RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Scourge and Fire

Lauro Martines

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About the Book

When the King of France invaded Italy in 1494, princely states would fall, sending tremors up and down the peninsula. The Medici fled from Florence; the republic sprang back to life; and the French army, occupying the Renaissance city for ten terrifying days, stood on the verge of sacking it. A ‘little friar’ from Ferrara, Savonarola was alone in knowing how to comfort citizens with his sermons and in urging the King to get out of Florence.

Although the French left a city riven by political factions, the Friar’s popular ‘party’ swiftly prevailed. With Florence at the height of its Renaissance glories, his voice rose above those of all other men. Claiming to be a messenger from God, he attacked evils on all sides – a mercenary Church, the despotism of the Medici, vile political elites, and Pope Alexander VI, Rodrigo Borgia, whose name itself was a byword for brazen corruption. Savonarola foretold a universal ‘scourging’, but made pleas, above all, for the renewal of Christianity and for the political voice of the people. His struggle turned into a battle for the ‘soul’ of Florence.

Excommunicated and silenced, Savonarola spurned Rome and began to preach again, retaining the strong support of the city republic. As the Pope and Medicean conspirators closed in on him, five prominent Florentines were beheaded for plotting against the state, further inflaming the passions already rife in the city. After an abortive trial by fire to shame and discredit him, his enemies set siege to his convent, leading to his arrest and trial on trumped-up charges of heresy.

Savonarola mingled the fervour of religion with the ardour of republican politics. *Scourge and Fire* is the story of his impact on Florence and of the city’s spell over him.

About the Author

One of the world's foremost authorities on the Italian Renaissance, Lauro Martines was born in Chicago, has a PhD from Harvard University, but has lived in London since 1970. Until recently he commuted to Los Angeles, where he was Professor of European History at the University of California. He and his wife, the novelist Julia O'Faolain, lived for some years in Florence. His books include *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy, An Italian Renaissance Sextet: Six Tales in Historical Context* and *April Blood: Florence and the Plot Against the Medici*.

‘Outstanding . . . The concluding pages of this book are the best distillation I have yet read of the authentic Florentine Renaissance ethos.’ Jonathan Keates, *Spectator*

‘A thoroughly good read that is also reliable history . . . impressive narrative power.’ *Wall Street Journal*

‘Martines paints a rich and fascinating portrait of Girolamo Savonarola, the Dominican friar who ruled Florence after the fall of the Medicis. Enraged by church corruption, he led a Florentine council for 20 years – until his enemies burned him at the stake in 1498.’ *Los Angeles Times*

‘Lauro Martines is one of our most renowned historians of the Italian Renaissance and of Florence in particular. His new book is, in some ways, a successor to *April Blood . . .* Together the two volumes make up an engrossing study of society and politics during the Tuscan city’s most illustrious half century.’ *Washington Post*

‘As one might expect from the author of such a classic as *Power and Imagination* and the study of the Pazzi conspiracy against the Medici, *April Blood,* Martines is particularly good at taking the reader through the ins and outs of Florentine politics. But he is also skilful in showing how the real drama was perhaps not the story of the friar’s brief conversion of Florence, but that of the city’s “conquest” of Savonarola.’ *BBC History Magazine*

