

The Life of the Last Visconti: A Study in Tyranny?

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This article questions the traditional reading of Pier Candido Decembrio's "Life of Filippo Maria Visconti" (1447) as a tyrant narrative, a reading first proposed by Jacob Burckhardt and highly influential ever since. An examination of the Milanese context and relevant collateral documentation establishes the unlikelihood that Decembrio wished to denounce his former master as a tyrant. Rather, his avowed aim was to spread his prince's fame and glory. In so doing, however, Decembrio avoided the encomiastic model of biography dear to most humanists, delivering instead an insider's account of the astute political practices that underpinned his master's grip on power.

INTRODUCTION

PIER CANDIDO DECEMBRIO'S biography of Duke Filippo Maria (1392–1447), the last member of the Visconti family to rule Milan, is one of the best known and least read of Renaissance classics. Written in 1447, in the immediate aftermath of Duke Filippo's death, the work covers the career of a prince whose thirty-five years in power (1412–47) made him a central figure in the politics of the period.¹ As secretary to the duke, Decembrio (1399–1477) was ideally positioned to provide an insider's account of his master's aims and methods. His biography immediately became, and has remained, a prime source of information on the long reign of the last Visconti.² More broadly still, it has served specialists as a window into the political culture of the early Renaissance. Jacob Burckhardt (1818–97) was among the first to recognize the work's importance in this respect, famously proclaiming: "the picture of the fifteenth century would be incomplete without this unique biography."³ The lack of a wider readership today may be put down to the fact that until recently there

¹ The best comprehensive account is to be found in Cognasso, 1955a. See more recently Soldi Rondinini; *Il ducato di Filippo Maria Visconti*.

² Decembrio, 1925–35, 281n1; Covini, 2015, 72. On Decembrio as regime insider, see Gabotto, 1893, 164–98, 241–45, 252–58; Borsa; Baroni, 400–01; Viti. For his literary output, see Zaccaria, 1956.

³ Burckhardt, 1960, 242.

has been no satisfactory, readily available edition of the text to consult. With this lacuna now remedied,⁴ the time seems ripe to revisit Decembrio's work, with particular reference to the question that lies at its heart, namely the question of tyranny.

It was again Burckhardt who identified the significance of Decembrio's biography in its vivid portrayal of Filippo Maria Visconti as the archetypal Renaissance tyrant: Decembrio, he wrote, had somehow managed to delineate "with marvelous accuracy, the conditions, forms, and consequences of a particular kind of tyranny."⁵ The tenacity with which Burckhardt's view has stood the test of time testifies to its validity.⁶ As a member of the Visconti court in Milan for nearly three decades (1419–47), Decembrio had ample opportunity to observe his master at close range. The princely behavior he describes displays the unmistakable connotations of tyranny as defined in classical political theory. A few examples will suffice: in Decembrio's account, Filippo Maria begins his reign by "showing himself to be the mild ruler everyone was hoping for," and allowing "all comers to approach him freely." It is not long however before the young man changes his tune: Decembrio notes how Filippo Maria soon begins to withdraw into solitude, until at last he drops all other concerns and hides himself away, "focusing his thoughts exclusively on his war plans."⁷ This passage bears a striking resemblance to one Decembrio himself had translated from Plato's *Republic* a decade before. At *Republic* 566d–567a Plato has Socrates explain how the typical tyrant, at the beginning of his reign, deceitfully "smiles and welcomes everyone," but then later turns his attention entirely to waging aggressive war.⁸ In Decembrio's narrative too, Filippo Maria will come across primarily as a warmonger: his thirty-five years in power see only rare intervals of

⁴ Decembrio, 2019, 1–149. The previous, exclusively Latin edition of the text (Decembrio, 1925–35) was based on an incomplete review of the manuscript tradition. It remains important for the massive and detailed historical notes compiled by the editors Butti, 3–74, and Fossati, 74–438. While serviceable, both the German and Italian translations have serious drawbacks: see Decembrio, 2019, 257–68.

⁵ Burckhardt, 2009, 312: "er völlig genügt, um . . . mit wunderwürdiger Genauigkeit die Voraussetzungen, Formen und Folgerungen einer bestimmten Art von Tyrannis darzustellen." Cf. Burckhardt, 1960, 242. On the tendency of S. G. C. Middlemore (1848–90) to translate Burckhardt's original "tyranny" as "despotism," see Kohl, 66–69. For Burckhardt on Renaissance tyrants, see Ruehl, 61–70.

⁶ See Zappa, 53; Monteverdi, 190; Garin, 178; Maderna, 24n1; Cengarle, 2006, 91; Boucheron, 2007, 32n111; Hankins, 2019, 98, 141. A notable exception is Viti, 494.

⁷ Decembrio, 2019, 12–15.

⁸ Plato, 2:294–95; cf. Decembrio's translation: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS I 104 sup., fol. 174^r. On Decembrio's translation of Plato's *Republic*, see Hankins, 1990, 1:117–54, 2:412–26, 2:531–618; Zaggia, 1993b; *I Decembrio*.

peace, and even these serve mainly as stepping stones to new wars. To head up his armies, he hires and handsomely rewards the most skilled generals he can find on the market.⁹ He pays close attention to equipping his fighting men and maintaining their morale and readiness for combat.¹⁰ Weaponry and horsemanship are his lifelong passions. Even late in life, when he can no longer ride with his men, he takes special pride in having assembled in his castle a vast collection of “every possible kind of weapon and machine of war.”¹¹

The duke’s obsession with war and warfare, however, does not tell the full story. More pertinent still are his personal character traits as documented by Decembrio. These amount to a suite of behavioral patterns that match up almost perfectly with those of the classical tyrant. Decembrio’s Filippo Maria for example is mistrustful: he mistrusts even his closest collaborators and devises sophisticated ways of testing their loyalty. Even so, writes Decembrio: “Never did he trust any of his people so completely that he forgot to distrust them even more.”¹² He accordingly sets in place a complex set of rules that govern the daily routines of the court. He carefully takes note of any deviation from the norm: his reactions to such transgression are completely unpredictable, and all the more terrifying for that. According to Decembrio: “Whenever the duke caught anyone in flagrant violation of the rules, he would sometimes shower them with gifts, while at other times he might just as easily strip them of everything they owned. He could lift such offenders up to the highest honors, or cast them down to the lowest depths, and utterly crush their spirits. . . . No one who came under surveillance in the duke’s court . . . ever escaped without being harassed by some trick or another. The tendency was to crack under such pressure and eventually to betray one’s feelings of anger and frustration.”¹³

Filippo Maria himself lives in a state of perpetual anxiety. His place of residence in Milan, the Castle of Porta Giovia, is a forbidding, heavily guarded fortress. From here he relentlessly hunts down his political enemies, inflicting upon them and their descendants imprisonment, torture, and death. Fearing retribution, he feels secure only when surrounded on all sides by armed bodyguards. He lives in self-imposed isolation from the outside world, seeking seclusion in the deepest recesses of his castle. He seldom if ever visits the city of Milan, preferring instead to frequent his country residences. His fear of the nighttime is such that even heavily guarded he cannot sleep. In thrall to sexual

⁹ Decembrio, 2019, 40–43.

¹⁰ Decembrio, 2019, 36–37.

¹¹ Decembrio, 2019 114–15.

¹² Decembrio, 2019, 40–41. Cf. Aristotle, 462–63 (5.9.5; 1313b): “it is a mark of a tyrant to be extremely distrustful”; Xenophon, 24–25 (4.1–2).

¹³ Decembrio, 2019, 66–69.

perversions of various kinds, he fails to consummate either of his marriages: he has his first wife beheaded on trumped up charges of adultery, and keeps his second wife under lock and key in a separate apartment. Ever suspicious of his subjects, he organizes a vast network of spies to keep track of any signs of subversive activity in the duchy.¹⁴

It may seem at this point that Burckhardt's verdict on Decembrio's biography can be swiftly confirmed, and that the work should be seen as an exposé of the cruelest of tyrannies. But the case cannot be so easily dismissed. Viewing the biography as a deliberate act of denunciation raises as many questions as it resolves. How, for example, can one reconcile Decembrio's supposed picture of his former master as a tyrant with his own long career as a loyal Visconti apparatchik? Did he experience, once the prince was safely dead and his line extinguished, a sudden change of heart? There is no sign of such a change in Decembrio's abundant post-Filippo Maria correspondence, where he continues to speak with reverence of his former master even long after his death.¹⁵ A lack of evidence also plagues the widely held thesis that Decembrio's delineation of Filippo Maria as a tyrant was a function of his participation in the city government that assumed control of Milan after the duke's death on 13 August 1447, and that later came to be known as the Ambrosian Republic.¹⁶ Chronology is a problem here: the records suggest that Decembrio was not among the founders of the republic, and that he joined its secretariat only later, in the spring of 1448,¹⁷ by which time the biography of Filippo Maria, composed in September and October 1447, had long been completed. A related problem concerns the frequent supposition that the Ambrosian Republic came into being on a wave of anti-Visconti sentiment,¹⁸ which Decembrio and others of his kind are thought to have shared. The evidence on this matter yields a

¹⁴ Decembrio, 2019, 52–53, 60–61, 68–73, 84–87, 106–07, 132–35; cf. Plato, 2:336–41 (579b–580a); Xenophon, 18–23 (2.10–18).

¹⁵ For examples, see Borsa, 370, 432–33; Decembrio, 2019, 252–55; Gabotto, 1892, 178; Gionta, 350; Decembrio, 1925–35, 137n1; Zaccaria, 1952, 91; Simonetta, 48. In the early 1460s Decembrio characterized Filippo Maria as “by far the greatest and most memorable of the Italian princes”: Decembrio, 2019, 182–83. On Decembrio's letter collection, see Zaccaria, 1952; Zaggia, 1993a, 200–01n136; Decembrio, 2013, 17–23.

¹⁶ For recent statements of this thesis, see Quillen, 50; Simonetta, 140; Cengarle, 2006, 89n1, 91n6.

¹⁷ Borsa, 358–64, cites a letter of 7 September 1448 congratulating Decembrio on his appointment as secretary of the republic on September 1. However, Decembrio had begun countersigning official government documents as early as April 20: see *Acta Libertatis Mediolani*, 40, 47–48, 422–24; Natale, 83.

¹⁸ Exemplified by Martines, 141. On the long history of this view, see Borsa, 367–73; Boucheron, 2015, 485.

picture that is far from clear.¹⁹ One thing alone appears certain: whatever the popular mood may have been upon the duke's death in August 1447, the actual founders of the Ambrosian Republic were all former Visconti men and conservative in their political stance.²⁰ It was only later, and under a government of quite different social composition, that the more radical phases of populist republicanism took hold.

