

A TALE OF A FEW CITIES:

*Topos, Topography and Topicality in Neo-Latin Epic**



By Paul Gwynne

*The city under siege became an essential component in epic narrative when Homer described the Greeks massing around the walls of Troy. In Neo-Latin epic the exploits of Italian condottieri were retold in their victories in siege warfare. Another type of siege epic, however, portrayed events from the perspective of those within the city walls, making the besieged city as much the locus of these epics as Troy had been for Homer. This paper contrasts corporate heroism with heroic individualism in the new age of gunpowder warfare in three epics: Mussato, *De Obsidione*; *De Blarru*, *Nanceid* and *Rococciolo*, *Mutineis*.*

If you intend to blockade our walls and break down our gates by storm, then we are ready: we shall receive firebrands and missiles upon our houses; if you divert our springs, we shall dig for a hasty draught of water and lick with parched tongues the earth we have dug; and, if bread run short, then we shall pollute our lips by gnawing things hideous to see and foul to touch. In defence of freedom we do not shrink from sufferings that were bravely borne by Saguntum when beset by the army of Carthage.¹

* The punning subtitle alludes to Ernst Gombrich's essay "Topos and Topicality in Renaissance Art" in which he defines *topos* as "the technical term in rhetoric for the commonplace, the general theme with a universal application" and *topicality* as "the term we use for a specific reference or allusion to events of the time". Gombrich 1975, 1–2. While Professor Gombrich bewailed the (then) current trend of recourse to topical reference to explain and elucidate Renaissance masterpieces, no such difficulty besets the literary historian of panegyric epic which relies for its effect upon reference to contemporary events in specific locations. Hence the additional term *topography* in the subtitle.

¹

Si claudere muros

Obsidione paras et vi perfringere portas,
Excepisse faces tectis et tela parati,

345 Undarum raptos aversis fontibus haustus
Quaerere et effossam sitientes lambere terram,
Et, desit si larga Ceres, tunc horrida cerni
Foedaque contingi maculato attingere morsu.

The traditional matter of epic is war.² From the moment Homer described the Greeks massing around the walls of Troy, the city under siege became an essential component in epic narrative, providing the focus for much of the martial action. Virgil's *Aeneid* begins at Troy, while Book Nine is devoted to the siege of the Trojan camp at Ostia. The first great set piece of Lucan's *Bellum Civile* is Caesar's siege of Massilia (cited above); the narrative of Silius Italicus's *Punica* is initiated by Hannibal's attack on Saguntum; while Statius's *Thebaid* is set almost entirely around the walls of Thebes.

The siege motif continued into Neo-Latin epic.³ In fifteenth-century Italy, the exploits of the *condottieri*, who fashioned themselves as latter-day Scipios and Caesars, were retold in their victories in siege warfare: for example, the third book of Francesco Filelfo's unfinished *Sphortias* celebrates the victory of Francesco Sforza at Piacenza (1447);⁴ while the *Volaterrais*, a 'brief epic' in four books by Naldo de' Naldi (c. 1432–1513) culminates with the Sack of Volterra by Federigo da Montefeltro (1472).⁵

While these Neo-Latin epics whitewash brutal campaigns to praise the dedicatee, an alternative siege poem evolved. This reversed the traditional role of the epic protagonist as the besieger, by portraying events from the point of view of those within the city walls, thus making the besieged city as much the locus of these poems as Troy had been for Homer.⁶ Poems such as *De Obsidione Domini Canis Grandis de Verona ante Civitatem Paduanam*, three books on the siege of Padua, by Albertino Mussato (1261–1329);⁷ the

Nec pavet hic populus pro libertate subire,

350 Obsessum Poeno gessit quae Marte Saguntum.

(Luc. 3. 342–350, translation: Lucan 1928, 139–141).

² Epic is defined by Horace as 'the deeds of kings and generals and the sorrows of war' (*Res gestae regumque ducumque et tristia bella*, (*Ars Poetica*, 73).

³ For an anthology of passages written in Italy from the ninth to the twelfth centuries, many containing descriptions of cities under siege (Aquileia, Pisa, Bergamo, Como, Milan), see Chiri 1939. In general, Gwynne 2016.

⁴ Robin 1991, 56–81; 177–196.

⁵ De' Naldi 1974.

⁶ In the postscript to his four-book epic *Contantinopoleos* Ubertino Pusculo claimed that he witnessed the siege and fall of Constantinople (May 1453): *Me Constantini studiis urbs dulcis habebat, / Cum cecidit bello: barbara praeda fui*; see Puscolo 1857, 83. The aftermath of the city's fall also elicited a number of poems as the Turks pushed north and further west to consolidate their victory. The four-book *Amyris* by Gian Maria Filelfo documents the Turkish advance and culminates with an appeal to Galeazzo Maria Sforza to lead a crusade of united Christian princes against Mehmed II. The *Alfonseis* (a ten-book epic on Alfonso V 'the Magnanimous') by Matteo Zupparado (c. 1400–1457) is similarly themed around the promotion of a crusade, and features John Hunyadi's valiant defence of Belgrade (July 1455, Book Four; July 1456, Book Nine); see Zupparado 1990.

⁷ Mussato 1999.

Historia Bononiensis (1472), by Tommaso Seneca (1390–1472),⁸ and *Tarentina*, four books on the Barons' conspiracy (1459–62), by Paracletto Malvezzi (1408–87),⁹ attest to the popularity of this sub-genre. Longer examples exist. The six-book *Nanceid* by Pierre de Blarru (1437–1510) describes the victory of René II, Duke of Lorraine (1451–1508), over Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy (1433–1477), at the siege of Nancy in 1477,¹⁰ while the twelve-book *Mutineis* by Francesco Rocciolo (c. 1460/70–1528) celebrates the spirited defence of the Modenese against papal, French and Imperial incursions.¹¹ In each case the corporate heroism of those at the barricades fighting for independence and freedom in the most severe circumstances is contrasted with the debatable heroics of the leading protagonist, who is often presented as an irredeemable villain in the manner of Claudian's invectives.

By choosing historical events as their subject these 'civic epics' belong to the tradition of Lucan and Silius Italicus rather than Virgil. Yet these poems are clearly intended to be more than verse chronicles, for they contain many of the classical tropes associated with the genre: there are appeals to the gods (here often transformed to the invocation of saints), banquets, journeys, storms, great battles, moments of individual heroism and councils of war. A brief survey of three epics will elucidate the progressive development of this distinctive group of poems.

Mussato, *De Obsidione*

The *De obsidione domini Canis Grandis de Verona ante civitatem Paduanam* by Albertino Mussato was composed for the first anniversary celebrations (1322) of the successful repulse of the forces of Cangrande della Scala, lord of Verona, from the walls of Padua.¹² The poem applauds the citizens' resilient defence at a particularly low point in the history of the protracted wars between Padua and Verona and culminates in the defeat of Cangrande's imperial designs at the battle of Monselice (1320; Mussato, *De Obsidione*, 3. 215–17). The poet cloaks these events in all the paraphernalia of epic and in so doing elevates the narrative into the realms of the heroic. Imitating Lucan with an invocation to Clio (the Muse of History, not of Epic) the poet announces his theme:

⁸ Seneca 1932.

⁹ Cornetanus 1899.

¹⁰ De Blarru 2006.

¹¹ Rocciolo 2006; Haye 2009.

¹² In general see Varanni 1988; especially Gianola 1988.

