An Unknown Early Modern New World Epic: Girolamo Vecchietti's *Delle prodezze di Ferrante Cortese* (1587–88)

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This article discusses an unpublished vernacular Italian New World epic of the 1580s, which narrates the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The work was authored by the traveler, diplomat, and Orientalist Girolamo Vecchietti, and it is dedicated to Ferdinando I de' Medici, grand duke of Tuscany. Vecchietti's poem is striking as a rare epic in terza rima, and as the sole surviving early modern Italian epic to center on the deeds of Cortés, rather than Columbus or Vespucci. It is also intriguing for its ambivalent attitude toward the Spanish colonizing enterprise, portrayed initially as a heroic evangelizing mission, but later shown in a more compromised light.

INTRODUCTION

"**VECCHIETTI DELLE PRODEZZE** di Ferrante Cortese . . . being an unpublished poem on the deeds of Cortez, the Conqueror of Peru, hitherto totally unknown": thus did *The Athenaeum* of 19 February 1859 announce one of the treasures of an upcoming Sotheby's sale, intriguingly identified as a "Consignment of Manuscripts from Athens."[1] The manuscript was sold on 30 July 1859, on the last day of a three-day sale, whose catalogue described *Delle prodezze di Ferrante Cortese* (The exploits of Hernán Cortés) as "unknown to all bibliographers."[2]

Eighteen years after its London sale, in 1877, the octavo manuscript entered the collection of the British Library, as Additional Manuscript

I would like to thank Déborah Blocker, Nathalie Hester, Francesco Guardiani, Lia Markey, and Pier Mattia Tommasino for their input and encouragement.

[1] *The Athenaeum*, no. 1634 (1859), 239.

[2] I consulted the copy of the July 28–30 Sotheby's sale catalogue held by the British Library (shelfmark: S-C.S. 468 [5]). The item number is 721 (page 72). The price of the book is annotated as seventeen shillings; the purchaser as "Lincoln" (I am grateful to Dr. John Boneham of the British Library Rare Books Room for confirming these details). The sale is anonymous, but Mattingly, Burnett, and Pollard, 287, identifies it as of the library of "A. Bradbury."

Renaissance Quarterly 71 (2018): 1351–90

30376.[3] Since then, curiously—despite appearing in the library catalogue and being listed in the relevant volume of Kristeller's *Iter Italicum*—the manuscript seems to have remained lost in plain sight.[4] No mention of *Delle prodezze di Ferrante Cortese* is found within the critical literature on New World epic in Italy; nor does it feature in studies of its author, the Calabrian-born erudite and traveler Girolamo Vecchietti (1557–ca. 1640), nor its dedicatee, Ferdinando I de' Medici (1549–1609).[5] The present article offers a preliminary analysis of this singular work, which is of considerable interest within the history of Italian responses to the New World.

Most studies of Italian New World epic date the tradition from two Latin poems published in Rome in the 1580s, Lorenzo Gambara's *De navigatione Christophori Columbi* (On the voyage of Christopher Columbus, 1581) and Giulio Cesare Stella's *Columbeis* (The Columbiad, 1589).[6] Gambara's work, four books long, is complete, though compact, while Stella's, two books long, is a fragment or sample. This pattern would repeat itself across the next half century, with numerous instances of unfinished works. Completed poems are rarer, and amount to only three across the whole of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Giovanni Giorgini's *Il mondo nuovo* (The New World), published in 1596; Tommaso Stigliani's better-known poem of the same title, of 1617; and Girolamo Bartolommei's *America*, of 1650. In Latin, the only complete New World epic to be published after Gambara's was Ubertino Carrara's twelve-book *Columbus* of 1715.[7]

[3] The date of acquisition by the British Library, 1877, is recorded in a pencil note in one of the blank pages following the text in the manuscript.

[4] *Catalogue*, 76; Kristeller, 4:79.

[5] An exception is *Medicea volumina*, 128, which notes the presence of a manuscript copy of Vecchietti's *Delle prodezze* in a 1609 inventory of books bequeathed by Ferdinando to his son Francesco (1594–1614). It is possible that British Library Additional Manuscript 30376 (hereafter BL Add. 30376), which is a fair copy, is the presentation manuscript listed in the 1609 inventory.

[6] The dates of the first official publication of both works are given here, although both circulated prior to this. On Gambara's poem, see Gambara; Selmi; Hofmann, 1994, 430–53; Watt, 126–28, 138. On Stella's, see Stella; Hofmann, 1988, 1990, and 1994, 453–73; Kallendorf, 2003a; Llewellyn; Watt, 138–40. Overviews and general studies of the Italian tradition of New World epic may be found in Lancetti; Steiner; Belloni, 1893, 427–46; Belloni, 1912, 290–93; Bradner; Hofmann, 1994; Guardiani; Hester, 2012; Hardie, 152–55; Geri; Hester, 2017, 270–75.

[7] Giorgini's poem is twenty-four cantos long; Bartolommei's, forty cantos long; Stigliani's twenty, in its first edition of 1617, and thirty-four in its expanded 1628 edition. For discus-

In total, ten whole or partial New World epics were published in Italy in the sixty-nine years between 1581 and 1650. Besides those already mentioned, five fragments, between one and three cantos long, were published between 1602 and 1624 (in chronological order, Giovanni Villifranchi's *Il Colombo* [1602]; Raffalele Gualterotti's *L'America* [1611]; Alessandro Tassoni's *Oceano* and Guidobaldo Benamati's *Il mondo nuovo* [both 1622]; and Agazio di Somma's *L'America* [1624]).[8] In addition to these printed works, mentions may be found of seven other poems completed or attempted on these themes within the same time frame. Most are lost, although a single canto of one, *L'America*, by the Florentine Giambattista Strozzi, survives.[9]

Of the surviving New World epics and fragments, the majority concern Columbus's voyages, although Gualterotti and Strozzi focus instead on Amerigo Vespucci, and Bartolommei narrates both men's tales.[10] The deeds of Columbus and Vespucci had patriotic appeal for Italian authors, even if both navigators were traveling under the command of non-Italian powers. The exploits of the Spaniard Cortés were, predictably, a less popular choice. The conquest of Mexico is narrated in only one of the surviving works, Giorgini's *Mondo nuovo*, where it is woven together with the narrative of Columbus's voyages a generation earlier. The only other Italian Cortés epic recorded is a lost work by a poet from Foligno, Giambattista Pietro Giorgi, presumably written in the 1590s, since eighteenth-century literary histories record that he died at the end of the sixteenth century at the age of twenty-eight.[11]

Vecchietti's *Delle prodezze* is thus unusual in terms of its subject matter. It is also anomalous in terms of metrical form. *Delle prodezze* is not written in ottava rima, like the great majority of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century epics and romances, or in the less frequented but still established choice of blank verse. Instead, Vecchietti chose for his epic the arcane solution of Dantean terza rima, much used at this time by authors of satires and correspondence verse, but

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sion on Giorgini, see Mancini; on Stigliani, see Guardiani; Aloè, 2011; García Aguilar; Russo; Watt 148–59; Artico, 8–11; on Bartolommei, see Geri; Piazzesi; Artico, 11–15; Hester 2017, 274–75.

[8] On Villifranchi, see Maffei; on Tassoni, see Tassoni, 139–50; Marghegiani Jones; Bucchi; on Benamati, see Marchegiani Jones.

[9] See Fido for the Strozzi fragment. A two-canto fragment of a poem on Columbus entitled *Il mondo nuovo* (ca. 1617), by Giovanni Maria Vanti, located in a private collection, is discussed in Tostini, 212–31. The poems known only from mentions are Alberto Lavezzola, *Il Colombo*, ca. 1583 (Valerini, 88); Luigi Alamanni, poem on Vespucci, before 1603 (Soldani, 56); Ambrogio Salinero, *Il Colombo*, before 1613 (Soprani, 16); Girolamo Tortoletti, *Il mondo scoperto* (The discovered world), before 1630 (Allacci, 133). The seventh poem is discussed below.

[10] On the scope of Bartolommei's poem, see Artico, 11.

[11] See, for example, Crescimbeni, 5:234.

far more rarely for its original epic vocation. This alone would merit the poem some measure of attention, even were it not for its compelling thematic interest.

Where the dating of the poem is concerned, the best clue is contained in the title and dedication that heads the poem in the London manuscript: "GIROLAMO VECCHIETTI ON THE EXPLOITS OF HERNÁN CORTÉS, TO HIS MOST SERENE HIGHNESS, CARDINAL FERDINANDO DE' MEDICI, GRAND DUKE OF TUSCANY."[12] The form of address allows an unusual degree of precision in dating. The period when Ferdinando I de' Medici could properly be addressed as both cardinal and grand duke of Tuscany was brief. He assumed the secular role on 19 October 1587, following the death of his brother Francesco I de' Medici; and he resigned his cardinalate on 28 November 1588, in order to marry and continue the line. This same distinctive form of address, with the double honorific, is found in the dedicatory letters of other works published in this short window, most famously Giorgio Vasari's *Ragionamenti* (Dialogues), dedicated on 15 August 1588 by Vasari's nephew "To the Most Serene Ferdinando Medici, Cardinal and Grandduke of Tuscany."[13] Similarly, the coinage for Ferdinando's rule has the title "CAR. MAG. DUX ETRURIAE" ("Cardinal and Grand Duke of Tuscany") in the first year of his reign, mutating into "MAG. DUX ETRURIAE" ("Grand Duke of Tuscany") from late 1588.[14]

If the phrasing of the dedication accurately indicates the date of composition of Vecchietti's poem—or the date by which it was completed—then the epic falls notably early in the Italian tradition of New World epic. Only Gambara's and Stella's poems had appeared before this time. No vernacular poem on the subject had yet arrived in print; nor would it for almost a decade to come.

CONTEXTS: FLORENCE

Little is known of Girolamo Vecchietti's life prior to 1590, when he accompanied his more famous elder brother, Giambattista Vecchietti (1552–1619), on a papally sponsored diplomatic mission to Egypt.[15] Girolamo's biographical memoir of Giambattista, however, written shortly after the latter's death, af-

[12] "GIROLAMO VECCHIETTI DELLE PRODEZZE DI FERRANTE CORTESE, ALLA ALTEZZA SERENISSIMA DI FERRANTE CARDINAL DE' MEDICI, GRAN DUCA DI TOSCANA": BL Add. 30376, fol. 2^{r}. Subsequent page references refer to the penciled page numbering in the manuscript, followed parenthetically by my canto and line numbering. All translations are mine.

[13] Vasari, n.p.: "Al Serenissimo Ferdinando Medici Cardinale e Gran Duca di Toscana."

[14] Orsini, 43–63.

[15] Almagià, 316, 319–20. On the Vecchietti brothers generally, see Almagià; Richard; Bernardini; Piemontese; Yousefzadeh. On Girolamo Vecchietti's life following his brother's death, see Beretta; Mayer, 210–13.

fords much useful material on the brothers' family background and Giambattista's early travels and connections.[16] This information helps illuminate the highly distinctive cultural context in which *Delle prodezze* was conceived and composed.

