

PICCOLOMINI AMONG THE ILLUSTRIOUS

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Like many famous books, the *Commentarii* of Pius II—who began life as Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini and was elected pope in 1458—is unfinished. Its author wrote of it, *fortasse alius hoc laboris assumet, ut suis queque temporibus reddat; nobis non tantum otii fuit* (“perhaps someone else will undertake the task of putting each detail in its proper order. We have not had the time.”).¹ Fortunately, no second hand ever revised this incomparable and unexampled book. Part autobiography, part memoir, part chronicle, replete with vivid and spirited character assassinations and the authentic indignation of one unprincipled schemer for his rivals, the *Commentarii* preserve in permanently unstable juxtaposition a vibrant presentation of a man and his fantasies about himself.

If each detail had been put in its proper order, the resulting picture would have been more consistent and for that very reason less interesting because at the heart of the *Commentarii* is an unresolved conflict between incompatible concepts of how people come to be who they are. These concepts rub against each other at many points in the *Commentarii*; they are awkward in juxtaposition and can never be made to fit together in a way that seems natural. In the end, is it chance, aided perhaps by character and enterprise, that gives one person an important role in the world and leaves another in obscurity? Or is there something else, something like providential design, destiny, fate—a vision of the fundamental truth of things granted by God that guides a person through tangled paths to a preordained goal?

This issue is as old as the bedrock layer of Western literature. Even where the question is resolved, its weight is acknowledged. Odysseus returns to Ithaca through the intervention of Athena; all the apparently accidental encounters that help him on his difficult progress are not accidents at all. But the singer of the great epic is himself inspired and sees things from a privileged perspective. At the level of human experience, the guiding hand of the goddess cannot be distinguished from a chance encounter with a schoolgirl playing on the beach.

Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini offers in the *Commentarii* an episodic account of a career that takes him from Siena to Basel to Arras, to Scotland to the court of the Holy Roman Emperor and through this bewildering network of back roads eventually to Rome and the papacy. His career is a fairy tale

¹ Pius II 1984, 1:408–409. All further quotations will be indicated by volume and page number in the text. Pius II 1959, 215. All English quotations from the *Commentarii* are by Florence A. Gragg and are taken from this edition by Leona C. Gabel. All further English quotations will be indicated by page number in the text.

Pius II 1959 is an abridgment of Florence A. Gragg’s translation of Vatican Library Codex *Reginense latino* 1995, the original manuscript. Hers was the first complete translation into English and—although there is another in progress—remains the only one. It appeared as *Commentar-*

ies of Pius II, Smith College Studies in History 22 (1937), 25 (1939–1940), 30 (1947), 35 (1951), and 43 (1957). The abridgment excludes, in the words of its editor, “a substantial body of historical material taken by the author—sometimes word for word—from other sources.” (5). It also places large portions of the text in italics to indicate material expurgated from the first printed edition of 1584 (fraudulently presented as the work of Pius II’s copyist). Van Heck follows this practice in his edition of the Latin text. I have not preserved the italics in either my Latin or English quotations.

come true for bright young men who must live by their wits pursuing the treacherous course of political patronage. But once he arrives at the great dignity of what he calls the Apostle's chair, he cannot accept it as a sequence of happy accidents. He wants something more stable and permanent guiding events. Something like what St. Paul refers to in a famous passage of First Corinthians as "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24).

Aeneas was an exceptionally well-traveled man at a time when travel was both arduous and dangerous. He advanced as a result of unplanned encounters, enterprise, and a gift for eloquence. He made his name at the Council of Basel and remained there when Eugene IV moved the council to Ferrara (and later to Florence). When the council fathers who remained at Basel deposed Eugene IV, Aeneas became secretary to the pope they elected, Amadeus of Savoy (now known as the anti-pope Felix V). He then left Felix to accept an offer from the Hapsburg emperor Frederick III to join his secretariat in Vienna. It was beginning to be clear that Eugene would, at considerable cost in power, keep the support of all the European rulers. Neither Frederick—who was neutral—nor any other European ruler recognized Felix V as pope when Aeneas left his service. When Frederick reconciled with Eugene IV, Aeneas was his chief negotiator, and despite Eugene's reputation for being implacable and unforgiving to his opponents, Aeneas managed his own reconciliation as well. The decision to leave Felix for Frederick's service and his reconciliation with Eugene made his subsequent career possible.

At the conclave following Eugene IV's death in 1447, one of Aeneas's former colleagues in the official household of Niccolò Albergati, the humanist Tommaso Parentucelli da Sarzana, was unexpectedly elected to the papacy and reigned as Nicholas V. Aeneas, who had been secretary to three cardinals, a council, an antipope, and an emperor without having taken orders, then began one of the most remarkable rises in the ecclesiastical history of the later Middle Ages. Ordained priest in 1446 or 1447, he became bishop of Trieste on 19 April 1447, one month to the day after the coronation of Nicholas V, who had the letter of appointment dispatched to Aeneas without fee. He became bishop of Siena in 1450 (also without fee), cardinal (at the request of Frederick III under Nicholas V's successor Calixtus III) in 1456, and pope in 1458.²

The *Commentarii* offers the unique account of a papal election in the late Middle Ages (or early Renaissance) by a participant. His election changed the way Aeneas came to see himself, and it determined his future fame. Aeneas, writing more than three years after the event, offers a brilliant narrative in which by his own eloquence and enterprise, unassisted by wealth or political patronage, he snatched victory from the (tainted) hands of Guillaume d'Estouteville, the wealthy and ambitious archbishop of Rouen who was essentially the French crown's representative in the college of cardinals.