- Te prodente canam seculo memoranda perenni
prelia que Patave magnus Canis intulit urbi
virtutem obsessi populi durosque labores
10 Germanasque acies et pulsum menibus hostem.
Postquam castra Canis Patavinam circiter urbem
fixerat, equatis succiso cespite campis
ne cursu obstarent visuve per arva virentes
arboree frondes neu quis foret exitus urbi,
15 sedulus armatis lustrabat valla manipulis
casside sub torva rigidisque horrendus in armis.¹³

(As you [Clio] show the way, I shall celebrate the battles, long to be remembered, that Cangrande brought upon the city of Padua; the resolution and hard work of the citizens under siege; the German troops,¹⁴ and the enemy repulsed from the walls. When Cangrande had fixed his camp around the walls of Padua, and when clumps of plants had been cut away on the level plain so that the trees' leafy foliage would not block his view or hinder a charge across the field, nor provide cover for an escape from the city, he keenly circled the ramparts with his army, dreadful under a grim helmet and in his plate armour.)

The syncretic nature of Mussato's epic is immediately apparent: *pulsum menibus hostem* (l. 9) echoes *invitant moenibus hostem* (*Aen.* 9. 676), yet the context has changed. Whereas Pandarus and Bitias betray the Trojan camp to the Rutulians in Virgil's epic, here the enemy is repulsed from city walls rather than invited in. The opening words of the narrative proper *Postquam castra* (l. 11) echo the beginning of Lucan Book 6 ("Postquam castra duces pugnae iam mente propinquis"), thus alerting the attentive reader to the contrasting epic strands. The first description of Cangrande functions in the same way: he is described in the sub-Virgilian phrase as *horrendus in armis*, combining the description of Mezentius (*horrendus visu*, *Aen.* 9. 521) and Aeneas (*acer in armis*, *Aen.* 12. 938), with *casside sub torva* (l. 16) echoing Statius's description of Creon, (*sub casside torva*, *Theb.* 12. 189). Examples could be multiplied.

After a lament that the city of Antenor should be subjected to a repetition of the siege of Troy (thus linking the contemporary and classical worlds), the siege begins as Cangrande severs the water supply so the mills no longer function (recalling the passage in Lucan cited above). The Paduans under siege are endlessly resourceful. Everybody literally puts their shoulders to the grindstone and flour is produced. Cangrande's attempt to burn down a

¹³ Mussato, *De Obsidione*, l. 7–16.

¹⁴ The reinforcements brought to Treviso from the Holy Roman Empire by Henry, Count of Görz, to defend the Padovana. The Paduans rallied at their arrival.

bridge used by the besieged to make sorties against him ends in disaster. The heroism of the anonymous citizens who defend the bridge elicits a rousing paean to the city state: “O civil patriotism preferred to unguarded death, dying for this ensures eternal life!” (“O civilis amor morti prelate patenti, / eternum pro quo morientem vivere certum est!”), Mussato, *De Obsidione*, 1. 287–288). The surety of eternal life by dying for one’s patria is emphasized throughout the poem.

Whereas the gods and goddesses intervene in classical epic, here the local saints defend their city. Saint Prosdocmus (a disciple of Saint Peter and the first bishop of Padua) rouses the inhabitants to defend their city during a night-time assault; in Book Two the martyr saints Hermagoras and his deacon Fortunatus object to having their feast day (12 July) interrupted by slaughter and complain to Christ. His reply is shocking to modern ears:

Christus ait: “Galli pereant certamine; digni
Marte luant tantis quesita salaria bellis.
Dignum et iustum est ut pereant per bella nefandi”¹⁵

(Christ spoke: “Let the Gauls perish in the fighting; deserving war, let them atone for the military glory they sought with such battles. It is right and proper that the impious perish in battle.”)

Christ is again solicited when another assault on the city via the monastery garden of Santa Giustina prompts the patron saint of Padua herself to intervene:

95 Nam Christum a dextris Patris de more sedentem
virgo adiit Iustina cito celebrima gressu
virgineo sociata choro sic questa dolenter:
“Christe Deus, mundo cui virgo iuvenula nupsi,
dum regina forem Patavi ditissima regni,
100 exaudi, si iusta peto, si crismatis uncta,
si martir, regis si filia Vitaliani.
Gens inimica meam bellis crudelibus urbem
obsidet integro cur tantis cladibus anno
te patiente Deus? Non exprobrare voluntas,
105 sed memorare, mea est. Nonne hec baptismate prima
urbs Cisalpinis lavacrum suscepit in oris,
Verona fidei post tempora multa rebelle?
Testis adest, si vera sacer transmissus ad illam
Prosdocimus docuit, Petri se dignate fassus
110 discipulum. Populus quisnam orbe fidelior isto
templa tibi sanctisque tuis maiora per omnes

¹⁵ Mussato, *De Obsidione*, 2. 148–150.

astruxit terras cultu celebranda perenni?
Et tamen ipsa meo vix iam viduata locello,
basilica gavisiva nova, nunc preside pulso
115 deseror infelix. Non importuna requiro.
Pone manum pharetre et saltem quacumque sagicta
fige Canem victumque mea fac cedere terra.”¹⁶

(The renowned maid Giustina accompanied by a virgin band with swift step approached Christ who was sitting, according to custom, at the Father’s right hand. She thus began her sad lament: “Lord Christ, whom I married as a young virgin in the world while I would become the richest queen of the Paduan kingdom, hear me, if I am seeking justice, if I have been anointed with chrism, if I am a martyr, if I am the daughter of King Vitalian. A hostile race besieges my city in bloody war, why Lord have you patiently allowed such slaughter for a whole year? It is not my wish to reproach you, but to remind you. Was not this city the first to undertake baptism on the Italian shores, and Verona, rebellious to the faith, only much later? A witness is at hand, if Saint Prosdocimus, who had been sent to that city taught the truth when he said that he was a disciple of Peter. Tell me, what people in this world is more faithful or has honoured you and the saints throughout their lands with greater churches which will be celebrated with everlasting services? And yet I am virtually now widowed in my little place, having been delighted with my new basilica, I am now unhappy and forsaken, since your protection has been withdrawn. I do not ask for much. Put your hand in your quiver and just stick an arrow in the dog and, wounded, make him leave my land.”)

Despite the Christian context, the topos is classical.¹⁷ That Giustina’s words are replete with Virgilian echoes should not, perhaps, be surprising for a saint whose church was built over the remains of an ancient Roman temple of Concord.¹⁸ Because of Giustina’s intervention Cangrande’s heroic pretensions are deflated and this would-be Achilles deserts the city walls with an arrow in him just as the saint had asked! (“By whose hand it was not known, but they believed that it was the arrow sent from Heaven which you, Giustina, had requested”).¹⁹ It is interesting to note that in this epic, written before the introduction of gunpowder had dramatically changed the nature

¹⁶ Mussato, *De Obsidione*, 3. 95–117.

¹⁷ This scene is obviously modelled upon Venus’ complaint to Jupiter (Verg. *Aen.* 1. 227–253) which, in turn, is based upon Homer: Thetis before Zeus (*Il.* 1. 495–510) and the complaints of Athena to Zeus (*Od.* 5. 5–20).

¹⁸ It should also be noted that the poet’s brother, Gualpertino Mussato, was abbot of the convent of Santa Giustina. The poem is thus an indirect celebration of family heroics.

¹⁹ “Huius nota manus non est, sed forte putarunt/demissam celo quam tu Iustina petisti.” (Mussato, *De Obsidione*, 3. 241–243).

of European warfare, this anonymous shot, which in reality narrowly missed its mark, is presented as heaven-sent (compare the reaction to the use of firearms in De Blarru and Roccociolo below).