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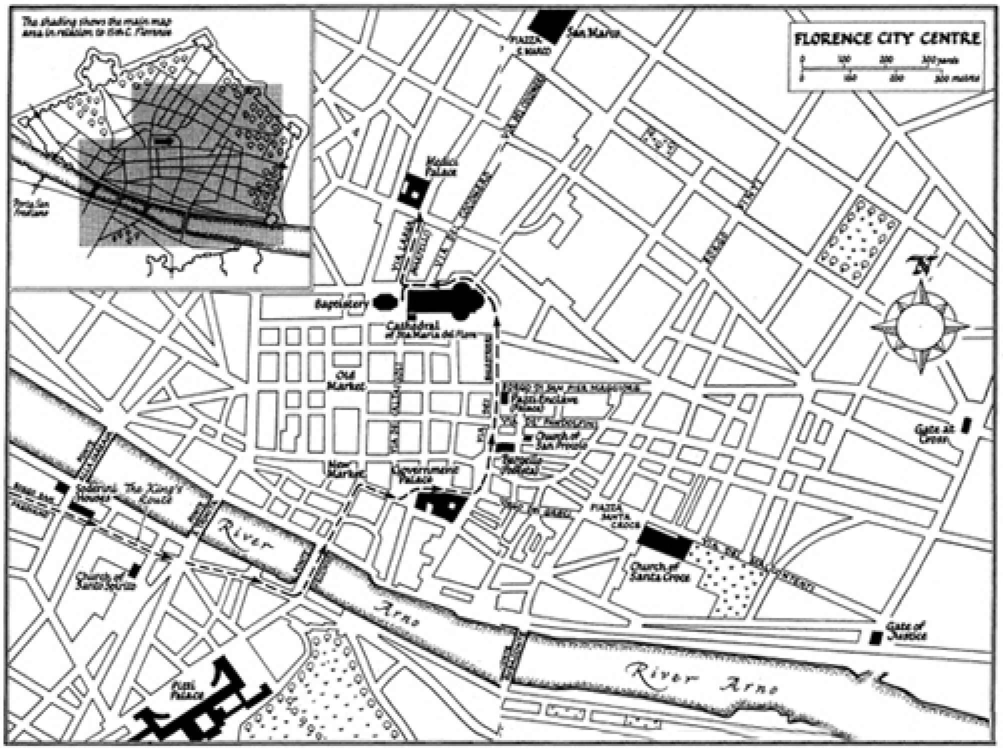

FLORENCE CITY CENTRE
San Marco
Medici Palace
Baptistery
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Old Market
New Market
Government Palace
Church of San Procolo
Church of Santa Croce
Church of Santo Spirito
Pitti Palace
Gate of Justice
River Arno
N


ITALY
in the late fifteenth century
DUCHY OF SAVOY
Turin
Milan
DUCHY OF MILAN
PRINCIPATE OF TRENT
REPUBLI
Venice
Ferrara
FERRARA
Parma
MARQ. OF MANTUA
DUCHY OF MODENA AND
REGGIO
REGGIO
REP. OF GENOA
Genoa
Bologna
Imola
Forli
REP. OF LUCCA
Pisa
Florence
REP. OF FLORENCE
Urbino
Volterra
Siena
REP. OF SIENA
Arezzo
Piombino
PAPAL
Perugia
STATES
Rome
CORSICA
(to Genoa)
SARDINIA
(to Aragon)
Tyrrhenian Sea
Adriatic Sea
Ragusa
KINGDOM
OF
NAPLES
Naples
Otranto
Palermo
KINGDOM of SICILY
(to Aragon)
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
N
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al mio carissimo jairo, un gigante a modo suo

Scourge and Fire

Savonarola and Renaissance Italy

Lauro Martines

PIMLICO

An X-Ray of Florentine Government

Government in Florence was the job of a pyramid of small councils, with the Signoria or Signory – eight Priors and the Gonfalonier of Justice – at the apex. These nine men held office for two months, and were then replaced by a new group. The city thus saw six changes of government per year. Although seemingly unstable, the system worked very effectively for more than two centuries, because other councils were drawn in to support the Signory.

Two bodies of counsellors, the Twelve Good Men and the Sixteen Gonfaloniers, worked closely with the Signory. They spoke for the different parts of the city and voted on most matters of importance. Their short office terms were staggered, so that the incoming (new) Signory always meshed, so to speak, with counsellors who were fully on top of the current political situation.

In wartime and periods of danger, the Signoria shared *diplomatic* power with the War-Office Ten, who served for six months or a year and who conducted the war. If the Ten were renewed, owing to strains in foreign affairs, they could be re-elected.

The Eight, a political and criminal police, were continually consulted by the Signory. Like the Sixteen, the Twelve, and the Ten, they met in the government palace, the *Palazzo della Signoria*.

