

Acting Power: Reading “Fiorenza” in the Time of Trump

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Thomas Mann’s only play “Fiorenza” (1905) juxtaposes two types of (potential) rulers, the motives and sources of their respective power: Lorenzo de’ Medici builds his reign on an astute reading of the mechanisms of Florentine society and on cladding the republic in the magnificence of the arts, thus turning popular attention to what he deems good and beautiful. Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola, by contrast, embodies resentment and turns into a leader who makes his audience re-feel negative emotions that they then direct outwards. As such, Mann’s depiction of Savonarola lends itself to an exploration of a contemporary political figure who has been repeatedly studied as an example of a ‘man of *ressentiment*,’ the 45th and 47th US president Donald J. Trump. Reading Trump in light of a fictionalized Savonarola draws attention to the different nature of the resentment today’s populists build on and the different passions they galvanize. While both ultimately direct their follower’s rage against the existent institutions and values, they instill a different sense of self in their audience. In the end, the fire they lit in others may claim their own lives.

Introduction

True power manifests itself in the absence of those who hold it. Thomas Mann’s only play, “Fiorenza” (1905),¹ demonstrates that in a compelling fashion. Two men dominate the story and the minds of the other characters, yet it is only in the third and final act that they enter the stage: Florentine ruler Lorenzo de’ Medici (1449–1492), known as ‘Il Magnifico,’ but now bedridden, confronts his challenger, Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498) who has moved the masses with his fiery sermons at the Cathedral of Florence. Thomas Mann’s original title for the play would have aptly summarized its plot, albeit with a question mark missing: “The King of Florence”² juxtaposes two types of (potential) rulers with distinct claims to power and legitimacy, leaving it open, though, whether one would have prevailed without the death of the other – and what the new rule will amount to.

Thomas Mann’s “Fiorenza”, though disliked by critics of his time and hardly performed on stage,³ is an intriguing study of the motives of those longing for power and the ways they relate to the masses. “To compare popular leaders sep-

¹ Thomas Mann: *Fiorenza – Gedichte – Filmentwürfe* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2014) 9–128.

² Dieter Borchmeyer: *Thomas Mann: Werk und Zeit* (Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2022) 333.

³ On the performance history and reception of “Fiorenza”, see Elisabeth Galvan: “Fiorenza” – auf dem Theater und hinter den Kulissen, in: *Thomas Mann Jahrbuch* 21 (2008) 57–69.

arated by four centuries is mixing water with oil,”⁴ Richard Sennet once observed. However, emulsions not only yield optically pleasing effects, but also actual benefits. The politics of 21st century America is far removed from the Florentine republic under Medici rule, but while US elections adhere to different rules and norms than the power struggle Mann re-imagined, the two share several parallels. On the one hand, presidential elections have a dramatic quality and thus have always invited comparisons to the world of the stage: “The American people have accepted the presidential contest as part of their entertainment life. [...] The people expect drama, pathos, intrigue, conflict, and they expect it to hang together as a dramatic package,” Robert Kennedy’s campaign adviser, Charles Guggenheim, once famously explained.⁵ While Mann staged an ailing Lorenzo in a verbal battle with Savonarola, ironically in many ways a fellow sufferer, US politics regularly pits two visions of the future against each other, with its representatives manning different stages across the country until they are headed to the presidential debate, to the ultimate confrontation which is in some ways a re-enactment of their (fictional) predecessors’ verbal duels.

On the other hand, these altercations have developed a quality in recent election cycles that are reminiscent of one character in “Fiorenza.” The few critics who have commented on Mann’s play have argued that Savonarola stands for Nietzschean *ressentiment*, a “single-minded person, showing the frustration, power-lust, and self-assertion – all components of Nietzschean *Ressentiment* – that make up his personality.”⁶ If “Fiorenza”’s Savonarola were to look into a (distorting) mirror to seek his contemporary reflection, he would find that scholars of different fields have identified another man of resentment – or, more precisely: a man who galvanizes men of resentment – in the current (and – for a brief time – former) president who reshaped the Republican Party: Donald J. Trump.⁷

Mentioning Savonarola and Trump in the same breath might sound even stranger than Sennet’s emulsion. Yet this article does not attempt mixing the two, instead it hopes to elucidate the appeal and motives of one by studying the

4 Richard Sennett: *The Fall of Public Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1977) 232.

5 Qtd. in Philip John Davies: *The Drama of the Campaign: Theatre, Production and Style in American Elections*, in: *Parliamentary Affairs* 39.1 (1986) 98.

