
The “bonfire of vanities” is a phrase sufficiently current in the American vernacular to have become the title of a major 1980s novel. But Girolamo Savonarola himself has remained an elusive figure, hard to access except in specialized studies. Lauro Martines has now made the Dominican friar and his career available to a wider audience in his engaging new book, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Renaissance Florence*. The book is conceived, not as a biography of the man himself, but as the “biography of a time and place,” of Florence from 1494 to 1498, when “Savonarola’s life and the history of [the city] were joined.”(5) It is Savonarola’s career, calling, and mission that constituted the core of his being and provide the focus of this book, which encompasses the time from his arrival in the city to his death in the Piazza della Signoria.

Martines is willing to take Savonarola on his own terms, avoiding the polarized and polemical views of an earlier historiography. He sees the Dominican preacher as a late medieval reformer, intent on making Florence into the New Jerusalem and even “the City of God.”(71) The source of this intense desire to purge at least one city of its sinful ways is traced back to Ferrara, where Michele Savonarola, Girolamo’s grandfather, who was a professor of medicine at Padua, served as court physician to the Este Dukes. Revulsion against the wealth and “vanity” of this Renaissance court, including its lax sexual mores, led the precocious Girolamo to reject his family’s hopes for the kind of promising career open to one of his social rank. Little is known of the friar’s “private life” – if he can be said to have had one – but these details help to explain the vehemence of his later efforts to reform a fallen people. An apt symbol of the young Savonarola’s conflicted relationship with the culture of the Italian Renaissance is his adaptation of the Petrarchan love sonnet to world-rejecting
themes, from “De ruina mundi” (On the ruin of the world) to “De ruina ecclesiae” (On the ruin of the Church). Defending the “true Church” against the “Roman harlot and pirate,” Sixtus IV(10), these lugubrious and scolding verses, which Savonarola wrote in his early twenties, set the tone for his later conflict with the Borgia Pope Alexander VI.

Leaving Ferrara in secret for the Dominican convent in Bologna, Savonarola wrote a memorable letter to his father in 1475, and this is included in Martines’ account. His rejection of a secular life, he explained, was due to “the great misery of the world, the iniquity of men, the carnal crimes, adulteries, thefts, pride, idolatry and cruel blasphemies, all present on such a scale that a good man can no longer be found….I could not bear the evil of the blinded peoples of Italy.”(12) Instead, “fleeing from the filth and iniquities of the wretched world,” he intended to become a “militant knight of Jesus Christ”(3), the embattled role in which he would ultimately die.

This letter is notable for another aspect of the friar’s thought, one which greatly strengthened him as a preacher and a thinker – his devotion to logic. Against his father’s pleas to return to Ferrara, the young Savonarola posed a wicked syllogism: either you love me or you don’t:

If you do love me, since I am made of two parts, soul and body, you either love the body or the soul more. You cannot say the body, because then you would not really love me, in loving the most vile part of me. If therefore you love my soul more, then why do you not seek what is good for it? (13)

Both in Bologna and in Florence, Savonarola would serve as a much-respected master of studies for Dominican novices, specializing in logic and scholastic theology, as well as scripture. The rigor and backbone provided by his training in logic, dialectics, rhetoric, and, not least, scriptural studies, gave a weight and substance to his emotional calls for self-renunciation and world rejection.
In a paradoxical twist of fate, Savonarola was twice recruited to Florence by Lorenzo di Medici, first to give a Lenten sermon cycle at the Medici Church of San Lorenzo in 1484. His oratorical debut was a failure, his poor delivery and heavy northern accent noted and dismissed by the sophisticated Florentine audience. He returned again in 1490, at the urging of Pico della Mirandola, as Lorenzo’s physical ailments increased and he sought spiritual advice. But Savonarola did not make the expected call on Lorenzo, who commented, “a foreign monk has come to live in my house and hasn’t bothered to come visit me.”