Everyday Florence, then, was ruled by a cluster of offices. The Signoria took the initiative and introduced all new bills to the Great Council, but only after sustained consultation. Offices were filled *by lot* or, in part, by election in the Great Council. Action *by lot* simply meant the blind drawing of

eligible names from electoral pouches. Political eligibility, in turn, was based on long residence in Florence (thirty years or more), on the long-term payment of taxes, but most especially – in practice – on descent from a direct male ancestor who had qualified in recent times for the Signoria, the Twelve, or the Sixteen. On these grounds, the men who were eligible for election to office were a citizen oligarchy.

In their habit of close consultation and the soliciting of advice, the Priors of the Signoria captained a collegiate form of government with a relatively wide social base. To help them decide important questions, they could at any moment – and often did – call in and, in effect, take the votes of the city's top politicians and leading public figures: in all, some 200 to 300 men. Just here was the solidity and force of Florentine republican government.

Chapter One

Chorus

IN THE FINAL months[1] of Savonarola's life – it was early 1498 – a plot was concocted to blow him up in the cathedral of Florence, as his great preacher's voice boomed forth from the pulpit to thousands of listeners. The ringleaders belonged to a kind of fraternity known as the 'Rude' or 'Ugly Companions' (*Compagnacci*). They planned to hire a man named Baia, an 'explosives expert' (*maestro difuochi lavorati*), and to let him concoct and place an explosive device in the cathedral. If they had carried out their plan, theirs would have been the first 'terrorist' bomb in the history of Europe. Having looked into the particulars, however, they discovered that some of their own friends and relatives, who were likely to be present at the sermon, might 'be maimed or killed', and so they backed away from the idea.

Viewed as a figure of prime political importance, Girolamo Savonarola would be the target of other murderous threats. The Pope himself, Alexander VI, longed to get his hands on him. No wonder, then, that in the 1490s, the people of Florence began to see something that they had never seen before, nor had any other Italian city: the sight of a simple priest, a Dominican friar, flanked by an escort of armed men whenever he left his convent to go out into the streets of the city.

The same friar also attracted acts of sacrilege. On the night of 3–4 May, 1497, several of his enemies broke into Santa Maria del Fiore, the city's great cathedral. They smeared the pulpit with excrement, covered it with the stinking carcass of a donkey, and drove nails up under the pulpit's bookrest, in the hope that if Savonarola managed to

preach the next morning, he would impale his hands, as he struck the bookrest in the midst of his fiery delivery. Less than a year later, with government support, his enemies mounted their final attack – an armed assault on his convent, San Marco. After a six-hour siege, which included the use of small artillery pieces, they finally forced him to surrender. And at about 2:00 in the morning, although surrounded by guardsmen, he had to walk through a moving gauntlet that stretched more than 1000 metres, all the way up to the government palace – a gauntlet of screaming and shouting men, who sought to kick and punch the cowled figure, as they spat insults and spittle on him, or tried to poke at his body with torches. Much of the city was awake that night; public fury with the Friar was all but palpable; and many of his supporters were either in hiding or in flight from Florence.

Who exactly was this hated priest, a man previously so revered by the Florentines, that even a few days before he faced the gauntlet, the city's rulers, the Signoria, had not dared to turn him over to the Roman Curia?

In the 1490s, at the summit of the high Renaissance, the most remarkable man in Florence was not the Magnificent Lorenzo de' Medici, nor even Michelangelo or Machiavelli, but – as he occasionally called himself – 'a little friar' from Ferrara, Girolamo Savonarola.

Of small to medium[2] height, dark-haired, grey-eyed, pale, boney-handed, big-nosed, and speaking with an accent that singled him out as a foreigner in Florence, he was the talk of all Italy, as he stood in the eye of a raging political storm. Government officials in Venice studied reports on him. The Pope and the Duke of Milan watched him with an anxious eye. He was to conduct embassies to the King of France, and many of the top men in Florentine government looked to him for advice, while others, including old-line aristocrats and political grandees, hated his guts. Yet he was a force in the shaping of the city's foreign policy and in the reshaping

of its morals. His voice as preacher, resounding through the grand void of the Florence cathedral, attracted thousands of listeners, hungry for his guiding words and passionate morality. The faithful and the curious poured in from neighbouring and more distant towns, at times swelling the attendant throngs to 14,000 or even 15,000 people, intent on listening to that stranger, or – given the intriguing rumours – just to lay eyes on him.