6 Ritchie Robertson: *Savonarola in Munich: A Reappraisal of Thomas Mann’s Fiorenza*, in: *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 74.1 (2005) 64. See also D. Borchmeyer: *Thomas Mann*, op. cit., 237.

7 See Joanne B Ciulla: *Leadership and the power of resentment/ressentiment*, in: *Leadership*, 16.1 (2020) 25–38; Stefan Dolgert: *The praise of resentment: or, how I learned to stop worrying and love Donald Trump*, *New Political Science* 38.3 (2016) 354–370; Casey Ryan Kelly: *Donald J. Trump and the rhetoric of resentment*, in: *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 106.1 (2020) 2–247; Cory Wimberly: *Trump, Propaganda, and the Politics of Ressentiment*, in: *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 32.1 (2018) 179–199.

other. The looking-glass may be as foggy as an emulsion, but it will allow patterns to emerge that are otherwise hidden from sight.

“Fiorenza” on the Origins of Power

“Fiorenza” has been described as a hybrid of different genres, a play that would rather be a novel, *bühnenspröd*,⁸ too brittle for the stage as Mann prefers his characters to tell us the action rather than to show us what matters. In fact, up until the last act, the plot unfolds unseen to the audience that has to re-construct the action in its minds through the information that is shared by secondary characters. The audience thus learns that the Florentine citizens are in turmoil since the arrival of Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola whose sermons ignite them in a heretofore unbeknownst fashion. Power is experienced second-hand, through those puzzled by it or in its thrall.

Scorned by the clerics and intellectuals of the city for his lack of erudition and intellectuality, Savonarola reaches the masses with an anecdotal and emotional style.⁹ Accounts of his sermons stress not only their relatability and immediacy, but also the sheer physicality of Savonarola’s performance. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), a philosopher once destined for the clergy, observes that the Dominican friar is able to establish an emotional proximity with his listeners: “Er spricht zu Florenz, er redet es mit du an und fragt mit entsetzlicher Ruhe und Langsamkeit, wie es lebt, wie es die Tage verbringt und wie die Nächte.”¹⁰ By addressing the audience first as his equal, using the informal *du*, and showing interest in its state of mind, Savonarola develops the kind of intimate rapport that makes his listeners not only follow his words but also re-feel his sentiments. Consequently, they become receptive for his message and learn to reject what they once cherished: Savonarola instills the Florentines with a sense of loathing for the beauty that the Medici have created, the aesthetics of a class that has sought truth in the arts, when truth can only be found in God. Their loathing also turns into self-chastising for the audience recognizes itself as having worshipped the wrong things and the wrong rulers. “Das Völkchen ist im Rausch, in einem anderen, als der, worin du es so lange versetzt hast[,]”¹¹ Pico tells Lorenzo, suggesting that both Il Magnifico and Savonarola had blinded the masses, one with the beauty and greatness he had shared with them, the other with his Godly fervor.

Although the intellectual characters appearing on stage are dismissing the Florentine citizens as “the masses,” they are still taken aback by the fact that

⁸ D. Borchmeyer: Thomas Mann, op. cit., 325.

⁹ T. Mann: Fiorenza, op. cit., 19.

¹⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹¹ Ibid., 89.

Savonarola is able to reach those they look down on: “Unser liebenswürdiges Florenz versteht sich doch, sollt’ ich meinen, darauf, Leute, die sich ohne Talent in die Öffentlichkeit wagen, unter seinen Witzen zu begraben. Er hat es erschüttert.”¹² Florence should know better, should mock Savonarola instead of celebrating him, Lorenzo’s son Giovanni, the future Pope Leo X. (1475–1521), believes, and yet he sees the people shaken. Witnesses of the sermons describe how Savonarola and his audience become one so that they take possession of both the friar’s and the listeners’ bodies:

Der Bruder besitzt die Kunst, mit einem rätselhaft betonten Wort die Gewissen zu berühren, dass die Menge wie ein einziger Körper zusammenzuckt, und es ist sehr interessant, dies zu beobachten, während man selbst in der eigenen Seele die gleiche Erschütterung spürt.¹³

Even Pico cannot withstand the friar’s pull and merges with the collective body, although he intended to remain a bystander. He is shaken, *erschüttert* – a fitting choice of word given that he partakes in a collective reaction that will destabilize the foundations of the Medici rule.