Girolamo Vecchietti was born in Cosenza in 1557, the son of a Florentine merchant, Francesco Vecchietti (d. 1560), and a local noblewoman, Laura di Tarsia.[17] The family retained contacts and some property in Francesco's home city, and Giambattista Vecchietti traveled north in 1571, at the age of nineteen. He was already an accomplished young scholar at this time, steeped in the avant-garde philosophy of Bernardino Telesio (1509–88), and schooled in literature by his relative Sertorio Quattromani (1541–1603). According to Girolamo's admiring biography, on a brief visit to the University of Pisa, Giambattista caused such a stir with his spirited exposition of Telesio's thought that he came to the attention of the aged Cosimo I de' Medici (1519–74), who requested a meeting.[18]

After a brief return to Cosenza, the young Giambattista spent the years 1574–78 in Rome, in the entourage of Cardinal Prospero Santacroce (1514–89), and he traveled afterward to Mantua and Ferrara as the guest of Curzio Gonzaga (1530–99) and Ercole Bevilacqua (1554–1600). Life as a courtier beckoned at this point, but, true to his Florentine roots, Vecchietti instead decided to pursue a mercantile career. In this guise, he undertook his first travels outside Italy, including two voyages to Alexandria, on one or both of which Girolamo may have accompanied him.[19] It was while he was in Florence, setting up a third voyage to Egypt, that Giambattista Vecchietti received the call that would launch his remarkable career as a traveler and diplomat. One morning early in 1584, he was woken by a summons to Rome, to meet with Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici on a "matter of the greatest importance": as it transpired, a mission to Egypt and to Persia in the service of Pope Gregory XIII.[20] Vecchietti traveled to Rome to learn more about the mission, then returned briefly to Florence to liquidate his

[16] Vecchietti, 1776. The memoir is written in the form of a letter, whose addressee is identified in a manuscript in the Archivio di Stato di Torino (hereafter AST) as a Niccolò Strozzi: AST, Raccolta Mongardino, 46, fol. 97^{r}.

[17] All biographical information derives from Vecchietti, 1776, unless otherwise stated.

[18] Vecchietti, 1776, 162.

[19] See Saltini, 274–75, for a note by Giambattista Raimondi, written shortly before Girolamo Vecchietti's 1590 mission to Egypt, which mentions biblical manuscripts in Arabic that Girolamo acquired in Egypt on a previous visit with his brother. That this was not the 1584 mission, discussed below in the text, seems clear from Girolamo's description of that mission in Vecchietti, 1776, and in a report on the 1584 and 1590 missions written for Paul V in 1609; see Almagià, 315–16.

[20] Vecchietti, 1776, 162: "servizio di molto grande importanza." On the 1584 mission, see Almagià, 316–18; also Yousefzadeh, 52, 58–64. Yousefzadeh emphasizes the key role that Ferdinando I de' Medici played in the sponsorship and oversight of the mission.

mercantile activities. After this, he embarked on his eventful journey, returning to Italy only in 1589.

There are three points in this narrative that deserve to be underlined in the present context. The first is that at the time of the composition of *Delle prodezze*, Girolamo Vecchietti's brother already had a strong client relationship with the poem's dedicatee, Ferdinando de' Medici, sufficient for Ferdinando to have recommended him for an ambitious diplomatic mission. The second is that Giambattista, and, through him, Girolamo, had contacts with two important loci for the emergence of the ideal of New World epic in Italy: papal Rome, where Giambattista spent four years in the 1570s, and Florence, where the brothers had family roots. The third point to note is the brothers' connection with Quattromani, and the place of poetry within Giambattista's polymathic culture. This aspect of his cultural profile has been given little emphasis in scholarship, but it emerges very clearly from contemporary documentation. The celebrated poet Gabriello Chiabrera (1552–1638), a close friend of Giambattista's from his Florentine years, described him as "dear to the great Phoebus in Castalia," and he portrays him in a dialogue as a literary authority, known especially for his devotion to Dante.[21]

It was presumably in part Giambattista's recognized literary expertise that smoothed his entry into the world of the Florentine academies. He was active in the early 1580s in the Accademia Fiorentina, where he delivered a lecture on Dante in May 1581.[22] In 1590, after his return from his long Persian mission, he was elected to the more select Accademia degli Alterati, where he gave a spontaneous admission talk on the Arabic and Persian languages, and the similarities of the latter to Tuscan.[23] In addition to Chiabrera, Vecchietti's academic acquaintances included the poet Giambattista Strozzi (1551–1634), a dominant figure in Florentine literary life from the 1580s, and the traveler Filippo Sassetti (1540–88), a fellow enthusiast for Dante.[24] When Sassetti died in 1589 in Goa, Vecchietti was prominent among his mourners: he wrote a sonnet on his friend's death, "Lungi dal natio lito in strania terra" (Far from his native shore in a strange land), and he delivered a commemorative oration in the Accademia Fiorentina.[25]

[21] Chiabrera, *canzone morale* 23, cited in Piemontese, 491: "O del gran Febo in Castalia caro." The dialogue is discussed below.

[22] Biblioteca Marucelliana, B. III. 53, fol. 18^{v} (*Atti dell'Accademia Fiorentina*).

[23] Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (hereafter BML), Ashb. 558 (*Diario dell'Accademia degli Alterati*), vol. 2, fol. 84^{r}. Vecchietti's academic name was Il Vano.

[24] Vecchietti's acquaintance with both men probably dates at least from 1581, when all three were active in the Accademia Fiorentina.

[25] Milanesi, 1n1, 104–05. Further verse by Giovanni Battista Vecchietti is found in Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence (hereafter BNCF) II. VIII. 38, fol. 13^{r} (encomiastic sonnet to an unknown addressee); in Biblioteca Casanatense, 488, fol. 97$^{r–v}$ (sonnet exchange with

Vecchietti's friendship with Strozzi, and their shared literary interests, are evocatively recorded in a letter that he sent from Hormuz in July 1587 to his relative Bernardo Vecchietti. Giambattista speaks of having acquired a "cloud [*nuvolo*] of poets," meaning, presumably, a collection of verse in Persian. He asks Bernardo to pass this news on to "signor Strozzi and my other poet friends, for, on my return, God willing, we will poetize until we drop."[26]

This circle of friends has a special importance in any consideration of the context of Girolamo Vecchietti's *Delle prodezze*, since both Sassetti and Strozzi had an interest in the project of New World epic. In a letter of 1585, in which he discusses Columbus's voyages, Sassetti mentions that he has urged "il nostro Tenero" ("our Tender One"—Strozzi's academic name in the Alterati) to attempt a poem on the subject. This would be a "noble work," replete with "greatness and wonder," and of a kind to put "the tales of Ulysses" in the shade.[27] As was noted earlier, Strozzi did indeed undertake a New World epic, *L'America*, although it is based on the tale of Vespucci, rather than Columbus. He seems to have worked extensively on it in the 1590s and the early 1600s; and he read the first canto of the poem to the Alterati in July 1601.[28]

As Lia Markey has noted in an important recent study, this interest in New World epic was part of a broader fascination in Florence in this period with the transatlantic world. The most striking manifestation of this is the two series of prints issued in ca. 1589–90 by the Florence-based Flemish engraver Giovanni Stradano (Jan van der Straet), *Americae retectio* (The discovery of America) and *Nova reperta* (Modern inventions and discoveries). Both contain images of the New World and exalt the achievements of Columbus and Vespucci. Stradanus's patron and collaborator in producing these works was a Florentine patrician, Luigi Alamanni (1558–1603), who seems, like Sassetti and Strozzi, to have

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Giovanni Antonio Donati); and in BNCF Magl. VIII 1399, items 255, 257, and 260 (two sonnets on the death of Cardinal Cinzio Aldobrandini, datable to 1610, and three sonnets on the marriage of a Neapolitan noblewoman, datable to 1619: perhaps the "worthy sonnets for the Duke of Bernauda's daughter," mentioned in Vecchietti, 1776, 190). It is possible that Vecchietti authored, or coauthored, a Persian-language poem recently discovered in the archives of the Medici Oriental Press and discussed in Yousefzadeh. Yousefzadeh attributes the poem to Giambattista Raimondi, in whose handwriting it is written, but the content and context could equally point to Vecchietti.

[26] Sassetti, 404: "Diane nuova al signor Strozzi et agli altri amici poeti, che al mio ritorno, Dio piacendo, poeteremo tanto, che straccheremo." The Bernardo Vecchietti to whom the letter is addressed is identified by Roberto Almagià as Giambattista's brother: Almagià, 318. Further on Vecchietti's interest in Persian poetry, see Casari, 2013a, 126.

[27] Sassetti, 310: "opera degna, e che ha in sé grandezza e maraviglia, e altro che le novelle di Ulisse."

[28] Fido, 279.

given serious consideration to the challenge of New World epic. In his funeral oration for Alamanni, Jacopo Soldani speaks of Alamanni having "settled upon Amerigo Vespucci's marvelous voyage as the topic for a most worthy epic poem, in order to glorify his homeland."[29]

If Florentine literary culture in this period supplies parallels for Girolamo Vecchietti's project of an American epic, it also provides a suggestive context for his experiment with terza rima. Indeed, it is hard to imagine anywhere other than Florence where such an eccentric literary project might have evolved. During a century in which Dante had come under attack from many quarters, Florence had remained supportive. When an attack on Dante attributed to a pseudonymous "Ridolfo Castravilla" reawakened polemic on the subject in around 1570, it was the Florentines who responded most energetically. Numerous meetings of the Alterati were devoted to rebutting Castravilla's critique of Dante's poem as a failed poem by the standards of Aristotle's *Poetics*.[30] Several Florentine academicians composed defenses of Dante, most notably Filippo Sassetti.[31]

We can also catch echoes in Florence in this period of debate on the best verse form for epic. A session of the Alterati in February 1582 saw a discussion on this subject between Francesco Bonciani, speaking in favor of ottava rima; Alessandro Rinuccini, defending terza rima; and Giambattista Strozzi, making the claim for blank verse.[32] The same debate is played out in Gabriello Chiabrera's dialogue *Il Vecchietti*, with Strozzi and Giambattista Vecchietti as speakers, again rehearsing the relative merits of blank verse and of ottava and terza rima.[33] Chiabrera's own practice suggests some flexibility on the issue, at least during the time of his early experiments with religious epyllia. The 1603 edition of his *Rime sacre* includes miniature epics in blank verse and in ottava and

[29] Soldani, 56: "per rendere più gloriosa questa Patria, si è proposto per soggetto di Poema degnissimo quel maraviglioso viaggio d'Amerigo Vespucci." Soldani's phrasing echoes Tasso's description of Columbus's voyage as "most worthy of epic and history" ("di poema dignissima, e d'istoria"): Tasso, 933 (15.32).

[30] See Weinberg, 178–79, 182; Gilson, 136–39, for responses to Castravilla; also Weinberg, 184, 188–90, 193–94; Brunner, esp. 129–31; Siekiera, 92, 102–03, for other Dante-related discussions in Florence in this period.

[31] Castravilla and Sassetti.

[32] Weinberg, 184. The three speakers are referred to by their academic names, respectively, l'Aspro (The Harsh One), l'Ardito (The Daring One), and Il Tenero (The Tender One). The Regent of the academy, Luigi Alamanni, ruled in favor of Bonciani and the conventional ottava rima form.

