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**FLORENTINE WOMEN AND VENDETTA: THE ORIGIN  
OF GUELF-GHIBELLINE CONFLICT IN GIOVANNI  
VILLANI'S *NUOVA CRONICA***

PÉTER BOKODY

By the fourteenth century, the Guelf-Ghibelline controversy was an established political issue in Italy. The opposition between the pope and the emperor was often used to raise the stakes of conflicts between cities and city-factions, and this antagonism was communicated through detailed visual symbolism.<sup>1</sup> The chroniclers described these struggles and their devastating consequences. Giovanni Villani, in his *Nuova Cronica*, not only recounted the myths around the foundation of Florence, but he also created an elaborate narrative of its recent history.<sup>2</sup> The illustrated copy of this work (ca. 1341–48, ms Chigiano L VIII 296,

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Vatican Library, Vatican) depicts the commencement of the Guelf-Ghibelline conflict in the city.<sup>3</sup> The absence of instructions given to the illustrators may suggest that the author himself supervised the pictorial program of the luxurious manuscript.<sup>4</sup> Until now the illustration showing the murder of Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti on folio 70r has been regarded as the first visual testimony of the Guelf-Ghibelline conflict in the chronicle. However, I argue that the preceding illustration on folio 69v, showing a meeting between two male and two female figures, also relates to this incident. The imagery provides a unique insight into the visualization of a key communal event at the dawn of the Renaissance, as well as into the perceived role of women in political conflicts. The true import of this illustration for the visual and political history of Italy has not been recognized until now, because of the incorrect identification of the scene, which in fact represents the fatal meeting between *messer* Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti and a *donna* from the house of Donati.

The illustration on folio 69v (fig. 1) shows a woman in a blue dress with a white headscarf standing at the elevated entrance of a building and a man on the street wearing a beige robe and a white bonnet (*cuffia*). Behind the first woman, another female figure in a red dress and without a headscarf stands within the doorway of the building. On the left side of the image, there is a second male figure in green clothes holding the rein of a horse. Luigi Magnani saw the scene as illustrating the chapter of the chronicle that precedes it (6.37), and Chiara Frugoni has followed this identification in the recently published edition of the manuscript.<sup>5</sup> This chapter notes the death of Count Guido the Elder in 1213, and somewhat like an obituary, it retells the first encounter between him and his future wife, Gualdrada de' Rovignani, during the visit of Emperor Otto IV to the Cathedral of Santa Reparata.<sup>6</sup> However, the building in the illustration itself, with its cornice, two-level structure, and additional door, resembles a palace much more than a church. Also, it is difficult to reconcile the presence and absence of the headscarf, indicating the married and unmarried status of the female

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Fig. 1. Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti meeting two ladies from the house of Donati, ca. 1341–48. Pigment on parchment. Ms Chigiano L VIII 296, fol. 69v, Vatican Library, Vatican. © 2017 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

figures, with the narrative. Finally, the inscription on the stairs of the building—*P[ER] UENDETTA*, that is, “in revenge”—remains implausible in this context.

These inconsistencies are resolved if we read the image in light of the ensuing chapter of the chronicle (6.38) on “how the parties of the Guelfs and Ghibellines arose in Florence.”<sup>7</sup> Villani reports that in 1215 Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti, betrothed to a maiden from the house of Amidei, was riding through the city when a lady from the house of Donati stopped him. The horse held by the man on the left refers to this situational element of the context. Pseudo-Latini identifies the lady as Gualdruda, the wife of Forese di Donati, whereas Dino Compagni

names her Aldruda Donati.<sup>8</sup> In Villani's version, the lady of the house reproaches Buondelmonte for being betrothed to a maiden who is not beautiful enough for him, and she shows him one of her daughters, whom she claims to have kept for him. Seeing the beauty of the girl, he marries her. The image corresponds closely to these events. The maiden in the open doorway can be identified as the daughter who is offered for the inspection of Buondelmonte. She is depicted on the unbarred threshold of the palace, which simultaneously indicates protection and availability. The opening of the house is controlled by her mother, who stands on the stairs of the palace and negotiates with Buondelmonte. The headscarf as an accessory of the mother's dress and its absence on the daughter reinforce the difference in status between the two female figures.