While the listeners leave the friar invigorated, moved, and determined to act on his words, Savonarola himself suffers with every syllable. As Savonarola will later acknowledge to Lorenzo, he exhausts himself not only mentally but also physically, investing his entire being into his sermons: “Mein Leben ist Qual. Fieber, Ruhr und unaufhörliche Gedankenarbeit zum Wohle dieser Stadt haben alle meine Lebensorgane so geschwächt, dass ich nicht die geringste Beschwerde mehr zu ertragen vermag.”¹⁴ The power he develops over his audience eats at his own substance, making his service an act of self-immolation. However, Savonarola draws the power over his audience not only through the physicality of his performance, but also by tapping into a shared underlying feeling that he renders to the surface – resentment. The only female character in the play – who, incidentally, also speaks the least – is at the root of Savonarola’s disdain for Florentine’s ruling family and the Florence it created: Fiore is reputed to be the most beautiful woman in Florence and Lorenzo’s mistress, though his designated heir, Piero (1472–1503), is already lusting after her. Prior to her life in Florence, she had encountered Savonarola as a young man who desired her the way many others did and do, yet she spurned him. Renouncing most earthly pleasures and hounding those who do still celebrate them has thus become Savonarola’s revenge, a way of expressing his resentment. Fiore, though, is one of the few unmoved by his words: she frequently attends his sermons, and even when he directly attacks, mocks, and denigrates her, she conveys no sense

¹² Ibid., 18.

¹³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁴ Ibid., 117.

of humiliation or fear. Instead, she is the only one who understands his motives and can therefore test him.

Fiore and the masses become the prime movers of the plot; the former visibly so, while the latter’s fickleness determines the underlying dynamics, the undercurrent, so to speak, of Florence’s destiny. While the theater audience suspects that the play has to lead up to a confrontation between Savonarola and Lorenzo, it at first cannot count to be privy to it, as so many of the plot’s crucial moments are only related to the spectators. However, Fiore’s appearance draws the audience more into the plot and it is she who orchestrates the climactic encounter. For she understands the types of power the ruler and the aspiring rulers embody, and she intends to see one prevail for the sake of Florence.

Fiore seeks heroism, in both her lover and the (prospective) ruler of Florence. While she does not spell out what she regards as heroic, she explicitly rejects the brute force and sense of entitlement Lorenzo’s son Piero, represents.¹⁵ His aggressive advances are met by Fiore’s cold dismissal: “Du bist kein Held; du bist nur stark.”¹⁶ Yet he believes himself to be just as entitled to Fiore as to the reign over Florence. Piero considers the Medici to be monarchs, *Fürsten*, whose rule should be unbound and remain unchallenged by either the aristocracy and the people: “Es soll kein Gesetz stehen bleiben, das dem Volk einen Schatten von Recht lässt und unseren Willen auch nur zum Scheine beschränkt. Es soll kein Adel mehr sein neben uns.”¹⁷ Though more benevolent in his paternal gaze on Piero, Lorenzo shares Fiore’s doubts that his son comprehends the nature and origins of Medici power. He therefore reminds Piero that the Medici have no hereditary or divine right to ruling Florence: “Wir sind nicht Könige, nicht Fürsten in Florenz.”¹⁸ In fact, Lorenzo knows that the Medici depend on the consent of those they rule and that their power is thus more fragile than it appears amidst the splendor surrounding them as it can only temporarily blind the Florentines. Should the latter’s affection wane, the Medici’s rule will be over. Lorenzo therefore tries to make Piero see that the Medici are only what the people allow them to be, that they owe their power to popular will, “dass wir nur von Volkes wegen sind, was wir sind; dass nur, wer uns des Volkes Seele abwendig zu machen trachtete, unser Feind und Nebenbuhler wäre [...] Begreift du?”¹⁹

In contrast to Piero, not only Lorenzo, but also Fiore has recognized Savonarola’s rise as a true challenge to the Medici, since the friar is undermining the extant order: “Aber es ist ein anderer aufgestanden, ihm den Kranz zu en-

¹⁵ Ritchie Robertson: Savonarola in Munich: A Reappraisal of Thomas Mann’s *Fiorenza*, in: Publications of the English Goethe Society, 74.1 (2005) 53.