It is a wonderful story, brilliantly related, a showpiece distinguished by the unforgettable scene of the eighteen cardinals seated in silence after the second scrutiny tensely waiting to see whether a pope would be elected by accession. As Aeneas has already explained, each cardinal wrote his

²The precise date of Aeneas's ordination as priest is uncertain; the editors of the new English translation of his selected letters note that he "took orders, porter through deacon, in March of 1446. He may have been ordained a priest as early as July of 1446—certainly by February of 1447." See Pius II 2006, 402, n. 36.

The date of his appointment as bishop of Trieste is taken from the annotations, by Vito Castiglione Minischetti and Ivan Cloulas, to Pius II 2001, 68–69. Minischetti and Cloulas give a precise date for his ordination as priest, 4 March 1447,

the day the conclave that elected Nicholas V began, but they offer no documentation. Pius II 2001 is a French translation of the fair copy by Johannes Gobellinus (Corsignano manuscript 147, Library of the Accademia dei Lincei [Rome]) supplemented by the Vatican Library Codex *Reginense latino* 1995 for the fragmentary volume 13, which is not included in the fair copy. It follows the principles that guided Leona C. Gabel's abridgment of the English translation so closely that its rationale could be said to be taken from her English word for word if it were not in French.

choice on a ballot and deposited it in a chalice. Three tellers then read out the votes and everyone kept his own tally. This form of written canvassing is called election by scrutiny. If no one had the necessary twelve votes for election, the cardinals could then agree to allow any elector who wished to change his vote to do so orally. This oral vote is called election by accession. However, to receive a vote by accession, a candidate must already have received at least one vote by scrutiny.

In Aeneas's account, on the first ballot, he and Filippo of Bologna³ each had five votes by scrutiny; no one else had more than three, and Guillaume had none. There was no agreement to proceed to accession on this ballot, *que res in primo scrutinio omissa est impediens illis qui a nullis electi fuerant, cum ad eos fieri non posset accessus* (1:98–99) (“owing to the opposition of those who had received no votes and therefore could not be candidates for accession” [80]). Instead the cardinals had lunch, and from the time they finished until after midnight, there was a frenzy of electioneering. [*Qui potentiores erant in collegio auctoritate atque opibus excellentes, alios ad se uocabant et aut sibi ipsis aut amicis apostolatum querebant, rogabant, promittebant; minas ingerebant; nec defuerunt qui sine rubore omni modestia procul reiecta pro se ipsis uerba facerent summumque sibi pontificatum arrogarent . . . ; nec ilerdensis sese negligebat. multa de se quisque predicabat. mira erat horum contentio, summa diligentia. inquieta dies, nox his insomnis fuit* (1:99). (“The richer and more influential members of the college . . . sought to gain the papacy for themselves or their friends.” He names four, including Guillaume, who “begged, promised, threatened. . . . Their rivalry was extraordinary, their energy unbounded. They took no rest by day or sleep by night” [80].)

Aeneas does not campaign at all, and yet Guillaume fears him and Filippo more than those who are actively soliciting votes. He sees Aeneas—*cuius taciturnitatem non dubitabat longe ualentiorum esse aliorum latratibus* (1:99) (“whose silence he had no doubt would prove more effective than the barking of the rest” [80])—as his main rival. And from this point on Aeneas presents the election as essentially between Guillaume and himself. Guillaume works feverishly through the night with the assistance of his countryman Alain of Avignon (Alain de Coëtivy), while Aeneas goes to sleep. Aeneas has nothing to offer anyone in return for his vote; Guillaume is wealthy and loaded with benefices that he can parcel out to supporters after his election. As he gains more and more commitments, he uses them as leverage to frighten others into offering their support.

Filippo of Bologna, convinced that Guillaume will be elected the next morning, wakes Aeneas in order to warn him of Guillaume's impending election and to advise Aeneas to go and offer Guillaume his vote now so as not to have the new pope for his enemy. “*Calistum expertus sum, qui nunquam pacificis oculis me intuitus est, cum eum non elegerem. mihi ex usu uidetur eius, qui pontifex sit futurus, ante uenari gratiam. ego quod mihi consilium accipio, id tibi do*” (1:100). (“I have had experience with Calixtus, who never gave me a friendly look because I had not voted for him. It seems to me expedient to curry favor beforehand with the man who is going to be pope. I offer you the advice I am taking myself” [82].)

Although Aeneas says that Pietro, cardinal of San Marco,⁴ gathers seven of the eight Italian cardinals and urges them to block Guillaume—who would need at least one vote from this group to be elected—by voting for Aeneas, the main emphasis in this narrative is on three exhortations that Aeneas himself makes. The first is to Filippo, whom he frightens from going over to Guillaume by a speech that sounds like a humanist poet's counterpart to the story of David and Goliath. [*A] deo datur apostolatus, non ab hominibus* (1:101) (“The apostleship is bestowed by God, not by men”) is its core.

³ Filippo Calandrini, archbishop of Bologna. He was the younger half-brother of Nicholas V.

⁴ Pietro Barbo. He became Aeneas's successor in 1464 and reigned as Paul II.

