. 2 (2013): 175–201. On the text, see also Marco Bardini, *Borbone occiso: studi sulla tradizione storiografica del sacco di Roma del 1527* (Trento: Tip. editrice pisana, 1991), 243–56.

⁵⁸ Guicciardini, *Il sacco di Roma*, 226.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 245. "Quare de vulva eduxisti me? qui utinam consumptus essem, ne oculus me videret" (Job 10:18).

⁶¹ Benvenuto Cellini, *Vita*, ed. Ettore Camesasca (Milan: BUR, 2007), I.32.

coincidental that in the next line Cellini transitions abruptly to the subject of the Sack: “Era di già tutto il mondo in arme” (The whole world was already at war).

Cellini introduces the subject of the war and brings the invading armies all the way up to the city gates in rapid succession. The problem is that—save for the artist himself and his companions—the city was decidedly not professionally “in arms” at this moment. According to Cellini, Clement let himself be readily convinced to dismiss the troops of Giovanni delle Bande Nere, formidable soldiers who had behaved abominably in Rome upon being hired by the pope; upon learning that “non era soldati” (there were no soldiers) in the Eternal City, save for the citizens themselves, Bourbon swiftly marched his troops south (“sollecitissimamente spinse l’esercito suo alla volta di Roma”), sending a panicked city to defend itself as best as it could in the absence of a properly trained army.⁶² The consequences of Clement’s poor decisions are measured on a page of Cellini’s *Vita*, where but a few lines separate the introduction of the war as a looming event and the arrival of the imperial troops at the city’s walls as a historical reality. As does Francesco Guicciardini, Cellini underscores the speed with which catastrophe appeared on the horizon. While he withholds direct criticism of his papal patron, the lesson offered by the Pulci episode—that men get the outcomes they deserve—implicitly casts a shadow over his treatment of the Sack and Clement’s culpability therein. As the enemy enters the city, Cellini takes refuge in Castel Sant’Angelo (against his will, he insists), where he encounters a Clement who had only just fled his apartments because, notably, he could not fathom that the enemy would actually storm the walls and overrun the city (“non possendo credere che coloro entrassino”)—despite the proof offered by the recent Colonna raid of how easily that could be accomplished.⁶³

From his station atop the fortress, Cellini claims to have accomplished impressive (and most improbable) feats of arms, such as shooting a Spanish soldier so squarely that the sword dangling across his belly sliced him in two. Like Luigi Guicciardini’s portrayal of the pope, he also watched the horrors of the Sack unfold from above. But while the sight brought Luigi’s pope to tears, Cellini instead views this as a novel moment of entertainment: “noi che eramo nel Castello, massimamente io, che sempre mi son dilettrato vedere cose nuove, istavo considerando questa inestimabile novità e ’ncendio, la qual cosa quelli che erano in ogni altro luogo che in Castello, nolla possettono né vedere né immaginare” (those of us in the castle—and especially me, since I always delight in seeing new things—stayed contemplating this unbelievable novelty and blaze, which those who were anywhere else but the Castello could neither see nor imagine).⁶⁴ The Sack becomes a spectacle enacted before him and his companions, one that for him provokes pleasure rather than anguish or revulsion. Cellini insists that it is not his task to relay the events that took place in those streets, as he intended only to write of those moments pertinent to his own life and art. In stark contrast with other Sack narratives that survey the damage and violence, Cellini denies the reader those details that he was uniquely positioned to witness, recounting them solely to his father upon his return to Florence (“raccòntogli tutte quelle diavolerie del Sacco”).⁶⁵ The Sack, then, becomes a spectacle for an audience of one. As one scholar has rightly put it, for the artist “the invasion of Rome was not a disaster, but an opportunity, and Cellini reveled in it”—but that revelry drew on

⁶² Ibid., I.34.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., I.35.

⁶⁵ Ibid., I.39.

the pleasures of fighting and profiting rather than on those of depicting warfare either artistically or literarily.⁶⁶

Novel displays of the body could also be found in satirical texts. In 1530, Aretino sent his Gonzaga benefactor a mock chivalric poem recently composed by his friend Lorenzo Venier. Published the following year, *La puttana errante* recounts the escapades of an insatiable prostitute (called only l'Errante) who, in search of carnal pleasures, travels down the Italian peninsula.⁶⁷ In the fourth and final canto, she establishes herself in Rome, where she engages in thousands of sexual acts. Not coincidentally, her movement down the Italian peninsula is followed closely by that of the imperial armies. While l'Errante is occupied with her carnal conquests, the invaders arrive and quickly take the city. The narrator first describes the invasion in familiar, if salty, tones:

Al suon di musichevoli archibusi
Entrârò in Roma (e tremo mentre 'l dico),
Sbuccar facendo i monsignor rinchiusi,
Populusque Romano, et ogni gente,
Come conta Pasquino, ch'era presente.
Piangea ciascun, ciascun chiedeva aita
Al fier tirar di questo e quel coglione.

