

*The neo-Latin historical epics of the north
Italian courts: an examination of 'courtly
culture' in the fifteenth century*

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Neque enim quisquam est tam aversus a Musis qui non mandari versibus
aeternum suorum laborum facile praeconium patiatur.

Cicero, *Pro Archia poeta*, IX, 20

Much has been done in recent years to qualify the notion first set forward by the great German historians of the nineteenth century that during the Renaissance interesting events occurred in only three places: Florence, Venice or Rome. Having said that, however, it is still true that many recent historical and art-historical studies of the smaller Italian cities such as Ferrara, Mantua, Urbino or Milan suffer a prejudice stemming from the nineteenth century: namely, the belief that these cities, by exclusion, are somehow analogous to one another. One popular practice is to represent the smaller urban capitals of fifteenth-century Italy as if they were interchangeable parts of a larger whole, sharing similar cultural traits, attitudes and ambitions. The framework seen binding these cities together is their comparable forms of government, which in most cases were monarchical or oligarchical, the leader or leaders ruling largely by means of a rather tightly-knit court system. The structure of a 'courtly' system of government is cited as the common factor, the shared 'trait' indicating the essentially similar 'character' of the different cities. The intellectual context for these suppositions is structuralist literary criticism, a context, I would argue, particularly ill-suited to historical research. Despite the modern rephrasing, however, the premise of this recent attempt to rearrange the north Italian city states into a single conceptual unit remains a reflection of the historiographical prejudices inherited from the nineteenth century. The new historians have sought to redefine the smaller cities as parts of a larger phenomenon in order to avoid the embarrassing question of whether any one of them on its own is sufficiently 'important' to merit historical examination.

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The alignment of the smaller city states of northern Italy into a single conceptual block may be useful to political historians, but it is particularly pernicious to those disciplines whose relation to 'pure history' is less easily measured – the disciplines of cultural, intellectual and art history. The relationship between historical fact and cultural artifact is complex and multi-faceted. The reduction of historical individuation causes a proportionate destruction of the tenuous links between a society and its culture. Effectively, the concept of 'the court' has functioned as a great equalizer. Individual differences in demography, geography and the changing political alliances which made the collective inhabitants of each town unique are eclipsed by the idea that all the north Italian courts generated an identical 'courtly culture'.¹ But to what extent is 'courtly culture' a definitive or constant factor? Did these centres share common traits in their patronage and attitudes towards the arts?

The scanty remains of north Italian quattrocento painting and sculpture makes it virtually impossible to reach any sensible conclusions regarding questions of patronage or taste. Despite this fact, however, the positivistic nature of art history as a discipline has nurtured the belief that sufficient amounts of disparate material can be used to form 'composite history'; the assumption being that a lack of truly comparative material can be overcome by means of a method based on the intuitive association and amalgamation of disparate bits and pieces of information. Art historians have welcomed the idea of 'courtly culture' since it offers a convenient umbrella under which similarity and homogeneity are stressed, while differences are glossed over. For example, Mantegna's paintings in the *Camera degli Sposi* or the calendrical frescos in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara are repeatedly cited by art historians as visual approximations of lost paintings originally in Ferrara, Bologna, Pavia or Milan, whose existence is known only through written records. But verbal and visual documents do not provide similar sorts of information. Verbal descriptions of works of art are notoriously inadequate in their ability to convey the style and spirit of a painting. It is impossible to judge what a fifteenth-century painting or fresco cycle might have looked like from a contemporary verbal description. The language for describing anything but the subject matter of paintings simply did not exist.² Comparisons with extant

¹ In this sense, 'courtly culture' functions as yet another historian's 'lump'. See Hexter's illuminating categorization (following Donald Kagan) of all historians as either 'splitters' or 'lumpers' in J. H. Hexter, 'The burden of proof' (Review: C. Hill, *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England*, London, 1975), *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 3841, 24 October 1975, 1250-2. I thank Gordon Campbell for this reference.

² Nor, it seems, did the desire to describe works of art feature prominently in the interests of the fifteenth-century nobleman. See, for example, Sforza Maria Sforza's letter of 23 August 1468 to his brother, Galeazzo Maria, in which a description of the *Salone dei Mesi* is abandoned under the pretext that 'la excellentia vostra ne assay meglio informata che mi per haverli veduti molte volte' (Milan, Archivio di Stato, *Sforzesco*, 1481). I thank Evelyn Welch for this reference.

works only compounds the confusion, offering false cognates and unreliable reference points. And if it is impossible to arrive at a completely clear understanding of what certain works of art might have looked like, how can we then go on to discuss questions relating to more abstract issues, such as taste and patronage?

There is one realm which contains sufficient material to permit an examination of the patterns of patronage in the different courts of northern Italy. Shortly after 1450, for reasons still not altogether clear to me, a number of humanist poets began to write Latin epics. This in itself was nothing new. Petrarch had creditably rejuvenated the form with his poem *Africa*, begun in 1338 or 1339 and provisionally finished in 1343.³ But whereas Petrarch had respected traditional decorum by basing his neoclassical poem on the classical figure of Scipio Africanus, the later humanists constructed their efforts around protagonists and events taken from contemporary local history.