In his Advent and Lenten sermons of 1490 – 1491, the friar stressed the need to avoid the corruption of contact with grandi maestri (great lords like the Medici), already hinting at the coming scourge of God for the many vices of Florence. It was left to Lorenzo, as he lay dying in 1492, to call Savonarola to the Medici palace for a final blessing.

A major strength of Martines’ account is his intensive use of the friar’s sermons, which began in earnest on his return to the city. Before crowds as large as fifteen thousand people, he attacked the corruption of the clergy; the avarice and usury of the rich; the neglect of the poor; and the moral depravity, of which sodomy was the primary symbol. All of his sermons were strongly scriptural in focus; he had the text of the Latin Bible at his command, having memorized large portions. Old Testament prophets provided topics for sermon cycles setting out apocalyptic visions of Italy’s coming punishment. An important factor in Savonarola’s success was his use of the printing press to reinforce his message. His sermons were printed shortly after their delivery, as were numerous works of popular devotion, including his Compendium of Revelations (1495). This aspect of his career, along with his scriptural emphasis and his anti-clericalism, anticipates Martin Luther, but their differences are equally significant, from the asceticism of Savonarola’s message to his effort to make Florence into a purified, reformed Christian state through a traditionally Catholic religious revival.
Under Piero, the weak son and heir of Lorenzo, Savonarola, now head of the Convent of San Marco, moved to the forefront of political events in Florence. Martines’ account (Chapter 5) of the descent of King Charles VIII of France into Italy and his eleven day stay in Florence is riveting, and one to which students should be referred for its detail and immediacy. As ten thousand French troops marched into the city in November 1494, Savonarola’s sermons called for Florentines to “repent, fast and pray,” because the French King represented the scourge of God against all of Italy. Unfortunately, the King disappears too quickly from the narrative; his coronation in Naples, defeat at Fornovo, and return to France receive little attention, perhaps because of the close focus on Florentine events.

The events of 1494 led to the end of sixty years of Medici rule, and the disruption of their patronage networks is depicted here in the kind of detail that will be appreciated by students of the Renaissance (if a bit difficult for newcomers to Florentine history). Cosimo, the founder of Medici power in the city, had famously said that “states are not ruled by Paternosters,”(68) but Savonarola’s ability to influence the structure and direction of the new government from the pulpit seemed, for a time, to call this maxim into question. With admirable precision, Martines explains crucial, but complex, political issues, such as the campaign for the Great Council (modeled on the Venetian Grand Council), the suppression of the parlemento (a traditional means of reshaping the Florentine government, now useful only for the return of the Medici “tyrants”), and the successful effort to end the prior’s former right to execute, exile or confiscate property by casting of the fatal “six beans” (six of nine votes).

Martines’ focus on the issue of parties, factions, or inteligenze (understandings that might verge on conspiracies) in the newly restored Republic is especially strong. He argues in a nuanced way that the Frateschi (Friar’s Men), or Piagnoni (Weepers), did not constitute a party in any modern sense, or even in the technical sense in which parties were vilified as trea-
sonous in Renaissance republics. The political power of the friar’s followers and the backlash that brought them down indicate that the *correnti* (currents or streams) colliding within the city state and the peninsula were real enough. At the same time, the re-appearance of prominent Savonarolan supporters within the government less than a year after their leader’s execution demonstrates the quick political reflexes of the city’s leading families, for whom self-preservation was the highest goal. (280)

A memorable section of the book (Chapter 9) is devoted to the “children’s confraternities,” young recruits for Savonarola’s religious revolution in manners and morals, who marched four thousand to eight thousand strong in processions intended to purge the city of its corruption. Fra Domenico da Pescia, the friar’s closest associate, wrote a letter addressing them as the “elect of God” (presumably unlike their worldly fathers) and urging them to

> go cleanse the countryside, all villas, all houses outside Florence, just as before Lent you purged the city of the tools of gambling, all dirty and vain paintings, and of all the other useless, vain and lewd things… whose effects is to make the lands, vineyards and olive groves sterile and accursed. (113-114)

In the city, they roamed the streets accosting overdressed women, demanding their jewellery for the poor, or going from door to door collecting “vanities” for bonfires in the central piazza. The privileged social origin of these adolescent boys – the young Francesco Guicciardini is a case in point – made them intimidating and reflected the friar’s political support among broad sectors of the ruling elite.