¹⁶ T. Mann: *Fiorenza*, op. cit., 74.

¹⁷ Ibid., 69–70.

¹⁸ Ibid., 95.

¹⁹ Ibid., 95.

treissen.”²⁰ At the outset, it is only Fiore who knows what has instilled a will to power in Savonarola. Early into the play, the audience learns that Savonarola only came to Florence at the behest of Pico. Intrigued by the friar’s oratory power and by his possible effect on the Florentine masses, Pico delighted in the experiment of exposing his city to Savonarola.²¹ Yet Pico is only to blame for the experimental set-up; the one to trigger Savonarola’s lust for more than Godly salvation is Fiore herself. The spectators know that she regularly frequents the Cathedral to hear Savonarola preach, but they are first left wondering why the friar would single out Fiore and denounce her as the embodiment of Florence’s decadence,²² turning her into the very allegory as which her character is often interpreted by critics.²³ Yet Fiore reclaims her personhood, so to speak, by – in stark contrast to the shaken Florentines – remaining unmoved by this words and by later revealing to Lorenzo that she once rejected Savonarola’s advances. As Lorenzo recognizes, Fiore is the root of Savonarola’s resentment, the reason why he is seeking dominance: “Du hast ihn gross gemacht!”²⁴

The “life-denying set of values”²⁵ Savonarola pursues and propagates are founded in the denial of the joys of life. Rather than seeking the latter elsewhere, he first just harbored, now cultivates resentment, and sows it in others. In exemplary fashion, Savonarola’s resentment allows him to claim a morally superior position to Fiore who lives according to the very values he is inverting:²⁶ the Medici rule of beauty and the arts is countered by Savonarola’s asceticism which descends into nihilism. The theater audience quickly recognizes in Savonarola a victim of resentment whose will to power contradicts his alleged values. As Lorenzo observes when he confronts the friar in the final scene: “Ich sähe Euch gern einig mit Euch selber. Wie aber: Ihr scheltet den Geist, der Euch emportrug, von dem Ihr Euch zur Grösse tragen *liasset* [...]”²⁷ Savonarola refuses to engage with Lorenzo’s arguments and ignores the contradictory nature of his strive for power over Florence. In the end, he prevails, not thanks to the power of his intellect, but thanks to the weakness of Lorenzo’s body. Could Savonarola have claimed Florence his own had he been challenged by Lorenzo at the time of his magnificence? The question will linger over Savonarola’s final rise over Florence. And the ambiguity of Savonarola’s triumph is intensified as the audience

20 Ibid., 74.

21 Ibid., 36.

22 Ibid., 30.

23 See, for instance, D. Borchmeyer: Thomas Mann, op.cit., 336; E. Galvan: “Firenze”, op. cit., 62.

24 T. Mann: Firenze, op. cit., 103.

25 Ritchie Robertson: Savonarola in Munich: A Reappraisal of Thomas Mann’s *Firenze*, in: Publications of the English Goethe Society, 74.1 (2005) 60.

26 On the effects of resentment: J. Ciulla: Leadership, op. cit., 27–30.

27 T. Mann: Firenze, op. cit., 123.

knows the fate of the historical friar whose will to power ultimately destroyed him.

Leaders of Resentment: Trump as Savonarola’s Understudy

Their victories have not been your victories. Their triumphs have not been your triumphs, and while they celebrated in our nation’s capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land. That all changes, starting right here and right now, because this moment is your moment – it belongs to you. It belongs to everyone gathered here today, and everyone watching, all across America.²⁸

It may be more subtle in his inaugural address than in his rally speeches, yet it can be heard loudly enough: Donald J. Trump, 45th and 47th President of the United States, frequently speaks to the men of resentment. There’s ‘them’ and ‘their’ triumphs, while ‘you’ and ‘your’ trials and tribulations go ignored and remain forgotten. ‘They’ tend to be a diffusely defined elite, politically liberal and allegedly in control of all facets of public life, possessing political, economic, and even cultural power. ‘You’ are the people, simple, yet virtuous, despised, downtrodden, and ignored by ‘them.’ But by reclaiming ‘your’ country, ‘they’ can no longer dismiss you, for your leadership values and hears you: “You will never be ignored again.”²⁹ Your leadership is not ‘them;’ in fact, ‘they’ despise your leader as much as ‘they’ despise you, for your leader has seen through ‘them’ and revealed ‘their’ true nature.