Other questions too tend to complicate the now commonly held notion that Decembrio set out to sabotage Filippo Maria's reputation. If the biography's intent was to expose Filippo Maria as a bloodthirsty tyrant, why does it contain at the same time so much praise for the man's princely virtues? For besides detailing the tyrannical character traits listed above, Decembrio also credits Filippo Maria with possessing a host of admirable qualities: throughout the biography the duke shows himself to be by turns pious, sincere, basically kind at heart, generous, ever ready to pardon his enemies, a careful manager of state business, and on the whole an effective and largely successful leader of men.²¹ He also possesses an exhaustive memory equipped with total recall of everything he has experienced and everyone he has ever encountered, no matter how insignificant.²² His wisdom is such, writes Decembrio, that "he might well have ruled forever" had his plans for ultimate success not been thwarted by the sudden onset of his final illness.²³ Even so, the steadfast manner in which the duke faced death reveals him to be a man of uncommon courage: in Decembrio's account, Filippo Maria dies heroically, showing "admirable fortitude" and "true greatness of spirit" at the supreme moment.²⁴

Consider too the issue of language. Throughout all his voluminous works, both before and after 1447, Decembrio never uses the words *tyrant* or *tyranny* to refer to the Visconti in general, or to Filippo Maria in particular; the *t*-word he reserves for the family's enemies, for the Florentines, and more particularly for the petty warlords and local strongmen in Lombardy who at every opportunity oppose the centralizing ambitions of the expanding Visconti state.²⁵ Decembrio's usage of the word *tyrant* is entirely in keeping with the standing policy of Visconti intellectuals stretching back to Francis Petrarca (1304–74).

¹⁹ Spinelli, 1986, 244n52, finds no sign of hostility toward the Visconti in the surviving documentation, thus confirming Cognasso, 1955b, 399. See also *Acta Libertatis Mediolani*, LVII. Other authorities disagree: see Boucheron, 1998, 207–11; Covini, 2015, 89–95.

²⁰ Cognasso, 1955b, 396–99; Spinelli, 1987, 29; Welch, 20–21; Boucheron, 2015, 487–88.

²¹ Decembrio, 2019, 44–51, 84–85, 130–31.

²² Decembrio, 2019, 106–07.

²³ Decembrio, 2019, 32–33, 72–73.

²⁴ Decembrio, 2019, 146–47.

²⁵ Decembrio, 2013, 351–52 (lines 113–16); Decembrio, 1958a, 1021 (lines 30–44); Ponzù Donato, 14.

The members of the Visconti family are invariably framed in this tradition as the bringers of peace and order to a troubled Italy; to do so, they must defeat the forces of disorder, the fomenters of destructive particularism and of internecine warfare and chaos; they must defeat the tyrants, establish the benign rule of law, and protect the borders of Italy from foreign invasion.²⁶ Like his father Uberto (d. 1427) before him, Decembrio articulates such themes across a range of works, perhaps most convincingly in his *Panegyric in Praise of Milan* (1435–36).²⁷ His adherence to this line of thinking was of course consistent with his official role, throughout Filippo Maria's reign, as a militant Visconti apologist and supporter of the regime.

CAUSA SCRIBENDI

The foregoing observations suggest there is room for a fresh investigation into Decembrio's famous biography. The key question concerns the contradiction outlined above: if the biography sometimes seems to describe Filippo Maria as a tyrant, how does one explain that it was written by one of his most devoted and faithful secretaries? Oddly enough this question has rarely if ever been posed, the assumption being that Decembrio must have harbored some form of resentment against his master, whether because of perceived mistreatment or on account of long suppressed ideological divergence.²⁸ With the scholarly consensus settled in this way, there has understandably been little interest in delving into the motivations behind the writing of the biography. Yet Decembrio's own account of these motivations can be found in an exchange of correspondence that took place shortly after the completion of the work in October 1447. Decembrio had sent a copy of the biography to Leonello d'Este (1407–50), the marquis of Ferrara, in hopes no doubt of receiving encouragement and perhaps an offer of patronage. It is worth remembering that at this stage, with his Visconti employment at an end and not yet appointed to any remunerative position within the new Milanese city government, Decembrio was angling for a place at another Italian court. Ferrara was a candidate, as were both Rome and Naples.²⁹ Sending the biography to the highly cultivated Leonello was probably a strategic move geared toward obtaining a preferment.

²⁶ Ferraù, 2005a, 434–35; Gamberini, 2016, 135–40; Gamberini, 2018, 116–20.

²⁷ U. Decembrio, 134–35 (2.35–39); Decembrio, 1958a, 1023 (lines 5–26).

²⁸ Lanza, 110, 153, believes Decembrio was resentful at having been poorly remunerated for his services at court. On this reading, the tyrannical behavior portrayed in the biography would be a form of payback. But the evidence is inconclusive. Borsa, 17–19, for example, surmises that Decembrio's requests for a pay raise in the 1430s were duly honored, an assumption that seems warranted in the light of his continuing loyal service to the Visconti.

²⁹ Borsa, 361–62, 432–33.

It was also a convenient and acceptable way for Decembrio to publicize his credentials as a skilled humanist.

In a letter of October 22 Leonello thanked Decembrio and expressed his admiration for the biography, which he had read not once but twice. Indeed he pronounced the work a masterpiece of concision and accuracy. His only criticism concerned Decembrio's all-too-graphic references to Duke Filippo's homosexual proclivities: these passages he advised Decembrio to delete, or at least to soften, in the interests of protecting Filippo Maria's reputation in the eyes of posterity: "Because while you may say that the whole business is common knowledge among those of us living today, there is still no reason to pass such information on to those who will come after us." In Leonello's view, Decembrio needed to remember that his literary works were "destined to become immortal."³⁰

Leonello had correctly divined that Decembrio's object in writing the biography had nothing to do with denigration. But if, as Leonello appeared to assume, the point was to erect a lasting literary monument to the deceased prince, Decembrio had some explaining to do. Decembrio's response of October 31 confirmed first of all that it was never his intention to damage his former master's reputation: "I loved that prince of mine," he wrote, "this is why I decided to write his biography." His objective, he stressed, was not "to cover my prince with opprobrium, but to spread his fame and glory." In keeping with this stated intention, Decembrio agreed to modify the incriminating passages: the trick was to revise them in such a way that contemporaries in the know would understand the subtle allusions, while posterity would be left with a less than clear picture. Here Decembrio was more forthcoming than humanists usually tended to be about the issues of truthfulness and deceit in history. In accepting Leonello's judgment as to the wisdom of detailing the prince's "secret and never to be mentioned vice," Decembrio also attempted to justify such an obvious *faute de goût*. "If I seem to you to have erred," he wrote, "I did so only that I might not err. Nothing is more reprehensible in a historian than lying. My fear therefore was that if I failed to mention these notorious things you refer to, my account would lack credibility when it came to treat the areas where my prince was deserving of praise and commendation. But since it seems to you more important to keep posterity in mind, I shall carry out the revisions, executing the task so subtly and concisely that my meaning will be intelligible without being explicit."³¹

³⁰ Decembrio, 2019, 250–51.

³¹ Decembrio, 2019, 250–55.

A subsequent letter proves that Decembrio did indeed carry out the promised revisions.³² The passages in chapter 46 as they read today represent the new version, corrected to Leonello's satisfaction. The whole process of negotiation, here encapsulated in the dealings between Decembrio and a prospective patron, offers insights into a number of issues. The tightrope Decembrio had to walk in taking on the biography of a contemporary prince had to do with needing to address a double audience. The challenge was that of maintaining credibility in the eyes of the living, while also respecting the requirements of decorum, especially with an eye to posterity. Those who would come after would presumably never be in a position to know what contemporaries knew. The humanist was expected to exploit this advantage through the rhetorical techniques of image manipulation, but how to do so without losing the confidence of contemporary readers? "Nothing is more reprehensible in a historian than lying." In Decembrio's view, the detection of a blatant lie would automatically result in a loss of credibility on other fronts: the intended work of history would be downgraded to the lowly status of mere adulation, and thus fail to convince contemporary readers.³³

The correspondence with Leonello shows Decembrio caught in a trap laid by humanism. The raising of the standards of history writing, so typical of the fifteenth century Renaissance,³⁴ complicated the task of those who dared to tread on the slippery terrain of the contemporary. The question was: how to reconcile competing demands? It is significant that Decembrio's way out of the dilemma involved shading his account just enough—so he thought—to satisfy both of his readerships, the present and the future. Open lying to present readers was forbidden, on penalty of being dismissed as a sycophant. But this did not preclude bending the truth, softening its contours to the point where decorum would be properly observed, truth respected, and posterity enlightened by an uplifting portrayal of exemplary, or near exemplary, conduct.

Decembrio accordingly took considerable pains to make sure that his biography would be acceptable to contemporaries, while at the same time being palatable to posterity. This is why, despite acceding to Leonello's strictures, he nevertheless refused to delete the references to his prince's illicit sexual practices: he clearly wished to be taken seriously as a historian, both in his own time and in the eyes of future generations. Being taken seriously as a historian meant

³² Decembrio, 2019, 254–55.

³³ For similar views, see Guarino Veronese's letter of 1446 to Tobia del Borgo, in Regoliosi, 31–33 (lines 75–106); cf. Schadee, 106; Peters, 426–27.

³⁴ The bibliography on the subject is vast. Convenient summaries include Baker, 2015; Fubini, 2013. For details, see Fubini, 1968, 542–59; Regoliosi; Fubini, 2003, 39–51, 93–130, 211–48; Helmrath, 193.

respecting the criteria set forth in the dictum of Cicero: “who does not know that the first law of history is not to dare say anything untrue, and the second is not to omit saying anything true, so that there will be no hint of prejudice either for or against your subject in what you write?”³⁵ In history as well as in biography, completeness was all. Failure to mention something as notorious as Filippo Maria’s penchant for bedding young males would amount to suppression of information. Such suppression would indicate authorial bias and disqualify any pretense a humanist author like Decembrio might have toward attaining the higher realms of *historia* as classically understood.

The requirement of completeness did not however mean total transparency, at least not in Decembrio’s eyes, or indeed in those of other humanists of his day.³⁶ Even Cicero has sometimes been misconstrued on this point. He does not lay down the rule that the aspiring historian must “tell the whole truth.” Rather he is concerned that there be no visible sign in the narrative of partiality, one way or another.³⁷ To this end, all that is known must be told. But the manner of the telling is left up to the historian’s judgment. The freedom the historian enjoys in the telling leaves open a fallback position that Decembrio is able to exploit: the prince’s secret vice must be mentioned for completeness’ sake, but it is permissible to allude to it in a considerably toned down form. There is no need to dwell on lurid detail. The scenes that presumably prompted Leonello’s objections to the first draft are accordingly dropped in the second and final version. Meanwhile just enough of the original is retained to preserve a semblance of fidelity to the historical record.

Decembrio’s remarks to Leonello go some way toward explaining the approach he adopted in writing the biography of Filippo Maria Visconti. If the objective was to produce a credible, suitably balanced portrait, then the man’s failings needed listing, along with his virtues. Such a program was perfectly in keeping with the example set by classical biographers like Suetonius and Plutarch, authors Decembrio particularly admired and wished to emulate.³⁸ Biography of this stamp is closer to historiography than to either panegyric or polemic. Within its confines the praise-or-blame modality is set aside in

³⁵ Cicero, 1988, 242–44 (2.15.62): “nam quis nescit, primam esse historiae legem, ne quid falsi dicere audeat? Deinde ne quid veri non audeat? Ne qua suspicio gratiae sit in scribendo? Ne qua simultatis?” My translation of this famous passage is slightly adapted from Woodman, 80. On the scant use of the *De oratore* during the medieval period and its return to prominence in fifteenth-century Italy, see Taylor-Briggs, 77, 101–06. Elsewhere Decembrio explicitly cites Cicero for the idea that “history loves and demands truth” (“historias, que veritatem, ut ait Cicero, et amant et exigent”): Hankins, 1990, 1:121n28.