The poem ends with some moralizing on Fortune's wheel as Cangrande's camp is ransacked and altars are set up to thank God for the Paduan victory. It is a feature of panegyric epic that unpleasant facts tended to be ignored or glossed over.²⁰ Here the poet omits the fact that when the enemy camp was captured and looted a number of Paduan fugitives and exiles were also barbarously killed or mutilated. Yet this is not a chronicle, but panegyric in epic form, the function of which, Gombrich reminds us:

is not to impart information [...] but rather to celebrate the family and the virtues of the patrons with all the grace and wit at the command of art.²¹

Cangrande's defeat (albeit momentary) affords the poet the opportunity of portraying the Paduans as epic heroes while stressing the fundamental difference between Troy and Padua. The city of Antenor will not suffer the fate of its metropolis. More importantly, the pagan past is superseded by the Christian present as the Paduans are presented as God's chosen people.

Pierre de Blarru, *Nanceid*

The same idea provides the over-arching theme of the *Nanceid* by Pierre de Blarru (1437–1510). This poem describes the final stage in the protracted Burgundian wars against Lorraine. It recounts the events of 1476 when, supported by the Habsburg and Lorraine nobility and by the municipalities of Alsace, the Swiss inflicted upon Charles the Bold a series of crushing defeats, thus preventing the formation of a continuous Burgundian territory from Dijon to Bruges.²² Like Mussato's *De Obsidione*, the six-book narrative is set almost exclusively around the walls of Nancy giving this epic unity of time and place as the Aristotelian tradition had stipulated. As the events of this war may not be familiar a brief synopsis follows.

The opening book gives little indication of the *Nanceid*'s epic content, or indeed of its classical origins as the protagonists are introduced symbolically by references to their coats-of-arms. The overall shape, however, from the description of the idyllic landscape of Lorraine to the peroration of protest against the horrors of war, suggests familiarity with Book One of Virgil's *Georgics*. Book Two is a straightforward account of the battles of

²⁰ Gwynne 2012, 5.

²¹ Gombrich 1975, 13.

²² For a succinct outline of the historical situation see Marti 2009.

Grandson and Muret. On 2 March 1476 the forces of the Swiss Confederation took the Burgundians by surprise outside the town of Grandson, put them to flight, looted the ducal camp, and captured the Burgundian artillery. Yet within a couple of months Charles the Bold had managed to replace his guns, gather a new army and lay siege to the small town of Muret. His troops suffered another crushing defeat on 22 June at the hands of a larger army fighting for the confederacy and their allies. Undeterred, however, in the autumn Charles turned his attention towards Nancy which had recently sided with the Duke of Lorraine. Thus in Book Three the action moves to the winter siege of Nancy. Most of this book tells the story of Suffren de Baschi who had tried to slip through the Burgundian line to inform the besieged citizens that René was levying troops in Switzerland and would soon be with them. Baschi fell into the Duke of Burgundy's hands and was immediately hanged. At the beginning of Book Four the citizens themselves send a plea for help to René. The first three hundred lines purport to be the letter recounting the dire conditions of starvation within the city. However, the citizens are resolute. Indeed their behaviour exemplifies Lucan's maxim: *nescit plebes ieiuna timere* (a starving people is incapable of fear, Luc. 3. 58). Indeed, this maxim is echoed towards the end of the poem: *vide pauper ieiuna quid ausit* (see what poverty and starvation dares, 6. 1039). The remainder of this book describes the successful ruse adopted by the messenger to return to the city. He dons the guise of a woodcutter delivering fagots to the troops near the ramparts. While they warm themselves by a new fire he leaps across the moat and re-enters Nancy. The besieged are thus reassured that the Swiss are on their way and that the saints are protecting them; the book closes with some observations on the mutability of Fortune. In Book Five the Swiss finally arrive and Charles begins to regret his adventure. The book ends with the pessimistic observation: "Sic nescius artis / vivendi, crudas penetrat vir mortis ad artes" (ignorant of the art of living, the man (Charles) makes himself skilled in Death's bloody arts, 5. 878–879). Book Six is devoted the final battle (5 January 1477) and its aftermath.

The poem was disseminated in two deluxe formats. A presentation manuscript was prepared for René himself (c. 1500);²³ while a sumptuous printed edition with thirty-five woodcuts (figs 1, 2, and 3) and a dedication to René's son and heir, Antoine de Lorraine (1489–1544), was published at Saint-Nicholas-de-Port by Pierre Jacobi, and seen through the press by De Blarru's friend Jean Basin de Sandaucourt on the forty-second anniversary

²³ Now preserved in the Bibliothèque de la Société d'histoire de la Lorraine; see Rouyer 1876.

of the battle of Nancy on 5 January 1518.²⁴ Like Mussato's poem, this epic was clearly intended to be celebratory and commemorative. More than *De Obsidione*, however, the panegyric function informed its composition and structure. It has long be acknowledged that 'epic is a form of praise' in which the topical structure of epideictic pervades the epic narrative so that the major episodes illustrate virtues or vices, in the manner of the *gesta* or *πράξεις* of epideictic oratory.²⁵ In De Blarru's poem Christian moralization gives this topical structure added significance as René and Charles are schematically presented as hero and villain. This is particularly noticeable in the blazon of each duke in full armour. The tradition of classical epic (and chivalric literature) required the protagonist to be magnificently apparelled. Dressed in shining armour, with nodding plumes, René seems a second Hector:

Nam letus et acer
355 bella sitit, galee crista ramosus et auri
bracteolis, ipsum hunc clamantibus Hectora multis.
Arma super cuius preciosa effulserat ostro
aurivomo vestis, vestique, ut audio, dexter
supparus herebat tricolor consutus, ut inde
360 gente ducem a tota color is secerneret ipsum.
Nix ibi flamma cinisque suos posuere colores,
e quibus in longum se supparus ille trahebat
materia intextus hac qua nos Seres honestant.
Sed domini phaleras et equi geminata tegebant
365 signa Hiebusee passim cruces, atque Renatum
late ostendebant Solyme de regibus ortum.²⁶

(For happy and brave he longs for the battle, and with plumes branching from his gilt helmet many people proclaimed him Hector. His purple surcoat was embroidered with gold and glittered over his precious armour and, so I heard, his cloak was sewn in three colours on the right, so that these colours would distinguish the duke himself from the whole crowd. Snow-white, flame-red and ash-grey are the colours there, below which his long cloak was trailing, woven in Chinese silks. The double-barred crosses of Jebus covered the trappings of the horse and rider all over and were proclaiming far and wide that René was descended from the kings of Jerusalem.)

²⁴ Note that the date of the battle was originally calculated according to the Roman calendar which began in March.

²⁵ Hardison 1962, 71.

²⁶ De Blarru, *Nanceid*, 6. 354–366.

This magnificent description of René is copied in the miniature accompanying his presentation manuscript and repeated in the woodcuts of the first printed edition (fig. 1).



Figure 1: René II, Duke of Lorraine, woodcut from Pierre de Blarru, *Nanceid*, 1518.

