

## CHAPTER 4

# Conclusion

Lapo's life and work reveal that he took part in one of the most flourishing periods of Italian Renaissance humanism. A Florentine, Lapo was, during his short career, a minor character in the age of Leonardo Bruni, Matteo Palmieri, Poggio Bracciolini, Lorenzo Valla, Leon Battista Alberti, Ambrogio Traversari, and others. But by stepping back from the main outlines of his life, perhaps one can arrive at some sort of qualitative judgment. Was Lapo a humanist of "second rank," as one historian has termed him?<sup>1</sup> Lapo perceived himself as ill-starred, and he bemoaned his career more than once in his letters; and the episode of 1436—Lapo's unrealized teaching career at the University of Bologna—would seem to support this picture.

Lapo's ill-starred image, however, highlights the biographer's dilemma in dealing with the source material for Lapo's life. His intellectual development and adult life must be reconstructed for the most part from his self-collected letters. Yet in so doing, one almost inevitably gives credence to the picture of a thinker with fortune against him, simply because our most authoritative source for everything else, the *epistolario*, so describes Lapo, along with providing its more concrete information. The real answer to the question asked earlier is that we cannot make a decisive, qualitative judgment, since those judgments must be made by comparison and the short span of Lapo's career does not allow us the needed material.

Still, Lapo's short *cursus* marks him as a special figure worthy of inclusion in the growing canon of Italian Renaissance humanist literature. As much of an intellectual vogue as was humanism—taken in Kristellerian terms—in early Quattrocento Florence, few humanists knew Greek, and even fewer knew it well enough to translate. That Lapo learned Greek so quickly and so well distinguishes him somewhat in the field and puts him

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1. Holmes, *Florentine Enlightenment*, 83.

in the company of such elites as Leonardo Bruni, Ambrogio Traversari, Guarino Veronese, and Lorenzo Valla.

Lapo studied Greek under the tutelage of Francesco Filelfo; this professional association opens an illustrative window for us onto the world of humanistic patronage. Filelfo's difficulties with the Medici must have been a contributing, if not the prime, factor in Lapo's alienation from Cosimo, an important source of Florentine patronage. Lapo's complaints concerning the lack of support from his *patria* can be traced, certainly, to this episode, and his dramatic snubbing of Cosimo in Ferrara is indicative not only of Lapo's temper but also of the great importance attached to the *padrone* in the environment of early Quattrocento humanism.

For humanists without independent wealth, there was really no fixed natural place. Their studies could be undertaken only under the auspices of a patron; thus, individual humanists had creatively to carve out individual careers and seek support where they could find it.<sup>2</sup> With Florentine resources closed to him, Lapo sought support at the papal curia and found it in Cardinal Giordano Orsini. But when the cardinal died in 1438, Lapo found himself bereft of a protector and was compelled once again to begin casting about for support. Death—both Lapo's own premature death and the cardinal's untimely death—has obscured our view and prevents us from judging just how much of a success Lapo could have been in the world of the curia.

What we can do is examine the work he left behind. The *De curiae commodis* is Lapo's last lengthy prose work. In presenting the curia's "benefits," Lapo reveals the institution's inner and outer functionings, and in so doing he reveals an insider's knowledge. This, to be sure, was one of his intentions: to show that he *was* a legitimate insider, even if he never had the actual, institutional sanctioning that he desired. But the rhetorical tools of this phase of humanism served him well (and certainly here Fubini's views about humanism's anti-institutional potential must be acknowledged).<sup>3</sup> For although Lapo had an insider's view of the curia, he had an outsider's status, a status, perhaps, that pained him enough to reveal—consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally—the manner in which the curia was falling far short of its ideal.

In the *De curiae commodis* Lapo is a cultural critic, but he is a critic of

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2. This is one reason why the debate concerning the merits of the active versus the contemplative life took on such dimensions in this phase of humanism, since one often had to lead a *vita activa* to arrive at the *vita contemplativa*.

3. See Fubini, "All'uscita dalla Scolastica medievale."

a restricted cultural milieu, the Roman curia. His critique, therefore, is subtle and is not the act of one intentionally burning his bridges. The key to the critique is the Stoicizing passage concerning the virtues (section IV). With a Ciceronian openness to presenting a variety of different philosophical positions, Lapo also reports the view of “Aristotle and others” (IV.16) concerning the virtues. But he advocates the Stoic all-or-nothing approach, that is, that one cannot be virtuous without practicing all of the virtues completely. It is the dialogue’s most fully explicated passage and the only major position that goes unchallenged. What can a close reading of the rest of the piece yield in light of this absolutely stated position but that the counterpositions to the criticisms of the curia cannot be taken wholly seriously? If Lapo, while maintaining that the virtues are unbreakably connected, is implicitly, often enthymematically, admitting that viceful abuses of wealth and power do occur at the curia, is he not telling us that the curia is not itself now a virtuous place?