“[C]eterum non ego is sum qui arbitrer passurum deum in manu Rbotomagensis ecclesiam, sponsam suam, deperire; . . . non feret diuina pietas hoc palatium, quod tot sancti patres habitauere, aut speluncam latronum aut lupanar meretricum fieri. . . . Rbotomagensi qui demandare pontificatum conspirauere, homines sunt, quorum cogitationes uanas esse quis nescit? . . . crastina dies ostendet romanum presulem a deo eligi, non ab hominibus. tu si christianus es, eum in Christi uicarium non assumes, quem nosti diaboli membrum esse.” (1:100–101)

“I am not the man to believe that God will allow the Church, His Bride, to perish in the hands of the Cardinal of Rouen. . . . The Divine Mercy will not endure that this palace, which has been the dwelling of so many Holy Fathers, shall become a den of thieves, or a brothel of whores. . . . Those who have conspired to commit the papacy to Rouen are men; and men’s schemes are vain—who does not know it? . . . Tomorrow will show that the Bishop of Rome is chosen by God not by men. As for you, if you are a Christian, you must not choose as Christ’s Vicar him whom you know to be a limb of the devil.” (82)

He then goes to his friend Rodrigo at daybreak.⁵ Rodrigo, a nephew of Calixtus III, had been made a cardinal at the age of twenty-five and was already among the richest members of the college, holding the most powerful and lucrative position in the papal administration, vice-chancellor. This office has been described as being, in the fifteenth century, like a second papacy. The vice-chancellor received every petition addressed to the pope (with accompanying fees) and registered every state act after editing it and putting it into its final form.

Rodrigo has more to lose than any of the other cardinals and is determined to be in the majority. He has committed himself to Guillaume, and Guillaume has given him a note assuring him that he will retain his office. Aeneas, despite his apparent indifference to the all-night bargaining, most of which he claims to have slept through, seems to know that Alain of Avignon has been promised the same office. “[T]u scedulam habebis, Auinionensis cancellariam; nam quod tibi promissum est, illi et promissum et affirmatum est. illi ne an tibi seruabitur fides? Gallo an Cathalano Gallus amicitior erit?” (1:101) (“You will have the note; Avignon will have the chancellorship. For what has been promised you has been promised him also and solemnly affirmed. Will faith be kept with him or with you? Will a Frenchman be more friendly to a Frenchman or to a Catalan?” [83].)

Although this conversation ends with Aeneas saying that Rodrigo *seque admodum cohibuit* (“completely abandoned his purpose”), Rodrigo did not cast his written ballot for Aeneas and presumably cast it for Guillaume.⁶

Aeneas now approaches the cardinal of Pavia (Giovanni Castiglione) and accuses him of betraying Italy. Despite his friendship for Calixtus’s nephew, Rodrigo, he now says to Pavia, “*Calistus admonere te potuit, quo sedente nihil Cathalani non occuparunt. expertus Cathalanos experiri Gallos cupis? . . . ubi amor patrie . . . ?*” (1:102) (“You might have taken warning from Calixtus, during whose papacy there was nothing the Catalans did not get. After trying the Catalans, are you eager to try the French? . . . What has become of your love for your country?” [84].)

Can we doubt the result of this speech? *Obstupuit his auditis Papiensis . . .* (1:103) (“The Cardinal of Pavia was stunned by these words” [84].)

⁵ Rodrigo de Lançol y Borja, born 1 January 1431, was created cardinal by his uncle, Calixtus III, in 1456 and was appointed vice-chancellor the following year. He was elected pope at the conclave of 1492 and reigned until 1503 as Alexander VI. Burkle-Young 2006a offers an account of his career and a fine analysis of his politics.

⁶ This is not necessarily a contradiction. Perhaps the purpose that Rodrigo abandoned was electing Guillaume. He might have voted for Guillaume in the second scrutiny in order to keep his word, meaning to abandon him in the event of a subsequent election by accession. His first cousin, Luis Juan del Milà y Borja, was among the four Iberian cardinals to vote for Aeneas in the second scrutiny.

The scrutiny, which seemed to so many just a few hours before to be hardly more than a formality, offers Guillaume an unpleasant surprise, followed by three devastating blows to the heart. Aeneas has nine votes, Guillaume six. The cardinals agree to election by accession.

Sedebant omnes suis in locis taciti pallidique et tanquam in excessu mentis essent attoniti nemo aliquandiu loqui, nemo hiscere, nemo partem corporis monere preter oculos, quos uarias in partes iactabant. mirum erat silentium et mira hominum effigies quasi inter statuas sors ageretur, neque uox audiebatur neque motus cernebatur ullus. (1:104–105)

All sat pale and silent in their places as if entranced. For some time no one spoke, no one opened his lips, no one moved any part of his body except the eyes, which kept glancing all about. It was a strange silence and a strange sight, men sitting there like their own statues; no sound to be heard, no movement to be seen. (86)

One by one, then, Aeneas gets the three votes he needs. The first is from Rodrigo, who *assurgens* “*Ad senensem*” inquit “*cardinalem accedo,*” *que uox gladius quidam fuit in corde Rhotomagensi; adeo exanguem reddidit hominem* (1:105) (“rose and said ‘I accede to the Cardinal of Siena,’ an utterance which was like a dagger in Rouen’s heart, so pale did he turn” [86]). Although Rodrigo is the first to accede, it is obvious to everyone that this is actually the decisive vote. Rodrigo has the most to lose and would never betray the commitment he has made to Guillaume (a commitment everyone seems to know about) unless he is sure that Guillaume cannot win. The second is from Jocopo, cardinal of Sant’Anastasia (Giacomo Tebaldi). This leaves Aeneas short by just one vote, and, as he has said earlier, there is always someone eager to cast the formally decisive vote in such circumstances so he can claim credit for the new pope’s election. Prospero Colonna stands to accede and two cardinals, Guillaume and the saintly Bessarion, try to drag him out of the room, but he fights them off and announces, “*Et ego*” inquit “*senensi cardinali accedo eumque papam facio*” (1:105) (“I too accede to the Cardinal of Siena and I make him pope” [87]).