³⁶ See, for example, Campano, 164; Ianziti, 57.

³⁷ Woodman, 81–83.

³⁸ Decembrio, 2013, 415 (lines 340, 355); Zaggia, 1993a, 193n106.

favor of pursuing an assessment of character, one that takes into account all the various features of a personality.³⁹

A significant indication of Decembrio's adherence to this approach occurs in chapter 50 of the biography. Having chosen Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars* as his model, Decembrio here comes to a staple item in the genre, the physical description of the subject. Rather than dress up an idealized portrait along the lines of so many Visconti panegyrists,⁴⁰ Decembrio tries instead to convey a more realistic picture of his prince's actual appearance: "He was an imposing figure of more than normal height. . . . He had a small nose, thick eyebrows, and a wide mouth. He had a weak chin, large jaws, and ears of average size. His neck however was rather thick."⁴¹ While to some extent patterned on Suetonian borrowings, this description contains enough originality to qualify as the verbal equivalent of Renaissance visual portraiture. One has only to consider the portrait of Filippo Maria (fig. 1) drawn in profile by Pisanello (1395–1455), presumably as a preparatory sketch for the bronze medal (fig. 2) he cast of the duke in 1441.⁴² Both the medal and the drawing vouch for the accuracy of Decembrio's description: the imposing figure, weak chin, small nose, and thick neck are all very much in evidence.⁴³ As if to underline the correspondence of his own description with that of the artist, Decembrio caps off his chapter with a remarkable statement. He notes that while Filippo Maria, sensitive about his physical defects, "never wanted to let anyone paint his portrait, that great artist Pisanello nevertheless created by a stroke of genius a living, breathing image of him."⁴⁴

This remark does not simply underscore the agreement of the portrait in words with the visual likeness; it also indicates a commonality of intent. Decembrio's objective too was to create a "living, breathing image" of his former master, one meant to portray Filippo Maria as he really was, in all his complexity and contradictions, while nonetheless respecting the standards of decorum called into play by Leonello. Recognition of his achievement was swift in coming. As a fitting reward, Leonello ordered Pisanello to cast a portrait medal of Decembrio, with the inscription "studiorum humanitatis

³⁹ Townend, 81; Wallace-Hadrill, 23–24; Albrecht, 325; Völkel, 30–31.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Filelfo, 1898, 5–7. After describing Filippo Maria as possessing a physique on a par with those of the greatest heroes of antiquity, Filelfo claims that "he outshines in beauty all other men, as the sun outshines the stars" ("ea est formae dignitate . . . ut non secus inter pulcherrimos solus luceat quam unius solis inter sidera splendor"). Unless otherwise specified, all translations in this article are my own.

⁴¹ Decembrio, 2019, 92–95. For the Suetonian antecedents, see 287–88.

⁴² Christiansen; Luciano.

⁴³ Hill, 125.

⁴⁴ Decembrio, 2019, 94–95.



Figure 1. Pisanello. *Filippo Maria Visconti*, 1440. Artwork in the public domain. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

decus” (glory of humane letters) next to his name, while the reverse side of the medal showed an open book, sometimes thought to represent a Bible (fig. 3).⁴⁵ More likely I think is the identification of the book as a generic representation of Decembrio’s prolific output as an author, something for which Leonello had genuine respect. Perhaps the book was meant even more specifically as a tribute to the biography of Filippo Maria itself, for both medal and biography figure together in Leonello’s next letter to the humanist: “I have finally managed to pry from the hands of the painter Pisanello the medal containing your portrait. I am sending it along with this letter, and keeping a duplicate for myself, so that you will see how much I value you and all that pertains to you. I am also exceedingly pleased with the correction you have made to your biography of Duke Filippo. For although what you wrote before was worthy of the historian in you, I consider this new version to be worthier still.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Hill, 179; Syson and Gordon, 118.

⁴⁶ Decembrio, 2019, 254–55.



Figure 2. Pisanello. *Filippo Maria Visconti*, 1441. Italian Renaissance Medals, Alberto Delitala Collection.



Figure 3. Pisanello. *Pier Candido Decembrio*, 1448. Italian Renaissance Medals, Alberto Delitala Collection.

One sees here that Decembrio's appeal to the duty of the historian to be truthful had not fallen on deaf ears. Leonello recognized the validity of history's truth claims: the prince's secret vice needed to be acknowledged. At the same time, he insisted on the principle of decorum as having a higher value. Truth was not to be served up raw; it required refinement and discretion if it was to function as a guide to future generations, a point Decembrio accepted with grace, and why not? Even the visual portraiture of the period—much admired for its realism—studiously avoided crudity: a profile view of Duke Filippo Maria like Pisanello's is, after all, only half true.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Woods-Marsden, 671; Weppelmann, 68–69.

THE MANY FACES OF TRUTH

The evidence so far examined suggests that Decembrio's concern in the biography of Filippo Maria was to develop a credible, if not entirely transparent portrait of his former master. Systematic denigration in any case was not on the agenda. Logic itself militates against such a hypothesis: What sense would it make to send a denunciation of darkest tyranny to a Renaissance prince like Leonello? Would such a hatchet job have won Leonello's praise? Would it have furthered Decembrio's hopes for employment at the Ferrara court, or at any Renaissance court for that matter? This being said, there remain the contents of the biography itself, and the long tradition of negative evaluation to which they have given rise. How does one account for the preponderance of tyrannical traits with which Decembrio invests the figure of Filippo Maria Visconti throughout the narrative? Was this imbalance caused by sheer clumsiness, or perhaps by the haste with which the biography was produced? Or was it simply an inevitable consequence of the biographer's commitment to historical accuracy, as Decembrio argued in the letter to Leonello?

It is first of all notable that Leonello singled out Decembrio's depictions of Filippo Maria's sexual depravations as the sole basis for his criticism of the work. What about the imprisonment and torture of political prisoners, the beheading of a wife, the extensive use of spies, the paranoia, the bodyguards, the sleepless nights, in short what about all the trappings of tyranny as classically defined and so carefully detailed in Decembrio's biography? These appear to have been of no concern whatsoever to Leonello. Does this mean he regarded them as routine matters of statecraft that would barely raise an eyebrow in his own time and would therefore do little damage to Filippo Maria's image in the future? Leonello was certainly no stranger to the ins and outs of courtly intrigue: he was unlikely to be shocked by features within the narrative that stacked up with the political practices of the period. More to the point however, both he and his father had known Filippo Maria Visconti personally, had dealt with him through diplomatic channels, and were fully aware of their powerful neighbor's quirks and obsessions. When reading Decembrio's biography Leonello must have been struck by its remarkably true-to-life character. In fact his letter to Decembrio begins with just this point: "I have read and reread your biography of Filippo Maria," he writes, "the work pleased me immensely, so vividly and accurately have you managed to capture the subject."⁴⁸

Vividness and accuracy were qualities a sophisticated reader like Leonello could appreciate. He could also associate them with the best exemplars of classical biography, and especially with Suetonius and Plutarch, favorite authors at

⁴⁸ Decembrio, 2019, 250–51.

the Ferrara court. It needs to be emphasized however that neither direct experience of the ducal personality, nor any particular literary sophistication were really needed in order to appreciate Decembrio's forthrightness: the bizarre behavior of the duke of Milan was already Italy's worst kept secret and had been broadcast from one end of Europe to the other. Rumors of the duke's secret vice were especially widespread, as both Leonello and Decembrio acknowledged in the letters cited above. The imperial chronicler Eberhart Windeck (1380–1440) reported in his *Memoirs* for example that while Filippo Maria Visconti for political reasons was forced to take a wife, "he did not love her; he preferred young boys."⁴⁹ The Florentine historian Giovanni Cavalcanti (1381–1451) was more explicit still, offering a much greater wealth of detail. Here is a portion of his account of Filippo Maria: "He was filthy with every conceivable vice and indulged in lascivious and shameful pleasures. He forever wanted young boys by his side, boys of around fifteen years of age. When in the mood, he would call for them to come stark naked to his ornate bed and make them submit one by one to every kind of depraved sexual act. He would often try to get his pageboys to submit to him as well, though sheer exhaustion would keep him in check. Basically, his need for sex was far greater than that experienced by ordinary men, and this led him to spend most of his time and energy in seeking to satisfy it."⁵⁰

Of course neither Cavalcanti nor Windeck were widely read before the nineteenth century, but this is not the point. The point is that both wrote from hearsay and both had, in their own ways, picked up and relayed gossip that must have been circulating at the time through various networks of communication, diplomatic and commercial. To put it bluntly, with regard to Filippo Maria's predilection for young males, the cat was well and truly out of the bag long before Decembrio began writing his biography. This left him little choice, having decided to take the high road of *historia*, than to touch on the matter.

Cavalcanti and Windeck represented camps that for different reasons were inimical to Visconti Milan: Florence in the first case, the Holy Roman Empire in the second. One might therefore conclude that both were eager to retail the worst they could find out about their enemy. But even writers closely

⁴⁹ Windeck, 95: "doch hatte er sie nit lieb: er hette die jungen knaben lieber."

⁵⁰ Cavalcanti, 135: "Il quale era immondo d'ogni cattivo vizio e si dava a' dilette lascivi e disonesti: sempre voleva allato a sé più giovinetti, da'quindici anni per insino, i quali ne'tempi dolci tutti ignudi in su 'n ricchissimo letto gli chiamava e ogni uno faceva stare paziente a ogni disonesto modo di lussuria l'uno all'altro; e spesse volte la pazientia de'valletti voleva ottenere, la quale, dalla fievolezza, il potere gli era negato, ma 'l disiderio aveva oltre agli altri grandissimo, e in questo spendeva non meno il tempo che la sollicitudine."

aligned with Milan and the Visconti can be seen to have owned up to the faults of their leader. A case in point is the Augustinian friar and Visconti apologist Andrea Biglia (1395–1435). In the early 1430s Biglia turned his hand to writing a history of Milan from 1402 down to his own day. This meant initially covering the breakdown of central power that followed the death of Duke Gian Galeazzo Visconti in 1402, then relating how order was gradually restored under the rule of his second son, Filippo Maria, and how the latter subsequently challenged rival powers Florence and Venice for hegemony in Northern and Central Italy. Biglia did not live to complete his history, which breaks off abruptly with the events of 1431. Although resident in Siena at the time of writing, Biglia was actually true blue Milanese, scion of a prominent and wealthy family. His account is informed by personal recollection as well as by what he was able to pick up from his contacts in Milan and elsewhere.⁵¹ From the present point of view what deserves emphasis is the way he presents Filippo Maria Visconti. While Biglia's narrative focuses mainly on political and military events, he can hardly help adding the occasional vignette. Despite his overall reticence, some of his asides provide glimpses into the dark world of Duke Filippo, glimpses that correspond to and corroborate the picture that would later be conveyed by Decembrio. Biglia too for example touches on the duke's taste for solitude, stressing that he carried his isolationism to extremes, so that he "eventually became an invisible presence; only on rare occasions could one approach him; for the most part his orders were received from afar, as if from a hidden oracle."⁵²

Suspicion, according to Biglia, was what drove the duke to such lengths: "having erected within his Milanese fortifications . . . a mighty citadel, there he dwelt, as if under prison guard, surrounded by sentinels who took turns watching over him."⁵³ Passages like these not only confirm features of the duke's personality highlighted by Decembrio, but also suggest that such oddities were known abroad. Nor are they the only features mentioned by Biglia that match up with Decembrio's account. One could list many others, including most sensationally the duke's beheading of his first wife, the Duchess Beatrice (ca. 1370–1418), charged with having committed adultery. Biglia's account of this event is so detailed, and so sympathetic

⁵¹ For details on Biglia, see Ferrai, 2005b.