This puts an interesting spin on Lapo’s argument in defense of wealth. Lapo proffers the opinion that wealth is to be preferred over poverty since the habitual sins of the wealthy are less extreme than those of the poor (VIII.20). He names the vices to which wealth can lead, depending on personality type: gourmandizing, idleness, extravagance, ostentation, debauchery, and power acquired by bribes (VIII.21).<sup>4</sup> He argues that “even if these sins are to be disapproved of, still, they are not so far from the human condition.” Lapo warns that in the right hands wealth can be used properly, in this case, that is, to exercise the virtue of liberality. But this is not the same Lapo we heard before, telling us that the virtues were unbreakably connected. Of course he could have written his dialogue inconsistently, alternately stressing now one position, now another; and if he did write in this fashion, he certainly would not find himself alone in the annals of Neo-Latin literature. But if we wish to see the piece as anything like a consistent whole, the importance of the Stoicizing section on the virtues as a key to revealing a consistent critique must be acknowledged.

It is not unreasonable to assume that Lapo wrote his dialogue when he was on the verge of substantial professional success. Whether that would have come in the curia or in another sphere is impossible to know. It may be the case that Lapo left the curia definitively in his last months. But it is difficult to ignore the fact that, along with the obvious frustration and

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4. Poverty, in contrast, leads to thefts, plunder, treachery, betrayals, and slaughter (VIII.22).

transparent criticism, there is in the dialogue a real fascination with and admiration for the curia's potential as Christianity's leader.

Lapo's argument in defense of wealth is sincere, and his historicizing of Christ's poverty is original in the environment of humanism. The defense of wealth is long and involved and placed in too strategic a position not to be earnestly meant. The historicizing of Christ's poverty is evidence, really, of the new historical sensibility that was characteristic of this phase of humanism and that helped inform, for example, Valla's criticism of the Donation of Constantine. Lapo may not be completely content with the fact that "those times required one set of morals, these another,"<sup>5</sup> but he is willing to recognize wealth's utility in the curia and uses humanist historical methodology to argue this case.

Finally, there is the issue of humanist self-presentation. Who was Lapo's intended audience? How does he wish them to see him? Lapo could have been trying to write, in an encoded fashion, only for his community of fellow humanists. He then would really be simply tweaking the noses of the highly positioned curialists whom he has grown to despise in the two years of his minor-league curial employment. He would be *stufo*—"fed up"—and ready to leave, but not before taking some parting shots. But a more inclusive reading of the piece as a whole reveals different conclusions. Lapo dedicated his treatise to Francesco Condulmer. There is no reason to assume that this dedication was intended as pure sarcasm. In the final analysis Lapo praises the curia's potential but criticizes the actuality. My belief is that Lapo wrote not only as a well-informed curial actor but also as an outsider who wanted to become an insider.

The *De curiae commodis* is not the parting shot of a fed up hanger-on. It is instead Lapo's last-ditch, highly critical but nonetheless sincere attempt to find a patron who would allow him to join a cultural environment at which he marveled but from which he felt unjustly excluded. Undeniably, there is strong criticism of curial morality. This demonstrates Lapo's desire to be perceived as an in-the-know, concerned insider. But the dialogue's hopefulness about the contemporary council

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5. It is significant that even after the defense of wealth has been made in full, Lapo has his interlocutor Angelo engage in yet another of the dialogue's criticisms of curial arrogance. It is almost as if there are two sides to Lapo's personality here, the predominant one, undoubtedly, recognizing the real need for curial wealth, the other, perhaps, unwilling to sit silently by and view such a dispassionate mixture of the sacred and the profane without at least some protest.

and its implicit loyalty to the pope regarding the conciliarism question also illustrate Lapo's attempt to show himself as an effective curial propagandist.

Social psychologists have described a cultural phenomenon known as *impression management*, that is, "the conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social situations."<sup>6</sup> This has been seen as an important governing principle in much social and individual action. One functions as one's own publicist, as it were, and attempts in various ways to achieve one's conscious or unconscious goals through control of the manner in which one is perceived.

My argument regarding the *De curiae commodis* is that Lapo there engages in strategic, self-presenting impression management, to show what a good curial insider he could be if given the opportunity. Beyond this, he himself functions occasionally as a fifteenth-century social psychologist, analyzing the behavior of some of his curial contemporaries based on just these sorts of assumptions about human behavior. Of course, there is no great similarity between Lapo and modern social psychologists, since Lapo assumes an objective moral criterion by which one can judge good and bad. For Lapo, that criterion is the correct practice of the virtues (including those that can be practiced with wealth) toward the end of leading an upright life.

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6. B.R. Schlenker, *Impression Management: The Self-Concept, Social Identity, and Interpersonal Relations* (Monterey, Calif., 1980), 6.