Before both text and image are dismissed as idle flattery it should be remembered that one of the functions of the panegyrist was to offer advice. Erasmus, whose *Panegyricus* was reissued by the Froben Press in Basel in May 1516 as a companion piece to the first edition of the *Institutio principis Christiani* (*Education of a Christian Prince*) argued that the role of the panegyrist is to present an image to which the dedicatee should aspire and one which an audience would admire:

Those who believe that panegyrics are nothing but flattery, seem to be unaware of the purpose and aim of the extremely far-sighted men who invented this kind of composition, which consists in presenting princes with a pattern of goodness, in such a way as to reform bad rulers, improve the good, educate the boorish, reprove the erring, arouse the indolent, and cause even the hopelessly vicious to feel some inward stirrings of shame. [...] It is, moreover, in the interest of the commonwealth that the subjects of any prince, even if he be not the best, should nevertheless have an exceedingly high regard for him; indeed, if the ruler should be undeserving of praise, it is for their benefit rather than his that the panegyric is written, for it is not merely

offered to him who is its occasion, but also to the multitude in whose hearing it is pronounced. You must therefore adapt it largely to their ears [...] Finally this kind of thing is written for posterity and for the world; from this point of view it does not matter much under whose name a pattern of the good prince is publicly set forth, provided it is done cleverly, so that it may appear to men of intelligence that you were not currying favour but uttering a warning.²⁷

In the *Institutio* Erasmus argued further that a prince should always be animated by true Christian piety and warned that the pagan authors present the wrong idea of a good prince and their works should, therefore, be carefully examined to see if they agree with Christ's teaching.²⁸ Moreover:

When he is listening to solemn panegyrics the prince should not immediately believe them or favour his praises, but if he is not yet as he is presented he should take it as a warning and pay attention so that one day he may equal his praises. If he is already such a one he ought to strive to become even better.²⁹

At the beginning of Book Six De Blarru interrupts the narrative to critique elaborate and polished armour: "*Virtus* alone gives men renown, and does not care for fickle arms; virtue does attract the gaze towards plumed helmets, or decorated armour, but is content with its own radiance."³⁰ Charles the Bold's shining armour becomes a symbol of his own arrogance (fig. 2).

²⁷ "Principio qui panegyricos nil aliud quam assentationes esse putant, prorsum ignorare videntur quo consilio, cui rei, genus hoc scripti sit a prudentissimis viris repertum; nempe in hoc ut obiecta virtutis imagine improbi principes emendarentur, probi proficerent, rudes instituerentur, admonerentur errantes, extimularentur oscitantes, denique ipsi apud sese pudescerent deplorati. [...] Tum autem publicitus interest ut de principe etiam non optimo, tamen plusquam optime sentiant ii quibus imperat. Hiis nimirum panegyricus scribitur, non principi, si sit illaudatus. Neque enim uni prestatur de quo dicitur, sed plurimis apud quos dicitur, quorum auribus permulta tribuas necesse est; [...] Denique posteris quoque scribuntur ista, scribuntur orbi; neque ita magni refert huc spectanti cuius nomine boni principis exemplar proponatur in publicum, modo id scite facias, ut cordatis non insecasse, sed monuisse videare." Erasmus 1975, 81–82.

²⁸ "Cave ne quidquid usquam offenderis, id protinus tibi putes imitandum. Sed omnia ad Christi regulam exigo." Erasmus 1974, 179.

²⁹ "Cum audiet solennes panegyricos, ne protinus credat aut faveat suis laudibus, sed si talis nondum est, qualis praedicatur, admoneri se cogitet, detque operam, ut iis laudibus aliquando respondeat. Si talis iam est, adniti debet, ut seipso melior evadat." Erasmus 1974, 178–179.

³⁰ Sola facit claros virtus, nec levia curat
arma, nec ad cristas, nec ad ornamenta retorquet
hec oculos, proprio atque suo est contenta nitore. (De Blarru, *Nanceid*, 6. 85–87).



Figure 2: Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, woodcut from Pierre de Blarru, *Nanceid*, 1518.

Note how the reference to “piety cast aside” (l. 268) distances Charles from Aeneas, the archetypal epic hero, and aligns him instead with Aeneas’s furious opponent Turnus:

- O nihil est gravibus vindicta dulcius aulis,
si, pietate procul iacta, furor iraque mores
turpiter humanos abigant: sic ferrea fiunt
270 pectora, et indutis fit homo tunc durior armis.
Et sese armatus dum spectat in agmine princeps,
ad solis radios fulgentibus undique lamis,
hunc ratus esse sui splendorem corporis, astrum
se putat, aut de diis, nunquam mortalibus, unum.
275 Mollia nec sentit quam sint precordia, ferro
septa, nec ex abavis sese mortalibus ortum.
Hinc, hinc illa amens multorum audacia regum
atque ducum excrevit, que se precellere celum
autumat, in vires quotiens bellumque coitur.
280 At quamquam multos animus facit Hectores ingens,
inveniet sibi quisquam suum semel Hector Achillem.
“Vincor et,” exclamans, dicet, moriensque superbum
incipiet tarde cum vita mittere pectus,
mallet et inscribi tumulo ”vir pacis amator”

285 quam “de carnificum Martis grege.” Sed tamen unus
quisque bono se iure putat contendere bellis.³¹

(Nothing is sweeter than vengeance for self-important courtiers, if, when piety has been cast aside, madness and rage disgracefully drive out humane behaviour: in this way hearts become steel and a man becomes harder than his own armour. While the prince, at the head of his troops, dressed in his suit of armour, regards himself as the plate metal flashes all over in the rays of the sun, he admires the brilliance of his person and thinks himself a star, or one of the gods, not a mortal. He does not even feel how vulnerable he is, but thinks himself wrapped in iron and not descended from human ancestors. From this belief has grown the mad audacity of many kings and generals, affirming that they surpass the heavens and is so often united in a show of strength and war. But although a great spirit makes many Hectors, every Hector will at some time encounter his own Achilles. He will then shout and say, “I am defeated” and as he is dying too late he will begin to put aside his proud heart with his life and would prefer to have inscribed on his grave: “a lover of peace’ rather than ‘a man from Mars’ herd of butchers.” Yet everyone believes they wage war with right on their side.)

Both the warhorse and its rider are proud in their armour. The description of Charles’ horse after the battle further highlights the moral. This is compounded by the pathetic simile:

At generosus eque postquam se filius uda
685 sentit humo captum, contra conatus in astra
surgere vi pugnat, nec durus mollia vincit.
Sed latus obversans nunc hoc, nunc illud, in armos
inque caput recidit: franguntur ephippia, criste
franguntur fragiles, et nuper fulgida nigro
690 arma luto pallent, rerum decor et fugit omnis.
Sic in viscata passerculus arbore visus
est mihi, cum redimi tentat, contendere captus.
Quo magis hic pugnat plumas absolvere, crasso
hoc magis intricat se visco, et rostra pedesque
695 implicat, elususque opera cruciatur inani.³²

(But when the noble thoroughbred feels himself trapped in the quagmire, having tried to raise himself up into the air, he fights with all his might, but his strength can no longer overcome his weakness. Turning to and fro, he falls on the weapons and on his head: the saddle

³¹ De Blarru, *Nanceid*, 3. 267–286.

³² De Blarru, *Nanceid*, 6. 684–695.

is ruined; the delicate plumes broken, and the armour recently gleaming is dull with and discoloured with mud, the brilliance of all the trappings has gone. Thus I once saw a little sparrow caught in a tree smeared with bird-lime fight to set itself free. The more it struggled to release its feathers, the more it snared itself in the thick glue and trapped its beak and nails and, deluded by the useless effort, tortured itself.)