⁵² Biglia, col. 60D: "Ipse praeter solitudinem diu coeptam, suspicionem quoque addidit vitae, ut jam nulli videretur, rarissimusque esset accessus in conspectum, ac tanquam ex oraculo illius mandata haberentur." Cf. Decembrio, 2019, 48–51, 86–87, 140–41.

⁵³ Biglia, col. 60D: "Exaedificata in Mediolanensi castro . . . arce munitissima, ibi velut in custodiam datus coepit vitam degere, adhibitis corporis custodibus, qui per vices cubiculum asservarent." Cf. Decembrio, 2019, 134–35.

toward an apparently innocent and even heroic Beatrice, that it became the stuff of lasting legend.⁵⁴ Decembrio therefore could not afford to ignore it. The best he could do was to fall back on the license the historian enjoyed in the telling. In the case of Beatrice, this meant painting the incident with different colors. Whereas Biglia's account had played on pathos and stretched out over several large folio pages, Decembrio's is as swift and brutal as the machinery of ducal justice: "With his wife Beatrice," he writes, "by nature a headstrong and grasping woman, the duke showed remarkable submissiveness at first, even admitting her to his sleeping quarters, eating the food she prepared, and allowing her to be present at his meals, as a kind of supervisor. Soon however, when she had been convicted of adultery, he had her beheaded, after first getting her to confess under torture."⁵⁵

Biglia's spinning of the tragic tale of Beatrice occupies a central place in his history, but what about the duke's penchant for young men? On this subject the Augustinian is understandably more restrained. There is only the barest allusion to rumors of such sinful pastimes, yet it is significant that even Biglia feels compelled to at least allude to the matter. He sees the rumors stemming from the duke's tendency to live in hiding, to embrace solitude, and to avoid as much as possible contact with other human beings. By adopting such a lifestyle, writes Biglia, "the number of his friends gradually dwindled, his involvement in the business of government ceased, and gossip began to crop up concerning certain of his other activities."⁵⁶ At this point, however, Biglia leaves the subject of the prince's sexual deviancies hanging in the air, stressing that his narrative will stick to relating the political and military history.⁵⁷ He refuses, in other words, to be led into an expanded enquiry into the duke's private life. Even so, enough information comes through to show that Biglia, like other contemporaries, was well aware of the flaws lodged in the prince's character.

Biglia's history did not remain a dead letter: it circulated widely, both in its own right, and as a source for subsequent historians. Biondo Flavio (1392–1463) recycled much of it in his own *Decades* (begun in the late 1430s, completed in 1453), including the sympathetic treatment of the

⁵⁴ Biglia, cols. 50D–52B; Crouzet-Pavan and Vigueur, 39–45, 83–84, 152, 256–64; Vaglianti.

⁵⁵ Decembrio, 2019, 60–61.

⁵⁶ Biglia, col. 60E: "Quippe natura super caeteros benignus omnem eo genere vitae humanitatem abdidit. Nec dubium ob eam rem et descivisse plerosque amicorum, et negotia cessavisse, et denique aliarum rerum precrebuisse rumores."

⁵⁷ Biglia, col. 60E: "Caeterum nos his literis, quae sunt publice gesta, consecramur."

Duchess Beatrice, and the references to Duke Filippo's "treacherous, dishonest, and vice-ridden conduct."⁵⁸ It is worth noting that Decembrio himself was among the first to read portions of Biondo's history: in early 1443 he and another important member of the Visconti administrative apparatus, Guarnerio Castiglioni, received drafts of the sections on the fifteenth century.⁵⁹ Yet another powerful figure in the Visconti administration, Simonino Ghilini, owned a copy of Biglia's history, which he probably shared with his chancery colleagues.⁶⁰ Decembrio in any case can be shown to have consulted both Biglia and Biondo for his biography of Filippo Maria.⁶¹ But again, this is not the point. The point is that long before Decembrio put pen to paper in 1447, a picture of Duke Filippo's human failings had entered Italian folklore, forcing Decembrio the historian to be as frank as possible about his subject's shortcomings. This did not mean conceding ground to the denigrators, nor did it mean idealizing in the manner of the panegyrists. Rather it meant taking into account what was already known, and retelling it from a somewhat different perspective. Because with respect to the preceding memorialists and historians, Decembrio had one major advantage, and that was his closeness to the scene of action. His quality as an eyewitness had the potential to endow his testimony with the ring of authenticity. This is no doubt the reason for his frequent appeals to having seen, heard, or experienced what he is describing.⁶² And yet the temptation to subscribe fully to his account of things must be tempered by information coming from other sources. A critical reading cannot lose sight of the fact that Decembrio's whole project is about seeking a balance between a frank portrayal and one that will help "spread his prince's fame and glory."⁶³

⁵⁸ Biondo, 398, summarizes Biglia, cols. 50D–52B, while at 420 he relays complaints about Filippo Maria, "apud quem nullus fidei, honesto, virtuti locus esset." On Biondo's use of Biglia, see Fubini, 1968, 544; Fubini, 2003, 215.

⁵⁹ Fubini, 1968, 543. On Castiglioni (d. 1460), see Decembrio, 2019, 291n129.

⁶⁰ Baroni, 410–11.

⁶¹ Cf. Biglia, col. 69B, on Filippo Maria's generosity in freeing his prisoner of war, Carlo Malatesta, in 1425 ("Ita denique . . . locupletem atque ornatum domum ad suos remittit" ["at last . . . he sent him home to his family, wealthy and well provided for"]); with Decembrio, 2019, 44–45, on the same event; and Biondo, 396, on the assassination of Giovanni Maria Visconti in 1412 ("Iohannes Maria minoris prudentiae adolescens, a civibus est trucidatus" ["Giovanni Maria, a young man of inferior political skill, was slain by the citizens"]); with Decembrio, 2019, 6–7.

⁶² Decembrio, 2019, 48–49, 70–71, 74–75, 114–15, 124–25.

⁶³ Decembrio, 2019, 252–53.

A KALEIDOSCOPIC BIOGRAPHY

One of the means by which Decembrio manages to reconcile these competing objectives has already been mentioned. It is well illustrated by the revisions carried out on the passages that treat the duke's homosexual activities. By minimizing detail and alluding rather than describing, Decembrio succeeds in softening the impact of such damaging information, while at the same time acknowledging its existence and enhancing thereby his credibility as a historian. Owning up to a modified version of the truth was arguably a stronger response than either denial or silence: so, in any case, ran the justification Decembrio offered in the letter to Leonello.

The same logic explains Decembrio's coverage of another black mark on Filippo Maria's record: the beheading of the Duchess Beatrice in 1418. Here too Decembrio clearly feels obliged to chronicle the event, but in so doing he reduces it to a minimum, according it only a few meager lines. Importantly, he also introduces a new element into the storyline: in direct opposition to Biglia's presentation of the duchess as the innocent victim of courtly intrigue, Decembrio has her confessing to her crime, albeit "under torture." This small change has a transformative effect, as it puts Filippo Maria in the clear. He becomes the wronged husband, whose vengeance falls into line with that exacted in other Northern Italian courts at around this same time.⁶⁴

The Beatrice passage shows that while Decembrio was ready to chronicle events that told against his man, he did so with the effect of ameliorating previous accounts. Here he undermines Biglia by portraying the duchess as a confessed adulteress. A question mark hangs over his contention. Did his closeness to the scene of action mean he knew more than his predecessor? Or was he tinkering around the edges, deliberately manipulating the facts in order to improve his prince's posthumous image? To this day historians remain uncertain as to whose version of the Beatrice story to believe.⁶⁵ In the absence of reliable documentation, all that can be said is that Decembrio's account sides with the duke and Biglia's with the duchess. For present purposes however, this is actually saying a great deal, because whether justified or not, Decembrio's corrections to Biglia are certainly not consistent with an interpretation of his biography as a tyrant narrative.⁶⁶ A perspective of this latter kind would presumably have entailed a much more lurid account of the Beatrice affair, with the blame apportioned accordingly. Instead of this, Decembrio delivers a reshuffling of the facts in the case, complete with a whitewashing of ducal conduct.

⁶⁴ Besides Beatrice, the list of princely wives beheaded for adultery includes Agnese Visconti (1363–91) and Parisina Malatesta (1404–25): see Crouzet-Pavan and Vigueur.

⁶⁵ Crouzet-Pavan and Vigueur, 39.

⁶⁶ For the killing of wives as a typical feature of tyrant narratives, see Luraghi, 2018, 18.

Sexual perversion and cruelty to wives were of course not the only vices commonly attributed to Filippo Maria Visconti in the fifteenth century. Decembrio also found himself confronted with a range of behavioral flaws that tarnished his master's reputation. One of the most notorious of these concerned the duke's inaccessibility and his tendency to live in hiding, a pattern of behavior commonly attributed to his obsessive fear of assassination. Contemporary perceptions on this point were considerably enriched by classical doctrine. According to the picture drawn by Xenophon for example, the typical tyrant is primarily a victim of fear: fear of being murdered leads him to become mistrustful of others, to shun crowds, and to seek safety in seclusion from the outside world. Eventually he comes to live in an entirely artificial environment, cut off from his people, surrounded only by bodyguards and flatterers. But even here he does not feel secure: he is if possible even more consumed by fear and suspicion than before; he can trust no one, has no friends, and no person he can confide in. He is, in short, the most miserable of all human creatures.⁶⁷

Xenophon's portrayal of the tyrant had become proverbial among Italian humanists with the wide circulation of Leonardo Bruni's early fifteenth-century translation of the *Hiero*.⁶⁸ The impact of this work on contemporary portraits of Filippo Maria Visconti should not be underestimated. Descriptions of the mysterious duke of Milan often blended hearsay with classical lore of a Xenophontic stamp. The previously mentioned historian Andrea Biglia had already noted in the 1430s how Filippo Maria ceased to visit Milan from early in his reign, how he tended to shut himself up in his castles, surround himself with courtiers, and studiously avoid any contact with his fellow citizens, all with disastrous consequences for the duchy as a whole.⁶⁹ But it was Biglia's former student, Enea Silvio Piccolomini (1405–64), who produced the most trenchant portrait of the duke of Milan as the quintessential classical tyrant. His description bears quoting:

Filippo Maria was so wracked by suspicion and fearful of meeting a violent death that he hardly trusted himself with himself. The sound of mice scurrying about the house could throw him into a panic, thinking his assassins had come to murder him. The sight of his own shadow often gave him a terrific fright. So he avoided human contact, even though he was otherwise of a kindly and high-minded disposition. But lo: those closest to princes have a stake in stirring up suspicions. They spread malicious rumors for the sole purpose of consolidating their own positions at court. "Take care, prince," they say, "in whom you place your trust; no one should be taken into your confidence without

⁶⁷ Plato, 2:338–41 (579d–580a); Xenophon, 19–22 (2.10–18); Luraghi, 2018, 19.