The format of the Renaissance historical epic is fairly consistent.⁴ The primary literary touchstone for the structure and poetic style of the poems is Virgil's *Aeneid*, Homer's *Iliad*, the *Thebiad* of Statius and the *Punic Wars* of Silius Italicus are also used, but more often as sources for isolated phrases, images and allusions. The content of the epics is taken from the recent past, historical events are aggrandized and contemporary figures recast in heroic guise. Usually there is the strong presence, if not the active intervention, of classical deities; and epic devices such as dreams, visions and the 'story set within a story' are used to provide explanations for actions that fall outside the chronology of the tale. By 1475, epics had been written on the lives of Francesco Sforza, Borso d'Este, Federico da Montefeltro, Lodovico Gonzaga, Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, and Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici.⁵ The fashion seems to have been pervasive. This might lead one to suggest that between 1450 and 1475,

³ Francesco Petrarca, *L'Africa* [edizione critica], ed. N. Festa (Florence, 1926). For an English translation, see *Petrarch's Africa*, trans. and annot. T. G. Bergin and A. S. Wilson (New Haven, Conn. and London, 1977). See also N. Festa, *Saggio sull'Africa del Petrarca* (Palermo and Rome, 1926); G. Martellotti, 'Sulla composizione del *De viris* e dell'*Africa* del Petrarca', *Annali della R. Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Lettere, storia e filosofia*, 2nd series, 10 (1941), 247-62; A. S. Bernardo, *Petrarch, Scipio and the Africa: The Birth of Humanism's Dream* (Baltimore, Md, 1962); J. Foster, 'Petrarch's *Africa*: Ennian and Vergilian influences', *Papers of the Liverpool Latin Seminar*, 2 (1979), 277-98, and V. Fera, *Antichi editori e lettori dell'Africa* (Messina, 1984).

⁴ See K. Borinski, 'Das Epos der Renaissance', *Vierteljahrbuch für Kultur und Litteratur der Renaissance*, 1 (1886), 187-205; A. Belloni, *Il poema epico e mitologico* (Milan, 1912); V. Zabughin, *Vergilio nel Rinascimento italiano da Dante a Torquato Tasso (Fortuna. Studi. Imitazioni. Traduzioni e parodie. Iconografia)* (Bologna, 1921-3); B. Zumbini, 'Dell'epica cristiana, italiana e straniera e particolarmente dei poemi del Vida e del Sannazaro', in *Studi di letteratura comparata* (Bologna, 1931), 39-86; M. A. Di Cesare, *Vida's Christiad and the Vergilian Epic* (New York, 1964), esp. pp. 51-7 and 73-86.

⁵ In addition to the *Hesperis*, *Sforziad*, and *Borsiad* discussed here, a partial list of neo-Latin historical epics based on the life of a particular ruler includes: Porcellio Pandoni's *Feltriad* (for Federico da Montefeltro); Gian Pietro Arrivabene's *Gonzagiad* (for Lodovico Gonzaga); Antonio Cornazzano's *Sforziad*; G. M. Filelfo's *Cosmiad* (Cosimo de' Medici), *Lorenziad* (Lorenzo de'

having one's deeds immortalized as the subject of an epic poem stood fairly high on the list of activities by which a princely patron defined himself. That is, of course, if one could prove that the wishes of the prince had any direct bearing on the matter.

The Renaissance historical epic appears simultaneously in two different courts. In a letter dated June 1451, Francesco Filelfo claims to have finished the first book of a work 'in heroic verse whose subject is Italy (*res italicae*), especially those matters in praise of the Sforza; accordingly, the title of this work is the *Sforziad*.'⁶ Work on the *Sforziad* proceeded slowly. Filelfo's original plan was that the *Sforziad* would consist of twenty-four books. The first four books were finished in 1455, a further four in 1463. An additional three books remain in an unfinished form. Apparently, he progressed no further. The extant manuscripts of the *Sforziad* have yet to be published.⁷ In the meantime, in Rimini, the poet Basinio Basini da Parma had begun and finished his epic poem for the *condottiere* Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta. One might argue that since both poems seem generated by similar circumstances within comparable milieux – begun at the same time by academic contemporaries and both based on the military exploits of fifteenth-century north Italian *condottieri* – the works themselves should share a common tone and quality, or even a similar 'message'. Interestingly, this is not the case.

Basinio was born in 1425 in the small mountain town of Vezzano near Parma, the son of a Mantuan soldier who had served under Ottobone dei Terzi.⁸ He was educated, for the most part, in Mantua at the school of Vittorino da Feltre, probably remaining there until Vittorino's death in 1446. He continued his Latin studies in Ferrara under Guarino da Verona,

Medici), *Martiad* (Federico da Montefeltro) and *Amyris* (Mahomet II, Sultan of Turkey, commissioned by Othman Lillo Ferducci); Giovanni Battista Cantalicio's *Borgiad* (Giovanni Borgia); Marco Girolamo Vida's lost *Felsinead* and the *Juliad* (both for Pope Julius II [della Rovere]) and Camillo Querno's *Alexiad* (Pope Leo X [de' Medici]). The list does not include the innumerable historical epics celebrating battles, important events or Christian heroes. A good résumé of the last category can be found in Di Cesare, *Vida's Christiad*, 73–86.

⁶ *Francisci Filelfi viri graece et latine eruditissimi Epistolarum familiarum, libri XXXVII . . .* (Venice, 1502), bk ix, fol. 65^r (Petro Tomasio, ex Mediolano pridie Idus Iunias M.cccc.li.): 'Ego res Italicas versu heroico sum agressus, praesertim eas quae Sphortianae laudis intersunt. Itaque poseos huius inscriptio est Sphortias.'