In addition to the descriptions of battle, the narrative reaches its dramatic climax via three episodes involving entrance into the besieged city. Increasing degrees of success highlight Charles' own failure to take the city: in Book Three Suffren de Baschi is captured within the enemy lines; in Book Four a messenger sent to René safely returns to Nancy; while at the end of Book Five Charles' Breton soldiers desert and seek refuge within the city. In Book Six the citizens themselves eventually break out and burn Charles' camp. Within this framework De Blarru has woven a withering critique of Charles' arrogance and the horrors of contemporary warfare. One incident must suffice to illustrate the theme:

- 90 Ad rem, Musa, redi. Sub principe seva locuto
imperiiis tandem duris paretur. Et aptat
horrida sese acies, iam muro infesta valenti.
Multaque turbato tonat ethere machina, petras
eiaculata graves, gentique urbique timendas.
- 95 Atque aut a colubris, aut a serpente venenum
cognomenque trahens, omnis tunc belua rugit
fusilis, inferno sua spargens castra latratu.
Et Narciseis deserta a vultibus, Eccho
nube repercussas traducit in ethera voces.
- 100 Et tonitru reboat celum, ac fremit omne cor, extra
se positum. Sed tam subito fragor irruit ictu
ut gravide crebro matri promittat abortum.
Vis furit: hinc vastis ferri mugitibus aures
attonite, nec enim mutum mugire metallum
- 105 fert natura, modum hunc artes docuere Cyclopum.
Audet et irati genus heu mortale tridentum
usurpare dei, stigiosque equare furores.
Nostra habet aethneos etas Cyclopes, et omnis
ars horum tremulis illatrat menibus, usquam
- 110 vita nec in tuto est, ferus at furit undique turbo,
aut qui intus cives, aut qui foris opprimat hostem.³³

³³ De Blarru, *Nanceid*, 3. 90–111.

(Return, Muse, to our theme. As the prince had spoken so fiercely, his harsh commands are finally obeyed. The bristling frontline prepares for war, already hostile to the strong walls. Many cannon thunder across the disturbed heavens and discharge great rocks which terrify those within the city walls. Deriving their venom and names (culverin and serpentine) from colubris and other snakes, then every monstrous gun roars filling its own camp with the infernal barking. Echo, forsaken by Narcissus, makes her complaints into the sky rebound back in a cloud. Heaven resounds with the thunder and everyone shouts as their hearts jump. The crash arrives with such a sudden impact that pregnant mothers abort. This violence rages: ears are deafened by the overpowering bellowing of the metal, nature does not make mute metal roar, the Cyclopes have taught this skill. Alas, humankind dares usurp the weapon of an angry god and to rival the fury of hell. Our age has its own Cyclopes from Etna, and all their skill is focused upon making walls tremble; no life is safe, but the wild barrel rages from all sides and crushes both the citizens within the walls and the enemy without.)

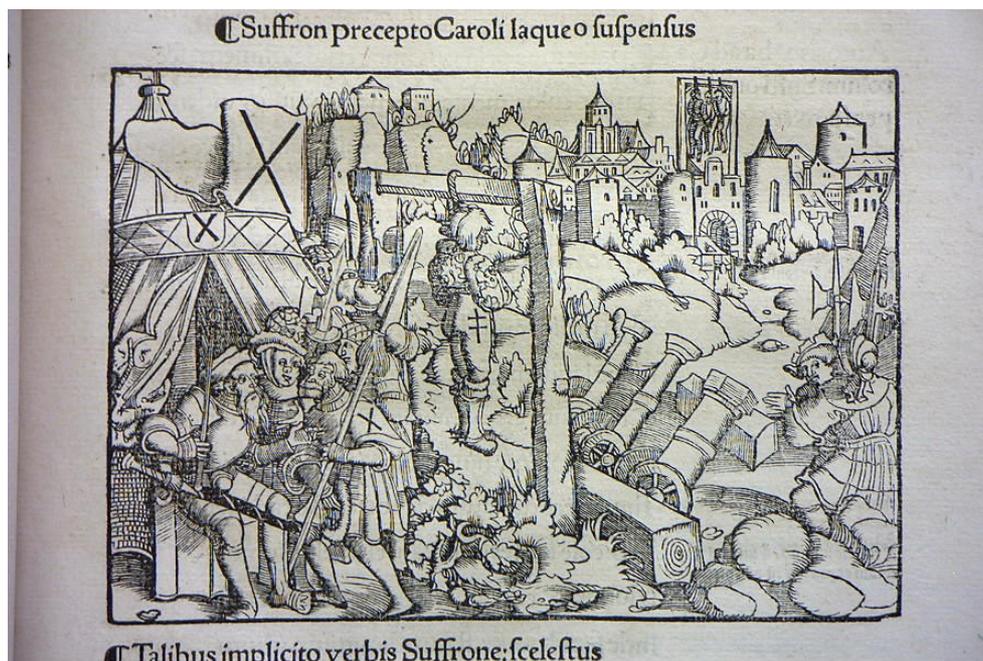


Figure 3: The Execution of Suffren de Baschi, woodcut from Pierre de Blarru, *Nanceid*, 1518.

Charles is not only presented as an archetype of arrogance in his shining armour, his pride is further bolstered by the gunpowder artillery in which he

delights. This innovation, which was transforming the art of warfare in the fifteenth century, is here literally portrayed as a diabolic.³⁴ The guns are named after snakes while their invention is ascribed to the Cyclopes in their Underworld caverns. How far Charles has degenerated from the classical ideal is shown in his vindictive treatment of Suffren de Baschi (fig. 3). There is something of Lucan's Caesar about him. The demonic sing-song of Charles's refrain, "Hang him high" recalls Caesar's words to the burghers of Marseilles: "dabitis poenas pro pace petita, / et nihil esse meo discetis tutius aeuo / quam duce me bellum." (You will suffer for seeking peace; you will learn that in my days none are safe but those who fight under my banner. Luc. 3. 370–372):

Cognitus at postquam est, inimici ad principis ora
ducitur. Hinc letus princeps, si letus ovante
est animus rabie, totum vomuisse furorem,
370 milite narratur viso, sed voce sub ista:
"Pendeat, aptaque det castris spectacula nostris:
pendeat et, laqueo fauces elisus, ad urbem
respiciens, reliquis commendet bella Renatis;
augeat his animum, et fructus promittat eosdem;
375 pendeat ergo: cibus mea non prius ilia pascet
quam mors ista oculos, iuro per numina, nostros."³⁵

(But when he [Suffren de Baschi] was recognized he is brought before the enemy leader. Overjoyed at this, if a someone can be overjoyed as madness rejoices, the duke spat out all his rage and it is said that, when he saw the soldier, he spoke thus: "Hang him high to entertain our troops: hang him high and, when the noose has stretched his neck, turn him to look at the city, let him recommend this war to the rest of René's troops; let him inspire them and promise them the same reward; so hang him high: I swear to god, I will not eat until I have feasted my eyes on his execution.")

Charles' behaviour contrasts with that of his prisoner who does not plead for his life, but asks only for an honourable means of execution:

A me tolle tamen, tolle hec suspendia, claros
nescitura viros. Capior, non latro, nec armis
470 proditor in vestris: ego iustus miles, et hostis
iustus. Et huic laqueo solus me, Carole, damnas.
Quod patria morior pro nostra et principe, mortis

³⁴ "With the introduction and development of artillery, sieges and siege-craft became more complex. Broadly speaking, the use of guns meant that sieges could be brought to a conclusion much more quickly." Vale 1976, 59.

³⁵ De Blarru, *Nanceid*, 3. 367–376.

lenit amarorem nostre, sed abominor huius
triste trabis speculum, et turpis me hec machina terret.³⁶

(Yet spare me this; spare me a hanging unfit for men of repute. I have been taken prisoner, I am not a thief, I am not a traitor in your army: I am an honest soldier and an upright enemy. Charles, you alone condemn me to this noose. Because I die for my prince and my fatherland, this eases the bitterness of our death, but I abhor the sad spectacle of this gibbet, this vile contraption terrifies me.)