Florence, still in the front line of the Renaissance cultural awakening, with Venice and Rome running closely behind, had expelled the Medici family from the city in November, 1494. An underground of feisty republicans had suddenly surfaced to hail the end of Medici tyranny, to seek open political debate, and to demand responsible government. Now the ascetic Savonarola stepped in to become the city's chief agent of republicanism and the implacable foe of dictatorship. This man was not afraid to speak his mind in a setting in which most prominent citizens, keeping to a watch-and-wait stance, were holding their tongues. Sixty years of bullying Medici rule had taught many Florentines to be silent about politics, or even to slip over into cooperation with those who were castrating the city's republican institutions, leaving only seductive but empty façades.

The talk of all Italy, a friar? Rumour held that Savonarola was the familiar of kings and princes; that he claimed to be a religious prophet in the Old Testament mould; that he was a fiery speaker and rabble-rouser; that he governed Florence from behind the scenes; that he – a man in holy orders – was a scandalous and virulent opponent of the Pope, Alexander VI; that he captained a secret political party; that he had taken power from the nobility and put it into the hands of the lower classes; that he was an ambitious, crafty, and proud overreacher, quietly engaged in piling up a fortune; that he had converted the citizens of Florence, famous for their cunning and business acumen, into a flock of gullible sheep; that he had been vile to his

own family; that he had splintered Florentine households, turning wives against husbands, brothers against brothers, and sons against fathers; that he was a holy man, a near saint, and a formidable intellectual; and that he was most certainly a heretic and a schismatic. There was also chatter alleging that he was a hermaphrodite, a homosexual, and even a sufferer of the new European scourge – syphilis. In short, his fames and infamies were many, and historians have remained divided for five centuries – at times fervently so – about his mission, his accomplishments, his influence, his public personality, and even his honesty and sincerity.

Alas for him, the charge of heresy stuck. In May, 1498, before a great crowd of men and boys – women had been barred – he and two other friars, his closest collaborators, were hanged in Florence's government square. This done, their bodies were immediately burned to ashes in a bonfire that also engulfed the gallows. Their charred remains were then swept up into carts to be wheeled off and disposed of in the river that cuts through the city. Rome and the government of Florence feared that the many who still believed in the Friar's words and deeds – people from all walks of life – would rush in to collect scraps of what remained, with an eye to having got their hands on relics. If these should occasion miracles, the Friar would then be looked upon as a saint and martyr.

The drama of Savonarola's years in Florence transcends its time and place, because it links high politics and religious activity in a time of epochal crisis.

Italy had fallen prey to an invading French army, and concerted attempts were being made to subject the peninsula to foreign rule. The entire period is frequently seen as a blotch and turning point in Italian history, especially as there was also a crisis in the Church. Well before Luther and Calvin, many Italians had seen that they lived under a reign of shameless simony and bartering in the papal court and college of cardinals. Poets made

blistering attacks on the curial hierarchy, and the angry Savonarola now branded the leaders of the Church as vendors who ‘trafficked in’ – buying and selling – ‘the blood of Christ’. A generation later, in the 1520s and 1530s, Luther and other Protestant Reformers would have little trouble smashing the traditional unity of Western Christendom; and it is arguable that Savonarola had inklings of the coming cataclysm.

Historical writing has two different stories to tell. There is first of all the one that passed before the eyes of contemporaries: a panorama of individuals, crowds, incidents, and dramatic scenes. Anecdote and colour are likely to govern this narrative. Streaming through all of it, however, in shifting forms of consciousness, is the second story: that is, a constant flow of cultural and political phenomena, the so-called impersonal forces. We dare not forget these for the simple reason that they both precede and succeed the life of every individual, every group, every singular event. And the job of the historian, surely, is to weave back and forth between the two stories; or at the very least, to keep the impersonal and seemingly formless story constantly in mind, for there, in and among the ‘forces’ without faces, is the ground of historical analysis, the social settings that serve to turn the actions of men and women into something more than unrelated fragments – indeed, into tapestries of historical meaning.