Trump’s othering strategy is right out of the playbook of populist leadership. Granted, this can mean many things, for populism is arguably one of the most contested terms in political science,³⁰ with it being understood as a style, a political strategy, a (thin) ideology – or something altogether different. Oft-quoted, Jan-Werner Müller describes it as “a particular *moralistic imagination of politics*, a way of perceiving the political world which opposes a morally pure and fully unified, but ultimately fictional, people to small minorities who are put outside the authentic people.”³¹ Although Müller abandons typical typologies by describing populism as a kind of political ‘imagination,’ he mirrors the scholarly consensus that ‘the people’ are core to understanding populism, while he simul-

28 Donald J. Trump, 2017 Donald Trump inauguration speech transcript, in: Politico.com (2017) <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/full-text-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript-233907>.

29 Ibid.

30 Together with Katherine Goktepe, I have discussed the different understandings of and approaches to populism in: Populism with a Ph.D.: education levels and populist leaders, in: Journal of Political Power 14.3 (2021) 449–450.

31 Jan-Werner Müller, ‘The People Must Be Extracted from Within the People’: Reflections on Populism, in: Constellations 21.4 (2014) 485.

taneously points to the rhetorical and thus imaginative component of othering. Populism's 'other' is framed as the root of people's resentment, letting leaders such as Trump engage in victimage rhetoric. Thus, they tap into a reservoir of negative emotions that have been repressed, often out of both a sense of helplessness and impotence.³² In some cases, such victimage rhetoric may lead to positive change in that the underlying causes of resentment are addressed, opening avenues for change.³³ Leaders like Trump, however, thrive *in* the reservoir of negativity which is why they seek to cultivate resentment. The resentful gaze is directed backwards, glued to past injuries, thus preventing any step forward towards liberating forgiveness or a sober account of the actual reasons why one harbors such ill will towards 'them':³⁴ the apocalyptic mood Savonarola spreads in Florence is matched by Trump's jeremiad of an imagined "American carnage."³⁵

In this vein, Trump has turned his voters against different groups they shall consider guilty of their perceived ill fate, from liberal elites to undocumented migrants – and he has turned them against the values of the 'establishment.' This has allowed Trump to breach norms once considered essential to electoral success: flouting the demands of propriety and political correctness, defying all expectations of 'presidential' behavior, touting his own wealth and connections, while mocking those who seemed untouchable before. In other words, Trump has not only become a textbook case of a populist, but also of a leader of the resentful, i. e.: "A leader who cultivates resentment creates followers who are impotent victims that depend on the leader to nourish their resentment and take revenge for them by destroying what the people they resent want and value."³⁶ One may beg to differ in one point, though. Just like Savonarola galvanized the Florentine people to turn against the splendor it had been taught to cherish, Trump moves his followers to action. The formerly impotent suddenly know how to act.

Naturally, the former reality TV star and divorcé bears little outward resemblance to the joyless Dominican friar – in fact, he is also far removed from the ideals the Medici embodied, for the type of splendor Trump favors is ridiculed by tastemakers as tacky, kitsch, or *nouveau riche*. Trump is, however, in some ways an understudy of Savonarola in that he establishes the emotional bond with the masses that allows him to rise, without suggesting a rapport between – even if only alleged – equals. "Populism can be thought of as *politics for*

32 C. Kelly: Donald J. Trump, op. cit., 7.

33 See thereon Jeremy Engels, The Politics of Resentment and the Tyranny of the Minority: Rethinking Victimage for Resentful Times, in: Rhetoric Society Quarterly 40.4 (2010) 304–305.

34 C. Kelly: Donald J. Trump, op. cit., 8.

35 D. Trump, Inauguration speech transcript, op. cit.

36 J. Ciulla: Leadership, op. cit., 28.

*ordinary people by extraordinary leaders who construct ordinary profiles,”*³⁷ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, two of the most influential scholars on populism, posit. However, Trump never suggests being one of ‘the people,’ he never attempts to ‘construct an ordinary profile,’ even though presidential candidates usually strive to present themselves as relatable and ordinary citizens. Instead, Trump celebrates and even exaggerates his wealth and success, setting himself further apart from the masses and going so far that the laws do not apply to him. As he famously said on the campaign trail in 2016: “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn’t lose any voters, OK?”³⁸ He only insists on being an outsider in the world of politics and ‘the establishment,’ but he never insinuates to his voters that he is one of them. Still, he knows their woes, he feels their anger, and he shares their resentment – though for different reasons.