Aeneas had already introduced the subject of how weakly human design affects events in his account of the last days of his elderly predecessor, Calixtus III. Aeneas is at Viterbo taking a cure for his gout and writing his history of Bohemia *atque Alfonso Aragonum et Sicilie regi dedicauit omine non bono; prius enim ille e uita excessit quam Historia finiretur* (1:96) (“which he dedicated to Alfonso, king of Aragon and Sicily—inauspiciously as it turned out, for the King died before the work was finished”). Alfonso falls ill “of a slow fever” (*lento morbo*), lingers for forty days, and dies “in sanctity” (78) (*religiosus principis obitus fuit* [1:96]).

[E]tsi enim mortuo Alfonso Regni principes ac ciuitates omnes Ferdinandum supra sese regem acceperunt et in eius uerba iurauerunt, Calistus tanem pontifex maximus odium quod in Alfonso uiuentem gesserat, eo extincto in filium continuauit regnumque Sicilie Alfonsi obitu ad romanam Ecclesiam deuolutum declarauit eo, ut uulgatior fama fuit, animo ut nepotem suum Borgiam ad Regni fastigium extolleret.

Sed quid uanius humana cogitatione? dum Calistus inimico Rege mortuo nimis alto fetur animo et iam sibi plana omnia censet, ipse quoque intra dies quadraginta morbo captus et extremo confectus senio fati fungitur. (1:97)

[A]lthough, at Alfonso’s death all the princes and states of his realm acknowledged Ferrante [Alfonso’s illegitimate son] as their sovereign and swore allegiance to him, Pope Calixtus transferred the hatred that he had felt for Alfonso during his life to his son and declared that the kingdom of Sicily had reverted to the Church of Rome. It was common talk that he intended to put his nephew [Rodrigo] on the throne. But what is more uncertain than the plans of men?

While Calixtus was unduly elated at the death of his royal enemy and thought that now everything was going to be easy for him, he himself fell ill and being weakened by extreme old age died within forty days. (78–79)⁷

Aeneas attributes Calixtus's unedifying death to frustration at learning that the Duke of Milan, Francesco Sforza, would not accept Ferrante's deposition. Calixtus could not have been pleased to learn of Francesco Sforza's opposition, but even if it killed him, as Aeneas rather extravagantly claims, Francesco's role in the transition was far from over.

It is possible, of course, that Guillaume d'Estouteville at some point looked as if he might be elected, but it is hard to imagine how he could have assembled the necessary twelve votes. Even in Aeneas's account he never had more than half the votes he needed, and despite all of the dishonesty and unscrupulousness that Aeneas attributed to him, Guillaume appears not to have voted for himself. Moreover, it was not because the Italians followed Pietro Barbo's advice that Guillaume fell short; Aeneas, by his own account, received the support of just five of the seven Italian cardinals whom Pietro Barbo had addressed, but he also had the votes of four of the six Iberian cardinals.⁸ Where would Guillaume find six more votes?

The issue that was most important to the Italian powers was how to keep France out of Italian politics. The Duke of Milan's first object was to avoid French intervention in the rivalries among the Italian states. Ferrante had to be allowed to succeed his father. Aeneas leaves out of his account both the role this issue played in the election and the role Francesco Sforza played in setting strategy.

Since Calixtus was known to be on his deathbed for weeks before he actually died, there was plenty of time for strategy. Aeneas omits what he certainly knew—Francesco Sforza's candidate was Domenico Capranica, and Domenico seemed almost certain to be elected. Aeneas gives a misleading account of Domenico's death and no indication of its effect on the conclave. He says that Domenico died during the funeral ceremonies of a *lente febre* (1:98) ("slow fever"). Domenico, who was fifty-eight years old, had been ill as Calixtus lay dying, but then Domenico apparently recovered and was declared to be out of danger in the second week of August. He then relapsed and died a few days later on 14 August.⁹ His death upset one of those vain human schemes in which foolish men place their confidence and left the conclave in a state of confusion. Aeneas was once Domenico's secretary and was probably one of the cardinals prepared to vote for him at the request of Francesco Sforza.¹⁰

Domenico's death forced a new round of strategy in conditions much less leisured than the first round's. The first scrutiny took place just two days after Domenico's death. In the circumstances, Francesco's ambassador, Ottone de Carretto, was forced to make a decision without being able to

⁷ This passage is cited and analyzed in Gish 2004. Although Gish says that the translation "for the most part . . . remains true to [the style of the author]," he demonstrates in devastating detail for the passage he cites that it does not and exposes its inferiority to the translation of Florence A. Gragg by simple juxtaposition. It is impossible to retain the characteristics of an author's thought if his characteristic expression is replaced by an alien and anachronistic simplification. What is nuanced and complex in Aeneas's Latin becomes blunt and crude in Meserve and Simonetta's English. Echoes of Cicero are replaced with echoes of PowerPoint.

⁸ See Pius II 1959, 86 and Pius II 2001, 116. An annotation to the French translation gives a useful list of the cardinals who participated in the election with their titles (106).

⁹ The details are given in Pastor 1891, 482–495.