It follows that the one thing we should not do to the men and women of past time, and particularly if they ghost through to us as larger than life, is to take them out of their historical contexts. To do so is to run the risk of turning them into monsters, whom we can then denounce for our own (frequently political) motives – an insidious game, because we are condemning in their make-up that which is likely to belong to a whole social world, the world that helped to fashion them and that is deviously reflected or distorted in

them. Censure of this sort is the work of petty moralists and propagandists, not historians.

Savonarola has been the property of specialist scholars for too long, especially since the first publication of the great biography by Pasquale Villari, *La storia di Girolamo Savonarola e de' suoi tempi* (1859). Soon translated and widely distributed in the late nineteenth century, Villari's book roused the imagination of historians and sent them searching through archives and manuscript libraries in the quest for more materials on the charismatic friar. In the late twentieth century, the work of scholars so swelled our knowledge of the man, his works, and his religious and political thinking, that it is daunting for any one historian to try to take it all in. In the present day, therefore, the experts – academics and men in holy orders – are all the more given to speaking only to one another.

I propose to carry the factual essentials of their knowledge out to a larger reading public, while also adding, of course, my own lines of analysis. Savonarola himself had no excessive respect for 'the philosophers', that is, the intellectuals who saw learning as an end in itself. He distrusted and assailed the aims of pure reason; but he was even more wary of priests and monks, because he believed that hypocrisy ran deeper in them and was compounded by ignorance.

This book, I should add, is not a biography – an enterprise better left in the hands of the specialists, although (and in any case) far too little is known about the Friar's private life to turn it into highbrow gossip or a tantalising narrative for 'psychobiographers'. What we know for certain about him is chiefly connected with his years in Florence and his time as a controversial public figure. My account is focused there, especially in the years from 1494 to 1498, when Savonarola's life and the history of Florence were so joined together that it is impossible to pull them apart. The result here, therefore, will be the biography of a time and place in

the sense of covering a short span, at least in historical terms; and Savonarola is, to be sure, the prime actor. Yet the few years in question hold much of the history of Florence, because they are a critical stretch in the city's tormented passage from republic to princely despotism, from government by citizens to the rule of one man attended by courtiers.

Savonarola was a 'fundamentalist' – if I may use this charged word – in wanting contemporaries to take their Christianity seriously. He wanted it to alter the substance and direction of their daily lives, even if doing so exposed them to persecution, ridicule, or threats. He also sought to keep to the words of the Bible. But he nailed his doctrinal commitment to the ideals of a republic in which all eligible citizens would have their say. Florentine politics, he argued, was the business of a whole community, not the affair of one man, one family, or a tiny elite. Princely rule (hence 'tyranny') of the sort promised by the Medici house had no greater foe than the little friar from Ferrara, especially as he knew that humane and responsible government could not be achieved without a strong sense of morality, of sympathy for the greater good of the community and even for the value of the individual soul. Just here, along the path cut by his moral stance, is where politics and his form of religious fundamentalism broke in to contest part of the same ground of action. The results were to haunt Florence for many years. However they might wish it were otherwise, even Machiavelli and Guicciardini, the two greatest political minds of the age, accepted that the state as they knew it could not stand outside the confines of religion, because it was bound to use God for political ends.

I have begun to touch on themes and hidden questions that will call for sustained treatment, as we move into the book and start to unfold a story that is as tragic as it is astonishing. Here however, at the very outset, we may edge

closer to the ways and thinking of the late fifteenth century, if we keep the following disagreement in mind.

Savonarola threw[3] Christian belief into the faces of supposed Christians. They knew, he reminded them, that Jesus Christ was born in poverty, and that the Virgin Mary, a woman of humble social station, if of powerful faith, must have been modest and simple in her dress as well. Why then did painters dress her up to look like a luxurious Renaissance whore? Could such an image be for true believers, or was it firstly an invention for wealthy and powerful men? 'Oh friar, stop there,' he might have mimicked, in one of his imaginary dialogues, planted in the middle of his sermons, 'all the finery is in her honour and in the honour of God.' 'No,' he would instantly have shot back, 'all that finery is for the honour of men, and first of all the patrons, a rich merchant and a bishop who live only to please their senses.'