⁷ For a summary of the history of the *Sforziad*, see G. Giri, 'Il codice autografo della *Sforziade* di Francesco Filelfo', *Atti e memorie delle R. Deputazione di Storia Patria per le province delle Marche (Centenario di Francesco Filelfo)*, 5 (1901), 421–57.

⁸ See P. I. Affò, 'Notizie intorno la vita e le opere di Basinio Basini', in *Basini Parmensis poetae opera praestantiora nunc primum edita et opportunis commentariis illustrata*, ed. L. Drudi (Rimini, 1794); Ch. Yriarte, *Un condottiere au XV^e siècle. Rimini. Etudes sur les lettres et les arts à la cour des Malatesta* (Paris, 1882), 255–9; C. Tonini, *La cultura letteraria e scientifica in Rimini del secolo XV ai primordi del XIX* (Rimini, 1884), 1, 100–8; B. Soldati, *La poesia astrologica nel quattrocento. Ricerche e studi* (Florence, 1906), 74–104; F. Ferri, *La giovinezza di un poeta, Basinii Parmensis carmina* (Rimini, 1914); F. Ferri, *Le poesie liriche di Basinio (Isottaeus, Cyris, Carmina varia)* (Turin 1925), and the entry on Basinio by A. Campana in the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (Rome 1965), VII, 89–98.

where he was registered as a *magister* and *grammaticus* in 1448-9.⁹ He is also described as a 'maistro de poitria' in a payment dated 23 August of the same year.¹⁰ In Ferrara, Basinio began an intense study of Greek under the tutelage of Theodore Gaza. Benedetto Soldati describes Gaza as possessing the ability to infuse his student with a passion for Greek literature, and it was certainly his influence which was responsible for Basinio's first attempt at Homeric imitation, the *Melagris*, a three-book poem recounting the fable of Meleager and the Calydonian Boar, written between 1448 and 1449 and dedicated to Leonello d'Este.¹¹ Basinio served Leonello not only as a poet, but also appears to have played a role in the Estense bid to take over those portions of the Parmense which had been left vulnerable by Filippo Maria Visconti's death in 1447. In 1449 Basinio fought with the Estense-backed troops led by Niccolò Guerriero dei Terzi (son of Ottobone) against the Rossi-led Milanese forces at the Castello Guardasone. But when Francesco Sforza acceded to power in March 1450, Ferrara became a significantly less safe haven. Sometime between July and October 1450 Basinio fled to Rimini where he was warmly welcomed by Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta and where he remained until his death in 1457.

On the level of plot, Basinio's epic poem, entitled the *Hesperis*, records a series of military skirmishes between Sigismondo, fighting on behalf of the Florentine government, and the successive kings of Naples, Alfonso and Ferrante d'Aragona.¹² Conceptually, however, the poem is presented as an Italian national epic with Sigismondo as the defender of Italy against the foreign invasion of, as Basinio calls them, 'the Celts'. The poem opens, characteristically, with a description of how Olympus has been torn asunder by the recent wars in Italy. Jupiter orders Mercury to urge Sigismondo, via a dream sequence, to reunite the Latin people against the invaders and end the war. Armour is made for him by Vulcan and Mars, and the special favour of Juno is promised should he prove victorious. Books I-III detail Sigismondo's battles against Alfonso. Books IV and V provide a lengthy digression into the previous crimes of the

⁹ See F. Borsetti, *Historia almi Ferrariae gymnasii* (Ferrara, 1735), II, 30; G. Voigt, *Die Wiederbelebung des classischen Alterthums oder das erste Jahrhundert des Humanismus*, 2nd edn, ed. M. Lehnerdt (Berlin, 1893), I, 565; G. Pardi, *Lo studio di Ferrara nei secoli XV^o e XVI^o con documenti inediti* (Ferrara, 1903), 177, and Campana, *DBI*, 90. Campana notes that there is no reason to believe that Basinio held his position at the Studio. Since the documents only list him as teaching grammar, it is more likely that he taught at the communal 'primary' or 'grammar' school.

¹⁰ See G. Bertoni, 'I maestri degli Estensi nel Quattrocento', *Arch Romanicum*, I (1917), 58-72, esp. pp. 69-70; G. Bertoni, *Guarino da Verona fra letterati e cortigiani a Ferrara (1429-1460)* (Geneva, 1921), 82 and 88-89, and Campana, *DBI*, 90.

¹¹ Soldati, *La poesia astrologica*, 78-80. The three books of the *Meleagris* are edited in *Basini Parmensis poetae opera*, I, 345-447.

¹² The work has been edited in *Basini Parmensis poetae opera*, I, 1-288. See also Affò, 'Notizie', in *Basinii . . . opera*, II, 31-5; Belloni, *Il poema epico*, 92-100; Zabughin, *Vergilio nel Rinascimento*, I, 287-93, and O. Pächt, 'Giovanni da Fano's illustrations for Basinio's epos *Hesperis* with two appendixes by A. Campana', *Stud Romagnoli*, 2 (1951), 91-111.

Aragonese against Italy. Book VI describes Sigismondo's triumphal entry into Florence. The following five books centre on Sigismondo's voyage to the mythical 'insula fortunata' in order to consult Psyche, the daughter of Zephyrus, who will teach him how to conquer the Celts. Unfortunately, he fails to make the proper libations to Neptune and his fleet is shipwrecked off the coast of Ethiopia. Whilst there, Sigismondo dreams of Psyche, who appears to him in the guise of his mistress Isotta degli Atti. He enters the court of Zephyrus and visits the Temple of Fame. Isotta/Psyche finally leads him to the Elysian Fields, where he meets his ancestors who urge him to continue his quest and to save Italy from the Barbarians. The final three books of the poem recount Sigismondo's ultimate victory over Ferrante d'Aragona.