When Suffren is hanged, the citizens of Nancy retaliate by stringing up all the Burgundian prisoners from the ramparts. This provokes Charles the Bold to redouble the bombardment which results in the grotesque spectacle of his artillery splattering the corpses hanging against the walls: and by blasting the walls he spatters the friends whom he sought to avenge' ("Et murum feriens, cum muro obtundit amicos, / quos petit ulcisci", De Blarru, *Nanceid* 3. 548–549).

Charles' use of gunpowder not only highlights his inhumanity, it also undercuts his classical pretensions. On the eve of the battle of Nancy the Swiss manoeuvre to avoid Charles' artillery, thus turning the tide of the battle (6. 448).³⁷ Without his cannon Charles is lost. He curses the day, Friday (*Veneris dies*), upon which he is forced to fight. This alienates the classical gods with whom he is associated, for Venus hears this curse and, complaining to Mars, curses him in return: "Believe me, proud man, you will never enjoy another day of Venus; you will never see another Friday," she spits ("Nulla, superbe, dies Veneris, mihi crede, colenda, / nulla tibi superset", 6. 197–198). Thus Charles enters the fray with the classical gods ranged, and raging, against him. His fate is sealed and his defeat comes as no surprise.

As we have seen, the narrative offers a withering critique of classical heroism exemplified in the arrogant persona of Charles the Bold, whose hubris transforms this epic into a Christian morality tale of pride before a fall. After the final battle the poet observes: "Arrogance was demolished and the smoking camps show that, when luxury has been put aside, those puffed up with pride can do nothing before the right hand of the thundering god bearing peace and arms."³⁸

³⁶ De Blarru, *Nanceid*, 3. 468–374.

³⁷ An aside by De Blarru emphasizes that the first point of war is avoidance of the guns: "A tonitru Martis se posse absolvere prima / necnon precipua est procinctis caution", 6. 448–449.

³⁸ Diruta castrorum fumansque superbia, luxu
deposito, monstrat tumidos nil posse tonantis
ante dei dextram pacem portantis et arma. (De Blarru, *Nanceid*, 6. 888–890).

By disparaging the classical ideology of one of the main protagonists, this poem, yet again, presents the triumph of Christianity over heretical paganism. In a critique of the heroic ethos the poet himself had lamented: “Oh glory, transient glory, how many generals have you destroyed, how many generals have you mocked with spurious renown” (“O gloria, gloria, quantos / fluxa duces perdis, falsoque eludis honore!” 5. 844–845). Charles’s arrogant, destructive folly resulted not only in his own death but also in the total annihilation of his whole army. René, in contrast, is seen as the ideal Christian ruler. This simplistic equation can easily be maintained while the setting and the protagonists are all secular. A dilemma occurs when the leading protagonist is the pope.

Rocciolo, *Mutineis*

Upon his election to the papacy (1 November 1503) Pope Julius II continued his predecessors’ policy against the dissident papal vicars by attempting to regain control of the Papal States. After successful campaigns against Perugia and Bologna, the pope turned his attention towards the Duchy of Ferrara. Unable to launch a direct attack against this powerful city, Julius focused instead upon Modena and neighbouring towns. Setting off from Bologna in deep snow on 2 January 1511 declaring, “Let’s see if I’ve got as much balls as the King of France”, Pope Julius II arrived before the walls of Mirandola a few days later (6 January) to direct the siege operations in person.³⁹ Annoyed by the local resistance, this ‘warrior pope’ spoke of sacking the town so that his ‘poor infantry’ could have some reward. “Those who were with Julius at the siege of Mirandola and saw him undaunted by cold and wind and snow and artillery fire knew that they were witnessing legend in the making. ‘This is something to put in all the histories of the world’, the Venetian envoy exclaimed.”⁴⁰ The attack on Mirandola is just one incident in the complex narrative of the *Mutineis* by the Modenese poet Francesco Rocciolo (c. 1460/70–1528).⁴¹ His episodic poem, composed and supplemented as the protracted campaign continued, records the events that led to the annexation of Modena and a number of satellite towns from the Duchy of Ferrara in the second phase of the Italian Wars as the Pope, Holy Roman Emperor, France and Venice battled for control of northern Italy.⁴² The

³⁹ Creighton 1911, 5, 143.

⁴⁰ Shaw 1993, 270.

⁴¹ For Rocciolo’s earlier epyllion on the arrival of the army of King Charles VIII of France before the walls of Modena see Hays 2005.

⁴² The *Mutineis* thus resembles Zuppardo’s *Alfonseis* which similarly grew in length as news of the on-going situation in Albania reached the Neapolitan court; see Hays 2009.

poem concentrates in particular upon the campaigns of Julius II against Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, in the years 1510–1513. Book Four describes the winter siege of Mirandola. Guicciardini records that the pope “lodged in a farmer’s hut lying within range of the enemy artillery, no farther than twice an ordinary crossbow’s shot from the walls of Mirandola.”⁴³ Rococciolo makes a similar observation:

Tum subit hospitio tenuis pauperrima tecti
Culmina. Despecto sedes vix digna colono
285 Atque oculis subiecta tuis, Mirandola, quantum
Quis peteret torto Balearis verbera fundae,⁴⁴
Nec pediti placitura domus, nunc continet altum
Ductorem coeli, nostrum qui temperet orbem
Quique praeest foribus divum, cui sidera parent,
290 Aeternique aditus nutu moderator Olympi.⁴⁵

(Then for his lodgings he enters the poorest eaves of a little house. A place hardly suitable for a grubby ploughman, and within sight of Mirandola that someone could hit it with a shot whirled from a Balearic sling; a house that would not please an infantryman now hosts Heaven’s noble commander, who rules our world and who controls the gates of Paradise, whom the stars obey and the controller by his nod of entrance to eternal Heaven.)

Julius however changed his lodgings and moved even closer to the walls. On 17 January “a cannon-ball passed through the room where the pope was sleeping and wounded two of his servants.”⁴⁶

Hostibus hinc data sunt magnae praesagia laudis
Immensumque decus spectant et pacis ademptae
Materiam facilem, dum se superare deorum
Fata putant sperantque suis ea vincere factis.
295 Ergo sulphureo praeclusam turbine glandem
Machina lata capit.⁴⁷ Contacto ferreus igni

⁴³ Guicciardini 1969, 212.

⁴⁴ Cf. Luc. 1. 229.

⁴⁵ Rococciolo, *Mutineis*, 4. 283–290.

⁴⁶ Pastor 1891–1953, 6, 342.

⁴⁷ The mechanics of the new ordnance clearly taxed Neo-Latin authors. At the beginning of the third book of his *Decades* Biondo Flavio justifies the use of neologisms to describe modern warfare and mocks the absurd circumlocutions the exclusive use of ancient terminology entails: “Quis enim et non legat libenter, et non vehementer admiretur, vas aeneum fusile, ferreumve oblongum, tanquam cavo ex gutture in orbem dedolata librarum sexcentarum, septingentarumque saxa, ignis ad interiorem partem sulphureis admoti pulveribus, et vaporis concludi impatientis violentia evomens densissimos quosque muros perfringere, [...]”, Biondo 1531, 294.