In many ways, this fictional dialogue catches the clash of basic attitudes between the supporters of the Friar and his enemies. The clash became fatal when it was fought out in the arena of politics.

Chapter Two

Vile Bodies: 1472–1490

HE KNEW LUXURY[1] – there was no doubt of this – having grown up on the periphery of (and almost within) one of Europe's most extravagant spots, the princely court of Ferrara. His grandfather's fame as professor of medicine at the University of Padua had been such as to call forth an invitation from the Marquis of Ferrara in 1440, and from then on, for the rest of his life, Michele Savonarola was court physician to the Este lords of that city. There, as a boy, Girolamo was to see opulence and raw power of the sort that he would come to detest and denounce.

Stemming perhaps from thirteenth-century warriors, the Savonarolas originated in Padua, where one of the old city gates was named after them. The professor's father had been a wool merchant, one of his brothers a canon lawyer; hence there was always room for a brilliant marriage. Girolamo's mother sprang from the Bonacossi, a branch of the old and powerful Bonacolsi clan, once the lords of Mantua. The linking of two such families, Savonarola and Bonacossi, reflected marriage practice of the day, and it is likely that one of the courtiers around the Este set up the initial feelers between the two houses. Naturally enough, therefore, when Girolamo was born, in September 1452, he was held to baptism by the chief secretary to Duke Borso d'Este, Ser Francesco da Libanori.

But after the rich old court physician died in 1468, the Savonarolas of Ferrara gradually lost their wealth and lofty contacts. The Friar's father, who had probably rebelled against Paduan study habits, went into business and money-changing, failed at both, fathered seven children, and left his two daughters without even the means of marriage –

proper dowries. Of the sons we know this much only: one became a professional soldier; a second would prosper in the medical profession; and a third, following his elder brother Girolamo, would enter the Dominican Order of preaching friars.

The sources hint that the child Girolamo was much preferred by his grandfather, owing probably to the boy's prodigious intellectual talents and love of study. Court physician Michele, the author of learned medical and scientific treatises, could not but look upon the child with pleasure and favour. Inevitably, therefore, Girolamo's primary subject had to be Latin; his grandfather seems to have been his first tutor; and soon enough, given the new taste of the age, he was reading Cicero, Quintilian, and even the 'lascivious' Ovid. In time, however, he would turn against fashion, as he began to cherish the early Church fathers – Jerome and Augustine especially, as well as their medieval heirs, St Bernard and Bonaventure, the great canonist Gratian, and St Thomas Aquinas, the most ambitious and creative of all Aristotle's commentators during the high Middle Ages.

The young Girolamo's[2] religious and mystical turn may be explained in part by the strong and loving influence of his grandfather, a man of profound religious sentiments who was repelled by the cult of pleasure and sensuality, the materialistic worldliness, of the Este court. About fifteen years before his hiring of the Paduan professor, the Marquis Niccolò III d'Este had insisted on the execution of the princess Parisina Malatesta, his second wife, and one of his own illegitimate sons, because the young prince and mother-in-law, who were nearly the same age and more than twenty years younger than the Marquis, were suddenly found to be carrying on as passionate and secret lovers.

Something of his[3] grandfather's revulsion is thought to have passed to the studious Girolamo. Years later there would be stories to the effect that as a young man he had

written idealised love verse in the Petrarchan manner, and that he had once fallen in love with a young but illegitimate noblewoman, a Strozzi from Ferrara. Not knowing of her bastardy, she had spurned his advances by observing that his family was not good enough for hers. Whereupon the stung Savonarola had immediately retorted, ‘And do you think it proper that the Savonarola house should give a bastard like you to one of its legitimate sons?’

Since these scraps offer almost as much as we know about the love claims, we may as well drop them. All that can be safely asserted is that something in his earliest years, or in his later adolescent experiences, led him to the conviction that humanity is given over to the base pleasures of vile bodies and to sensuous, material waste. He would find good reasons for his flight from such a world.