⁶⁸ On which, see Maxson; Baker, 2018.

⁶⁹ Ferrau, 2005b, 334–36.

careful scrutiny; for many hate you and long to see you dead. Your own brother was murdered. Who knows whether some hired killer is not seeking to enter your service? The best policy is to shut yourself up in the safety of your palace with a few reliable men. Avoid seething crowds: a prince who is too often seen by the populace ends up being an object of contempt.” And so it comes about that the pernicious influence wielded by courtiers turns princes—whose mission should be to serve the best interests of the community at large—into tyrants, neglectful of their public duties and prioritizing instead their own private pursuits and pleasures.⁷⁰

Piccolomini’s picture is an odd mixture of the particular and the general. Ostensibly about the duke of Milan, it also mobilizes classical baggage to uncover a pattern whereby even well-meaning and “high-minded” princes can—under the evil influence of courtiers—evolve into tyrants. Both the pattern of evolution and the definition of tyranny as a perversion of the true mission of government have strong classical roots. But the framing and the details—e.g., the reference to the assassination of Giovanni Maria Visconti in 1412—make it clear that classical theory is here being applied to explain how and why Filippo Maria became a tyrant.

Piccolomini’s description of Filippo has been compared to Decembrio’s,⁷¹ and the two obviously have much in common, even though they were produced at different times and appear to be quite independent of one another. More to the point however, it can be shown that while Piccolomini’s portrait follows a strictly classical, almost abstract formula, Decembrio’s is tempered by personal observations that often clash with and even undermine the stereotypical image of the tyrant as classically defined. Decembrio too for example gives considerable ground to the theme of solitude. His Filippo Maria fears assassination, and consequently lives behind a wall of armed bodyguards. Access to his person is

⁷⁰ Letter to Juan de Carvajal (1450), *Der Briefwechsel*, 2:171: “Erat autem Filippus suspicionum plenus mortisque formidans, vixque se sibi credebat. Sepe muribus domi cursitantibus, interfectores suos adesse putavit umbramque suam nonnunquam expavit. Conspectus hominum fugit, magnus alioquin, liberalitate et magnificentia clarus. Sed augent suspensiones, qui sunt principibus cari. Cunctos nanque mortales criminantur, soli ut in gratia perseverent. ‘Attende princeps,’ inquit, ‘cui te credas; nemini cito confidendum est; multi te odiunt cupiuntque perisse. Frater tibi occisus est. Quis novit, an conductus ad necem tuam aliquis servitium querat tuum? Optimum consilium est, ut paucorum sis utque domi te claudas. Tumultuantes fugias turbas; contemptui princeps est, quem sepe populus videt.’ Sic assentatorum perniciosus consuetudo principes, qui communitatis commoda querere debent, obliti suorum, tyrannos efficit, utilitati voluptatique proprie servientes.” On Carvajal (ca. 1399–1469), see O’Brien, 2019.

⁷¹ *Der Briefwechsel*, 2:171n.

strictly regulated. His places of residence are subject to close surveillance: no one gains entry without the proper authorization. Even in the seclusion of the inner sanctum the duke cannot feel safe. “He was especially fearful of being poisoned,” writes Decembrio, “so he had his servants carefully monitor one another’s actions: while one poured out and offered the wine, another would be stationed there as an observer.”⁷² But while passages such as these conform to the Xenophontic image of the miserable tyrant, other sections of the biography present an entirely different picture. Quite often the duke appears as an affable, fun-loving presence, relaxed in the midst of his retinue. He enjoys a good joke, lively conversation, and lighter forms of entertainment such as games of chance. During Milan’s long winters he takes part in snowball-throwing contests.⁷³ “In the summertime on the other hand,” writes Decembrio, “if he felt like resting, he would lie down in full view, wrapped up in a cloak, with a bandana to shade his eyes, and would turn himself to one side, looking for all the world like someone who was indulging in a moment of blissful meditation. Meanwhile his servants would be playing games nearby, but the racket they were making did not disturb him in the slightest. When the weather turned really hot he would often lie thus completely naked, with nothing to cover him whatsoever, while his servants looked on.”⁷⁴

Passages like this are hard to reconcile with the cliché of the classical tyrant fearful of his own shadow. Within the confines of the court at least, Decembrio’s Filippo Maria frequently comes across as a highly sociable creature. “Throughout his entire reign,” writes Decembrio, “he was never to be seen otherwise than clinging to some fellow or other as he ambled along.” He would often “grab someone to babble to, walking and talking at the same time.” His conversation would be “mostly about war, or about his dogs, or about the qualities of various birds and horses, or it veered into light banter.”⁷⁵ He sometimes entertained his entourage with snake shows, where “he would hold live serpents in his bare hands . . . the point being to frighten squeamish spectators and make others laugh,”⁷⁶ or he might “have his personal suit of armor hauled out of storage so that he could show it off to admiring crowds of onlookers.”⁷⁷

The question at this point becomes how to explain the coexistence of two contrasting pictures of Filippo Maria Visconti within the pages of the same

⁷² Decembrio, 2019, 104–05.

⁷³ Decembrio, 2019, 76–79, 112–13, 120–23.

⁷⁴ Decembrio, 2019, 104–05.

⁷⁵ Decembrio, 2019, 100–03.

⁷⁶ Decembrio, 2019, 122–23.

⁷⁷ Decembrio, 2019, 114–15.

biography: on the one hand the dark tyrant shrinking from human contact, on the other the amiable, talkative jokester prince. The answer, I believe, may partly lie in Decembrio's proximity to the scene of action. Having lived and worked at the Visconti court for twenty-eight years (1419–47), Decembrio naturally enjoyed a front-row seat from which to observe his boss's quirky behavior. He endured his master's mood swings, along with his occasional bouts of solitude, even daring to lodge the odd complaint within the pages of the biography itself.⁷⁸ But he also witnessed and wrote about the lighter moments. Is it any wonder that his portrait of Filippo Maria is nuanced, variable, perhaps even laced with contradictions? Decembrio after all was not known for his powers of synthesis. As a humanist author he tended to be a compiler. His prolific output, no less than 127 books, was achieved largely through his skill in cribbing content here and there, then weaving it into a more acceptable form of high-sounding Latin.⁷⁹ His secretarial duties followed a similar pattern, requiring that he put the thoughts of his superiors into finely honed prose. Unlike other humanist-secretaries of his generation, Decembrio never really developed into a distinguished producer of ideas of his own. He remained a transcriber of things heard and seen, a gift he shares with other great biographers.⁸⁰ His keen sense of observation and the ability to convey his impressions in striking language served him especially well. In the biography of Filippo Maria he faithfully recorded what he observed, noting everything down without worrying about overall consistency.

The princely portrait that emerges can be said to have a kaleidoscopic character in that it can be viewed from many different angles, and in many different configurations. There is no single overriding image, only facets of the duke's personality, none of which is necessarily more true than any other. All reflect Decembrio's personal experience at the Visconti court. A biography the work certainly is, but it is also a memoir of things glimpsed in the cloistered corridors of power. When Decembrio describes the duke pacing up and down in the rooms of his castle, the scene at once becomes unforgettable: "When he reached the end of the room he was walking in he would come right up to the wall, put his foot against it and give a little shove as he spun around and started back. Behind him would be one of his dogs, following in the footsteps of his master."⁸¹ Personal testimony of this kind not only distinguishes Decembrio's work from its more bookish classical model, Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*,

⁷⁸ Decembrio, 2019, 74–77, 124–25, 140–41, 269n7.

⁷⁹ Ditt, 57–58; Kristeller, 2:295.

⁸⁰ E.g., with James Boswell (1740–95): see Sisman.

⁸¹ Decembrio, 2019, 102–03.

but also frustrates any attempt to impose upon it any single overarching interpretation.

THE LOGIC OF WAR

In classical theory, tyranny is not simply a question of personal vice: it is also a mode of governance. The tyrant rules exclusively with an eye to his own well-being, and that of his immediate entourage. The pursuit of aggressive warfare is integral to such a program, because war rallies support, encourages patriotism, and enhances dependence on the leadership. A state of war legitimizes stricter controls over the citizenry. Those suspected of subversive activity are rounded up and punished with the utmost severity. The rule of the tyrant becomes thereby more secure. This is why under tyranny war becomes an enterprise without end.⁸²

At first glance, Decembrio's biography appears to correspond fairly closely to this pattern. War and warfare occupy a large proportion of the narrative. Filippo's wars begin with his seizure of power in 1412 and continue almost without interruption down to the end of his reign. His mind is "focused to the highest degree on military matters"; he holds his fighting men "in the highest esteem," and rewards them accordingly. War he regards as the very backbone of the state; without it nothing truly great can ever be accomplished. "It was his view," writes Decembrio, "that even the arts of negotiation and diplomacy were next to useless, unless they were backed up by a credible military machine."⁸³

As it turns out, however, war in Filippo Maria's thinking is not the product of a tyrannical mindset, at least not in Decembrio's telling. Rather, the prince's warlike activities stem from a power dynamic inherent in the nature of the Visconti state itself, destined as it was—by virtue of its traditions, wealth, and population—to become the dominant force in Northern Italy. Moreover, as Decembrio makes clear, the war-driven expansion of the Visconti state did not begin with Filippo Maria: it was a feature of the family's long history, arguably reaching its zenith with the conquests of Filippo's father Gian Galeazzo in the late fourteenth century. The paternal model is in fact never far from Filippo's mind as he attempts to replicate its successes. Even prophecy has a role to play in determining his career trajectory, for court astrologers consistently predicted that he was "destined to surpass by far the glory of his forebears."⁸⁴

⁸² Plato, 2:294–95 (566e–567a); Aristotle, 324–27 (4.8.3; 1295a), 462–65 (5.9.5–10; 1313b–1314a).

⁸³ Decembrio, 2019, 38–39, 114–15.

⁸⁴ Decembrio, 2019, 10–11. For the father as role model, see 18–19, 62–63.