Mox volat ille globus, quanto non murmure credas
Fulmina Phlaegreos quondam turbasse Gigantes
Insanam aut Bacchi vexasse tonitrua matrem.
300 Effugiunt tormenta procul per culmina tecti
Pauperis et frangunt sonitu monstrante ruinam
Fulcra thori, quo membra pater reparabat ab alto
Lapsus equo. Fugiunt omnes. Fugientibus illis
Intrepidus perstat media in caligine putris
305 Sulphuris et caeci volventibus omnia fumi.⁴⁸

(The enemy now sees a chance for great praise and honour and an easy opportunity to regain the peace that had been snatched away; at the same time the Fates believe themselves superior to the saints and hope to conquer them by their own deeds. So a wide cannon takes a loaded missile with a sulphurous whirl. When the fuse is lit an iron ball immediately takes flight; you would not believe that the lightning which once routed the Phlegraean giants or the thunder which savaged Bacchus's mad mother raged with as much noise. The cannon-balls fly far and through the roof of that poor house and, with a tremendous bang, heralding destruction, smash the bedstead on which the pope, having dismounted his lofty steed, was resting. Everyone scatters. While they are all fleeing, he stands undaunted in the midst of the darkness with everything enveloped in clouds of foul-smelling sulphur and black smoke.)

The primary object here is, of course, to emphasize the pope's staunch determination and ability "to keep his head while all about were losing theirs"; yet standing in the midst of the sulphur and smoke there is something of the foul fiend about him, reminding us that "war, the traditional epic theme, produces a Hell on Earth"⁴⁹ The image recalls (perhaps inadvertently) the opening of Claudian's *In Rufinum* where Allecto stands amid the fire and brimstone of Tartarus, summoning the Furies to destroy world peace.⁵⁰ Despite this setback Julius's campaign was ultimately successful. Pastor records that the pope "was in such a hurry to set foot in his new conquest that he would not wait to have the gates unbarred, but clambered through the breach on a wooden ladder."⁵¹ Book Five opens with Fortune smiling as the

⁴⁸ Rocciolo, *Mutineis*, 4. 291–305.

⁴⁹ Hardie 1993, 79. Note also Cervantes' observation: "Blessed be those happy ages that were strangers to the dreadful fury of those devilish instruments of artillery, whose inventor I am satisfied is now in Hell, receiving the reward of his cursed invention, [...]" Cervantes 1925, 1, 402; cited in Vale 1976, 57.

⁵⁰ Allecto similarly disturbs the golden age of Naples by stirring up the Barons' War at the beginning of Paracleto's *Tarentina*: "Pro dolor! En iterum redierunt aurea mundo/Saecula: Parthenopes regnum sic pace quiescit." (Paracleto, *Tarentina*, 1. 96–97).

⁵¹ Pastor 1891–1953, 6, 342.

French, who were coming to relieve Mirandola, have decided, for the moment, not to continue the war. But as the Pope leaves, Erinys begins to sow discord. Adopting the form of an aged town councillor the Fury makes an impassioned speech against the new Imperial overlords:

Infernos egressa sinus nam murmure caeco
Ac placitas varians formas tentavit Erynnis
Corda ducum. Coeunt faciles in crimina Galli
30 Pactaque despiciunt. Montes tum corripit altos.
Ingerit obscaenum sceleratae caedis amorem
Sanguineamque sitim populandaque viscera monstrat
Urbis et occulta laudem sibi quaerere palma.
Tum Mutinae turre ac celsa palatia tristi
35 Corripit afflatu mediamque accensa per urbem
Solicitat proceres, sanctum quin ausa senatum,
Longaevum mentita senem, sermone benigno
Intrare ac patribus tristes immittere curas:
'Non bene conveniunt Germanica facta Latinis.
40 Vox diversa sonat. Mos noster discrepat illo
Vivendique modus. Variam sic aspice mentem
Corporis ut cultum. Tetram fluit undique vestis
Ingluviem plenique sinus abdomine Bacchi.
Ebria gens certe est, semper temulenta, prophanis
45 Vocibus atque gravem medio in sermone Lyeum
Ructat et immunda stantes aspergine vultus
Conspuit ac olido stomachum conturbat hiatu.
Indomitum stertit, clamoso somnia somno
Nostra ruens, potatque iterum vix sidere nato
50 Luciferi et tarda vix claudit pocula nocte.⁵²

(Having slipped from the depths of hell with a silent hum, and adopting a pleasing appearance, Erinys insinuates herself into the generals' hearts. The French immediately start conspiring and scorn the treaties. Then she crosses the high mountains. She encourages obscene love for wicked slaughter and thirst for bloodshed and reveals how the centre of the city can be plundered and how they can earn praise for themselves with a secret victory. She then seizes the towers and lofty palaces at Modena and inflamed with a sad breath she solicits the elders throughout the city; indeed having ventured into the venerable city council, she mimics a senator of great age and begins with genial conversation and infuses the councillors with sad cares: 'German and Italians do not get on well together. They speak differently. Our customs and way of life are different from theirs.

⁵² Rocociolo, *Mutineis*, 5. 27–50.

Consider their different attitude as well as the way they behave. Their clothes are covered with foul gluttony and their bellies brimming with wine. They are a race of drunkards for sure, always sloshed, belching profanities and their breath thick with wine and standing in a filthy spray they dribble down their faces and stuff their stomachs through their stinking jaws. They snore fiercely disturbing our dreams by the fearful noise, and they start drinking again as soon as day breaks and scarcely put aside their cups late at night.)

As this chauvinistic diatribe ends, the poet calls upon the saints to intervene. The Fury's speech is thus balanced by the mediation of Saint Geminianus, the fourth-century bishop and patron saint of Modena:

Dic, age, dic, Erato: Quisnam deus expulit istas
Insidias faciliq̄ue dedit nos currere vento?
Non opus hoc hominum. Coelestia fata revolvi
Iam decet et divum penetralia pandere cantu.
150 Cura vigil nostri pastoris vidit ab alto
Audentes crudele nefas et conscia fraudum
Murmura et instanti fluitantia cuncta periclo.
Ingemuitque deus gemitu, quo sancta deorum
Maiestas gemuisse potest. Dehinc talia secum
155 Fatur et attonitae succurrit fortiter urbi:⁵³

(So speak, now speak, Erato: which saint banished these sieges and allowed us to run with a favourable wind? This was not the work of men. It is now fitting that the heavenly fates are turned and to reveal inner shrines of the saints in song. From on high our patron saint's wakeful love saw those men daring cruel wickedness and conscious murmurs of plots and everything wavering in the present danger. The saint heaved a great sigh of the sort which only the holy majesty of the saints could groan. Then speaking to himself, he valiantly moved to the rescue of the thunder-struck city.)

The siege of Modena and its satellite towns was a minor event in the greater scheme of the Italian wars. The supernatural machinery elevates the factional in-fighting and local discord to universal significance. In so doing the poet does not apportion blame to an individual or a particular event. He is thus able to remain neutral and liberate himself from potential censure in the shifting political climate.

The death of Julius II and the election of Leo X in 1513 signified a change in papal policy and potential peace for the inhabitants of Modena. This again causes consternation in Hades. Book Eight opens with an Infer-

⁵³ Rocociolo, *Mutineis*, 5. 146–155.

nal Council in which Pluto incites his minions to action once more. The devils use gunpowder. History repeats itself when a fragile truce is broken by a gunshot.

160 Perfurit incassum vallo depulsus ab alto
Herberiae miles. Tum certat fraudibus: Unum
Perculit, in summo qui perstans culmine portae
Dum tormenta parat, liventis fulmina plumbi
Sensit et ardenti percussus tempora glande
165 Procubuit vitamque ferox emisit in auras.⁵⁴

(A soldier from Ruberia, emerging from the deep valley rages to no effect. Then he fights with deceit: he shot a lone man who was standing on the gatehouse preparing the cannons; he felt the lightening shot of the livid lead and, stuck in the temples by the fiery bullet, he sank down and angrily sent his life into the air.)