¹⁰ Aeneas never says that Domenico was the Duke of Milan's candidate and suggests that Domenico was merely personally ambitious, perhaps even that ambition killed him, just as frustrated vengeance had killed Calixtus, for Aeneas comments that Domenico had *supra modum succedere aspirabat* (1:98) ("too passionately aspired to succeed [Calixtus]" [79]). After the election, he says that *Franciscus Sfortia, dux Mediolani, etsi alium pontificem expectabat, Enee tanem cognita electione gausus est* (1:108) ("Francesco Sforza, though he had expected a different pope, was nevertheless pleased to learn of the election of Aeneas" [89]). He does not say what other pope Francesco expected, nor does he say anything about the grounds for Francesco's expectation.

consult the duke. His decision was to support Aeneas, so Aeneas did not arrive in Rome for the conclave as one of the two favorites (with Filippo of Bologna), as he claims, but as a noncandidate. By the time of the first scrutiny, however, he was the candidate of the Duke of Milan. It was the support of Francesco Sforza's ambassador and Ferrante's envoy, Galeotto Agnensis, more than Aeneas's stunning eloquence and brilliant exhortations, that stopped Guillaume—if Guillaume ever was a serious candidate. Pietro Barbo's endorsement and the agreement of Latino Orsini to support Aeneas were the work of Ottone and Galeotto, whose efforts on Aeneas's behalf were far more important than anything Aeneas may have said to Filippo, or Rodrigo, or Giovanni Castiglione, or anyone else. How effective, after all, could his exhortations have been? Neither Rodrigo nor Giovanni Castiglione voted for him in the scrutiny.¹¹

Aeneas's account seems to borrow from events at the conclaves of 1455 and 1447. Bessarion was on the verge of being elected in 1455 when Alain of Avignon addressed the college and persuaded them in a famous speech not to elect a Greek pope.¹² (The real problem seems to be that Bessarion was a scholar, personally austere and interested in reform, a man whose faith was the center of his life and thought, thoroughly apolitical and therefore thoroughly unpredictable, perhaps immune to the influence of the political cardinals—a large majority.) In 1447, according to Aeneas, Prospero Colonna was within two votes of being elected when Giovanni Berardi, like Colonna a member of the landed nobility, argued successfully that Tommaso Parentucelli should be elected because he belonged to no party. (Colonna's election would have destroyed a tense balance among the Roman baronial families.)¹³ Perhaps Aeneas was too vain to see Giovanni Berardi and Alain credited with more effective eloquence than his own. In any case, the story of how he held off Guillaume's wealth with his inspired speeches is almost certainly a fairy tale modeled on the events of 1447 and 1455.

Vanity may be one of the seven deadly sins, but it has rarely seemed as attractive as it is in Pius's account of himself; his vanity seems like verve and liveliness. His road to success was a most unlikely one, and he might have lost his way at many points. Who can blame him for feeling an exhilarating pleasure in contemplating himself as pope after unpromising beginnings, after a daring—and wrong—decision to support the Council of Basel and Felix V against Eugene IV? Who can blame him for presenting his success as his own, determined by strength of character, a refusal to lose heart when things looked difficult, dauntless enterprise, faith in God's providential design, and powerful eloquence?

Part of his exhilaration is based upon what is evidently a deeply held belief in the value of what he calls *boni nominis gloria* (1:37) ("the glory of a fair name" [27]). It is difficult to measure Aeneas's religious character. No one is likely to think of him as a spiritual master. He is not to be confused with the rare cardinals of the period who actually cultivated a spiritual life, figures such as Niccolò Albergati, Johannes Bessarion, or Nicholas Krebs von Cues (Nicholas of Cusa), but neither was he among the most cynical or irreligious popes of the later fifteenth century and early sixteenth century.

¹¹ Ludwig Pastor's detailed account of the election is based on the record preserved in the Vatican Secret Archives and on Ottone de Carretto's report of 20 August 1458 to Francesco Sforza preserved in the Ambrosian Library, Milan. See Pastor 1894, 5–15.

Since I have previously cited Burkle-Young 2006a, I want to note that his account of the conclave of 1458 (Burkle-Young 2006b) is flawed, although it offers a good summary of the background and gives a list of the eighteen cardinals who attended the conclave. He gives an incorrect date for the opening of the conclave, claims that Guillaume was one

of the nine cardinals who voted for Aeneas on the second scrutiny, and offers a list that differs in other respects from Aeneas's, citing only Pastor, whose account does not support these claims.

¹² Aeneas, who was not present, offers a version of Alain's speech in the *Commentarii*.

¹³ For Aeneas's account of the election of Nicholas V, see Pius II 1912, 237–263. For an English translation, see Pius II 2006, 243–273.

He has an occasional attack of piety, often of a naïve sort, it is true—he permanently injured his feet by walking barefoot to a shrine in Scotland in order to fulfill a vow after having bargained with God for his life in a storm at sea—but if faith is peripheral to his main interests most of the time, he nevertheless recognizes an obligation to cooperate with providence. What distinguishes him from a more thoroughly humanist and “Renaissance” figure, such as Leonardo Bruni, is precisely his refusal to see human history as restricted to human agency. Still, it is the pursuit of policy, not of sanctity, that seems to animate him. If his Christianity seems superficial and suspect, his belief in Christendom is firm and serious. Perhaps what has caused so many historians to see him as a more or less prototypical “Renaissance” figure, besides his classical literary formation, is the extent to which his energies and aspirations are focused on the human world: politics, institutions, money, literature, architecture, fame.¹⁴ Yet he cannot consistently restrict his field to human values. He is not a vulgarian and yearns to be preserved from men’s folly by God’s agency. He is repulsed by the mentality of merchants whose god is money. He is also repulsed by mere force and ruthlessness, even by mere personal success. He takes pleasure in his success and seems indistinguishable in his vanity, ambition, nepotism, and greed from other popes of his own epoch,¹⁵ but he is also animated by what he calls “noble deeds,” and it is his concern for noble deeds that prevents him from living in a world in which all values and all agents are human—a world in which chance plays a predominant role.

The noble deed that he devoted himself to as pope and failed to achieve was the project of war against the Islamic Turks. Talking nations into religious war is more likely to be seen as God’s work today by the Islamic East than by what is left of the Christian West. It is true that Pius II seems to conflate religious culture with faith, but it is also true that in his eyes the Ottoman Empire is a deadly threat to what he thought of as Christianity. When he says that Islam perverts the Gospels, he is probably serious. The Ottoman Empire in 1458 was, in his eyes, something like what the Third Reich was to Winston Churchill or Franklin Roosevelt in 1940.