The early chapters of Decembrio's biography are consequently devoted to describing Filippo Maria's wars. The military campaigns unfold in stages, beginning with Filippo's occupation of Milan then covering his reconquest of Lombardy, followed by the seizure of Genoa, and finally the decades-long series of wars fought against the combined might of Florence and Venice. In all of these conflicts Filippo Maria was the aggressor, and Decembrio does not shrink from labeling him as such. Consider his account of how young Filippo acquired Milan in the first place. The sudden death of his father in 1402 had been followed by the collapse of ducal authority. While nominal supremacy initially devolved to Gian Galeazzo's first son, Giovanni Maria (1388–1412), real power came into the hands of the unscrupulous mercenary captains who had up to that point served as the backbone of the Visconti armies. Foremost among these warlords was Facino Cane (1360–1412), who gradually secured for himself control over Milan and other key towns throughout the duchy. Filippo Maria meanwhile, as Gian Galeazzo's second son, was relegated to Pavia, where he pursued a life of leisure. When Facino Cane occupied Pavia as well, Filippo was further marginalized, falling into such a state of abandon that he could often be seen, according to Decembrio, "wandering about the city alone and conducting his affairs like any other private individual."⁸⁵

Decembrio next describes how in May 1412 Filippo was stunned to receive news of the assassination of Giovanni Maria, an event that coincided with the death of Facino Cane on the same day. The two strongmen of the duchy, one the nominal head, the other *de facto*, were no more. Milan now came under the sway of the leaders of the coup d'état, Estorre (1346–1413) and Giovanni Carlo (d. 1427), the son and grandson respectively of Bernabò Visconti (1323–85). These heirs of Bernabò saw themselves as rightful claimants to the Visconti succession and were determined to make good their cause. Their claim had some justification, because years before, in 1385, their father/grandfather Bernabò had been ambushed by his own nephew, that is by Gian Galeazzo Visconti. Bernabò's capture, imprisonment, and death brought to an end a power-sharing arrangement between uncle and nephew, the result being the concentration of authority in the hands of Gian Galeazzo alone. But the heirs of Bernabò had lived on to fight another day and were now, in May 1412, well positioned to reclaim their right to rule the duchy. After their successful plot against Duke Giovanni Maria, only Filippo Maria, Gian Galeazzo's sole surviving legitimate son, stood between them and total success.

Holed up in Pavia and more or less penniless, the twenty-year-old Filippo Maria watched on as these events unfolded. Decembrio describes him as

⁸⁵ Decembrio, 2019, 10–11.

being at this point “in dire need and fearing for his own life.”⁸⁶ At a loss as to what course to take, the young man lets himself be persuaded to marry Facino Cane’s widow Beatrice (1370–1418), a woman twice his age but who in the meantime had inherited her husband’s lands, armies, and vast wealth.⁸⁷ Suddenly finding himself in command of a mighty military force, Filippo Maria seizes the initiative, marches on Milan, drives out the heirs of Bernabò, and has himself proclaimed duke of Milan. He next moves his forces into position around Monza, where his political rivals have taken refuge. Bernabò’s son Estorre is killed in the ensuing battle, while the grandson Giovanni Carlo just manages to escape with his life.

Decembrio’s account of these events has a definite purpose: it aims to demonstrate that Filippo Maria’s obsession with war, weaponry, and military manpower had legitimate origins going back to the events of 1412. The narrative stresses that military might was the absolute prerequisite for Filippo’s coming into power in the first place: he alone, writes Decembrio, “of all the Visconti who had ruled from the beginning, . . . finding himself excluded from Milan . . . and devoid of all hope, was forced to seek supreme power through his own efforts.”⁸⁸ In fact, reports Decembrio, the military imperative did not fade away after the taking of Milan, but continued to occupy center stage in Filippo Maria’s thinking. Once in control of the city, Filippo “withdrew into solitude, turning his mind to higher aims, until at last he dropped all other concerns and hid himself away, focusing his thoughts exclusively on his war plans.”⁸⁹ In Decembrio’s narrative these words describe not, as might first have appeared to have been the case, the thoughts of Plato’s typical tyrant, but those of an enterprising prince in the making. Filippo’s aim is the restoration of Visconti control over Lombardy, a task he rightly reckons can be accomplished only by force, or threat of force. His efforts in this direction are crowned with success. They are universally hailed as a towering achievement. One by one the local potentates who had set themselves up across the region during the decade of anarchy are cowed into submission: Lodi, Como, Piacenza, Cremona, Brescia, Bergamo, and Parma all return to the Visconti fold.

As the war narrative continues, Filippo Maria outfoxes rival power Florence and occupies Genoa, a move that signals still larger intentions. Up to this point his ambitions might have appeared to be those of a regional player only. It now becomes clear that he is obsessed with a much grander idea: to fulfill his father’s dream of establishing Visconti hegemony over Italy as a whole. This larger plan

⁸⁶ Decembrio, 2019, 58–59.

⁸⁷ Covini, 2014, 110; Vaglianti, 92–93.

⁸⁸ Decembrio, 2019, 34–35.

⁸⁹ Decembrio, 2019, 12–15.

is destined to prove overly ambitious and is eventually thwarted by the combined action of Venice and Florence. War on two fronts is more than Filippo Maria can sustain, and at his death in 1447 Milan finds itself in danger of being overrun by the invading Venetian armies. Even so, Decembrio's narrative keeps the faith, depicting the duke in 1447 as far from beaten. With help on the way, "Filippo hoped," writes Decembrio, "to win either favorable peace terms, or else a complete victory over his enemies. And he might have achieved this goal . . . if death—as if begrudging him this final triumph—had not suddenly and unexpectedly put an end to all his plans."⁹⁰

Far from being critical of Filippo Maria's military adventurism, Decembrio celebrates its accomplishments. While in a later work he was to go some way toward acknowledging the realities of what was in effect a disastrous *fin de régime*,⁹¹ there is no sign of any such acknowledgment in his biography of Filippo Maria. On the contrary, Decembrio portrays Filippo in 1447 as a victor robbed of his final victory. He sums up his prince's military career in the most admiring of terms: Filippo Maria, he writes, "subdued the whole of Lombardy, from the Alps to the Tyrrhenian Sea, including Genoa, and even Emilia and Romagna. And with his wars and campaigns he laid waste cities near the Adriatic Coast, and Tuscany and Umbria as well."⁹²

In the archetypal tyrant narrative, the hubris of the excessively ambitious and warlike tyrant is eventually punished: nemesis ensues, bringing on the final reckoning.⁹³ But such is not at all the trajectory at work in Decembrio's biography of Filippo Maria. Instead, Decembrio depicts his prince as victorious from beginning to end. Such a portrayal is perfectly consistent with Decembrio's earlier work as an apologist for the Visconti war machine. His *Panegyric in Praise of Milan* (1435–36) ends with an upbeat account of the Milanese victory over the Venetians at Soncino in 1431.⁹⁴ His *Funeral Oration for Niccolò Piccinino* (1444) celebrates the deeds of Filippo Maria Visconti's leading military commander.⁹⁵ A lesser-known work, a *Comparison of Caesar and Alexander the Great* (1438), proposes a tendentious reading of a passage in Aristotle's *Politics* in order to support the Visconti case for pursuing aggressive war. Addressing Filippo Maria directly, and citing Aristotle's contention that human kind is naturally divided into masters and slaves, Decembrio argues that: "if the observance of justice means looking after the welfare of

⁹⁰ Decembrio, 2019, 32–33.

⁹¹ Decembrio, 2019, 204–05; cf. Covini, 2015, 87–93.

⁹² Decembrio, 2019, 34–35.

⁹³ Luraghi, 2015, 77.

⁹⁴ Decembrio, 1958a, 1023–25.

⁹⁵ Decembrio, 1958b.

human society, then it is no crime to use force to make men assume their proper place in the social order.”⁹⁶ War is but an extension of this principle, as it serves to decide who is the stronger party and thus who deserves to rule over the other. The result benefits human society as a whole, because might makes right and it is best for all that the stronger prevail over the weaker.

These ideas were not original: Decembrio simply copied them from the statements of other high-ranking officials.⁹⁷ They served as a platform for a larger program based on the belief that it was the Visconti family’s mission to pacify and rule Italy, by force of arms if necessary. The prosecution of war in this type of thinking had in any case nothing to do with classical concepts of tyranny. Again Decembrio can be called to witness. In the *Panegyric in Praise of Milan* he runs through Plato’s five types of government (aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, tyranny), classifying Visconti Milan as a timocracy. Given that aristocracy, the rule of the best men, is by Plato’s own admission an ideal type almost never to be found in reality, timocracy, the rule of honorable men, is the best government one can hope for. Decembrio then defines more precisely what he means by timocracy, describing it as being: “When a man eager to win honor and glory seizes power, not in order to deal out death and destruction to his people, but rather so that—by waging just wars in earnest and noble defense of his country—he might secure praise for himself and benefits for his fatherland.”⁹⁸ Not surprisingly Decembrio names the Visconti, specifically the former duke Gian Galeazzo and now his son Filippo Maria, as the most recent exemplars of such devotion to the common good.

The distinction drawn here between the tyrant, whose warmongering brings only “death and destruction to his people,” and the good prince, whose wars are

⁹⁶ Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS It. 2072, fol. 5^v: “perchè se l’officio de la iustitia è lo bene della humana societate regardare, non serà iniqua cosa la generatione humana a questo per forza incitare.” Decembrio is commenting here on Aristotle, 15–31 (1.2.3–23; 1253b–1255b), 37 (1.3.8; 1256b); cf., however, Aristotle, 610–13 (7.13.13–15; 1333b–1334a). On Decembrio’s *Comparison of Caesar and Alexander*, see Zaggia, 1993a, 205–07.

⁹⁷ See the argument in favor of war developed by Guarnerio Castiglioni in his letter to Decembrio of 22 November 1423: Decembrio, 2013, 97 (lines 44–54). The passage quoted above from Decembrio’s *Comparison* is a translation of lines 50–52 of Castiglioni’s letter: “Si . . . iustitie officium est bonum humane societatis respicere, non erit iniquum humanum genus ad hoc per vim cogere.”

⁹⁸ Decembrio, 1958a, 1017 (lines 13–15): “Cum vir quispiam honoris victorieque avidus principatum capit, non ut cuiquam violentiam aut necem inferat, sed ut ingenue belligerando rem publicam diligenter et egregie tuendo, sibi laudem, patrie vero utilitatem pariat.” The entire passage (lines 5–21) reprises an earlier statement by Decembrio’s father Uberto (U. Decembrio, 128–31 [2.23–25]), but adding a new emphasis on the role of the Visconti family: see Ferrà, 2005a, 448n25.

“just” in that they secure “benefits for the fatherland,” could not be clearer, with the Visconti obviously falling on the right side of the ledger. Equally clear by now too should be the thematic continuity between such earlier manifestations of Decembrio’s ideological commitments and the war narrative he develops in his biography of Filippo Maria.

TECHNOLOGIES OF POWER

Good government, in humanist thinking, is commonly associated with the ruler’s possession of a prescribed list of virtues. Foremost among these comes *iustitia* (justice), followed by a variable list of others, including *prudentia* (practical wisdom), *magnanimitas* (greatness of soul), and *modestia* (avoidance of extremes). Humanists never tired of urging Renaissance princes to practice such virtues as the surest way to win loyalty from their subjects, and earn respect abroad. The cultivation of virtue thus had an instrumental side, whose realization however required true possession, not a mere sham performance.⁹⁹

A prime locus for the development and deployment of these ideas were humanist-authored advice books, often addressed to the prince himself, or to his heir. Writings of this kind might be couched in treatise form, or presented in the guise of letters, memoirs, or dialogues. The precepts recommended therein were by no means original: they reflected classical discussions of virtuous government, and were replete with material derived from Plato and Cicero in particular. Decembrio’s own father, the renowned Lombard humanist Uberto Decembrio, authored an early example of this type of literature in 1422. His *Four Books on the Commonwealth: De Re Publica Libri IV* were heavily reliant on borrowings from Cicero’s *De officiis* and Plato’s *Republic*, the latter in the translation he himself had prepared with the help of Manuel Chrysoloras. Addressing Filippo Maria Visconti directly, Uberto argues throughout the *De Re Publica* for justice as the foundation of a stable, well-ordered society. The ruler’s role is to be the deliverer and guarantor of justice, here understood as the virtue by which “all the ranks of a city are preserved in a stable order, trust is inviolably upheld, and the love of all the citizens is maintained through friendly bonds.”¹⁰⁰

Pier Candido Decembrio was no stranger to such principles, as can be seen in his own meditations on the duties of a prince. The idea of the ruler as the embodiment and paragon of justice remains in place for example in a letter he addressed to Filippo Maria Visconti around the year 1430.¹⁰¹ “Happy the

⁹⁹ Hankins, 2019, 37–48, 296, 399–400, 622n51; Pedullà, XVIII–XXI.