[33] See Chiabrera, 1974, for the text of the dialogue; Fasoli, 110–22, for discussion. The dialogue probably dates to around 1620. On Chiabrera's friendship with Giambattista Vecchietti and its traces in his work, see Piemontese, 491; Chiabrera, 2003, 278.

terza rima, and the dedicatory letter presents the volume as an opportunity for readers to compare these competing metrical forms.[34]

Not only is it possible to trace in 1580s Florence an interest both in Dante and in New World epic, but it is also possible to find hints that the two interests intersected. In his funeral oration for Luigi Alamanni, Jacopo Soldani speaks of Alamanni's dual cult of Vespucci and Dante, both cast as providential travelers conducting a "sacred journey" into unknown realms.[35] Soldani's words find an echo in an album in the Biblioteca Laurenziana, compiled by Alamanni, which contains preparatory drawings by Giovanni Stradano for his *Americae retectio* series, along with fifty drawings by the same artist illustrating scenes from Dante, accompanied by copious annotations in Alamanni's hand.[36] The Dante-Vespucci conjunction also features in one of Stradano's images for the *Nova reperta* series, which figures Vespucci measuring the location of the Southern Cross, using an astrolabe. This engraving has an insert with a portrait of Dante and a citation from the passage in the first canto of *Purgatorio* in which Dante seems to refer to the constellation, which was invisible at his time.[37]

It is impossible to establish with certainty how familiar Girolamo was with the Florentine literary circles I have been discussing, given the near void of biographical information on his early life. Eighteenth-century sources, however, record that Girolamo, like his brother, was a member of the Accademia Fiorentina in the early 1580s, specifically during the 1582 consulate of Giambattista Strozzi.[38] On 4 April 1583, he is recorded as having delivered a public lecture on the "styles of the poets," commenting on a sonnet by Giovanni Della Casa:[39] a detail that surely suggests the influence of Sertorio Quattromani, who left an important commentary on Della Casa's poetry, published posthumously in 1616.

This is not the only evidence of Girolamo's interest in poetry, even setting aside *Delle prodezze*. The biographer Janus Nicius Erythraeus (1577–1647), who knew the Vecchietti brothers personally, confirms that both wrote verse, Giambattista with great elegance, Girolamo rather less so. (Erythraeus facetiously suggests that Girolamo's muse may have been impeded by his teetotalism, citing

[34] See Chiabrera, 1605–06, 3:3–8 (letter to Giovanni Vincenzo Imperiale); Fasoli, 122.

[35] Soldani, 57: "sacro viaggio."

[36] See Brunner; Markey, 126, 186–87nn13–14.

[37] See Van der Sman, 152 and fig. 12 (151); Watt, 135–36 and fig. 9.2 (136). Vespucci himself had referred to the passage in the letter in which he reported his sighting of the four stars.

[38] Salvini, 244–46.

[39] Della Casa, 17, 59: "degli stili de' poeti." I was unable to check this detail in the volumes of *atti* of the Accademia Fiorentina held in the Biblioteca Marucelliana, B. III. 52–54, as these terminate in 1581.

Horace's maxim that "no songs can win lasting praise that are composed by drinkers of water."[40]) I have identified ten surviving lyrics by Girolamo Vecchietti, mainly dating to the period 1619–21. Girolamo's biographical letter on Giambattista quotes from two sonnets mourning his death, seemingly part of a longer elegiac sequence.[41] Three opaque and mystical sonnets alluding to the Song of Songs are found among the paratexts of Girolamo's vast chronological treatise *De anno primitivo* (On the ancient year), published in Augsburg in 1621.[42] Three further poems are included in the exculpatory *Difese* (Defenses) that Vecchietti wrote during his imprisonment by the Inquisition in the 1620s and 1630s, when he refused to retract supposedly heretical claims in the treatise.[43] Finally, a volume in the Archivio di Stato in Turin contains two canzoni dating to 1621, addressed, respectively, to Philip IV of Spain (1605–65) and Ferdinando II de' Medici (1610–70).[44] The former is discussed below in the text.

CONTEXTS: ROME

The second context that needs to be considered for *Delle prodezze* is papal Rome in the 1580s: the key locus for the first two Italian New World epics to be published. Lorenzo Gambara's *De navigatione Christophori Columbi* appeared in 1581, and then again, in variant versions, in 1583 and 1585. Giulio Cesare Stella's *Columbeis*, or *Columbeidos libri priores duo* (The first two books of the Columbiad), received its first authorized publication in 1589, although it circulated earlier in manuscript, and it was available in a pirated London print edition from 1585.[45]

In an important study of the composition and context of Gambara's poem, Elisabetta Selmi has argued that these two Latin Columbus epics were spon-

[40] Horace, 83 (*Epistles* 1.19.2–3), cited in Erythraeus, 1:197: "nulla placere diu nec vivere carmina possunt, / quae scribuntur aquae potoribus."

[41] Vecchietti, 1776, 182, 191.

[42] Vecchietti, 1621, n. p.

[43] BML, Plut. LXXXIX, sup. 36, fols. 40^{r}–41^{r}, 51^{v}, 54^{v}–56^{v}. The poems are a canzone (incipit, "Sempre in nuvolo il sol non si nasconde"), a sonnet (incipit, "Né più si brama, né bramar più lice"), and a poem in quarta rima (incipit, "Odi le mie voci e non rispondi"). A further copy of the *Difese* is found in Biblioteca Casanatense, 488. For discussion, see Almagià, 343; Beretta, 449–50.

[44] AST, Raccolta Mongardino, 46, items 17 and 19. The incipit of the canzone for Ferdinando (probably datable to 1621, when he became grand duke, under the tutelage of his mother and grandmother) is "Per Padre, et Avo, et per Bisavo insigne." The Turin volume also contains a further copy of the canzone found in the *Difese* (item 18).

[45] On the date of the first Roman edition, sometimes erroneously cited as 1590, see Stella, ci.

sored by rival clerical factions. Selmi's reconstruction locates Gambara's supporters in the circles of the erudite and bibliophile Fulvio Orsini, and perhaps also among intellectuals close to Filippo Neri's Oratorians, such as Silvio Antoniano. Stella's poem, by contrast, was launched with the support of the Jesuits of the Collegio Romano.[46] The preface to the 1589 edition of the poem (which pointedly omits all mention of Gambara) was signed by Francesco Benci, professor of rhetoric at the Collegio, himself soon to author an important modern martyrdom epic, *Quinque martyres e Societate Iesu in India* (Five Jesuit martyrs in India), published in 1591.[47]

All these circles were invested in the question of Christian epic and its role in evangelization. Benci, indeed, explicitly addresses his work to the future missionaries and potential martyrs he taught in the Collegio, who are enjoined to carry the memory of his verses with them as they journey to America or China on their mission of propagating the faith. Although Columbus's expeditions were not religious missions in the same literal way as those of the Jesuit martyrs, they lent themselves to being presented in this manner. Indeed, as is well known, Columbus himself envisaged his voyage in a providential light.[48] For this reason, there are good grounds for considering the Italian New World epic as a branch of the multifarious tradition of Christian epic in the seventeenth century, along with martyrdom epics, Crusade poems, and narratives of early Christian history, such as Francesco Bracciolini's *La croce racquistata* (The cross regained, 1611).[49] Of the two earliest New World epics, Stella's poem, in particular, develops the religious theme strongly, making ample use of the Christian supernatural—the *meraviglioso*, in Tasso's terminology. Columbus's mission is ratified as providential by God himself, who sends an angel to assure him that he has been divinely ordained to the task of "carrying Christ to new realms."[50] Just as Juno opposes Aeneas in Virgil, Stella's model, so Satan pits himself against Columbus's pious mission: a motif already established within Iberian New World epic, and given fresh currency in Italy by Tasso.[51]

[46] Selmi, 461, 467.

[47] Ibid., 464; Gwynne. On Jesuit New World literature more generally see M. Benzoni, 105–17.

[48] Columbus; Prosperi, 20–21; Watt, 18–50.

[49] For an overview, see Chiesa.

[50] Stella, 60 (1:355–56): "et Christum . . . in nova regna feres." Stella plays here on the pun on Columbus's name, *Christum-ferens* (Christ-bearing), already found in Columbus's own writings.

[51] On Stella's Christianizing imitation of Virgil, see Stella, esp. xlvi–xlix, lxx–lxxv; Hardie, 154–55. On his place within the tradition of "Satanic" New World epic, see Cañizares-Esguerra, 50.

Vecchietti's choice of the vernacular for his poem, and his adhesion to a Dantean verse form, marks his work as distinctly Florentine in comparison with the cosmopolitan Roman epic ideal. Nonetheless, it seems highly likely that Vecchietti was acquainted with the poems of Gambara and Stella, whether through his brother's contacts in Rome from the time of his sojourn there in the 1570s, or through Florentine connections. Close ties existed between Florentine academic circles and the circles of Gambara and Stella. In his preface to the 1589 *Columbeis*, Francesco Benci tells us that Stella sent the poem for review to the Accademia Fiorentina, which Benci praises as "most rich in great men and fine intellects."[52] Benci also cites two Florentines, Piero Vettori (1499–1585) and Pietro Angeli da Barga (1517–96), among the critics to whom Stella submitted his work. Where Gambara is concerned, the Oratorian context may be relevant in considering the likelihood that the work circulated in Florence. Filippo Neri was Florentine himself, and Florentines were prominent among his disciples. These included the New World poet Giambattista Strozzi, who resided with the Oratorians in Santa Maria in Vallicella when he moved to Rome in 1590.[53]

We have much evidence, admittedly dating from a later period in Girolamo Vecchietti's life, to suggest that he was fully in sympathy with the evangelizing ideology that informed early Italian New World epic. Illuminating on this score is a collection of documentation found in the Raccolta Mongardino of the Archivio di Stato di Torino, containing copies of letters and reports that Vecchietti wrote to successive popes, mainly dating from the period 1603 to 1611. In a letter to Clement VIII, of 1603, Vecchietti speaks of his willingness to face danger and death on missions in the service of the church, and of his delight in hearing of Clement's foundation of a congregation intended to further the propagation of the faith.[54] Other papers, addressed to Pope Paul V, around 1609–11, speak of the desirability of outreach to Christians in Ethiopia and the Congo, and the favorable opportunities for Christian evangelization in India, where successive Mughal emperors had shown a sympathetic interest in the Christian faith.[55]

[52] Stella, 6. The Alterati received a print copy of Stella's poem after its 1589 publication, presented by Giambattista Strozzi: BML, Ashb. 558 (*Diario dell'Accademia degli Alterati*), vol. 2, 82^{v}.

[53] Fido, 278; Barbi, 41–42. Girolamo Vecchietti himself is associated with Filippo Neri in an anecdote in Antonio Gallonio's biography of the saint: Leone 264–65.

[54] The reference seems to be to Clement's 1599 foundation of a Congregation "super negotiis fidei et religionis catholicae" ("on Matters of the Faith and the Catholic Religion"), a precursor of the later Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. See Almagià, 324.