Basinio's *Hesperis* is more heavily reliant on the structure, language, conventions and *ethos* of the classical epic than any of its successors. And whereas Sigismondo may have received the poem as a homage to his military exploits, the modern reader immediately recognizes the extent to which Sigismondo's deeds serve merely as a series of convenient *loci* for the reworking of an established poetical form. That is not to say that this was necessarily Basinio's sole intent. He was a man with firm political convictions and was, no doubt, appreciative of Sigismondo's patronage, particularly in light of the fact that Rimini was, to some extent, a political haven for Basinio.¹³ But there is no indication that there was any significant political motive behind the inception or writing of the *Hesperis*. Basinio was more a poet in search of a theme than a courtier in search of a vehicle. The intrinsic value of the *Hesperis* was as a poem; and as such it was intended to stand alongside his other poems - the *Meleagris*, the *Astronomica* and his unfinished *Argonautica*. There is something rather touching in the sincerity with which he says at one point: 'And if there is something praiseworthy in my verses, it is all due to the fountainhead and rivers that flowed down from Homer.'¹⁴

Filelfo was born in 1398 in the town of Tolentino near Macerata in the Marches.¹⁵ He studied at Padua, learning Latin grammar from Gasparino Barzizza. Between 1417 and 1419 he was in Venice teaching the children of the Venetian nobility. In 1420, after having been granted Venetian citizenship, Filelfo travelled to Constantinople where he served as secretary to the Venetian legate for two years and as secretary and councillor to John Paleologus for five years, in which capacity he was sent on

¹³ See p. 419.

¹⁴ '... Quod si laudis habent aliquid mea carmina, ab illo / Fonte mihi, et fluviis magni defluxit Homeri.' Quoted by Affò, 'Notizie', in *Basinii... opera*, II, 18 and cited by Belloni, *Il poema epico*, 93. See also F. Ferri, *Una contesa di tre umanisti (Basinio, Porcellio e Seneca). Contributo alla storia di studi greci nel quattrocento in Italia* (Pavia, 1920).

¹⁵ For the best account of Filelfo's career, see C. de' Rosmini, *Vita di Francesco Filelfo da Tolentino* (Milan, 1808). See also, L. A. Sheppard, 'A fifteenth-century humanist, Francesco Filelfo', *Library*, 4th series, 16 (1935), 1-26, and E. Garin, 'La cultura milanese nella seconda metà del XV secolo', *Storia di Milano* (Milan, 1956), VII, 555-6.

diplomatic missions to the Turkish Sultan, King Vladislav of Poland and Emperor Sigismund in Germany. While in Constantinople, Filelfo married the daughter of his Greek master John Chrysoloras (the nephew of Manuel). He returned to Venice during the autumn in 1427, bringing with him a substantial number of Greek manuscripts, only to find the city deserted due to an outbreak of plague. He journeyed south, first to Bologna teaching rhetoric and moral philosophy and then to Florence, where he was appointed to a professorship in 1429 and granted citizenship in 1431. Filelfo's programme of lectures in Florence, proposed to Ambrogio Traversari in a letter of April 1429, illustrates not only the breadth of his learning, but also the amazing confidence he had in his own talents.¹⁶ In the morning he would discuss Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* and *Rhetorica*, the first decade of Livy and the Greek text of the *Iliad*; during the afternoons, Terence, Cicero's *Orations* and *Letters*, Thucydides and Xenophon. While in Florence, he also completed translations of some *Orations of Lysias*, the pseudo-Aristotelian *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, a selection of *Lives* from Plutarch and several tracts of Xenophon. Unfortunately, during this time, he also managed to fall on the wrong side of Cosimo de' Medici. When Cosimo returned from exile in 1434, Filelfo fled to Siena where he remained until 1438. In 1439 he moved to Bologna, from where he decided to accept Filippo Maria Visconti's invitation to settle in Milan.

Filelfo was very well cared for by Filippo Maria. He received an ample salary, a house and Milanese citizenship. In return, he produced a *Life of John the Baptist in terza rima*, ripe with flattering digressions on the piety and magnificence of his patron,¹⁷ and he began a commentary on the *Sonetti* and *Canzoni* of Petrarch.¹⁸ Filippo Maria's death and the accession of Francesco Sforza in 1450, however, left Filelfo significantly less comfortable. As he saw his fortune diminish he became, in the words of one scholar, 'the most persistent of beggars'.¹⁹ Lavish gifts ensured his patrons of a steady flow of pleasing panegyric verse; less than that unleashed volumes of the most caustic abuse.

¹⁶ The letter is edited in *Ambrosii Traversarii Generalis Camaldulensium . . . latinae epistolae a donno Petro Canneto Abbate Camaldulensi in libros XXV tributae . . .*, ed. L. Mehus (Florence, 1759), bk XXIV, epist. xxxix, cols 1015-16. See also K. Müllner, *Reden und Briefe italienischer Humanisten. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Pädagogik der Humanismus* (Vienna, 1899), 148-62; G. Zippel, *Il Filelfo a Firenze (1429-1434)*. *Saggio* (Rome, 1899), and Sheppard, 'A fifteenth-century humanist', 3-4.

¹⁷ F. Filelfo, *La vita del Sanctissimo Johanni Battista* (Milan: Mantegazzi, 8 March 1494) [Hain 12966].