¹⁰⁰ U. Decembrio, 90–91 (1.53).

¹⁰¹ Decembrio, 2013, 386–92; Simonetta, 49.

commonwealth,” he writes citing Plato, lucky enough to be ruled by a wise king.¹⁰² On closer inspection however, something has changed: the lineup of virtues still prioritizes justice, but the concept of justice now entails the notion of conquest through aggressive warfare.¹⁰³ The reasoning here is once again based on a tendentious reading of Aristotle. Filippo Maria’s wars are justified in that they have been undertaken not wantonly, but out of the purest of motives, for they aim to assure “that the worthier rule over the less worthy,” thus guaranteeing the best outcome for human advancement.¹⁰⁴ In short, even in the context of something approaching an advice book, Pier Candido shows a high degree of willingness to adapt the teachings of the genre to the circumstances of his day. After almost two decades of uninterrupted warfare, classical precepts on good government were beginning to bow to the dictates of fifteenth-century power politics.

It is nevertheless important to distinguish between humanist advice books of whatever persuasion, and the sort of exercise Decembrio is engaged in when writing his biography of Filippo Maria Visconti. In the biography Decembrio is addressing neither the prince, who is dead, nor his nonexistent successor. By the fall of 1447 the house of Visconti has become a thing of the past. City officials have set up a new constitution: Milan is now a self-governing polity. In a sense then, Decembrio the former prince’s secretary is writing *post res perditas*. His biography looks backward rather than forward. It is a retrospective work that has multiple aims, none of which correspond to the advice book obsession with teaching virtue. Rather, with respect to the conduct of government, the book largely bypasses questions of virtue and vice, focusing instead on the technologies of power that allowed Filippo Maria Visconti to rule over his state without interruption for thirty-five years, longer than any other comparable monarch of the period.

An example comes to hand in Decembrio’s description of the method Filippo Maria used in choosing his counselors. Humanist advice books followed classical precedent in recommending that appointments to high office be reserved for the worthiest men of the realm.¹⁰⁵ The careful selection of the best candidates marked out the just prince from the tyrant, the latter being inclined to assign offices to corrupt and rapacious cronies. In Decembrio’s narrative however, Filippo Maria Visconti’s way of filling offices falls into neither of these preordained categories. Instead, “his technique was to appoint honest men of great learning and then give them vile and morally corrupt colleagues.” “The

¹⁰² Decembrio, 2013, 387 (lines 60–61).

¹⁰³ Decembrio, 2013, 388 (lines 90–99).

¹⁰⁴ Decembrio, 2013, 388 (lines 95–96): “ut digniores minus dignis imperent.”

¹⁰⁵ U. Decembrio, 224–27 (4.15–20); Hankins, 2019, 244.

result,” continues Decembrio: “was that his administration became a kind of prison farm, stocked (if I may say so) with both tame and wild animals. . . . If the duke chanced to send envoys on a diplomatic mission, he chose men whose characters were diametrically opposed. And he used the same tactic with his secretaries, for he liked to pair up the best men with the worst, and the competent with the incompetent, even showing he preferred the latter to the former, in complete disregard of their actual merits.”¹⁰⁶

While this may sound like an abuse of power bordering on tyrannical cruelty, the opening and closing remarks of the chapter in question make it clear that such is not the case, at least not in Decembrio’s reckoning. If anyone had a right to complain about princely misconduct it was Decembrio, for as secretary and frequent envoy of the duke, he had often been on the receiving end of his master’s oddities. Yet here the title of chapter 34 *De Astutia Eiusdem in Deligendis Consultoribus* (His cleverness in choosing his advisors), and its incipit leave no doubt as to Decembrio’s admiration for the “remarkable shrewdness” shown by Filippo Maria in selecting his collaborators.¹⁰⁷ The reason lies in the logic that governs Filippo’s every move at court: mistrustful as he is of everyone in his service, he is consumed by a thirst for information. By filling offices with men of contrasting character, the duke hoped to create an atmosphere of constant conflict, with the result that he “would be amply informed about everything that was going on.” “What really mattered to him,” concludes Decembrio, “was that the secret vices and virtues of each and every one of his employees would be fully revealed, and would, so to speak, clash before his very eyes, so that he would come to know not just what each man was doing, but even what he was thinking.”¹⁰⁸

These remarks are not the only allusions to practices of this kind. Decembrio comes back to hammer the point time and time again, insisting that it was Filippo Maria’s habit to “deliberately stir up quarrels among his own men, in order to pry into their minds in every possible way and make it impossible for them to hide anything from him.”¹⁰⁹ “He used to say,” writes Decembrio, “that there was no one in his entourage who could keep a secret from him, for anytime he wanted he could shake it out of them, or, to use his own words, he could force them ‘to cough up what was eating them.’” Again, Decembrio’s incipit makes clear his admiration: he recognizes and even celebrates the touch of the master. “We know of no prince in history,” he writes in chapter 41, “so clever [*callidus*] in assessing the loyalty of his dependents that he could

¹⁰⁶ Decembrio, 2019, 50–53.

¹⁰⁷ Decembrio, 2019, 50–51.

¹⁰⁸ Decembrio, 2019, 52–53.

¹⁰⁹ Decembrio, 2019, 40–41.

outrank Filippo Maria in shrewdness [*astu*] and cunning [*calliditate*]. In this area the duke truly perfected techniques of the most exquisite and refined kind imaginable.”¹¹⁰

Decembrio’s celebration of his prince’s cunning (*calliditas*) stands in sharp contrast to the advice book tradition, where *calliditas* is presented as incompatible with justice, the prime requisite of good government.¹¹¹ As a regime insider and close observer of the workings of power, Decembrio is able to recognize and appreciate the intention behind his master’s methods. Filippo Maria is not indulging in the gratuitous cunning typical of the tyrant. He is rather busy harvesting information with a purpose: the data on his dependents once collected and stored within his inexhaustible memory, the duke will be able to retrieve and unleash it as required. Like others in the Visconti circle, Decembrio knows only too well the power such information confers: “Because the duke took careful note of the virtues and vices of those surrounding him, he could list the crimes and good deeds of each man, and tell you when and where the actions took place.”¹¹² Keeping tabs of this kind meant the duke could discipline those guilty of transgression at a time of his own choosing; consequently, many were those who were “struck down by their punishment before they even knew they had committed an offense.”¹¹³

Important to note here is that information at court flows in one direction only: toward the duke. His reach moreover does not stop at the walls of the palace, for as Decembrio reports, the duke “had in his employ quite a few men . . . whose job it was to fan out across the city and to observe . . . whatever was being said or done.” These spies “then relayed this information to the duke’s men, who in turn passed it on to the duke himself.”¹¹⁴ Meanwhile Filippo Maria is especially careful at all times to conceal his own thoughts behind a sphinxlike demeanor. “It was difficult,” writes Decembrio, “to catch him in an angry mood, . . . the one thing that betrayed his inner wrath was a vein that would swell up on his lower forehead.”¹¹⁵ Here again one enters new territory: humanist advice books like Uberto Decembrio’s *De Re Publica* followed Cicero in enjoining rulers to be transparent in their dealings with their subjects. A prince was urged not to deceive his people by concealing his designs behind a misleading façade.¹¹⁶ Yet under the

¹¹⁰ Decembrio, 2019, 66–67.

¹¹¹ See, for example, U. Decembrio, 150–51 (2.88): “scientia que a iustitia remota est calliditas potius quam scientia est appellanda” (“knowledge divorced from justice is rather to be called cunning than knowledge”); cf. Cicero, 1975, 64–65 (1.19.63).

¹¹² Decembrio, 2019, 106–07.

¹¹³ Decembrio, 2019, 70–71.

¹¹⁴ Decembrio, 2019, 106–07.

¹¹⁵ Decembrio, 2019, 70–71.

¹¹⁶ See examples in U. Decembrio, 96–97 (1.68), 150–51 (2.84).

rubric of *dissimulatio* (concealment), Pier Candido actually celebrates “the fact that Filippo Maria revealed his deepest thoughts to no one,”¹¹⁷ that he often expressed himself “in deliberately convoluted language,” that he constantly kept everyone guessing as to what his next move might be. In the field of *dissimulatio*, writes Decembrio, Filippo “was truly so incredibly astute [*astutissimus*] and sharp-witted [*sagax*] that, to quote an old saw, he might well have ruled forever.”¹¹⁸ The coupling of the two adjectives here applied to Filippo Maria, *astutissimus* and *sagax*, shows that Decembrio approves of the prince’s penchant for such extreme precautionary measures. This is because as a secretary by profession, and as a long-standing servant of the prince, Decembrio can appreciate the darker arts of secrecy, feint and surprise. Such practices correspond to a strategy of power seizure and conservation that is the obverse of what is imagined in humanist advice books, in which *dissimulatio*, *astutia*, and *calliditas* are presented as unworthy of a virtuous prince. And yet Decembrio here acknowledges the fact that these were the very qualities that brought Filippo Maria Visconti to power in the first place, and then kept him there for so long “that he might well have ruled forever.”

CODA

Decembrio’s biography is neither a tyrant narrative, nor a picture of the ideal Renaissance prince imagined by the humanists. Meant primarily to honor the memory of Filippo Maria Visconti, the work contains aspects of both traditions, yet cannot be accurately characterized as belonging to either. It lies somewhere in between. There are elements of Visconti panegyric, with chapters dedicated to the prince’s clemency, his fame, his devotion to his parents and family, and other standard themes.¹¹⁹ Alongside these however, and interspersed among them, one finds the less conventional elements on which the foregoing pages have focused. These include the acceptance of aggressive warfare as a legitimate policy tool, and the consequent need to prioritize military power as the foundation of the state. No less significant is the implicit questioning of the humanist belief in virtuous rule as a necessary condition of good government. In Decembrio’s narrative, princely qualities framed as vices within humanist advice literature (e.g., *astutia*, *calliditas*, *astus*, *dissimulatio*) become political virtues: it is largely due to their skillful deployment that Filippo Maria enjoys such a long and successful reign. Equally important, though not covered above for lack of space, are other features of the duke’s style of governance highlighted in the

¹¹⁷ Decembrio, 2019, 76–77.

¹¹⁸ Decembrio, 2019, 72–73.