[55] AST, Raccolta Mongardino, 46, items 23 and 26. The former is discussed briefly in Almagià, 341–42.

Further evidence of Vecchietti's concern with world evangelization may be found in his 1621 treatise *De anno primitivo*, which marshals the fashionable science of chronology in support of a complex, eccentric, apocalyptic vision.[56] Book 7 of the treatise unfolds this vision through a detailed reading of the book of Revelation. As is usual within the Christian apocalyptic tradition, Vecchietti envisages that the last days will be presaged by a moment of global religious harmony, in which humanity will unite in "one fold, with one shepherd" (John 10:16). In Vecchietti's calculation, this moment was close at hand. Within thirteen years of the publication of the treatise, in 1634, the entire Islamic world would convert to Christianity, under a sultan Vecchietti associated with the angel of Revelation 14:6. Soon after this, a king of Spain, figured in the angel of Revelation 10, would complete the evangelization of the New World.[57]

A canzone by Vecchietti dating to the same year as *De anno primitivo*, and addressed to the young king Philip IV of Spain, reiterates these apocalyptic prophecies and gives them a more affective, lyric form. The poem survives in print, in a plain, duodecimo pamphlet found in the Archivio di Stato di Torino. It was printed in Augsburg, where Vecchietti found himself in 1621 to oversee the publication of the treatise.[58] Like the treatise, the canzone predicts the coming of universal Christianity as imminent: soon, "races, peoples, and tongues, united in melodic concert, will sing the praises of the Word made Flesh."[59] Meanwhile, all Christians must suffer at the thought of how many of their fellow humans lack the comfort of the true faith: "On right and left, let it grieve us that so much world is divided from God."[60]

In its evangelizing concerns and its apocalyptic overtones, Vecchietti's canzone is reminiscent of aspects of the thought of the Calabrian-born philosopher and theologian Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639), whose intervention would

[56] On chronological studies in this period, see Grafton; Nothaft, 241–75.

[57] Vecchietti, 1621, 77 (7.21–22), for the prophecy related to the Islamic world; 78 (7.23–24) for that relating to the New World. Vecchietti tentatively dates the Spanish-led conversion to 1644 in 7.25, on the basis of a reading of Zechariah 8.

[58] AST, Raccolta Mongardiano, 46, item 17. The title of the pamphlet is *Girolamo Vecchietti a Filippo Quarto Re di Spagna* (Girolamo Vecchietti to King Philip IV of Spain), and the poem's incipit is "Hanno il tempo ben lor tutte le cose." The publisher's name is given as "Sara Mangia," or Sara Mang, the widow of the printer Christoph Mang (d. 1617). She was active as a printer from 1617 to 1624.

[59] AST, Raccolta Mongardiano, 46, fol. 50^{v}: "Genti populi et lingue, / unite in un melodico concerto, / renderan lodi allo humanato Verbo."

[60] Ibid., fol. 52^{r}: "Poi da destra a sinistra si compunga / cotanto mondo esser da Dio diviso."

be crucial in securing Girolamo Vecchietti's release from prison in 1633.[61] Campanella's acquaintance with the Vecchietti brothers dates to 1592, when he met Giambattista in Rome, prior to his own long imprisonment. The two became close during Giambattista's last years in Naples (1615–19), when, according to Girolamo, they "discussed great mysteries of the conversion of the nations to Christ," and fantasized about a possible voyage together to the Near East, if Campanella's freedom could be secured.[62] Campanella's major work of these years, *Quod reminiscentur et convertuntur ad Dominum universi fines terrae* (All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, 1615–18), a compilation of evangelizing speeches addressed to the rulers of the world, probably attests to the tenor of these conversations with Vecchietti, who is cited twice in the work.[63]

Despite their lay status, the Vecchietti brothers deserve to be considered as part of the phenomenon or the moment in church history that Luke Clossey has termed "Global Salvific Catholicism."[64] They belong to an interesting point in this history, prior to the creation of the Congregation De Propaganda Fide in 1622, when popes such as Gregory XIII, Sixtus V, and Clement VIII organized their evangelizing outreach in an ad hoc manner, employing envoys who had acquired the requisite linguistic skills through their own travel and study, rather than systematically training up Arabic-speaking clerics for deployment in Africa and the East.[65] Although the Vecchietti brothers' engagement in successive popes' diplomatic initiatives was doubtless motivated in part by self-interest (the two were perpetually short of money, following the loss of their Florentine patrimony), there is evidence that the brothers were committed participants in the task of the propagation of the faith. That Girolamo, early in his career, should have turned his pen to an epic of the conquest of Mexico, seen as a providential mission to bring the truth of Christ to a land lost in religious error, seems quite consistent with what is known of his later views and beliefs.

CONTEXTS: FERDINANDO DE' MEDICI

The final tesserae to put in place in this contextual reconstruction are associated with Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici, the dedicatee of *Delle prodezze*, and

[61] On Campanella's interventions during Vecchietti's imprisonment, see Beretta. On the intersection of apocalypticism and world evangelization in Campanella's thought, see Headley, 326; Prosperi, 62–63. Prosperi's essay supplies the broader context

[62] Vecchietti, 1776, 190: "conferivano gran misteri della conversione delle genti."

[63] Piemontese, 487–88.

[64] Clossey, 248–57.

[65] On systematic training in the Oriental languages intended for missionaries in post-1622 Rome, see Girard. On the study of Arabic in Rome prior to this time, see Casari, 2013b.

hence a pivotal figure in this study. Born in 1549, the fifth son of Cosimo I de' Medici and Eleonora of Toledo, Ferdinando became a cardinal at the age of fourteen in 1562, following the death of his brother Giovanni, who was to have sustained the role of family cardinal.[66] Ferdinando took up residence in Rome in 1569, and, by the 1580s, he was proving one of the most authoritative figures of the papal court, his influence bolstered by his family wealth. Ferdinando followed the traditions of his family in sponsoring art and architecture, embellishing first Palazzo Firenze, in Campo di Marte, and then Palazzo Medici, on the Pincio, which he acquired in 1576. These Roman palaces lodged important collections of books, artworks, and "curiosities," which later followed him in large part to Florence, after his transfer to the city as grand duke.[67] In addition to his art patronage and collecting, Ferdinando was also a keen rider and huntsman, in a style that recalls more worldly, pre-Tridentine princes of the church, such as his distant cousin Leo X (Giovanni de' Medici).

Unlike his role model Leo, Ferdinando was not particularly famed as an erudite or a literary patron, but there are reasons to think he might have appreciated a literary offering such as Vecchietti's *Delle prodezze*. Emulation might be sufficient motive in itself. Both the Roman New World epics of the 1580s, Gambara's *De navigatione* and Stella's *Columbeis*, were products of writers with strong patronage ties to Ferdinando's great rival within the College of Cardinals, Alessandro Farnese.[68] Meanwhile, the instant fame of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (Jerusalem delivered) following its publication in 1581 had strengthened the already powerful claims of the rival Este dynasty of Ferrara to primacy in vernacular literary patronage.[69] Vecchietti was not the only poet within Medici circles who was encouraged to try his hand at epic in the 1580s. Ferdinando's former tutor, the poet and humanist Pietro Angeli da Barga, was engaged during this period on a Latin epic on the Crusades, which was eventually published in its complete form in 1591.[70] As this project suggests, and as Gambara's and Stella's poems confirm, Latin epic enjoyed great prestige and momentum at this mo-

[66] Studies of Ferdinando down to the mid-1990s are cited in Fasano Guarini, 1996. More-recent studies include S. Butters, 1999, 2002, 2007, and 2010; Fasano Guarini, 2002. Comerford, 64–81, offers a useful summary of his politics and interests.

[67] On Ferdinando's collecting as cardinal, see Hochmann.

[68] For Gambara's connections with Alessandro Farnese, see Selmi, 460n9, 462. For Stella's, see Stella, 10. For Ferdinando's rivalry with Alessandro Farnese, see Fasano Guarini, 2002, esp. 67–68, 74.

[69] On cultural rivalry between Florence and Ferrara in the first years of Ferdinando's rule, see Fenlon, 213–15.

[70] On Angeli and his ties to the Medici grand dukes, see Cipriani.

ment; yet there is no reason to think that a vernacular epic would not be acceptable to a Florentine cardinal (especially one who was no great Latinist himself).

Consideration of Ferdinando as dedicatee can help explain Vecchietti's choice of the Spaniard Cortés, rather than Columbus or Vespucci, as the hero of his epic (although it should not be forgotten that the Calabrian-born Vecchietti was himself originally a subject of the king of Spain). Ferdinando was half-Spanish, through his mother, Eleonora de Toledo; he was the grandson of a Spanish viceroy of Naples, Pedro Alvárez de Toledo, and the great-grandson of the second duke of Alba, who participated in the conquest of Granada under Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492. Ferdinando showed himself "fervently pro-Spanish" as cardinal, in keeping with his father's and brother's political leanings as rulers of Florence.[71] During the Corpus Domini festivities in Rome in 1578, Ferdinando hung a portrait of Philip II of Spain above the main door of his palace, publicly proclaiming his Spanish allegiance.[72] In 1582, he took on the title of cardinal protector of Spain.[73]

Over and above his Spanish sympathies, there were more specific reasons why it might be thought that an epic of the conquest of Mexico might interest Ferdinando. The cardinal was deeply involved in the project of world evangelization, as well as in the related Catholic dream of a new Crusade against Ottoman power.[74] In 1584, Gregory XIII named Ferdinando cardinal protector of Antioch, Alexandria, and the kingdom of Ethiopia; and he took this responsibility to heart. On Gregory's suggestion, he financed a new press, the Tipografia Medicea Orientale, intended to print biblical texts in Arabic and other "heathen" languages, intended for evangelizing purposes.[75] A secondary end of the press, in which the Vecchietti brothers played a vital role, was to collect manuscripts in these same languages—both fragments of scripture in languages such as Judeo-Persian, and philosophical, scientific, and literary writings in Arabic and Persian—to feed the growing interest in *orientalia* in the West.[76] Ferdinando's commitment to Catholicism's global reach did not diminish as he passed from the role of cardinal to grand duke. In his first year as grand duke of Tuscany, he oversaw the publication in Florence of the Jesuit Giovanni Pietro

[71] Fasano Guarini, 2002, 71.

[72] S. Butters, 1999, 23.

[73] Fasano Guarini, 2002, 72–74. The dedication of Vecchietti's *Delle prodezze* in BL Add. 30376, cited above, underlines Ferdinando's Spanish allegiance and lineage by addressing him by the Spanish version of his name, Ferrante. The choice also flatteringly assimilates Ferdinando/Ferrante to the hero of the poem, "Ferrante Cortese."

[74] On Ferdinando's fascination with crusading culture, see S. Butters, 2010, 187–90.

[75] On the Tipografia, see Saltini; Tinto; Fani and Farina; Casari, 2013b.

[76] On the Vecchietti brothers' role in manuscript hunting, see Richard; Piemontese; Fani and Farina, 90, 150, 154, 160–62; Casari, 2013a, 126.