¹⁸ During the fifteenth century, the commentaries were printed in Bologna 1476 and Venice 1481, 1484 and 1493. They were also reprinted together with Bernado Glicino's (Ilicino) commentary on the *Trionfi* in Venice 1478, 1484, 1488, 1490, 1493, 1494 and 1500 and in Milan 1494. See E. Raimondi, 'Francesco Filelfo interprete del *Canzoniere*', *Stud Petrarch*, 3 (1950), 143-64.

¹⁹ Sheppard, 'A fifteenth-century humanist', 6. See also F. Gabotto, 'Misericordia e suppliche di professori', *Intermezzo*, 1 (1891), 31-6.

Filelfo's *Sforziad* was begun during this period.²⁰ The poem opens with a convocation of the gods. Jove decrees that Francesco Sforza is destined to become the undisputed ruler of Milan, but only – to use the Sforza motto – ‘merito et tempore’ (‘by his own merit and at the appointed time’). Jove sends Discord to earth to disrupt the Venetian Senate’s plans to sign a peace treaty with Milan, in order to provide Francesco with the opportunity to prove himself in battle. Meanwhile, Pallas Athena, taking the guise of Francesco’s wife Bianca Maria, encourages him to take up his rightful place as the Duke of Milan. The story then develops into a fairly predictable chronological narrative of Sforza’s victories over the towns of San Colombano, Pavia, Piacenza, Cremona and Casalmaggiore. The means by which these cities are won, however, is never ordinary. For example, when the Venetians threaten to take control of Cremona, they are met by Bianca Maria. Apollo, who has fallen deeply in love with her – anyone familiar with the features of Bianca Maria might stop to question this – comes to her rescue, changing her appearance to that of her husband Francesco.²¹ The Venetians flee in fright at the mere sight of the great leader. Similarly, at one point Pluto and Neptune don human form in an attempt to infiltrate the Milanese forces. They too take fright at the mere presence of Francesco and flee.

Filelfo was capable of producing stunningly clever Latin verse. The quality of his *Satires*, for example, won him the laureate crown from Alfonso d’Aragona.²² But the *Sforziad* falls well short of this mark. It is a pastiche of material drawn directly from contemporary chronicles whose seams are only thinly disguised by a wash of wholly unconvincing classical contrivances. As one of his enemies, Galeotto Marzio da Narni, cleverly pointed out, Filelfo seemed not to know the difference between chronicle and poetry – ‘differunt, differunt, inquam, poemata et commentari’.²³

Sometime after 1460, Tito Vespasiano Strozzi began to write his epic poem celebrating the life and deeds of his patron, Borso d’Este.²⁴ Tito,

²⁰ See de’ Rosmini, *Vita di Francesco Filelfo*, II, 156–74; A. Novara, *Un poema latino del quattrocento. La Sforziade di Francesco Filelfo* (Carmagnola, 1879); Giri, ‘Il codice autografo’, 421–57; F. Lo Parco, *La Sforziade di Francesco Filelfo* (Trapani, 1902); Belloni, *Il poema epico*, 100–3; A. Calderini, ‘I codici milanesi delle opere di Francesco Filelfo’, *Arch Stor Lombardo*, 5th series, anno XLII (1915), 335–411, esp. pp. 335–7; Zabughin, *Vergilio nel Rinascimento*, I, 297–9; E. Garin, *Testi inediti o rari di Cristoforo Landino e Francesco Filelfo* (Florence, 1949), and G. Bottari, ‘La Sphortias’, *Francesco Filelfo nel quinto centenario della morte (Atti del XVII convegno di studi Maceratesi [Tolentino, 27–30 settembre 1981])* (Padua, 1986), 459–93.

²¹ De’ Rosmini calls this episode ‘[un] idea stravagante, ridicolosa, indecente’ (*Vita di Francesco Filelfo*, II, 174).

²² F. Philelfi *Satyrarum Hecatostichon prima (-decima) decas* (Milan: C. Valdarpher, 1476). See R. P. Oliver, ‘The Satires of Filelfo’, *Italica*, 26 (1949), 23–46.

²³ G. Marzio da Narni, *Invectivae ad Franciscum Philelphum*, ed L. Juhász (Bibliotheca scriptorum medii recentisque aevorum) (Leipzig, 1932), 5. See also Bottari, ‘La Sphortias’, 472.

²⁴ See R. Albrecht, *Tito Vespasiano Strozzi. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Humanismus in Ferrara* (Leipzig, 1891); A. Della Guardia, *Tito Vespasiano Strozzi, Poesie latine tratta dall’Aldina e confrontate coi codici* (Modena, 1916); Joseph Fögel and Ladislaus Juhász, *Titus Vespasianus Strozzi, Borsias (fragmenta). Bucilicon Liber* (Bibliotheca scriptorum medii recentisque aevorum) (Leipzig,

son of the Florentine *fuoruscito* Giovanni (Nanni) Strozzi, was born in Ferrara in 1425, which makes him an exact contemporary of Basinio da Parma. He was educated in Ferrara, learning both Latin and the rudiments of Greek vocabulary from Guarino. Tito's earliest verses date from 1438, when he was 13. By the age of 16, he was sufficiently at ease with the demands of Latin verse to write a collection of epitaphs on the occasion of Niccolò III d'Este's death. Also at this time, Strozzi began to write love poetry. In 1443 he presented Leonello d'Este with a book of love elegies, the first post-classical appearance of such a series in Italy. Leonello was sufficiently pleased to appoint Strozzi as his court poet. Leonello's death in 1450 deprived Strozzi of a patron who was his intellectual equal, but it by no means deprived him of patronage. Whether or not Borso actually read Latin poetry seems not to have mattered. Strozzi retained his post as court poet, and in 1461 he and his brothers were presented with a large estate at Racano by the duke. It is also true, however, that under Borso the subject matter of Strozzi's poems changed from love poetry to short verses written largely for social occasions in which praise for Borso's rule was usually the dominant theme. The *Borsiad* was begun in this climate.