To the sounds of musical harquebuses
They entered Rome (I tremble to speak of it),
Ferretting out the hidden Monsignors,
The Roman populace, and all peoples,
As Pasquino, who was there, recounts.
Everyone was weeping, everyone was asking for help
As this and that *coglione* was yanked.⁶⁸

But if the narrator quakes and the inhabitants wail, l'Errante can do nothing but laugh at the sight before her:

Sol l'Errante ridea, puttana ardita

⁶⁶ Gwendolyn Trottein, "Cellini's Roma," in *Rethinking the High Renaissance: The Culture of the Visual Arts in Early Sixteenth-Century Rome*, ed. Jill Burke (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 118. On the pleasurable aesthetics of warfare, see, for example, Pia Cuneo, *Artful Armies, Beautiful Battles: Art and Warfare in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2002).

⁶⁷ Lorenzo Venier, *La puttana errante*, ed. Nicola Catelli (Milan: Edizioni Unicopli, 2005). See Nicola Catelli, "Pornografia e polemica civile nella *Puttana errante* di Lorenzo Venier," in *Il discorso polemico: controversia, invettiva, pamphlet*, ed. Gianfelice Peron and Alvisè Andreose (Padova: Esedra editrice, 2011), 189–200; Gabriele Erasmì, "La *puttana errante*: parodia epica ispirata all'Aretino," in *Pietro Aretino nel cinquecentenario della nascita*, 2 vols. (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1992), 2: 875–95. These scholars identify l'Errante with the historical Venetian courtesan Elena Ballerina.

⁶⁸ Venier, *La puttana errante*, IV.21.4–22.2. Catelli suggests (p. 12) that the allusion to Pasquino is a nod to Aretino's *frottola* on the Sack, *Pas vobis*, a satirical depiction of the horrors perpetrated. This hypothesis is supported by the reference to the pulling of *coglioni*, meaning both "fools" and "testicles," since the *frottola* describes men bound by their testicles. See Aretino, *Scritti*, 159–78. On Aretino's poem, see Nicola Catelli, "Pietro Aretino e il Sacco di Roma (1526–1527)," *Campi immaginabili* 32/33 (2005): 22–39; Jessica Goethals, "Vanquished Bodies, Weaponized Words: Pietro Aretino's Conflicting Portraits of the Sexes and the Sack of Rome," *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 17, no. 1 (2014): 55–78.

...
Sol l'Errante non era sbigottita
A la ruina, a la destruttione
Di Roma *coda mundi* e de' suoi preti.

L'Errante alone was laughing, the impertinent whore

...
L'Errante alone was not aghast
at the ruin and destruction
of Rome, tail of the world, and of her priests.⁶⁹

The poem then pivots, leaving behind an Eternal City that is now “a sangue, a ferro, a foco” (of blood, of swords, of fire)—the very Rome, that is, typically envisioned in narratives of the Sack. It instead follows l'Errante into the imperial soldiers' camp where she performs “cose ladre, ribalde, anzi miracolose” (thieving, dastardly, even miraculous deeds).⁷⁰ Her miraculousness lies in her preternatural sexual endurance: she lustfully vanquishes the entirety of the invading army. Such a total victory over the antipapal forces merits a triumphal procession for “l'invitta, real Puttana errante” (the unvanquished, regal whore-errant), the true conqueror of Rome.⁷¹ For her is prepared a “carro trionfal bello e galante, / Imitando ser Cesare o Marcello” (triumphal chariot, fine and gallant, / Imitating Sir Caesar or Marcellus).⁷² The bawdy heroine thus fornicates her way through the rubble in a pornographic, exultant parade to which the reader becomes spectator.

The few scholars to discuss the poem have rightly noted its satirical relationship to the *Trionfi*, Petrarch's six-part poetic vision of the sequential triumphs of Love, Chastity, Death, Fame, Time, and Eternity.⁷³ Venier especially parodies the *Triumphus pudicitie*, in which Laura, victorious in her contest with Love, leads a parade of allegorical Virtues and famously honorable women through Rome before setting down her laurel crown (“depose / le sue vittoriose e sacre foglie”) at a temple dedicated to chastity.⁷⁴ In contrast, l'Errante progresses through the streets surrounded by Vices and members of Rome's underbelly until, in imitation of her Petrarchan forebearer, she “depose / sua corona di cazzi, e non di foglie” (removes her crown, not of leaves but of cocks).⁷⁵