Maffei's important history of Jesuit missions in Asia and America, *Historiarum indicarum libri XVI* (Sixteen books of the history of the Indies).[77] The extraordinary sequence of battle paintings he commissioned for the Armeria in Palazzo Vecchio in the same year combines scenes of battles between Christian and non-Christian troops in America and Africa, alongside the Medicean defeat of a French-allied Turkish fleet at Piombino in 1555.

It is within this more general pattern of interests that we should locate Ferdinando's particular fascination with Mexico, to which Lia Markey has recently called attention. The cardinal's collections in Rome contained several Mexican featherwork mosaic pieces, including two miters, acquired between 1584 and 1586, one of which may still be viewed in the Museo degli Arienti, and two Madonnas, both untraceable, one a gift from the Spanish ambassador in 1588.[78] More strikingly—for his father Cosimo I had already collected New World artworks—Ferdinando came into possession of a rare codex containing the extraordinary bilingual ethnographic compilation *Historia general de las cosas de nueva España* (General history of the matters of New Spain), assembled by the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590), working with a team of native Mexican researchers from the Colegio Imperial de Santa Cruza de Tlatelolco, where he taught.[79] The manuscript, now known as the Florentine Codex, seems to have accompanied Ferdinando when he moved to Florence in 1587, and it has been identified as the source for Lorenzo Buti's representation of New World natives in one of the battle scenes of the Armeria.[80] Markey's recent study of the place of the New World within Medici court culture evocatively defines the appropriation of New World objects and images as a species of "vicarious conquest."[81] This offers a rich context for Vecchietti's project, which enabled his Medici patron to pursue this vicarious conquest on the page.

A SINGULAR EPIC POEM

Turning from questions of context to analysis of the poem, I should make clear from the outset that my intention is not to claim lost-masterpiece status for *Delle prodezze*. Although it is a fascinating text, its interest derives mainly from its unusual subject matter and the unusual manner of its treatment. Stylistically, the text is unremarkable. In terms of syntax and lexis, Vecchietti leans

[77] Markey, 98, 184n15.

[78] See Gallori, 73; Hochmann, 222–25.

[79] See León-Portilla; Schwaller.

[80] On the Buti image, see Heikamp; Markey, 100–02. On Ferdinando's acquisition and ownership of the Florentine Codex, see Markey, 96–100.

[81] Markey, esp. 159.

more toward the *mediocritas* of Ariosto than to Tasso's more taxing and consistently elevated poetic language, but he lacks Ariosto's ease and fluency, his lightness and grace, his effortless *varietas* and his mastery of pacing. Vecchietti's style can be monotonous, and it is almost invariably lax in its narrative rhythms, drawing out speeches, in particular, far beyond the length their content would seem to demand. The use of the Dantean form of terza rima tends to underline this slowness, in that it recalls by contrast the extraordinary terseness and denseness of Dante's narration and dialogue.

In terms of structure, Vecchietti observes very strictly the Aristotelian principle of unity of action. The plot of the extant cantos is linear and unitary, without any significant *episodi*, or subplots, to use the terminology employed by Tasso. The epic starts in medias res, as was the custom for martial epics. A succinct first canto narrates the story of Cortés's expedition, from his first landing in the Yucatán Peninsula in February 1519 and his alliance with the Tlaxcaltec people, encompassing his first attack on Tenochtitlán, his flight from the city during the so-called Noche Triste, and the death of Mocteczuma. As the canto ends, Cortés is in Tlaxcala, overseeing the construction of brigantines to launch a fresh assault on Tenochtitlán. This places the action in the summer of 1520.[82] True to the model of Tasso, there follows a council in hell (cantos 2–5), in which Satan and his demonic troops discuss the threat Cortés represents to their domain. The gods worshipped by the peoples of Mexico are equated with demons, as was customary with the religious Others of Christian epic.

After much discussion, Vecchietti's demons decide to adopt a two-pronged attack on the Spaniards, spearheaded by two native Mexicans with a grudge against the invaders. The first of these, unexpectedly, is Anacaona, co-ruler of Jaragua, in Hispaniola, who had in historical fact died in 1503, hanged by the Spaniards for insurrection in her native land.[83] Vecchietti resurrects her, and makes her queen of an invented realm in Mexico. The second antagonist is an invented character, Viperomo, a warrior of the people of Cholollan, the present-day Cholula, allied with Cortés. Anacaona is to be stirred by demons to rise against Cortés with an army, while Viperomo is to be spurred to a rebellion aimed at destroying Cortés's half-built ships. Cortés will thus be confronted by a double enemy, without and within, in a manner reminiscent of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, although with a gender reversal, in that it is a female figure, Anacaona, who will lead the enemy army, while a male figure, Viperomo, is charged with the role Tasso gives to his enchantress Armida, of fostering dissent from within.

The remainder of the poem is mainly devoted to tracing the outcomes of these two devilish incitations. Cantos 6–8 show Anacaona speaking in the sen-

[82] On the military history of the conquest, see Hassig. For analysis, see Elliott, 3–56.

[83] Fumagalli, 94–96.

ate of her kingdom to convince her nobles to follow her into battle against Cortés, following a dream in which Beelzebub and his cohorts have urged her to such an attack. A wise elder, the Cassandra-like Oroaspe, argues for the folly of this enterprise, but the queen wrathfully silences him and expels him from the senate. She then summons the Aztec emperor's ambassadors to announce that she will imminently lead an army to join him. In canto 9, the action moves to Tlaxcala, where Cortés is overseeing the construction of his fleet. There we see Viperomo stirred to rebellion by the god Quetzalcoatl, who appears to him in a vision (personified by the demon Farfarello, a figure from Dante's *Inferno*). Cantos 10–11, the first action scenes of the poem, show Viperomo rousing his countrymen and racing to the Spanish shipyard, where Farfarello, again in his divine guise, urges Viperomo to set fire to the stores of pitch amassed to waterproof the craft. Canto 12 introduces Cortés for the first time, as he is informed of the fire and rides to the docks to find the pitch blazing infernally, stirred from within by the invisible Farfarello. Canto 13 sees Cortés attempting to dissuade Viperomo from his rebellion, only to be greeted by a speech of defiance. Viperomo runs into the pitch store to pursue his destruction, ultimately burning horribly to death within the store.

After this brief passage of action, cantos 14–17 devolve into Vecchietti's usual, more leisurely manner. In canto 15, Cortés is seen suffering from insomnia, as he fearfully meditates on the dangers of his situation. Viperomo's rebellion has brought home to him how isolated the Spaniards are among their far more numerous, and potentially treacherous, allies. In canto 16, a friend and counsellor, Velleio, advises Cortés on how to deal with Viperomo's rebel followers, not through any violent repression, but rather by simply ordering them to fell trees sufficient to make up the pitch that their rebellion had destroyed. This will allow him to gauge their temper. If they obey with a good heart, he will know himself safer than he feared. If their response is sullen or unwilling, he must be ready to act decisively to neutralize the threat.

Cantos 17 and 18 show Cortés putting this advice into action, in one of the most oddly decelerated moments of this ever-laggard poem. Terrified at the prospect of harsh punishment, Viperomo's men are delighted when they learn they may redeem themselves through a morning's hard labor, and they set about their task with enthusiasm. Almost the entirety of canto 18 is taken up with a description of this work, in a strange deviation into a kind of proto-industrial georgic, describing pitch production, from the felling of trees to the furnace work.[84] It may be that we can catch an echo in this passage of the fascination with chemical

[84] Vecchietti's likely historical source, Cortés's *Tercera relación*, mentions pitch production for the ships only in passing (Ramusio, 6:138), saying that, since none was available, he had Spanish soliders go to collect it on a nearby mountain.

and industrial processes that was such a feature of later sixteenth-century Medici culture, and which we find celebrated in Francesco I's *studiolo* in the Uffizi, with its images of the workshops of alchemists and goldsmiths, a wool factory, an armory, and a glassworks.[85]

Following the ten cantos devoted to the Viperomo narrative, the poem returns to Anacaona for the final five cantos. Her plot is reintroduced through a long and detailed topographical description of the extent of her kingdom, which extends across a vast swathe of northern Mexico and the southern states of the present US, stretching from the Panuco River, near Tampico on the east coast of Mexico, to Florida in the northeast, and the "Vermilion Sea," or Gulf of California, in the northwest.[86] Anacaona is preparing for her march in support of the Aztec emperor when her plans are disrupted by the arrival on her shores of a small band of Spaniards, led—as we later learn—by an unnamed young, blond hero. It may be assumed these are the survivors of a misadventure at sea vaguely alluded to in the second canto of the poem, when a small band of ships is seen being blown off course by demonic intervention.[87] The first vision of these visitors is through the terrified eyes of a party of Anacaona's troops, reporting on a bruising encounter with the Spaniards' firepower. The strangeness of the newcomers, with their horses, their armored bodies, and their lightning-bolt guns, leads the native Mexicans to assume that they are gods. Anacaona, by contrast, knows them to be mortal, and she launches a fierce attack on them, leading the charge herself, at the head of an Amazonian brigade of female archers.[88] After the predictable ensuing massacre, Anacaona changes strategy, relying on guile where force has proved inadequate. By the end of the poem, she has invited the courteous young leader of the Spaniards to enjoy her hospitality in the city while he repairs his ships, presumably with treacherous intent. The poem breaks off at this point, abruptly, at the end of the twenty-fourth canto (perhaps not coincidentally, twice the length of Virgil's similarly unfinished, twelve-book *Aeneid*).

Several elements within Vecchietti's poem distinguish it from other New World epics of the period. Most obviously, the poem lacks any nationalistic impulse to celebrate Italy's part in the discovery of the New World. Not only does Vecchietti choose Cortés, rather than Columbus or Vespucci, as the hero of his poem, but he also refrains from inserting invented Italian characters among

[85] For a description of the scheme, see Feinberg.

[86] BL Add. 30376, fols. 67^{v}–68^{r} (19.16–39). Anacaona's kingdom does not map onto any historical political entity. It is referred to at fol. 24^{v} (6.47) as the "Kingdom of Panuco" ("Regno di Panuco").

[87] BL Add. 30376, fols. 7^{v}–8^{r} (2.82–105).

[88] On female warriors in Italian New World epic and the historical source material that inspired their inclusion, see Aloè, 2014; March and Passman.

Cortés's troops. *Delle prodezze* represents Cortés's expedition with historical accuracy as Spanish-led and Spanish-manned, although reliant for success on alliances with local peoples such as the Cempoalans and the Tlaxcaltecs. Vecchietti also respects the proportions of these armies, showing Cortés nervously cognizant of the far greater numerical weight of his allies (the Spaniards, on their arrival in Mexico, numbered few more than 600, while the joint army that marched on Tenochtitlan following the alliance with the Tlaxcaltecs was 6,000–7,000 in strength).