Strozzi was faced with two rather extraordinary obstacles in writing the *Borsiad*. The first was that Borso was not a military hero. His military career was short-lived and almost completely confined to his youth. Overlooking the terrible defeat he suffered in 1440, when a sizeable portion of his troops were killed and all of his equipment and personal belongings were confiscated, there were few events worth mentioning and even fewer worth versifying. Strozzi solved this problem by focusing his attention on Borso's 'role' as a peace-maker amidst the war-torn states of northern Italy. The same message had been presented previously in Strozzi's four-line epigram, inscribed on the base of the statue of Borso then placed in front of the Palazzo della Ragione:

Hanc tibi viventi Ferraria grata columnam
ob merita in patriam, princeps iustissime Borsi,
dedicat, Estensi qui dux a sanguine primus
excipis imperium et placida regis omnia pace.²⁵

The structure of the *Borsiad* reflects this change in emphasis. Whereas its form and much of the language is based on the *Aeneid*, the basic premise stems from the descriptions of the *aurea saecula* in the Fourth *Eclogue* and the *Georgics*. The panegyric tone comes largely from Claudian.

1933), and W. Ludwig, *Die Borsias des Tito Strozzi. Ein lateinisches Epos der Renaissance* (Munich, 1977). Ludwig suggests that Strozzi had developed the idea of writing an Estensian epic as early as 1443 citing Tito's *Lucilla* of that year containing the lines (ll. 23-4): 'Hinc genus Estense et magnorum ingentia facta / ipse canam referentque tuum meo carmina nomen' (*Die Borsias*, 17-18).

²⁵ As Ludwig has pointed out, the last phrase of the poem echoes the description of the Golden Age by Virgil in the eighth book of the *Aeneid*. See Ludwig, *Die Borsias*, 23, citing *Aeneid*, VIII, 324-5.

The second, more serious obstacle was that Borso died somewhat unexpectedly on 20 August 1471, when only four books of the *Borsiad* had been completed. Ercole I obviously had no interest in funding a panegyric tribute to his half-brother and no further work appears to have been done on the poem prior to 1485. This is not to say that Strozzi had abandoned the *Borsiad*, however. Sometime between 1472 and 1474, in answer to a letter he had received from his friend, the Milanese humanist Platinus Platus, asking him why he had abandoned his great project, Strozzi responded with a lengthy elegiac epistle, in which he outlined his new plans for the *Borsiad*.²⁶ Rather than writing an epic based on the career of a living leader, he planned to rework the first four books to form the historical prelude to a larger panegyric of the Este household and the duchy of Ferrara. It was to be more of a genealogical epic, culminating in the glorious reign of Ercole I.

When Strozzi did return to work on the *Borsiad*, work proceeded slowly. Books V–VII were written sometime between 1485 and 1494. And although Books VIII–X reflect the events and political concerns of the Este during the years 1492 to 1495, evidence suggests that poem was not fully finished until the year of Strozzi's death, 1505. It is unlikely that a lack of support from the duke was the main reason for this slow progress. Instead, it probably reflects the lack of time Strozzi had available given his role as one of Ercole's most valued political advisers. Under both Leonello and Borso, Strozzi had played an important part as diplomatic envoy between the court of Ferrara and Rome, Naples and Venice. Under Ercole, Strozzi was elected governor of the Polesine in 1476, then governor of Lugo and ambassador to Innocent VIII in 1485. In 1497 he attained the highest political office in Ferrara when Ercole I appointed him as *Giudice* of the *Dodici Savi*. The *Borsiad* seems to have been a constant concern, but not necessarily the primary one in Strozzi's busy life.

Recasting the *Borsiad* as a familial epic meant Strozzi had to fashion an appropriate device for legitimizing Borso's rule. The truth was that Niccolò III had never imagined Borso as a leader. The succession had been intended to pass through Leonello and his descendants. To overcome this problem, Strozzi utilized the device of the Assembly of the Gods. The Olympians are saddened and worried by the state of the world and the evil ways into which mankind has fallen. Borso is Jupiter's gift to mankind. Mercury is dispatched to find Amor and lead him to Bologna, where his task is to fill Stella Tolomei with love for Niccolò III d'Este; Venus and Juno meanwhile urge Niccolò to bed the lovely Stella. The previous birth of Leonello to the couple is not mentioned. Instead, the scene shifts again to Olympus where Jupiter outlines Borso's qualities as a

²⁶ See *Strozzi poetae pater et filius* (Venice, 1513), 92^v–95^r, and Ludwig, *Die Borsias*, 42–5. See also S. A. Simioni, 'Un umanista milanese, Piattino Piatti', *Arch Stor Lombardo*, 4th series, 2, anno xxxi (1904), 5–50 and 227–301.