It is illuminating to recall that Petrarch's *Trionfi* adapted to literature a historical practice, one that was enjoying burgeoning visibility in the early modern period: the triumphal, “joyous” entry of a ruler into a city, staged as an elaborate multi-media spectacle. Such triumphs blended medieval processions with Roman iconography sourced from works like Plutarch's *Lives*; Petrarch's poem (available in illustrated editions) and Andrea Mantegna's nine-part canvas series *The Triumphs of Caesar* (c.1484–1492), showing the emperor's victorious parade, also served as important references.⁷⁶ Such grandiose events attracted droves of spectators and were commemorated in

⁶⁹ Venier, *La puttana errante*, IV.22.3, 5–7.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, IV.23.1, 8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, IV.25.4

⁷² *Ibid.*, IV.25.5–7.

⁷³ Nicola Catelli, introduction to *La puttana errante*, 7–19; Courtney Quaintance, *Textual Masculinity and the Exchange of Women in Renaissance Venice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 36–41.

⁷⁴ Francesco Petrarca, *Triumphus pudicitie*, in *Trionfi*, ed. Guido Bezzola (Milan: BUR, 2019), Ins. 185–86.

⁷⁵ Venier, *La puttana errante*, IV.46.2.

⁷⁶ See Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Margaret M. McGowan, *Festival and Violence: Princely Entries in the Context of War, 1480–1635* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 29–48; Roy Strong, *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals, 1450–1650* (Berkeley: University of

festival books and artworks. A series of tapestries depicting the *Conquest of Tunis* (1546–1553) would soon celebrate Charles V's triumph over Ottoman forces in Tunisia; in addition to memorializing this military victory, the tapestries would be redisplayed at other key Hapsburg festivities.⁷⁷ While Venier satirizes the *Trionfi*, he also crafts a parodic parade that could not but remind readers of this highly visible form of political-military exultation that was ever more in vogue in early modern Europe. L'Errante's conquests are not political or military, but carnal. She therefore takes the place of Charles V—an emperor who was forced to deal rather nervously with his victory, which placed the pope in his hands, and whose own triumphal march through Rome would occur only in 1536 in celebration of his victory over Tunisia, not the Eternal City.

Notably, like Luigi Guicciardini and Cellini, Venier likens the Sack of Rome to a spectacle made to be watched, pointing specifically to this genre of the triumphal entry. In departure from other texts, he presents a parade of flesh in pleasure, rather than pain, even while l'Errante clearly embodies the vices associated with Rome. Paradoxically, Venier's libidinous cavalcade restores a perverse order and structure to the imperial presence in Roman streets, which elsewhere was rightly depicted as mayhem. At the same time, however, this is a city in which the pope is notably missing. Under his watch—and thanks to his effective absence, Venier implies—Rome was utterly screwed.

Conclusion

The Sack was anticipated well before it actually took place, as evidenced by the myriad of prophetic texts and voices, satirical takes, and worried communications between involved parties, among others. As apocalypse marched toward Rome in the form of Spanish, German, and Italian troops, the pope—at least according to the testimony of contemporary commentators—implausibly continued to deny its increasing inevitability. Poor preparation and questionable decisions left the city exposed, a vulnerability on which its enemies capitalized to horrific and humiliating effect. Turned loose upon the vanquished city, the invaders perpetrated innumerable terrors in its streets, creating a “twisted kind of carnival” of violence.⁷⁸ In the aftermath of the Sack, writers drew disparate meanings from the tragedy—from political significance to entertainment value—but shared a focus on its spectacular quality through the device of figures who hear and see the armies swarm into the city and the fates of the citizens who fall into the conquerors' hands. For contemporaries, the Sack bridged Renaissance Rome to fallen cities of biblical and epic proportions, including ancient Rome itself. As history and literature seemed to intersect in a way that called into question Rome's very eternality, writers of all kinds—from Celebrino (writer of popular manuals) to the Guicciardini brothers, from Cellini to the ribald satirist Venier—asked how such a catastrophe came to the gates of Rome and what lessons to take once it did.

California Press, 1984), 31–36. Also see Konrad Eisenbichler and Amilcare Iannucci, eds., *Petrarch's "Triumphs": Allegory and Spectacle* (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1990).

⁷⁷ Fernando Checa Cremades, “The Language of Triumph: Images of War and Victory in Two Early Modern Tapestry Series,” in *Festival Culture in the World of the Spanish Habsburgs*, ed. Fernando Checa Cremades and Laura Fernández-González (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 19–40.

⁷⁸ Idan Sherer, “A Bloody Carnival? Charles V's Soldiers and the Sack of Rome in 1527,” *Renaissance Studies* 34, no. 5 (2019): 790.