Having done a good deal of work in the fields of classical literature, history, and moral philosophy, Savonarola’s abilities carried him easily through studies at the University of Ferrara, where he appears to have taken an advanced Arts degree. With the death of his rich grandfather, and his father’s failures in business, there must have been talk in the family about what he should do with his life. For a time he even studied medicine. To go into trade, or to seek a secretarial post at the Este court, was out of the question for a young man who already looked upon the world with disaffected eyes, even if his parents had urged him to consider money-making pursuits, as we infer from the reaction he expected when he threw up the ways of ordinary life for the quiet of the cloister.

His poem on[4] the destruction of the world, *De ruina mundi*, written at the age of twenty, begins with a despairing statement about the passing away of everything good, almost despite the providence of ‘the supernal King’. Earth, he finds, ‘esteems those who are the enemies of God’ and Rome is ‘in the hands of pirates [captained by Pope Sixtus IV]’, meaning cardinals and bishops.

Ah, look at that catamite and at the pimp,
Dressed in purple, frauds looked up to
By the common people and adored by the blind world.

His anticlerical stance leads him to a set of themes that turn up occasionally in Italian verse of the fifteenth century. Thus, the honoured and the happy are the sort of men who live from theft. Wealth acquired by means of trickery and violence is what produces ‘noble’ spirits. Noble too, in the world’s eyes, are the destroyers of people and the disdainers of Christ. Earth honours the keepers of fraudulent account books and the masters of the art of doing evil. Not surprisingly, therefore, ‘usury is called philosophy’ – meaning, scornfully, that the practice of lending at interest had been converted into a question hedged in by the dense, abstract debates of canonists and theologians.

Earth is so pulled down by every vice
That it will never stand again.
And Rome, the capital, slips into the muck,
Never more to rise again.

The young Savonarola lives with one hope alone: that in ‘the next life’ all those who were truly noble will be known. He closes the *Canzone* with an envoi, telling it to go forth with his message, but to beware:

Avoid all those who put on purple.
Flee from palaces and ostentatious loggias,
Speaking to the few alone,
For you will be the enemy of all the world.

At the age of[5] twenty, then, he had found his moral voice, which he was putting, interestingly, into a verse form refined by Petrarch for love and for moral rumination about love: a stage on the way to the love of God. But there was

nothing revolutionary in his anticlerical outlook. Scorching criticism of the upper clergy, in Italy at all events, came forth in the eleventh century, peaked in the thirteenth century, and continued robustly up to the time of Luther and the Protestant Reformation. In Girolamo Savonarola's time, the tradition of anticlericalism was exceptionally strong in educated circles, such as at the University of Bologna and in Florence, where lawyers and literary men were frequently in close touch with learned clerics, as well as with men in the Roman Curia. They were thoroughly familiar with the chosen enemy. The novelty in Girolamo's indictment of powerful clergymen was to emerge only years later, in the scope of his accusations. Meanwhile, he entered more of the same hard line into his *De ruina ecclesiae* ('On the ruin of the Church'), a poem written in 1475, the very year of his 'escape' to a convent.

Here, speaking to[6] chaste Mother Church, he grieves over the disappearance of all Christian heroism, with its great ardour, love, and piety. Weeping and hiding away in a 'beggarly cave', the Lady tells him that 'When I saw that proud woman [a corrupt papacy] go into Rome' and take over, she retreated into her cave. The real Church, therefore,

Goes about poor, with her parts exposed,
Her hair in strands and her garlands torn;
[. . .]
She is blasphemed by dogs.
The swindlers of our holy days.

For now, at least, 'a false, proud whore' has won out, and all we can do is 'Weep and be silent.'

The young Savonarola had hit his stride: he had just entered the Dominican Order, but he was making a clean distinction between the true Church and the harlot in Rome. He was not, however, proposing to go about trumpeting this

claim. On the contrary, the poem ends by saying that not to be heard or understood ‘is perhaps better’. His fight at the moment, with himself and with his family, was an internal one, and it was movingly described in the famous letter to his father of 25 April 1475, occasioned by his flight from Ferrara to the convent of San Domenico in Bologna.