Vecchietti's adherence to the historical record is striking when his poem is compared with Giovanni Giorgini's *Il mondo nuovo*, the vernacular epic closest to his in time. Giorgini meshes together the tales of Columbus and Cortés, ignoring the quarter-century that lay between their two expeditions; and he is sufficiently cavalier about historical fact as to have King Ferdinand of Aragon (1452–1516) conduct the Spanish New World armies himself. The poem ends, Tasso-style, with Ferdinand fulfilling his vow of missionary conquest within the great temple of the vanquished Tenochtitlan, five years after the historical Ferdinand's death. Vecchietti allows himself considerably less license, keeping far closer to the relatively sober model of historical epic offered by Lorenzo Gambara. His principal anachronism, the inclusion of the long-dead Anacaona, is explained away within the poem by the fiction that she was saved from her death by demonic intervention.[89]

A further respect in which *Delle prodezze* may be assimilated to Gambara, and differentiated from most of the New World epics that followed, is in the absence of an invented love story, or love stories, at least as the poem stands. Love was introduced for the first time into Italian New World epic by Giulio Cesare Stella in his *Columbeis*, where Anacaona is given a role reminiscent of Dido in the *Aeneid*. Most subsequent vernacular authors followed the pattern of Tasso, and, before him, Ariosto, in mingling the themes of arms and love.[90] Vecchietti's poem is more austere. The final canti, it is true, bring Queen Anacaona into juxtaposition with the new character of the shipwrecked Spaniard, easily assimilated to romance love heroes by his blondness and youth. In their scenes together, however, there is no hint of a future erotic development; rather, Vecchietti's emphasis falls on the queen's cunning in luring the young man to the city, in a manner that seems to anticipate a tale of treachery, rather than love.[91]

[89] BL Add. 30376, fol. 15$^{r–v}$ (4.100–14).

[90] Giorgini's and Stigliani's love plots are discussed in Aloè, 2014. On Stella's Anacaona and Virgil's Dido, see Stella, lxi, lxv–lxvi

[91] See especially BL Add. 30376, fol. 85^{r} (24.3), where Anacaona is said to be setting a trap for the Spaniards; also lines 7–9 of the same octave, where she is said to be hiding her "cruel plan" beneath a mild expression; also ibid., fol. 86^{r} (24.56), where she is described as "false Anacaona."

THE SHADOWS OF CONQUEST: *DELLE PRODEZZE* AS "PESSIMISTIC" EPIC

One striking illustration of Vecchietti's espousal of a (relatively) historical and verisimilar model of epic is the limited use he makes of the Christian *meraviglioso*. There is almost nothing by way of interventions by God, or by saints and angels, in the portions of the epic focused on the Spanish. Confronted with the aftermath of Viperomo's rebellion, Cortés passes a sleepless night worrying about the future of his enterprise; yet he finds release not through a supernatural vision, nor even through prayer, but rather through the advice of a sympathetic lieutenant. Nor is there any particular emphasis on Cortés's religious piety; although he is shown as a gracious and benevolent leader, he has little of the Goffredo-like aura of the divinely appointed *miles Christianus* that characterizes the Columbus of Stella's *Columbeis*.

The same may be said, to a slightly lesser extent, of the demonic *meraviglioso*. Following the initial council of hell, the role of dark magic in the poem is relatively limited, consisting purely of the Virgilian Fury role adopted by Beelzebub and Farfarello. Both come in visions experienced by a sole witness, rather than generally visible miracles or portents. Even when Farfarello appears before Viperomo when he is in the company of his comrades, they see no more of him than a "dark light, / turbidly gleaming."[92] Aside from an initial, passing mention of a demonically induced storm, there seems little indication of any devilish power that extends beyond the psychological. Although Farfarello-Quetzacoatl is present in the burning pitch scene, stoking the fires, he seems powerless to save his protégé Viperomo when he ultimately succumbs to the flames.

The most striking feature of the poem's two episodes of devilish incitation is that they serve to recall two of the most shameful early incidents in the Spanish conquest of America: Nicolás de Ovando's treacherous slaying of the caciques of Hispaniola in 1503, and his subsequent execution of Anacaona; and the massacre carried out by Cortés's men and their Tlaxcaltec allies at Cholula in October 1519.[93] In the first supernatural episode following the council in hell, Beelzebub and his demons appear to Anacaona in a dream in the guise of her murdered compatriots. The scene is a horrific one, recalling the men's cruel deaths (they were burned alive at a banquet): "She had withdrawn to a secluded place, lofty and royal, and Sleep was now enfolding her with his dark wings, when in the midst of her sleeping, royally garbed yet charred and squallid in ap-

[92] Ibid., fol. 40^{r} (11.80–81): "un cotal cupo lume / di torbido splendor diffuso."

[93] On the first of these episodes, see Fumagalli, 94–99. On the second, see Peterson and Green; McCafferty.

pearance, torn and broken, Beelzebub came before her, and with him another forty, all alike, dripping with bloody gore."[94]

Similarly disturbing, in its recollection of historical atrocities, is Farfarello-Quetzalcoatl's visit to Viperomo, when the purported god recalls the destruction of his temple at Cholula during the massacre and the burning of the priests who officiated there.[95] The episode is one of the most notorious in the early history of the conquest of Mexico, and one of the most controversial. Cholula, or Chollolan, was a great religious center of preconquest Mexico, compared by Gabriel de Rojas, in his 1581 *Relación de Cholula* (Report on Cholula), to Mecca or Rome.[96]

The two incidents, sixteen years apart, share certain historical parallels that their symmetrical placement within the poem serves to throw into relief. Both occurred in situations where peace appeared to obtain between the Spanish forces and their hosts. In the Hispaniola episode, the caciques had come to meet Ovando's men of their own accord and were feasting at the time of the massacre. In Cholula, the Spaniards had been welcomed into the city and treated as honored guests. In both cases, Spanish narratives spoke of fears of native treachery and presented the respective atrocities as preemptive and self-defensive. Cortés justified the killings at Cholula on the grounds that his interpreter Malintzin ("la Malinche") had heard of a plot to kill the Spaniards the next day. In both cases, however, alternative narratives were also in circulation. Bartolomé de las Casas presents Ovando's murder of the chiefs and his execution of Anacaona as acts of pure tyranny and cruelty. Similarly, De las Casas speaks of Cortés's acts in Cholula as motivated not by apprehension but rather by a calculated strategy of terror, intended to intimidate the Cholultecs and the other native peoples who lay in the Spanish path.[97]

Vecchietti's treatment of these episodes in *Delle prodezze* serves in some ways to reinforce the official, Spanish narrative. Cortés alludes to the Cholultecs' past treachery against the Spanish as he deals with Viperomo's new rebellion, and, as the poem ends, Anacaona is shown poised for similarly treacherous dealings

[94] BL Add. 30376, fol. 20^{v} (6.28–36): "In ben riposto luogho alto, et reale / ella si era gia tratta, e il sonno intanto / tutta già la coprìa, con sue fosche ale, / quando in mezzo al dormir in reggio ammanto, / ma in vista arsiccio, et squallido sembiante, / lacero tutto et delle membra infranto, / a lei si fece Belzebù lì avante / et seco altri quaranta in simil forma / di sanguigno cruor tutta stillante."

[95] See, particularly, ibid., fol. 34^{r} (9.115–20), for Farfarello-Quetzalcoatl's description of the destruction of the temple at Cholula and the burning of his "dear ministers."

[96] Cited in D. Carrasco, 137.

[97] Detailed discussions of the various motivations given for the massacre in contemporary sources may be found in Peterson and Green; McCafferty.

with her Spanish guests.[98] Both Viperomo and Anacaona are represented as unsavory characters, given to violence and ill faith. Anacaona is shown as a tyrant to her own people, cruelly turning on the venerable Oroaspe when he dares to speak up against her.[99] Viperomo is cast in the mold of Tasso's rebel Argillano, who raises a mutiny against Goffredo, incited by the Fury Aletto: "Head he was of the people of Chololan, Viperomo by name, a vast man, quick of hand and of tongue; proud and arrogant by nature, and followed by the plebs, rash and empty-headed."[100] The trait of quickness of hand and tongue reprises a near-identical phrase in Tasso's introduction of Argillano, while Viperomo's vast build, his oversized pride, and his association with the world of snakes (his name combines *vipera*, viper, and *omo*, man) associate him with Ariosto's Rodomonte.[101] Viperomo's snake associations also serve to reinforce his connection with the deity Quetzalcoatl (the god's name means "plumed serpent" in Nahuati).

Despite all this negative framing, Vecchietti's evocation of the atrocities at Hispaniola and Cholula remains a striking choice, especially given that it was not forced upon him by narrative exigencies. Both massacres took place well before the foregrounded narrative of the poem—that in Hispaniola almost two decades earlier—and there was no need to recall them in order to motivate the vengeful fury of his Mexican characters. Virgilian and Tassian precedent allowed for much flimsier grievances to trigger supernaturally instigated episodes of violence in epic. Amata is driven to fury by Ascanius's mistaken killing of a pet deer, while Argillano is stirred to rebellion by the false tale of Goffredo's treacherous killing of Rinaldo. Vecchietti's probable source, Cortés's *Tercera relación* (Third letter), does speak of a native rebellion at the time while the brigantines are under construction, but this has nothing to do with the massacre at Cholula, and the grievances that led to the uprising are left undescribed.[102]

[98] References to the Cholultecs' earlier treachery are found at BL Add. 30376, fol. 45^{v} (13.31–33), and at ibid., fol. 61^{r} (17.26–30).

[99] Oroaspe is introduced, in highly laudatory terms, at ibid., fol. 25^{v} (7.91–100). For Anacaona's attack on him, see ibid., fols. 27^{v}–28^{v} (8.1–33).

[100] Ibid., fol. 32^{r} (9.37–42): "Capo era delle genti ciolollane; / Viperomo havea nome, a dismisura / grande, et di lingua pronto, et delle mane, / orgoglioso, et superbo per natura, / et seguitato dalla bassa plebbe, / assai vano, et di poca levatura." I have used Chollolan, the original Nahuatl name for Cholula, in this translation, as close to Vecchietti's usage of *Ciololla*, *ciollolano*.

[101] Rodomonte wears serpent, or dragon-skin, armor, and he is compared, like Virgil's Pyrrhus, to a snake in its new skin. See Ariosto, 477, 544 (14.118, 17.11). For Tasso's description of Argillano, see Tasso, 542 (8.58): "pronto di man, di lingua ardito" ("swift of hand, bold of tongue").

[102] Ramusio, 6:139. The rebel cities are named as "Cecatami" and "Xalacingo." For speculation about the identity of these cities, see P. Carrasco, 490n8.

Whatever Vecchietti's motive for introducing troubling reminiscences of Spanish massacres into his poem, the effect is to inject a strong element of moral ambiguity into the poem, complicating what might have been a much simpler, ideologically crisper story of a Christian good overcoming a pagan evil. Anacaona and Viperomo may be deceived by demons in their vengeful aggressions against Cortés, but the injuries they seek to avenge are not feigned. Moreover, in these episodes, Vecchietti allows space to discourses counter to the poem's own providentialist framing. This may be seen first in Anacaona's speech to her senate in canto 7, denouncing the depredations of the Spanish army and the burning of Cholula.[103] Still more trenchant is Viperomo's defiant address to Cortés in canto 13, which flatly labels the Spanish colonialist incursions as motivated purely by rapacity and greed. "And you, rapacious thief, now tell me, if you will, where you found the model for this iniquitous custom, whose equal is not found beneath the sun. You take pitiless and cruel delight in going around disturbing the peace of others and you relish others' pain. In truth, I was never in your land; nor did any other man from these parts ever arrive there with his vessels to disturb your long-established peace, to trouble your life and take away your freedom."[104] Viperomo's tirade recalls speeches put in the mouths of native Mexicans in Girolamo Benzoni's 1565 *Historia del mondo nuovo* (History of the New World), one of the key sources for the anti-triumphalist version of the conquest, along with the writings of de las Casas.[105] The speech concludes with a bitter denunciation of the atrocities at Cholula, and particularly the burning of Quetzalcoatl's temple with all who sheltered in it.[106] Recollection of this real-life immolation is thus positioned immediately before Viperomo's similarly horrific fictional death.