From the start of his involvement with the restored republic, Savonarola’s life was in danger due to the volatile political situation. In December 1494, he predicted his own death after a conversation with Christ, who spoke of his own crucifixion, and warned, “so will it be with you.”(72) These dialogues with God and the private revelations he received were the basis of
Savonarola’s claims as a prophet, which aroused both intense fervour from his supporters and intense antagonism from his enemies. The Arrabiati (Angry Ones) and Compagnacci (Rude Companions) were groups of upper-class men for whom the friar’s piety, calls for moral reform, and demands for a broadly based, non-oligarchic republic were incompatible with their preferred style of life and of politics. Martines’ book opens with a description of their campaign of “dirty tricks” against the Dominican preacher, which included the placing of dead animals in the cathedral and the planting of explosives to blow up the pulpit as he preached.

Because of his many enemies, Machiavelli’s “unarmed prophet” eventually required an armed escort of over one hundred men just to walk the few blocks from San Marco to the Cathedral for sermons. When his political support began to erode after his excommunication by Alexander VI in 1497, the Dominican convent armed itself to resist their leader’s inevitable arrest. Martines’ account (Chapters 16-17) of the events leading to the fall of Savonarola is extremely well done, from the rained out “trial by fire” to the military siege of San Marco and the riots that followed. But the long excerpts from Savonarola’s trial and tortured confession (Chapter 18) are truly harrowing. His clothing, dignity, and pretensions stripped away by multiple rounds of strappado, the friar confessed to almost everything demanded of him before being hanged and then burned with his two closest Dominican associates in May 1498.

Martines’ study of Savonarola is a major achievement, very well written and compelling in its presentation of detail, as well as in its overall argument about the role of religion in politics. It is the book to which students, teachers, and general readers should be referred for their introduction to the “little friar” of San Marco. The bibliography is very good but manageable in length; it gives a short review of earlier historiography and valuable tips on how to approach the specialized literature. There is also a useful two page summary of the Florentine political sys-

Mary R. O'Neil
University of Washington, Seattle
New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Save Citation Â» Export Citation Â» E-mail Citation Â». First published in a print version of the same name in 2000, a major study of Virgilâ€™s relationship with Lucretius.Â In addition to Catherine Wilsonâ€™s overview chapter â€œEpicureanism in Early Modern Philosophyâ€ (pp. 266â€“286) on Epicureanismâ€™s place in early modern thought, this volume contains thematic treatments of Epicurean attitudes toward such topics as atomism, empiricism, cosmology, psychology, pleasure, politics, language, and arts. Copenhaven, Brian P. Renaissance Philosophy (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) JFD 01-14648. Arranged according to the master schools of Renaissance philosophy, this study examines all the major philosophers of the period. The Crusades: An Encyclopedia, edited by Alan V. Murray (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 4 vols. *R-RMRR D155 .C78. Daly, Lowrie.Â The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades, edited by Jonathan Riley-Smith (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) JFF 95-6286. The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England, edited by Nigel Saul (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) JFE 97-7870. Pelikan, Jaroslav. By Lauro Martines. (New York: Oxford University Press. 2006. Pp. xvi, 336. $30.00.) Lauro Martines, prolific author of books on the Italian Renaissance, has turned his elegant and lively prose to a violent, puzzling period of Florentine history at the close of the fifteenth century, the years leading up to Girolamo Savonarola's public execution and burning for heresy and treason in 1498. The fire-and-brimstone Dominican friar, transplanted from his native Ferrara, who rocked Florence with his sermons, springs from these pages in all his troubling contradictions. Was he above all a politic