As a consequence, writes Villani, "the kinsfolk of the first betrothed lady . . . were filled with the accursed indignation, whereby the city of Florence was destroyed and divided. For many houses of the nobles swore together to bring shame upon the said M. Buondelmonte, in revenge [*per uendetta*] for these wrongs."<sup>9</sup> The words *P[ER] UENDETTA* are written on the stairs, below the mother. As in Villani's text, their function is to anticipate the end of Buondelmonte: on the morning of the Resurrection he is slain by members of the Amidei family under the statue of Mars at the Ponte Vecchio.<sup>10</sup> The next illustration on folio 70r corresponds to this event, and the two images bracket the chapter in the manuscript (fig. 2). Villani lists four active attackers and one passive accomplice, and names Oderigo Fifanti as the one who opened the veins of Buondelmonte. In the image two horsemen and two footmen can be seen, one of them stabbing the body, which lies on the ground. Although in the text Villani emphasizes that Buondelmonte wore a new white garment and he was riding a white palfrey, the illustrator opted for the same beige clothes as on the previous image, presumably to underscore the identity of the figure. The equestrian statue of Mars is placed on the pillar of the bridge and holds a sword in its raised right hand. The violent attackers are aligned with the statue, indicating

8 Source: Notes in the History of Art / Fall 2017



Fig. 2. Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti murdered at the Ponte Vecchio, ca. 1341–48. Pigment on parchment. Ms Chigiano L VIII 296, fol. 70r, Vatican Library, Vatican. © 2017 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

the connection between them and the god of war, whereas Buondelmonte's victimhood is expressed visually by his reverse position.

Villani links the murder to the “idol of Mars,” which had been worshipped by his ancestors, the pagan Florentines; and the illustration is part of the detailed visual rhetoric of the chronicle tracing the history of the statue from the Baptistery (temple of Mars) to the Ponte Vecchio.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in his reconstruction the statue of Mars is animated and empowered by “the enemy of the human race,” and Buondelmonte himself breaks up the engagement under the “influence of the devil [*subsidio diaboli*].”<sup>12</sup> Although early fourteenth-century testimonies unanimously considered the murder to be a catastrophic event and the starting point of Guelf-Ghibelline controversy in Florence,

there were disagreements over who should take the blame for it.<sup>13</sup> In the chronicle attributed to Pseudo-Latini, Buondelmonte is forced to betroth himself to Oderigo Fifanti's niece after a brawl.<sup>14</sup> Here, it is the Donati mother who secretly contacts Buondelmonte and tells him to marry her daughter to avoid humiliation and preserve his honor as a knight.<sup>15</sup> Dino Compagni erases the references to the brawl and constructs the conversation between Aldruda Donati and Buondelmonte as an ad-hoc meeting, which transforms the calculated attempt at preserving honor into an immediate and emotional decision.<sup>16</sup> Dante unambiguously places the blame on Buondelmonte in a brief section in the *Divine Comedy*.<sup>17</sup> The disdained house of Buondelmonti is responsible for ending the concord and prosperity of Florence, since their member flew from his own nuptials at another's urging. Dante regards the assassination as a necessary sacrificial offering for peace to Mars, to "the mutilated stone [*pietra scema*] that guards the bridge."<sup>18</sup> Villani's version follows Dino Compagni's situational reconstruction of the event as an ad-hoc meeting on the street, but by describing Buondelmonte's action as a deed under the influence of the devil and incorporating the reference to the statue of Mars, he also aligns with Dante's condemning view.