A further nuancing factor in Viperomo's characterization is his portrayal as a devout worshipper of Quetzalcoatl. This *pietas* serves to distinguish him from antagonist figures such as Rodomonte in Ariosto or Argante in Tasso, who are explicitly characterized by their "titanic" contempt for the divine order. When Farfarello first appears to him in the guise of the god, Viperomo feels "rever-

[103] BL Add. 30376, fol. 24$^{r–v}$ (6.28–48).

[104] Ibid., fol. 46^{r} (13.49–60): "'Et tu, ladrone ingordo, hor dimmi hor d'onde / preso hai lo esempio di sì inqua usanza / cui par non è per quanto il sol circonde, / ché spietato et crudele hai dilettanza / di andar turbando sol le paci altrui / et ti rallegri nella altrui doglianza. Certo nel tuo paese io mai non fui / né meno alcun di queste altre contrade / vi capitò giamai co' i legni sui, / che a voi la vostra anticha securtade / turbasse, et vi noiasse il viver vostro / privandovi di vostra libertade.'"

[105] See, for example, G. Benzoni, fols. 93^{r}, 99^{v}–101^{r}. For discussion of Benzoni's *Historia*, see Romeo, 86–88; M. Benzoni, 87–92; Enders and Fraser.

[106] BL Add. 30376, fol. 46^{v} (13.70–81).

ence" ("riverenza"), as well as fear and stupor.[107] On Farfarello's second appearance to him, in canto 11, he "prostrates himself . . . reverently and humbly" before the god.[108] Viperomo's rhetoric to his followers rests heavily on the topos of obedience to the divine; they are to obey his command to rebel not because of his own personal authority, but because the god speaks through him. After reporting his vision and Farfarello-Quetzalcoatl's instructions, he concludes with an exhortation to faith and obedience phrased in terms any Christian would recognize: "Now then let us gladly all move to obey the God; let there be no further dispute; may all acquiesce."[109]

Viperomo's dutiful devotion to Quetzalcoatl makes it difficult to read him as a wholly negative figure. Demonic though he is—and the burning pitch in which he meets his death, reminiscent of Dante's Malebolge, underlines this infernal character—we are not encouraged as readers to greet his death with unalloyed moral satisfaction.[110] Cortés, who models our response, is moved when he sees him dying, and calls vainly for him to be rescued, while the narrative voice of the poem refers to him as "unhappy Viperomo" and "the poor wretch."[111]

This element of ideological blurring is the most interesting feature of *Delle prodezze*, bringing it close to what Virgil criticism terms a "pessimistic" (or ambivalent) model of epic.[112] Contrary to the impression of the first few cantos, it is not always easy to distinguish good from evil in Vecchietti's poem. Still less is it easy to read this as a tale of the encounter of civilization and savagery. True, the native Mexicans of the poem are in some ways exoticized and otherized—for example, in the description of Anacaona's female troops in the full "barbaric splendors" of their war dress, dripping with gold and jewels and wearing feather headdresses.[113] With historical accuracy, however, preconquest Mexico is por-

[107] Ibid., fol. 33^{r} (9.82).

[108] Ibid., fol. 40^{v} (11.95–96): "reverente e humile / . . . in terra si distende."

[109] Ibid., fol. 37^{r} (10.91–93): "hor dunque lieti / tutti moviamoci ad ubbedire il Dio / né più si cerchi, e ogniuno in ciò si acqueti."

[110] The manner of Viperomo's death recalls, in particular, the fifth *bolgia* of the eighth circle of hell (the Malebolge), described in cantos 21–23 of *Inferno*. His association with the Dantean demon Farfarello, who appears in this same passage of *Inferno* (22.94), reinforces the reminiscence.

[111] BL Add. 30376, fol. 49^{r} (14.17) and fol. 50^{r} (14.56): "Viperomo infelice . . . il meschin." For Cortés's attempted intervention and his pitying response to its failure, see ibid., fol. 49^{r} (14.1–15).

[112] I follow Craig Kallendorf in applying this term to the early modern epic tradition. See Kallendorf, 2003a and 2003b, for readings of Giulio Stella's *Columbeis* and Alfonso de Ercilla's *La Araucana* that stress their pessimism or ambiguity; also, more generally, Kallendorf, 2007, esp. 67–77.

[113] BL Add. 30376, fol. 70^{r} (19.109–44): "barbariche pompe" (line 126).

trayed not as a primitive society, but rather as a highly sophisticated one. The scenes in Anacaona's kingdom show her consulting with her nobles in the senate, and laying on a magnificent banquet for the Aztec ambassadors, complete with white linen napkins and gold table furniture. Courteous and elaborate speaking is prized in this culture as much as in Renaissance Europe. Cortés selects Arboace as leader of the Cholulans following Viperomo's death on the grounds of his eloquence, of which we hear a sample; and the poem ends with Anacaona and the young Spanish captain trading elegant courtesies on the beach. What the Spanish have to offer their new subjects is the Christian religion, rather than any obvious advance in cultural sophistication, except in the single regard of technological advancement, embodied in their armor and guns.

Even this sole claim to Spanish superiority is not represented in the poem in a triumphalist manner, but rather in an elegaic one. The only martial encounter in the poem pits modern artillery against the Stone Age weaponry of Anacaona's army, in a battle in which chivalric values such as honor and valor are explicitly stated to have no place. "Daring little avails; nor does valor," the narrative voice comments: "Strength, daring, and skill; intelligence and art mean nothing in this disarray."[114] These interjections recall Ariosto's narrator's elegy on firepower as signaling the demise of chivalry in the Cimosco episode of *Orlando furioso*.[115]

The episode in Vecchietti is interesting in the light of later critical debate on the problem of New World epic. In a letter of 1622, Alessandro Tassoni poured scorn on his contemporaries for attempting to craft a grand, martial epic from the squalid, unequal military tale of the Spanish conquest ("What is the point of crafting a warrior hero where there was no war to be had, or, if war was waged, it was against unarmed, naked, fearful men?"[116]) Vecchietti is not vulnerable to this accusation; on the contrary, his battle scenes anticipate in practice Tassoni's theoretical point. It is perhaps no coincidence that the poem falters to a close so shortly after this eminently unepic encounter, as if the muse of epic must of necessity fall silent before such a tale. The general scarcity of individualized characters within the poem—demons aside, only seven named figures appear in its roll call, extraordinarily few for a poem of twenty-four cantos—converts from a poetic weakness to a strength in the battle scenes, in that it serves to underline the mismatch between epic conventions and the realities of the en-

[114] Ibid., fol. 75^{v} (21.56), fol. 80^{v} (22.100–01): "Poco vale lo ardir, poco il valore"; "Forza, ardire, o destrezza, ingegno, od arte / che si usi, tutto è niente al suo scompiglio."

[115] Ariosto, 371–72 (11.26).

[116] Tassoni, 136: "A che, dunque, voler formare un eroe guerriero dove non si poteva far guerra, o, facendosi, si faceva contro uomini disarmati, ignudi, e paurosi?" Tassoni's main polemical target is Tommaso Stigliani. For discussion of the text, see Bucchi, 101–03; Geri, 34–35.

counter described.[117] There can be no Hector in such a battle, no Achilles, no Camilla or Aeneas or Rinaldo or Clorinda. In the face of the Spanish guns, Anacaona's glamorized Amazons become simply undifferentiated cannon fodder. The Spanish soldiers similarly fade into anonymity, their valor consisting only in the handling of their guns.

It is hard to know what to make of this ambivalence within what had seemed initially a straightforward celebration of the triumph of Christianity against the forces of hell. In canto 1, the peoples of Mexico may be seen "wandering errant in wicked and fierce ways, of false, impious, evil beliefs."[118] The Christianization of such "savage parts" can only be regarded as a noble end; indeed, the Spanish mission is directly mandated by God, who sends on it men "especially dear to him."[119] The physical conquest of the New World is here folded into the providential spiritual labor of evangelization, so the spiritual gains of the colonized peoples clearly outweigh their material loss.

Such is the picture at the outset; yet in the course of the poem, we hear enough of the violence of the colonizing armies to complicate this vision, to the point that, at times, the perspective of *Delle prodezze* seems closer to that of a critic of the conquest such as Girolamo Benzoni than to that of a straight celebrant of Spanish power and zeal. Although the first canto mentions the "cruel and abominable cult" reigning in Tenochtitlan, Vecchietti does not dwell on the lurid aspects of Atzec religious culture, such as the practice of human sacrifice.[120] Instead, the principal horrors of the poem, such as the massacres of Hispaniola and Cholula, are the work of God's own warriors, the Spaniards. Even if Cortés is represented within the poem as a markedly humane leader, responding to the rebellion of Viperomo's Cholultecs with clemency and restraint, there are sufficient allusions to Spanish violence in *Delle prodezze* to remind the reader that this was not always the conquistadors' way.

THE SHADOWS OF CONQUEST: MEXICO AS MIRROR

Speaking of the forthcoming campaign of New World evangelization he sees prefigured in the book of Revelation, the older Vecchietti of *De anno primitivo* makes an interesting stipulation. "Let not the end of those navigations," he states,

[117] In addition to the named characters mentioned so far (Anacaona, Viperomo, Cortés, Arboace, Oroaspe, Velleio), an engineer in Cortés's service is named as Princasso in canto 12. The blond Spanish leader of the final cantos, although he is not given a name, may be counted as an eighth individualized figure.

[118] BL, Add. 30376, fol. 3^{r} (1.49–50): "ivi errando in costumi iniqui e fieri / di credenze fallaci empie, et malvagge."

[119] Ibid. (1.52–53): "selvagge / parti"; "de' suoi più cari."