ruler of men. When we return to earth, Borso has grown up. His inherent virtue has led him to be chosen by the people of Ferrara as their next leader. The Ferrarese are blessed because they are wise enough to recognize a gift of the gods. Book IV contains a lengthy episode in which the Marchese Borso visits the priest and prophet Malchus, who outlines the future events of his reign, including his elevation to the dukedom of Modena and Reggio in 1452. Book V of the *Borsiad* describes the visits of two other important guests, Pope Pius II [Piccolomini] and the poet Giovanni Pontano, who comes to Ferrara in his capacity as the Neapolitan ambassador. The set-piece of Pontano's visit provides the structure for Books VI–X. He is taken to the Estense villas of Belriguardo and Quartisana. Whilst walking in the grounds, Pontano begs to hear the history and origins of the Este house. There follow two long speeches delivered by Girolamo Castelli, the court doctor to the Este. The first recounts the Estense lineage stretching from Priam of Troy, through Charlemagne, Ruggiero and Actius (the founder of the Este clan) to Borso, the first Este duke. Ercole's reign is foretold by Atlas in Book VI. An account of Borso's early military career is begun at the end of Book VII. The second speech continues the tale of Borso's career, but centres more on Ercole, presenting his birth in virtually identical terms as Borso's was in Books I and II. Again, Jupiter sends Mercury to earth to ensure that Niccolò III meets and wins Ercole's mother, Riccarda da Saluzzo. The major theme of Books VIII–X is Ferrara's links with Milan, reflecting the alliance between the families during the years in which this section of the poem was written.

We have considered three poems, not remarkably dissimilar in style, tone, content or purpose, and all written during the last half of the fifteenth century in a courtly milieu by men who certainly knew each other – Basinio and Tito Strozzi, for example, were boyhood friends, having been classmates together in Guarino's school in Ferrara. But if one considers the conditions under which each of these three poems was written, the individuality of their authors begins to emerge. Basinio da Parma was a court poet. The *Hesperis* was only one of four major poems he wrote during the relatively short period between 1448 and his death in 1457. Filelfo was what we might call today 'a free-lance scholar'. With the exception of the period between 1438 and 1450, when he had found favour in the court of Filippo Maria Visconti, Filelfo never stayed in one place for more than five years, and on more than one occasion he left town rapidly and under duress. The *Sforziad* is his only large-scale verse work. Tito Vespasiano Strozzi was a courtier, diplomat and intimate of the Este court, where he happily remained for most of his life. Like Basinio, he bore the title of court poet, but writing verse was his hobby, a gentlemanly pastime at which he doubtless wished to excel, but which always took second place to his political career. Indeed, Strozzi adopted his 'humanist' name of Vespasiano as early as 1460, in proclamation of his

aspirations to mirror the universal man – the poet and politician – lauded by Suetonius and Tacitus.²⁷

And what of their patrons? We have yet to reach a clear understanding of Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta's personality. The diaries of Pius II [Piccolomini] present him as rapacious and murderous, worthy of being canonized to hell.²⁸ But this was also the man who financed Basinio's poetry and the decoration of the Tempio Malatestiano. Was Sigismondo the motive intellectual force behind these works of art, or was he simply the canny consumer? What were Basinio's duties as court poet? Did he write what he was told or was part of his job to look for the medium and vehicle which might best serve his patron? More to the point, did Sigismondo merely pay Basinio's salary or did he actually commission the *Hesperis*? Since the *oeuvre* Basinio produced under Sigismondo is so varied – numerous smaller panegyric poems, a two-book astronomical poem, an historical epic and a mock-antique epic – one suspects the former. Individual occasional poetry may have been specifically commissioned, but it seems more likely that major works were presented by the artist rather than requested by the patron. Indeed, even a cursory look through any large manuscript collection will show how many works found patrons only after they were finished: for example, Ludovico Lazarelli's *De gentiliū deorum imaginibus*. As Saxl has pointed out, the erasures in the Vatican manuscript, Urbinas latinas 716, indicate that it had originally been dedicated to Duke Borso d'Este.²⁹ With Borso's death, his name and the numerous references to the patron as 'dux' were replaced with that of the then Count Federico da Montefeltro and the appropriate forms of 'princeps'.

Evidence suggests that the Sforza court had absolutely no interest in Filelfo's epic.³⁰ On the other hand, the chancery was eager to hire Filelfo to write a straightforward history, *De vita et rebus gestis Francisci Sfortiae*, to compete with Bartolomeo Facio's *De rebus gestis ab Alphonso Primo Neapolitanorum Rege commentariorum libri decem*, begun in 1448 and finished in 1455.³¹ Filelfo may have been willing to accept the commission in theory, but there is no evidence that the project actually progressed significantly, as the Simonetta brothers were once again searching for an author as early as the mid-1450s. It seems that the problem in Milan was

²⁷ See Ludwig, *Die Borsias*, 33–5.

²⁸ Enea Silvio Piccolomini (Papa Pio II), *I Commentarii*, ed. L. Totaro (Milan, 1984), esp. pp. 364–75 and 908–11. For an abridged English translation, see F. A. Gragg, *Memoirs of a Renaissance Pope: The Commentaries of Pius II* (London, 1960), 110–12 and 184.

²⁹ F. Saxl, *Verzeichnis astrologischer und mythologischer illustrierter Handschriften des lateinischen Mittelalters in römischen Bibliotheken* (Heidelberg, 1915), 101–2.

³⁰ See G. Ianziti, 'Patronage and the production of history: the case of quattrocento Milan', in *Patronage, Art, and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. F. W. Kent and P. Simons (Canberra and Oxford, 1987), 299–311, esp. pp. 305–8.