The fresh outbreak of hostilities recalls that moment in the Trojan War when the archer Pandarus sabotages a truce by wounding Menelaus with an arrow (Hom. *Il.* 4. 85–140); in both cases the heroism of hand-to-hand combat (*comminus*, l. 158) is completely undercut by the use of artillery. While no ancient epic was complete without *aristeia* (Greek ἀριστεία, ‘deeds of excellence’) in which the hero, or one of his companions, demonstrated his prowess in single-handed combat, the increasing use of fire-arms in Renaissance warfare virtually precluded deeds of individual heroism on the battlefield for “the gun could not only batter down fortifications, but could kill, and kill selectively, from afar”.⁵⁵ Even in the ancient world, Paris had earned eternal opprobrium for killing Achilles at a distance with the help of Apollo to guide his arrow (see Verg. *Aen.* 6. 56–58).⁵⁶ In this passage our sympathy is entirely with the lone, fallen soldier (and by association the besieged); all are portrayed as the helpless victims of external and, as we have noted, diabolical forces.

Following the pessimistic readings of Virgil in Lucan and the Silver Latin Poets, much of the *Mutineis* is a fierce diatribe against war; in particular the reliance in contemporary warfare upon artillery and the involvement of innocent civilians in the conflict. As such it can be read as a critique of the panegyric epics on the *condottieri* warlords who were using the new technology to bolster their classical pretensions. It is certainly more

⁵⁴ Rocciolo, *Mutineis*, 9. 160–165.

⁵⁵ Vale 1976, 64.

⁵⁶ In this context it is interesting to note that in the nineteenth century Zulu warriors would not have firearms – the arms of a coward, they said, “for they enable the poltroon to kill the brave without awaiting his attack”. Bourquin 1979, 149. For the one-sided use of artillery in the same war see Hall 1979.

than “a poetic *laus Urbis*” as Craig Kallendorf suggests.⁵⁷ For by celebrating the patriotism and communal sentiments of the city under siege Rocciolo questions the relevance of classical heroism in contemporary society when warfare was being dramatically reshaped by increasingly sophisticated ordnance. Indeed Mussato, De Blarru and Rocciolo present in their siege epics a vibrant and alternative response to the tradition of heroic poetry that survived far into the eighteenth century, thus proving that epic was not, as Bakhtin once advocated, “complete in its development” and “already antiquated” by the end of the classical period.⁵⁸

As a postscript it should also be noted that the theme can be found in other poetic genres. An elegy ascribed to Baldassare Castiglione no less, records a particular instance of heroic bravery attributed to civic pride. On 29 June 1500 a combined French and Florentine force had laid siege to Pisa. The French artillery immediately began to pound the city. Realising that their high walls were vulnerable and would not resist the French bombardment, the Pisans constructed a second defence system, behind, but not part of, the wall being battered by artillery fire. This consisted of an earthen rampart with a ditch in front of it. Within a day the French guns had knocked down over a hundred feet of the city walls, but when they surged through the breach, they were surprised by this second barrier with the feisty Pisans on top:

De Fortitudine Poliphilae Pisanae
Quo fessum rapitis,⁵⁹ Pisae gens libera, faustum?
Haec urbs usque aliquid parturit egregium.
Gallorum instabant acies, et miles ethruscus.
Tormentis dabant moenia aperta viam.

5 Matronae aggeribus subeunt, nataeque parandis

⁵⁷ Kallendorf 2010, 895.

⁵⁸ Bakhtin 1981, 3–4. A few examples of later siege poems must suffice: Oliver Cromwell’s poet laureate Payne Fisher (1616–93) wrote an epyllion in five books (or *Idylls*) on the Battle of Marston Moor (2 July 1644), *Marston Moor sive de obsidione praelioque Eboracensi carmen* (London: Thomas Newcomb, 1655); Heinrich Meibom the younger (Henricus Meibomius, 1638–1700) dedicated his *Panegyricus de Brunsvicensi obsidione* to Rudolph Augustus, Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel (1666–1704) (Helmstedt: Henning Müller, 1671); an *oratio metrica de obsidione urbis Viennensis* in 409 Virgilian hexameters (*quantum fieri potuit*) was recited in the Gymnasium at Ulm by Johannes Gaupp (Gauppianus, 1667–1738) on 22 June 1684 (Ulm: Johannes Carolus Gassenmajerius, 1684); while Carolus Antonius Wetstneius dedicated over 500 hexameters on the relief of Leiden to Prince William V of Nassau-Orange (1748–1806) with the dramatic title, *Avitarum victoriarum inlustrissimam Leidam a Gulielmo Primo reipublicae fundatore, ex Hispaniorum faucibus extortam atque adsertam Heröo nunc carmine decantatam* (Leiden: Henricus Mostert et Petrus Delfos, 1771).

⁵⁹ Verg. *Aen.* 6. 845.

Atque viri: inter quos deicitur Thamyras.
Matris et ante cadit vultum: silet illa: tegitque
Aggere: neu trepidat, dissimulat quid agat.
Hortatur comites ad opus: labor undique fervet.
10 “Nate”, ait “ensis eras, nunc patriae es clypeus.
Exanimoque tuos defendes corpore cives:
Dignior esse tibi non poterat tumulus.”
O non foemineum pectus: quod casus acerbus
Non tetigit nati: sed patriae pietas.⁶⁰

(On the courage of Polyphila of Pisa.)

Free people of Pisa, to what place are you hastening your fortunate dead? This city constantly produces something remarkable. The French were pressing on hard together with the Florentine soldiery. The walls had been blown open by their cannon. The women mount the ramparts to repair them with their daughters and their men, amongst whom Thamyras is killed. He fell before his mother’s gaze: she stood silent: she covers the rampart and she does not tremble nor disguise what she is doing. She encourages her comrades to the task and they are busy on all sides. “Son”, she says, “you were a sword, now you are a shield. You can defend your fellow citizens with your lifeless corpse. You could not have a more honourable grave.” It is not feminine courage, it is not the bitter death of the son which blocks the ramparts, but regard for the fatherland.)

This tenacious defence of their city and their fierce resistance earned the Pisans the admiration of all Italy. Within two weeks the French were forced to break off the siege. On 11 July they retreated northwards while ‘Fare come Pisa’ became a proverb for gallantry and determination.⁶¹

⁶⁰ BAV, Vat. lat. 3351, fol. 71^v.

⁶¹ See Mallett 1995, 254. More poems on this remarkable event can be found at BAV, Vat. lat. 3351, fol. 63^v *De Fortitudine Martiae Pisanae etiam a Marullo celebratae*. Incipit *Obsidet Etruscas gallo dum milite Pisas*; fol. 70^{r-v} *De Fortitudine Andraginae Pisanae*. Incipit *Assidua Pisas galli obsidione premebant*; fol. 83^r *De Eudoxa Pisana*. Incipit *Stabat pro patria et muris Pisana virago*; fol. 83^r *De Antimacho Pisano Agricola*. Incipit *Menenius plebem eloquio sedavit et urbem*; fol. 83^v *De Conviciis Pisanorum in Etruscis*. Incipit. *Sume cholium muris Pisanus clamat ab altis*.

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Figures

- 1 René II, Duke of Lorraine, woodcut from Pierre de Blarru, *Nanceïd*, 1518.
- 2 Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, woodcut from Pierre de Blarru, *Nanceïd*, 1518.
- 3 The Execution of Suffren de Baschi, woodcut from Pierre de Blarru, *Nanceïd*, 1518.