The inscription *P[ER] UENDETTA* in the illustration reflects Villani's opinion: the original cause for the Guelf-Ghibelline conflict was Buondelmonte's decision to abandon his betrothed one; his violent death was only a consequence. The inscription does not function as the title or the synopsis of the image. They are meant to be read together as a combined scriptural-visual statement: "in revenge of what is depicted here that will happen." The notion of vendetta as a justified reaction to an offense was in harmony with contemporary Florentine understandings of conflict resolution across all strata of society: private justice or revenge was an integral part of fourteenth-century criminal legislation.<sup>19</sup> For the contemporaries the "uendetta" of the Amidei was plausible, since it targeted the original aggressor (Buondelmonte, who dishonored a member of their family) instead of his relatives (leading to collateral revenge), but it was excessive, since it resulted in the death

of the victim.<sup>20</sup> In Florence the statute of the *podestà* in 1325 underlined that taking revenge on someone other than the original aggressor was punishable even by death, depending on the circumstances.<sup>21</sup> A further addition to this decree in 1331 specified that retribution must remain in line with the original offense, and it spelled out that only a killing could be revenged by killing.<sup>22</sup> These contemporary regulations may suggest that the unlawful and excessive revenge of the Amidei could have been perceived by Villani and others as the trigger of the subsequent long conflict. But the very existence of the statute indicates, in fact, that disproportionate vendetta (including murder) occurred in Florence, to such an extent that it required legislation.

By recognizing Buondelmonte's decision as the source of the Guelf-Ghibelline controversy, Villani inevitably stages the Donati women as key players in communal politics and partially responsible for the escalation of the conflict. I suggest that the image indicates this independence and active agency by liberating the two female figures from the constraints of the architectural setting. The physical barriers (the shutters) are removed from the entrance to provide free access for the gaze and, metonymically, for the body of the male suitor. This openness and display went against the recommendations of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florentine texts which emphasized that women and girls should stay within the house, locked away from the gaze and reach of men wandering the streets. In the period, enclosures (households or convents) were meant to defend the honor of unmarried girls, married women, and nuns inside the city.<sup>23</sup> The control of doors served the purposes of safety and confinement at the same time.<sup>24</sup> These recommendations were also reflected in the imagery: in representations of the Annunciation, closed doors and windows indicate the chastity of the Virgin Mary, whereas in secular contexts prostitutes are placed at open windows or doorways.<sup>25</sup>

These texts condemn women's involvement in public affairs and aim to reduce their contact with the rest of the city. The discourse about the visibility of girls at marriageable age is particularly strict: they should



neither see men nor be seen by them, to preserve the honor of the family. In the illustration, the Donati ladies disregard these recommendations. Buondelmonte is approached by the mother publicly on the street, and the daughter offers herself at the doorway for his inspection. Villani presents the origins of the Guelf-Ghibelline controversy as Buondelmonte's diabolic desire to break up his previous betrothal, and the image makes clear that he acted under the influence not only of the devil but of Florentine women as well.

#### NOTES

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6. Giovanni Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, ed. Giuseppe Porta (Parma: Fondazione Pietro Bembo, 1990), 1:264–66 (6.37). For the English translation, see *Villani’s Chronicle*, ed. Philip H. Wicksteed, trans. Rose E. Selfe (London: Constable, 1906), 120.
7. Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, 1:267–69 (6.38); and *Villani’s Chronicle*, 121–22.

8. The lady was probably Gualdrada, wife of Forese di Vinciguerra Donati. See Dino Compagni, *Cronica*, ed. Davide Cappelletti (Rome: Carocci, 2013), 33 (1.7), 125; “Cronica fiorentina compilata nel secolo XIII,” in *Testi Fiorentini del Duecento e dei Primi del Trecento*, ed. Alfredo Schiaffini (Florence: Sansoni, 1926), 118.
9. Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, 1:267 (6.38); and *Villani’s Chronicle*, 121–22.
10. Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, 1:267–68 (6.38); and *Villani’s Chronicle*, 122.
11. Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, 1:268 (6.38); and *Villani’s Chronicle*, 123. For the statue of Mars and its complex role in Villani’s text, see Luca Gatti, “Il mito di Marte a Firenze e la ‘Pietra scema,’” *Rinascimento* 35 (1995): 201–30. For the depiction of the statue of Mars in the chronicle, see also Verena Gebhard, “Die ‘Nuova Cronica’ des Giovanni Villani (Bib. Apost. Vat., ms. Chigi L. VIII.296): Verbildlichung von Geschichte im spätmittelalterlichen Florenz” (PhD diss., Ludwig-Maximilians University, 2007), 186–207.
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