¹⁴ Pius II is commonly, and with good reason, referred to as a Renaissance pope, but his late medieval features are also well recognized. Martels and Vanderjagt 2003 grew out of a workshop at the University of Groningen called “Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini as a Transitional Figure between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance” (vii).

¹⁵ In book 7 of the *Commentarii*, Pius has a conversation with Nicholas of Cusa, whom he is trying to bully into consenting to the creation of new cardinals, something Pius promised both before and after his election not to do without the approval of the college of cardinals in consistory. Nicholas’s response gives a telling picture of how Pius II and his papacy appeared to a nonpolitical cardinal with an exceptional reputation for probity. [I]d ex me petis quod nequeo sine diuina contumelia prestare. cardinales absque ingenti causa creare nouos pro tua libidine paras nec iuramentum pendis, quod in conclauis et ante assumptionem et postea sacro collegio prestisti . . . nunc . . . me tue cupiditatis astipulatorum uis faere non possum. . . . si uerum potis es audire: nihil mihi placet quod in hac curia geritur. corrupta sunt omnia . . . nec tibi nec cardinalibus ecclesie cura est. que obseruantia canonum? que reuerentia legum? que diligentia diuini cultus? ambitioni et auaritie omnes student. . . . frustra hic sum. indulge ut abeam. non possum ferre hos mores (2: 446). (“[Y]ou ask of me what

I cannot grant without incurring Heaven’s reproach. You are preparing to create new cardinals without any pressing reason merely at your own whim . . . you have no regard for the oath you swore to the sacred college in the conclave both before and after your elevation . . . and you wish to make me a tool of your ambition. I cannot do it. . . . If you can bear to hear the truth, I like nothing which goes on in this Curia. Everything is corrupt. . . . Neither you nor the cardinals have any care for the Church. What observance of the canons is there? What reverence for laws? What assiduity in divine worship? All are bent on ambition and avarice. . . . I do no good here. Allow me to withdraw. I cannot endure these ways” [228].)

Pius has the effrontery to accuse Nicholas of *superbia . . . et intolerabilis arrogantia* (2:447) (“pride and intolerable arrogance” [229]) for wanting to leave the Curia and by the time the conversation is finished seems to think he has won him over. In the end, he creates six new cardinals, four of them the nominees of secular politicians, including one (Francesco Gonzaga, son of the Duke of Mantua) who was seventeen years old *quod longe maiorem pre se ferret etatem, et grauitate ac prudentia prope senili* (2:449) (“but looked much older and had almost the dignity and wisdom of an old man” [230]).

From the beginning of his pontificate, he sees the defense of Christendom against the advance of the Ottoman Empire as an urgent necessity and a European obligation. Christendom is a political and broadly cultural concept; its defense does not seem to be a spiritual issue. The glory of a fair name, he says, *Haec est enim quae clarissimas alit mentes et ultra spem vitae caelestis* (1:37) (“sustains the most brilliant intellects even more than the hope of a celestial life” [27]). But the pursuit of noble deeds is also his encounter with a sense of truth that is independent of personal interests. Indeed, he has hopes that his failure to have convinced the European powers to drop their own quarrels and go to war against the Turks will demonstrate his wisdom in time to come. He recalls that many of the great popes were not appreciated in their own lifetime—he is thinking of popes he has known, not of historical figures such as Gregory VII—but, like them, he hopes to be ranked, after his death, among the illustrious popes.

Aeneas had a spectacularly successful career, and he relishes it, especially in the famous description he offers of his own election. But aside from his personal success and the subsequent enjoyment of the wealth and patronage placed at his disposition, his pontificate, despite its success in consolidating the power of the papacy against the conciliarists, failed to achieve what he regarded as the most important goal of his papacy.¹⁶ In speaking of Nicholas V, he says that the conquest of Constantinople by Mohammed II left a black mark on his pontificate. He hoped to be the pope who redeemed that black mark, but he was not.

Pius’s pontificate effectively begins with the congress he opened at Mantua for the purpose of uniting the European powers against the Ottoman Turks in a “crusade” that would recapture Constantinople and reclaim the East for Christendom.¹⁷ The congress was a fiasco. He failed to reform the Curia, succeeded only in showering patronage on Siena and on his own family, reintroducing elements of the local nobility into the government of the republic of Siena, building an “ideal city” in his native Corsignano, and otherwise taking care of local and personal affairs. He never succeeded in putting together the money and the military force necessary for the crusade he envisioned. At the end of his short pontificate, he went to Ancona, where he died waiting for the Venetian fleet and the Burgundian army that he meant personally to lead after failing to convince the Duke of Milan, the emperor, and the king of France to do so. Constantinople and Eastern Christendom were not reclaimed. His pontificate saw the continued erosion of an institution that not only failed to reclaim the East but that bears a considerable responsibility for the fragmentation of Christendom in the West.

If Pius II is among the illustrious popes, it is mainly the result of what we might call arts and letters. There are just two places where he is unreservedly presented as one of the illustrious popes and where a casual visitor might find it easy to think of him that way. The first is his birthplace, Corsignano. Between 1459 and 1462 Pius II spent a fortune (and encouraged the curial cardinals to follow suit) on building the architectural elements of an “ideal city” there.¹⁸ He then renamed the town Pienza and made it an episcopal see. The second is Siena, which was embellished not merely by Pius II but by his nephew, Francesco Nanni-Todeschini-Piccolomini, archbishop of Siena in 1460 at the age of twenty and a cardinal from 1461 until his own very brief pontificate (as Pius III) in 1503. This cardinal-nephew had a splendid library built onto the cathedral in which he meant to preserve his uncle’s books. It is embellished with a series of ten frescos that give a quite misleading

¹⁶ For a study of the *Commentarii* that emphasizes Pius’s success in augmenting his institutional authority as pope, see O’Brien 2005.