[120] Ibid., fol. 4^{r} (1.91–93): "crudo abbominevol colto."

in a gloss, "be to occupy lands nor to subdue people nor to acquire treasure; may it be solely the glory of God and the salvation of souls."[121]

This tacit acknowledgment that previous Spanish missions may have been less pure in their motives is interesting for the perspective it offers on Vecchietti's earlier epic project. *Delle prodezze* represents Cortés's expedition in the guise of a providential, salvific mission, a triumph for Christian truth over devilish imposture. Yet this triumph is clouded by troubling recollections of the sufferings imposed on the saved by their saviors; and the possibility of alternative, less celebratory narratives cannot be banished from the text. Something similar is found in the New World section of Campanella's treatise *Quod reminiscentur*, despite that text's overall commitment to the church's evangelizing project. At one point, Campanella gives voice to a New World native, who complains of the "cruel exterminations" and "servitude" to which his people have been subject, and accuses the Spanish conquerors of pillaging others' lands "under the false pretense of teaching the gospel."[122]

Apart from the intrinsic ambiguities of the subject matter, a further factor to consider in explaining *Delle prodezze*'s ambivalence toward the Spanish New World conquest may be the dramatic shift in political allegiance that marked the early years of Ferdinando de' Medici's rule. After assuming the role of grand duke in 1587, Ferdinando set about the task of finding a wife and securing the future of his dynasty. Following an unsuccessful attempt to find a suitable match from within his existing Spanish-Hapsburg alliance, Ferdinando unexpectedly turned to France, choosing Christine of Lorraine, a granddaughter of Catherine de' Medici, as his bride. This shift to a French alliance, which antagonized Philip II, marked a significant development in Medici grand-ducal politics, and a partial reversion to the pro-French allegiance of Florence's republican past. Contemporary sources suggest this was a popular move. Reporting on Ferdinando's marriage negotiations in April 1588, the Ferrarese ambassador speaks of the Florentines' "universal" desire to see the match with Christine concluded.[123]

Given the evidence that *Delle prodezze* dates from Ferdinando's first year as grand duke, it seems quite possible that Vecchietti found himself wrong-footed by his dedicatee's sudden change of allegiance. A poem celebrating Spain's triumph in Mexico might have seemed an appropriate literary offering for a Spanish-allied cardinal, with a marked interest in the New World, in, say, 1586 or 1587. The same gift might have seemed less felicitous in late 1588 when addressed to the

[121] Vecchietti, 1621, 78: "ut navigationum illarum finis non sit ad terras occupandas, nec ad populos subiugandos, nec ad thesauros acquirendos; sed ad Dei solummodo gloriam, et ad Animarum salutem."

[122] Headley, 335.

[123] S. Butters, 2010, 217n116.

new grand duke of Tuscany, flush with a new French alliance that also had the advantage of reuniting his junior branch of the Medici family with the long-dominant branch from which Christine descended. Among epic projects being cultivated in Florence in this period, Pier Angeli da Barga's Latin crusading epic acquired a new Medicean relevance with this marriage, since Christine was, through her father, a descendent of the crusader Godfrey of Boulogne. Angeli had published samples of his epic in Paris in 1582 and 1584, dedicating them, respectively, to Henri III of France and Catherine de Medici. His 1591 complete edition was, however, repatriated to Florence and published with a dedication to Christine.

Vecchietti's project was considerably less timely, especially if conducted in an overtly triumphalist manner. Indeed, at this throwback moment in Florentine politics, as the city returned to its ancient French alliance, a poem on this subject risked stirring uncomfortable memories close to home. The experience of the Mexican peoples in 1519–20 offered distinct parallels with Italy's capitulation to French and Spanish invaders in 1498–99: the first step on a political trajectory that would conclude with a lasting Spanish hegemony within the peninsula. In both cases, a wealthy, proud land with a highly sophisticated culture lost its independence suddenly and terminally, within a few years. In both cases, political divisions were a major factor in occasioning defeat. Cortés triumphed in Mexico, despite the slightness of his forces, by exploiting antagonisms between the existing Mexican powers, and particularly that between the Atzecs, or Mexica, and the Tlaxcaltecs. Similar divisions had proved fatal in the instance of Italy, as Machiavelli scathingly underlined in *The Prince*.

The notion that Italians, or some Italians, perceived parallels between the Spanish conquests of the New World and of Italy is not new in studies of Italian attitudes to the Americas. The prime sites for the diffusion of Bartolomé de las Casas's critical writings on the New World conquest in early seventeenth-century Italy were Venice and Savoy, both of which staged themselves as bastions of resistance to Spanish "tyranny" within the peninsula.[124] The rhetoric of Italian liberation, anticipated in Petrarch's canzone "Italia mia," and in the closing peroration of Machiavelli's *Prince*, found particularly explosive expression in the second and third decades of the century, with Carlo Emanuele of Savoy hailed by many as a potential savior of Italy. This is the context for Alessandro Tassoni's aborted New World epic, the one-canto sample, *Oceano*, which is dedicated to Carlo Emanuele, hailed as a "bold and mighty" defender of Italy against "enemy offense" and "scorn."[125]

[124] Battlori, 41–63.

[125] Tassoni 139: "Tu, magnanimo Carlo, a cui le porte / d'Italia il re del ciel diede in governo / perché la difendessi ardito e forte / da l'inimico oltraggio e da lo scherno."

Although Vecchietti's poem is far from sharing the anti-Spanish virulence of some seventeenth-century writers, it may still be the case that parallels between Spanish rule in Mexico and in Italy inform certain aspects of the work. It is relevant to recall here that Vecchietti was a native of the Spanish viceroyalty of Naples: a region sometimes designated as an internal, Italian "Indies," particularly in Jesuit sources.[126] The analogy rested on the supposed lawlessness and irreligiosity of the lower-class and rural population of the region, perceived as in need of evangelization as much as the true Indies beyond the seas. Further parallels with Mexico in particular might be found in the administrative structure; both New Spain and Naples were kingdoms ruled by a viceroy, the only portions of the Spanish Empire in this period to be designated as such.

Thinking about these parallels may help to explain the prominence Vecchietti gives to the episode of Viperomo's rebellion against Spanish authority, and Cortés's handling of the aftermath of this revolt. This episode has roots in Vecchietti's source, Cortés's *Tercera relación*, where Cortés recounts that he decided to pardon two rebel caciques in 1520, even though their murder of Spaniards might have justified a harsh response.[127] Vecchietti's amplification of the episode, however, and the insistence with which he underlines its moral lessons, is likely to reflect events closer to home. In 1585, a violent revolt over grain shortages in Naples had provoked equally brutal reprisals from the Spanish authorities, culminating in the construction of a macabre temporary monument displaying the heads and hands of executed rebels.[128] There could hardly be a greater contrast with the clemency of Vecchietti's Cortés, when confronted with a similar situation. The gratitude and loyalty Vecchietti shows Cortés eliciting from the pardoned Cholultecs may be intended to underline by contrast the political dangers of punitive repression, which risks fomenting the very violence it seeks to repress.

Another passage of *Delle prodezze* with intriguing resonances, when read with an eye to Italian contexts, is the speech given by Anacaona to her senate in canto 6, seeking assent for her plan to embark on a campaign of armed resistance to the Spaniards. Anacaona's speech is framed as negative within the context of the poem, and it is contrasted with Oroaspe's wise counseling of resignation to God's will. Nonetheless, the queen's denunciation of Spanish rapacity, and her desperate call for solidarity in the face of the invader, may well have chimed with Italian readers: "The enemy is common to every land of this continent, and we can already see that he has run through the whole, and fought it and beaten it and

[126] Selwyn; Cooley.
[127] Ramusio, 6:139.
[128] Villari, 27–43.

razed it.[129]" This rhetoric recalls the closing peroration of Machiavelli's *Prince*, which describes Italy, like Anacaona's Mexico, as "beaten, stripped, torn, overrun," and calls for a political "redeemer" capable of freeing the peninsula of the "barbarous dominion" all abhor.[130] Spanish imperialism in America and in Europe seem implicitly juxtaposed here, in the same way that we see, far more explicitly, in Dutch republican sources of this same period; and perhaps also in Girolamo Benzoni, whose fiercely anti-Spanish rhetoric Benjamin Schmidt has related to his roots in Spanish-dominated Milan.[131]

CONCLUSION: VICARIOUS DEFEAT?

The Machiavellian context evoked at the end of the previous section is not of secondary importance to an understanding of *Delle prodezze di Ferrante Cortese*, as I will argue in a second study of the poem. Vecchietti's treatment of politics, and, in particular, of the relationship of princes and subjects, suggests a close and critical reading of Machiavelli's political theory, especially in regard to the questions of the political uses of "cruelty" and the dilemma of whether it is preferable for a ruler to be loved or feared. Addressed, like Machiavelli's *Prince*, to a new Medici ruler of Florence, and composed in a period and context in which Machiavelli's long-banned writings continued to be widely read in the city, *Delle prodezze* deserves a toehold within the history of Counter-Reformation political thought, as well as within the histories of New World epic, of the reception of Dante, and of the keen and sustained interest in Mexico and the New World on the part of the Medici court.[132]

As this study has emphasized, much of the interest of Vecchietti's poem lies in the ambiguity of its treatment of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Through the figures of Anacaona and Viperomo, and the dark tales of oppression they evoke, Vecchietti saps his epic narrative of any clear triumphalist message, and recalls to his potential Italian readers their own status as colonial subjects of Spain. Recalling Lia Markey's term "vicarious conquest" to describe Medici Florence's symbolic appropriation of the New World through collectible material objects and imaginative projections, *Delle prodezze* may be described as simultaneously mobilizing the dynamics of vicarious conquest and vicarious defeat.

[129] BL Add. 30376, fol. 24[r] (7.28–30): "'Lo inimico è comune ad ogni terra / di questo continente, et già si vede / che il tutto scorre, e zuffa, e abbatte, e atterra.'"

[130] Machiavelli, 169, 174–75: "battuta, spogliata, lacera, corsa"; "redentore"; "barbaro dominio."

[131] Schmidt, 46–53.

[132] On the circulation and discussion of Machiavelli's writings in Florence in this period, see Cochrane, 122–25; Headley, 180; H. Butters, 84; Van Veen 298; Brown, 30–32.

Such ambivalence is by no means new, of course, within the history of epic. Virgil's treatment of the foundation of Roman power in the *Aeneid* is famously complex and chiaroscuro, particularly in the episode of Dido, proxy for Rome's one-time rival power of Carthage, razed unpityingly to the ground by Virgil's day. Critics have also long noted an element of sympathy for the vanquished in Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, especially in the noble, doomed figure of the dispossessed sultan Solimano. The *Liberata* ends on a triumphal note, with Goffredo's raising of Christ's standards in the reconquered temple of Jerusalem, but it is impossible to forget the scenes of carnage that precede this Christian triumph, as the crusaders run riot in the vanquished city, still less Solimano's bleak, battlefield vision of the "cruel tragedy" of human life.[133]

Nonetheless, it would be reductive to see Vecchietti's sympathy for the vanquished as reflecting no more than a sensitive response to the ethical complexities of his literary models. Rather, it seems also to reflect the complexities of the Italian response to the story of the New World and its fateful encounter with the Old. The native peoples of Mexico and Peru inhabited diverse identities for Italian observers: as godless souls to be brought to salvation through faith; as innocents mown down by the cruel steel of a relentless enemy; as custodians of an exotic and sophisticated culture, whose artifacts could stand comparison with the finest products of Europe; as proxies for bitterly remembered Italian military defeats. It is from this intricate comingling of attitudes and projections that the troubled narrative of *Delle prodezze* emerges—an unfinished, perhaps unfinishable, "failed New World epic," of interest to the modern reader precisely in the measure in which it fails.[134]

[133] Tasso, 1254 (20.73): "l'aspra tragedia de lo stato umano."

[134] On the "failure" of the project of Italian New World epic, see Hester, 2012.

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