> Honoured father,[7]
> I have no doubt that my departure is very painful to you, particularly because I stole away so secretly, but by this letter I want you to understand my soul and will, so that you may take comfort from it and realise that I have not made this move in so childish a way as some people think. And first of all I want you, as a manly spirit and disdainer of fleeting things, to be swayed by truth, rather than – as women are – by passion, and to judge in accordance with the empire of reason whether or not I was right to flee from the world and to pursue my own calling.
>
> The reason that moves me to enter a religious order is this: first, the great misery of the world, the iniquity of men, the carnal crimes, adulteries, thefts, pride, idolatry, and cruel blasphemies, all present on such a scale that a good man can no longer be found. Whereupon many times a day, while crying, I used to sing this line: Fly from these lands, bolt from this shore of misers. I could not bear the evil of the blinded peoples of Italy, all the less so when I saw virtue trampled and vice elevated . . . owing to which I prayed daily to my lord Jesus Christ that he pull me up out of this slime. . . . Now God, in his infinite mercy, has shown me the way, and I have accepted it, although I am unworthy of so much grace.
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> Answer me therefore. Is it not some great good for a man to flee from the filth and iniquities of the wretched world, in order to live as a rational being and not like a beast among swine? And would mine not have been a great ingratitude to have prayed God to show me the straight way to take, he having stooped to show it to me, and then not to take it? Oh my Jesus, rather a thousand deaths than that I should ever be ungrateful to you this way. So, dear sweet father, rather than weep, you should thank our lord Jesus, who gave you a son and then kept him very well until his 22nd year; and not only this, he also deigned to make him his knight militant. Well, then, don’t you think it a true [gift of] grace to have a son who is one of the knights of Jesus Christ? But to speak briefly, you either truly love me or you don’t. You would not say, I know, that you don’t love me. Therefore, if you love me, since I am made of two parts, soul and body, you either love the body or the soul more. You cannot say the body, because then you would not [really] love me, in loving the most vile part of me. If therefore you love my soul more, then why do you not seek what is good for it? You should surely rejoice and celebrate over this triumph.

> I know that the flesh must feel some pain, but it should be reined in by reason, especially by wise and magnanimous men like you. Do you think it wasn't painful for me to part from you? I want you to believe that in all my life I have had no greater pain, no greater affliction of mind, than in abandoning my own flesh and blood and going out among people unknown to me, to sacrifice my body to Jesus Christ and to put my very will into the hands of those who are perfect strangers to me. . . . But because I know that you complain of my having stolen away and almost fled from you, you should know that my pain and passion were so great in having to leave you, that if I had shown any signs of this, I believe that my heart would have broken before I parted from you, and you would have impeded my decision and my action, so don't marvel at my having said nothing to you . . . I beg you, dear father, to put an end to your laments, and do not want to cause me more sorrow and pain than I already have: do not grieve over what I have done (for certainly I wouldn't renounce it even if I believed that this would make me greater than Caesar), but rather because I am still flesh and bones like you, and the senses fight off reason. I have a cruel battle on my hands in the fight to keep the Devil from jumping on my shoulders, and all the more so the more I feel about you. These days with their fresh wounds will soon pass away, and I hope that in time you and I will be consoled through grace in this world, and then in the next one through glory [our salvation]. . . . I beg you to comfort my mother, pray you both to give me your blessing, and I shall always pray fervently for your souls.

The letter reveals that Savonarola already knew how his father had reacted, or was bound to react, to his departure and religious vocation. They had discussed the matter; there had been much gentle but firm disagreement about it, and so the young man had resolved that his flight would have to be precipitate. A month or two later, the family were still wailing over his decision, as attested to by his impatience in a second letter:

> What are you crying about, you blind ones? Why so much weeping and grumbling, people without light? If our prince [of Ferrara], reaching out among the people, had asked me to strap on a sword and become one of his knights, to what jubilation and feasting you would have treated yourselves! And if I had rejected the request, which of you would not have thought me crazy? Oh you without common sense, oh blind fools and without a ray of faith! The Prince of princes, he who is infinite power, calls me with a loud voice – more, he begs me (oh vast love) with a thousand tears [as on the Cross] to gird on a sword of the finest gold and precious stones, because he wants me in the ranks of his militant knights. And now, because I have not spurned so great an honour, unworthy me .