¹⁷ For the Congress of Mantua, see Russell 1992, 51–93.

¹⁸ On the project of turning his birthplace into an “ideal city,” see Mack 1987. Pius encouraged curial cardinals to build expensive residences in Pienza in a way that amounted to insistence, accompanied by bribes and threats, at least in the case of Francesco Gonzaga. Mack 1987, 137.

sense of Pius II's pontificate. The Congress of Mantua does not look like a fiasco, and Pius II's death at Ancona looks like a triumph.¹⁹

The books that would have been preserved here had Pius III had a longer pontificate are now scattered, but the frescos and the room itself are an attractive representation of fame and glory that Pius II would have loved. It even has an ancient Roman sculpture of three beautiful nude women as the Three Graces. It would strike someone like Calvin or even Pius V as the anteroom to hell.

Outside of Pienza and Siena, his greatest claim to being placed among the illustrious popes is precisely the *Commentarii*, a book that was rather haphazardly written in casual snatches and never properly finished. Aeneas was, perhaps among all the popes, the best writer; he was almost certainly the most thoroughly professional writer among them and the one who put the highest value on being a writer; he sacrificed sleep to this activity throughout his pontificate. So if he is among the illustrious popes, it is by virtue of his writing—his having been a pope at all may seem to be incidental.

In his magisterial *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance*, the subjects' great modern historian, Eric Cochrane, reviews the precarious history of the *Commentarii's* survival and the reasons for its belated reputation. Its only printed edition before the nineteenth-century rediscovery of the original manuscript was heavily expurgated and fraudulently presented as the work of the author's copyist. "[I]t might well have become the classic of literature in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that it has become only in the twentieth had it not been put aside during the anti-Pisan reaction of the following pontificate and had it not been frankly and abundantly expurgated by its only Renaissance editor, Francesco Brandini Piccolomini, in one of the more unfortunate moments of scandal-erasing hysteria in the Counter Reformation (1584)."²⁰ The original manuscript, partly in Pius's own hand, lay buried and unidentified in the Vatican Library until the end of the nineteenth century. It is only a happy accident that it was ever identified as the work of Pius II—something that his post-Tridentine successors actively tried to hide—and published in a complete and accurate text. The author would have been astonished to discover that of all his writings, this unfinished manuscript should be the basis of his claim to be numbered among the illustrious writers of his time, if not exactly among the illustrious popes.

His having been a pope is not, however, altogether irrelevant to his achievement in the *Commentarii*. Becoming a pope can change one's life—it certainly changed Aeneas's life—and the change begins with a change of name. In Aeneas's case, the selection of a papal name was typically literary and typically witty. There had been only one pope called Pius before Aeneas chose the name and that was thirteen hundred years in the past. Aeneas, celebrated poet that he was, could not resist becoming "Pius Aeneas," not after his obscure second-century predecessor but after the hero of Virgil's epic.

And that brings us back to the classical world, where heroes do not become heroes by chance. The heroic side of Pius—the Pius animated by noble deeds—is in constant danger of being obscured. He can look like a lucky careerist; and he is distinguished by a breathtaking ability to change sides when circumstances seem to warrant such change. As secretary to the Council of Basel he was a champion of the conciliar theory against the supremacy of popes; as pope he condemned that pernicious doctrine. He is, I believe, unique among the popes in having condemned his own writings.

¹⁹ For a history of the library's construction and an illustrated résumé of its decoration and contents, see Cecchi 1982.

The ten frescoes on the career of Pius II are the work of Bernardino di Betto of Perugia, known as Pinturicchio. For

a comment on the preparatory drawings by Raphael, see Rowland 2004, 18.

²⁰ Cochrane 1981, 47.

He advised the perplexed to reject Aeneas and accept Pius (*Aeneam rejicite; Pium suscipite*) in his apology for his youthful writings.²¹

It is advice he took himself, although the change was not a sudden one. What gives the *Commentarii* much of its interest and makes this book so different from the narrative represented by the frescoes in Siena is seeing Aeneas shift from telling a story of personal triumph to telling a story about a person whose life has a meaning determined by something other than chance and the energetic exploitation of opportunities, for even when such exploitation is crowned by success, chance plays a predominant role. In the end he rejects the idea that the essential characterological quality of a person is determined by chance. He is clearly uncomfortable with such thinking and repeatedly wishes to see himself not as a successful careerist but as someone who can sacrifice everything to noble deeds—it is such deeds that lead to the glory of a fair name, and this glory is beyond human manipulation; it is bestowed finally by fidelity to truth, something inspired by God Himself.