³¹ Bartolomeo Facio, *De rebus gestis ab Alphonso Primo Neapolitanorum Rege commentariorum libri decem. Ioannis Michaelis Bruti opera nunc primum . . . editi . . .* (Lyon, 1560).

one of mis-matched 'clientelismo'. The 'patrons' clearly wanted one sort of product, whereas the 'supplier' was committed to producing something quite different. Interestingly, neither side really succeeded. Despite a tremendous effort to find a 'professional humanist' to write the *De vita . . . Francisci Sfortiae*, in the end, Giovanni Simonetta had to write it himself sometime during the early 1470s.³² Similarly, Filelfo had little success with his *Sforziad*, having completed less than half of his projected 24-book poem before his death in 1481.

An equally lengthy delay plagued Strozzi's *Borsiad*. As mentioned, the time-consuming demands of Strozzi's political career played a major role in slowing down the poem's progress. For despite the fact that the new structure of the poem was established as early as 1470-2, the second campaign of writing did not begin until 1485. Work on the remaining six books took another twenty years. In sum, the ten books of the *Borsiad* span forty-five years of Tito's life.

The neo-Latin historical epic was a literary genre sparked by a particular set of circumstances involving the kind of humanistic study practised in the north Italian courts during the middle decades of the fifteenth century.³³ Basinio, Filelfo and Tito Strozzi were direct products of this milieu. One is tempted to propose that, of the three, Basinio was the most successful in completing his poem, because he finished it whilst he was still a young man, still infused with an excitement peculiar to those years. But such an argument suggests that the reason why Strozzi took so long to complete his poem or why Filelfo never finished the *Sforziad* is either that the epic became a less popular literary genre during the later years of the fifteenth century or that epic-writing is a young man's ambition. Whilst the latter possibility may be true, the former is certainly not. The neo-Latin epic remained a popular genre well into the seventeenth century.³⁴

But, given the example of the neo-Latin historical epic, one must re-evaluate two basic assumptions regarding the notion of 'courtly patronage': first, that 'courtly culture' is one aspect of the 'courtly persona' determined by the prince and/or his closest advisers; second, that all courts, by definition, function in a similar manner and towards similar ends. One interesting fact about the neo-Latin historical epic is that it was neither motivated nor particularly well nurtured by courtly patronage. On the contrary, it was a largely self-sustaining invention of the humanists. We have numerous examples of young poets proclaiming their epic intentions,

³² See E. Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago, 1981), 113-17 and 527, and G. Ianziti, 'The first edition of Giovanni Simonetta's *De rebus gestis Francisci Sfortiae commentarii*: Questions of Chronology and Interpretation', *Bibl Hum Re*, 44 (1982), 137-47.

³³ For the most recent survey of humanistic education in fifteenth-century north Italy, see A. Grafton and L. Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities. Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).

³⁴ For evidence of the popularity of the neo-Latin epic in the courts of France, see A. Hulubei, 'Virgile en France au XVI^e siècle', *Rev Seizième Siècle*, 18 (1931-2), 1-77, and D. Maskell, *The Historical Epic in France (1500-1700)* (London, 1973).

but not a single case where a patron approached a humanist to commission such a work. True, Tito Strozzi modified the structure of the *Borsiad* to win Ercole I's favour, but he did not abandon the Borsean premise of the poem. Similarly, Filelfo kept writing his epic years after its 'patronage' had failed.³⁵ As mentioned above, the deeds of virtually every Renaissance prince were immortalized in epic verse; but we have no evidence that either the prince or his court played a determining role in this process beyond the fact that some courts employed a court poet.

Examined from this perspective, the idea of 'courtly culture' as some sort of self-explanatory phenomenon becomes less convincing. Recognition of the structure of the court as a geo-political reality has its purpose, but the thesis that this structural feature extends as a defining factor into cultural matters fails at the level of example. It neglects the diversity and individuality of the works of art attributed to its influence. One might argue that the *Hesperis*, *Borsiad* and *Sforziad* are more similar than dissimilar, and that this generic likeness reflects the common cultural bonds shared by Rimini, Ferrara and Milan. Indeed, as mentioned, a similar argument has been proposed with regard to the visual arts – the *Salone dei Mesi* in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, the *Camera degli Sposi* in Mantua and the sculptural decoration of the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini are repeatedly and favourably compared as sharing the common trait of being 'courtly' – but to what end? Were it lost, it would be impossible to reconstruct the *Borsiad* by reading the *Hesperis* or *Sforziad*. Yet art historians are content with their understanding of fifteenth-century Milan, Rimini and Ferrara because of what has survived in Urbino or Mantua due to their similarly 'courtly' settings.

Some might argue that the historian can only make the best of an impossible job, patiently fitting together fragments of historical information in the hope of gaining some clear view of the past. Faced with such a task, he eagerly takes up whichever tool appears to speed or ease the process. But in this case, a method has been adopted which has little value beyond blurring the distinction between one piece of the puzzle and the next. By allowing the concept of 'courtly culture' to function as the definitive common denominator between such cities as Ferrara, Milan, Rimini, Urbino and Mantua, the process of fitting things together may have been facilitated, but only at the cost of obliterating the original purpose of the exercise.

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³⁵ Filelfo does claim, however, that it was not his fault if the *Sforziad* remained unfinished, but the fault of those who allowed him to be too poor to contemplate anything but starvation. *Philelfi Epistolarum libri XXXVII*, fol. 192^v-193^r (Frederico comiti Urbinati et imperatori, ex Mediolano kalen. Augustis M.cccclxvii.). Cited by de' Rosmini, *Vita di Francesco Filelfo*, II, 157-8.