¹¹⁹ Decembrio, 2019, 44–47, 62–65.

biography: his avoidance of half measures for example,¹²⁰ or again his relentless pursuit of political enemies, including the elimination of their offspring down to the second and third generation.¹²¹

All of these are signs of the power politics of the period coming to the fore in humanist literature. Even the high-sounding Latin of Decembrio's work, combined with its classicizing veneer, cannot hide the affinity his vision shares with the precepts later to be recommended by Machiavelli in *The Prince*. At one point Decembrio actually has Filippo Maria Visconti proclaim that the "security of his state" is dearer to him than the salvation of his soul.¹²² Prioritizing one's hold on power in this way was arguably an even more radical move than the coeval Florentine appeal to loving one's country (*patria*) more than one's soul.¹²³ Indeed, Decembrio's biography poses a broader question about the nature of the relationship between Machiavelli and his humanist predecessors. *The Prince* is frequently set off against humanist advice books, creating the impression of a definitive break with the humanist tradition. But Decembrio's portrait of Filippo Maria Visconti leads one to ask whether the practices first described in a systematic way by Machiavelli were not in force long before, and whether their implementation as policy was not already reflected in the humanist histories and biographies of the fifteenth century.¹²⁴

In Decembrio's case, three features appear to define a particularly incisive approach to princely biography. First, as a seasoned professional whose career unfolded in close proximity to the seat of power, Decembrio is privy to many secrets, and is willing to share them with his readers. Second, he is writing *post mortem principis*, in the immediate aftermath of the defunct Visconti rule, and thereby enjoys a much greater degree of freedom of expression than might otherwise have been the case. Third, his commitment to historical accuracy, a commitment he defends in the letter to Leonello d'Este, encourages him to depict his prince as he actually was, rather than as he ought to have been. The resulting biography is admittedly a *mélange* of many things: part apology for the fallen ruler, part personal record of things seen and heard, part panegyric. But it is

¹²⁰ Decembrio, 2019, 48–49, 66–69.

¹²¹ Decembrio, 2019, 72–73, 285n88; cf. the decree on *lesa maestà* of 1423 in Black, 142–43; Cengarle, 2014, 141–44.

¹²² Decembrio, 2019, 76–77: "statum vero dominatus sui saluti corporis et animae antefere." The word *status* here (*status*) refers not to the political community in the abstract, but rather—as in Machiavelli—to the prince's power over his dominions. On this latter sense of the word, see Pedullà, LXV.

¹²³ E.g., Machiavelli, 1962, 225 (*Istorie fiorentine* III.7); Machiavelli, 1961, 505 (letter to Francesco Vettori, 16 April 1527). But the saying was already prevalent in the previous century: see Pedullà, LXIX.

¹²⁴ As suggested by Fubini, 2009, 278–81.

also, and perhaps primarily, a description of the political strategies put in place by a contemporary prince to forge a lasting system of power. The biography evaluates these strategies with regard to their effectiveness alone, beyond questions of good and evil, and it is this transgression that signals the transition to political realism of a proto-Machiavellian type.

The same characteristic helps explain the sharp divide in the work's critical reception, a divide that was in evidence even during Decembrio's own lifetime. On the one hand stand critics like his rival at court, Francesco Filelfo (1398–1481). A prolific humanist and protégé of the late duke, Filelfo attacked the biography in 1456 for the way it supposedly heaped shame on a prince who deserved only the highest praise. And yet, wrote Filelfo, "that iniquitous, ungrateful wretch Decembrio," had shown no hesitation in spreading malicious lies about the man to whom he owed everything.¹²⁵ As late as 1473, Decembrio was still being called upon to defend himself against the charge that he had "paid insufficient attention to illustrating his prince's virtues, and accorded too much space to the depiction of his vices."¹²⁶ Decembrio's answer was to stress that of the ninety-seven works he had so far written, only the biography of Filippo Maria had attained wide circulation: "everyone knows it," he wrote, "everyone is reading it, and everyone commends it as an accurate portrait of the character and genius of that most worthy prince."¹²⁷

No doubt there was some exaggeration here. Yet it was true that Decembrio's biography aimed to portray a real prince, rather than an idealized one. The point of the exercise was to delineate the duke's peculiar habits and character traits, in the manner of Suetonius, and to illustrate his political ingenuity. To the extent this was possible within the constraints imposed by frameworks of patronage and propriety, the operation can be judged to have been a success. For even as Filelfo and his like raged against Decembrio's violation of standing codes of decorum, the work found an appreciative readership, particularly among the front rank of humanist secretaries and bureaucrats that formed its primary target audience. In Aragonese Naples for example, the officially appointed court historian Bartolomeo Facio (ca. 1410–57) recycled aspects of Decembrio's biography to compose his own thumbnail sketch of Filippo Maria

¹²⁵ Filelfo, 2015, 77, (4.23–29); Filelfo labels Decembrio a man "quo ingrator inter Cisalpinias nemo est nec iniquior urbes" (4.23–24).

¹²⁶ Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS 834, fol. 39^r, letter in which Decembrio tells of an influential person: "me minus clare virtutes illius principis scripsisse dictitans, vitia nimis ample et aperte retulisse." For details on this manuscript, see Sverzellati, 441–52.

¹²⁷ Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS 834, fol. 39^r: "Nam cum in presentem usque diem libros nonaginta septem palam ediderim, unicum principis illius vite toto orbe vulgatum norint omnes, legunt et commendant, quasi mores et ingenium dignissimi principis continentem." Cf. Simonetta, 48n44.

Visconti.¹²⁸ So too did the former imperial secretary and soon-to-be pope Enea Silvio Piccolomini, who used the opportunity provided by his *De Europa* (1458) to revise his earlier assessment of the duke of Milan as a Xenophontian tyrant.¹²⁹ Both Facio and Piccolomini now recognized that Filippo's shrewdness (*calliditas*) endowed him with considerable advantages in dealing with friends and adversaries alike. Both historians acknowledged the duke's supreme ability as a master of deceitful cunning, using the same terminology as Decembrio, later to be made famous by Machiavelli, to characterize Filippo Maria as "an expert practitioner in the fine arts of dodge and feint" ("simulandi et dissimulandi egregius artifex").¹³⁰ Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) joined the chorus. Like the others, he too described the last Visconti duke in terms that unmistakably reveal his reading of Decembrio's biography. Filippo Maria was far from being a perfect specimen of human virtue, yet he possessed qualities that made him a formidable antagonist in the early fifteenth-century Florentine wars with Milan. The recurring adjective to be found wherever the duke's name pops up is *callidus*: Filippo Maria was, writes Poggio, both "shrewd and sharp-witted" ("callidus et ingenii sagacis").¹³¹ The teaming up of *callidus* and *sagax* here echoes an earlier formulation by Decembrio, and points ahead to Machiavelli's similar combination of wisdom and cunning as requisite qualities in any prince who hopes to rule successfully.¹³²

Men like Facio, Piccolomini, and Poggio all shared one thing with Decembrio: they were humanists whose career activities were not limited to the literary sphere. Immersed in the political machinations of the turbulent fifteenth century, they did not blanch in the face of the realities imposed by challenging circumstances. All three knew Decembrio personally and were favorably disposed toward him and his work.¹³³ All three wrote contemporary histories

¹²⁸ Facio, 2004, 182. Decembrio was resident at the court of Naples in 1451–52, and again for three years beginning in 1456: see Borsa, 378–79, 387–92.

¹²⁹ Piccolomini, 446–47. Piccolomini's description of Filippo Maria here incorporates elements from both Decembrio and Facio. For the personal relationships between the three men, see Piccolomini, 778, 784; Facio, 1745, 106–08; O'Brien, 2015, 202.

¹³⁰ Decembrio, 2019, 72–73; Machiavelli, 1960, 73 (*Il Principe*, chapter 18).

¹³¹ Bracciolini, 1715, 240.

¹³² Decembrio, 2019, 72–73; Machiavelli, 1960, 87 (*Il Principe*, chapter 10), on which see Stacey, 217, 217n47.

¹³³ Facio, 1745, 24, included Decembrio in his catalogue of the most eminent men of the century. Shortly after becoming pope as Pius II in 1458, Piccolomini appointed Decembrio to a position as secretary in the Curia: Hilary, 701. Poggio praised Decembrio as "a man of outstanding genius and learning, a paragon of every virtue" (Bracciolini, 1538, 184: "virum ingenio et doctrina praestantem, omnique virtute accumulatum").

that to one degree or another demonstrated the same flexibility and openness, the same acceptance of new norms of behavior that typified Decembrio's assessment of Filippo Maria Visconti.¹³⁴ But it was not their view that was to prevail in the reception history of the biography. On the contrary, their views have until now remained a submerged undercurrent. What transpired instead was a resurfacing in the sixteenth century of the accusations that had plagued Decembrio from the beginning. The authoritative voice here was not Filelfo but rather one of the leading lights of the Italian and European literary scene in the mid-sixteenth century, Paolo Giovio (1483–1552).

Two of Giovio's works are relevant: his *Portraits of Famous Men of Letters* (1546), and his *Lives of the Twelve Visconti* (1549). The first reveals that while Decembrio's biography of Filippo Maria was still not available in print, it was nevertheless circulating in manuscript almost a century after its initial appearance.¹³⁵ One reason for this, noted Giovio, was the work's high level of literary polish, especially evident in its elegant use of the Suetonian model. An aficionado and connoisseur in his own right, Giovio could easily approve of such a stylistic choice. But he had serious objections concerning the contents of the biography. These objections turned on the same points that had been raised by Filelfo: Decembrio stood accused of having "wielded his pen with somewhat less restraint than would become an unprejudiced writer" and of having "laid bare with unseemly eagerness and malice the hidden vices of his prince," vices which it were better not to have mentioned at all.¹³⁶ Giovio repeated these same accusations three years later in the penultimate chapter of his *Lives of the Twelve Visconti*. Here again he characterized Decembrio as a writer trapped in the throes of bias and "swollen with unjustified bitterness" against his prince. Reasons unspecified had led the secretary to turn against his former master, and to demolish Filippo Maria's reputation by "omitting the praise that was his due, and instead shining a spotlight on his vices."¹³⁷

Prejudice either for or against was of course exactly what Decembrio had tried to avoid. He had set out hoping to convey in descriptive mode the "living, breathing image" of a prince he professed to admire and even love. But only a

¹³⁴ Schadee, 105–08; O'Brien, 2015, 203–11; Fubini, 1990, 227–29, 259–63, 290–98, 301–02.

¹³⁵ Giovio, 1577, 19. For details on this work, see Zimmermann, 206–07.

¹³⁶ Giovio, 1577, 19: "ita quod proposuerat expressit, ut aliquanto inverecundius, quam scriptorem odio vacuum deceret, stylum exercuisse iudicetur, quum vitia hominis occulta, nec ulli magis quam ipsius pudori nocentia, ob idque velanda prorsus, cupide nimis, maligneque detexerit." Translation adapted from Giovio, 1935, 43.

¹³⁷ Giovio, 1549, 186: "Sed eam voluptatem Candidus December illius aetatis scriptor iniquo felle turgidus, quum omissis laudibus quae in Philippo celebrandae fuerant, vitia notaret, ad suspicionem libidinis revocavit." For details on this work, see Zimmermann, 165, 224.

happy few appear to have caught his meaning. It little mattered that these few were men of stature like Leonello d'Este, Bartolomeo Facio, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Poggio Bracciolini. The Filelfo-Giovio line of interpretation came to prevail throughout the following centuries, while the alternative slipped into the background. Perhaps the time has now at last come for a reappraisal of Decembrio's text and others like it.

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