One of the problems a modern reader may have in trying to understand the complex figure of Pius in the *Commentarii* lies in seeing how fundamental a role glory plays not just in animating Pius to pursue the project of war against the Ottoman Turks but also in writing the *Commentarii*. *Gloria* is a vague concept to most modern readers and easily, if improperly, can be assimilated to more familiar concepts such as vanity, propaganda, or celebrity. Although its meaning undergoes a change in the course of the *Commentarii*, *gloria* is never very far from the author's mind and is finally a supreme religious value distinct from its classical sense. If earlier parts of the *Commentarii* are marked by vanity and a Ciceronian sense of *gloria*, things change once its author is pope. Aeneas had a considerable career as a diplomat; his skill as a writer and his powers of oratory served him well in this role. Had he never been anything more, he would have been capable of writing an account of politics in the empire, in Italy, and in the institutions of the Church just as knowledgeable and instructive as the *Commentarii*. If he had given himself an exaggerated role in such an account, we could properly speak of vanity. Once he becomes pope, however, he is no longer merely an observer or a witness; he is a central actor in events; his decisions play a large role in shaping them. Personal motives and even personal vanity do not disappear, but something else has entered. What he does as pope has a significance that demands a poet, and there is only one possible poet who is in a position to offer a knowledgeable account of his decisions and actions.²²

Pius, who signed himself “poet” until he entered orders—Frederick III crowned him with a laurel wreath and conferred this title on him in 1442—plays two roles in his *Commentarii*, just as Julius Caesar—Pius's model—plays two roles in his own *Commentarii*; like Caesar, Pius is both hero and poet. At the outset, as Aeneas, he is eager to show his own role in events; he has an orator's sense of how powerful words can be.²³ Despite invoking the usual clichés about how the papacy is conferred by God, not by men, all the distortions in the account of his own election, for

²¹ The phrase occurs in the bull *In minoribus agentes* (1463). The Latin text of the bull appears in Gaudi 1860, 173–180. The phrase is on 175, col. 1. For an English translation with an incisive headnote, see Pius II 2006, 392–406; the phrase that gives the collection its title appears on 396.

²² I am grateful to Dustin A. Gish for helpful comments and for supplying me with a copy of the full text of his review of *Pius II: Commentaries*, edited and translated by Margaret Meserve and Marcello Simonetta cited in n. 7. The published version omitted much of the analysis—which I

draw on here—including an illuminating discussion of the difference between vanity and *gloria* and the observation that Aeneas, like Julius Caesar, is both actor and poet in the *Commentarii*.

²³ Joycelyne G. Russell quotes Aeneas's letter to Adam Moleyns of 29 May 1444: “Great is eloquence, and if the truth be told, nothing so much rules the world” (Russell 1992, 51). When he went to Ancona twenty years later, he had come to recognize the limits of eloquence.

example, place an emphasis, sometimes a false emphasis, on his personal enterprise and on his skill as rhetorician and orator.

His personal powers as orator and as rhetorician fail to move the European powers, however, once he becomes pope and assumes a central role in events. The project that will determine his character as pope, the glory of his papacy, is not, like the building of Pienza, merely a reflection of personal success; it will determine the survival of what has been entrusted to him as successor to the apostles. His long speech to the consistory before he leaves Rome for Ancona is a confession that oratory has failed and that a self-sacrificing gesture, in imitation of the martyrs of the first age of Christianity, is called for. It is the only way he can prove the purity of his motives. Glory, at this point, is something that comes from fidelity not just to Christianity but to his role as its designated protector: *ab his et ab illis ecclesia nostra magna effecta est. seruari non potest, nisi predecesores nostros imitemur qui regnum ecclesie condidere, nec satis est confessores esse, predicare populis, fulminare uitia, uirtutes in celum tollere: ad priores illos accedendum est, qui pro testamento domini sua corpora tradiderunt* (2:772). (“By martyrs and confessors alike our Church was made great. It cannot be preserved unless we imitate our predecessors who founded the Church’s kingdom and it is not enough to be confessors and preach to the peoples, to thunder against vices and extol virtues to heaven. We must draw near to those earlier saints who gave their bodies as witnesses of their Lord” [358].)

Aeneas was a famous speaker, a great rhetorician, and it is, of course, basic to a practical rhetorician’s success never to tell his audience what it will not accept. Pius, once placed in the Apostle’s chair, laid careerism and practical success aside, at least in his own view—forget the nepotism, the unedifying squabbles over money, the political compromises, the patronage, Pienza as the ideal city, and all the other efforts at self-promotion—in order to engage in the necessary project of defending Christendom against the Ottoman Turks. Famous for his eloquence as he was, proven political adviser to bishops, cardinals, an antipope, and an emperor, and master political strategist besides, he failed to persuade the European powers to forgo their rivalries and save Christendom. Nothing could be more important. It was in his view truly God’s work, and its necessity could not fail to be seen eventually even if men’s greed and folly led them for the moment to ignore it. When Pius left Rome for Ancona, he was not yet sixty, but his body was worn down by illness and a lifetime of hard use. He did not know that he would die there after just a glimpse of the Venetian fleet and without seeing the army that Philip of Burgundy was supposed to provide. He did not, however, doubt that given the reluctance of those who should have known better, it was up to him to recognize the truth the world rejected. It was his time to testify to a truth that took priority over any possible personal interest. He could hardly have doubted as he traveled to Ancona that he would never see Rome again. This witness to truth for its own sake is something that Aeneas, before his election, could not have offered. He had himself come to reject Aeneas and accept Pius. He had come to see that the failure of the European powers to defend Christendom was a failure he had to redeem with his own life. If his whole pontificate from the Congress of Mantua to his death at Ancona is marked by a failure to achieve what he regarded as his most urgent and important project, it was because the leading men of his own time were too corrupt to see straight. It was his fidelity to his role as pope, guardian of the faith, however personally unworthy, and his refusal to yield to the folly of a corrupt audience that would place him among the illustrious popes. Whether it does is perhaps beyond our competence to decide, but we can see alongside the triumph of careerism his vision of himself as noble and illustrious in the *Commentariū*, a book that encompasses rival views of human identity: subject to chance—up for grabs, the way the papacy was (or perhaps was not)

on the night before his election—or determined by truth. In the end, it is as if the clichés about the vanity of men’s designs and the apostleship’s being bestowed by God, not by men, cease to be resources of the rhetorician’s art and become truths to which he commits his life and by which he forms his character. He had gone beyond wit and eloquence and lived up to his name.

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