While Savonarola’s time, of course, pre-dates populism as a distinctly democratic phenomenon, his case already demonstrates how proximity can be established without the semblance of equality. He addresses Florence informally, using the pronoun *du*, and he cares about the Florentines’ everyday worries, yet in his sermons he demonstrates their failings, not just in succumbing to the Medici rule and its decadence, but also in their spiritual lives. The simplicity of his cloth and his frail body further underline how different he is from the Renaissance Florentines who celebrate beauty and physical prowess. Only said difference allows him to rise, since he needs to embody the ascetic ideal that Florence shall strive for under his rule. Just like Americans must be made to embrace winning the Trump way, Florentines shall forsake earthly joys in the Dominican spirit. Both (aspiring) leaders may thus celebrate their distinctiveness, as long as they do not reveal that their resentment has different roots than the people’s resentment. They cannot stir the fire if anyone learns what lit theirs.

Leaders of resentment depend on “crafting a shared victimhood”³⁹ so that they can insulate themselves from becoming the targets of the resentful masses they intend to move to their side. If they become equated with ‘them,’ the game is up. Their followers need to believe that their chosen leaders are driven to power because they share their negative feelings, that they long to rule out of a mutual understanding of how the masses have been wronged and a pure desire to right these wrongs. And the people need to believe that these leaders do not want to rule over them, but over ‘them,’ the resented elite or another group they blame for their woes. Lorenzo acknowledges that something other than a selfless

³⁷ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser: *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 78.

³⁸ Colin Dwyer: Donald Trump: ‘I Could ... Shoot Somebody, And I Wouldn’t Lose Any Voters’, in: NPR (2016), <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/01/23/464129029/donald-trump-i-could-shoot-somebody-and-i-wouldnt-lose-any-voters>.

³⁹ J. Ciulla: *Leadership*, op. cit., 27.

care for public welfare drove him to power, his love of and for Florence notwithstanding. An inner fire gave him the urge to strive for power: “Ich nannte sie Dämon, Wille, Rausch, doch sie ist namenlos.”⁴⁰ Savonarola, by contrast, conceals his true motives, not just from the people, but also from himself. While he shares the resentment for the ruling class that he is instilling in the Florentines, he does so out of vengefulness for past injuries. Yet to the masses, he casts the Medici and the aristocracy as the reason of an ungodly course Florence has taken, leading the people to believe that they need to liberate themselves from their rulers to establish a God-fearing order. Only Lorenzo and Fiore learn of the true nature of Savonarola’s resentment, which instils in them not just a fear for Florence but also for the friar himself: when Lorenzo on his deathbed asks Savonarola for the absolution, the latter wants him to relinquish power and set Florence free from Medici rule. Lorenzo abides, saying he releases Florence from the Medici grip, *für dich*, for Savonarola. The friar, however, claims that he only wants the city to be ready for the rule of God, “Frei für den König, der am Kreuze starb.”⁴¹ Lorenzo immediately realizes that Savonarola remains in denial of the true reasons for his Caesarian aspirations: “Für dich! Für dich! Was lügst du? Wir erkannten einander!”⁴²

Lorenzo recognized in Savonarola what eluded the public – he sees himself in the friar whose inner fire drives him to power. And he would maybe also recognize that fire in Savonarola’s understudy of our time: to his voters, Trump fashions himself as a leader who shares their resentment, not because he suffers *with*, but *for* them. Neither he nor Savonarola see themselves as fellow victims of their followers, as they are not their equals and, as said, do not pretend to be. But both leaders share their followers’ resentment because they have been faulted by the same. They resent ‘them’ just as much as the masses do, but not for how they (allegedly) wronged the masses. Instead, ‘they’ have vexed these leaders personally. Savonarola had to endure Fiore’s rejection and the ridicule of the aristocracy – Trump was made a mockery by intellectual, cultural, political, and even business elites, who made it clear that, in their eyes, the reality TV star lacked in everything from taste to real wealth. The disdain Savonarola and Trump endured makes them hate ‘them’ with the necessary fervor to become credible voices of collective resentment.

In “Fiorenza,” Pico had toyed with Florence’s future by introducing it to Savonarola. While he believed Florentines too erudite to fall for the friar, he enjoyed the spectacle of their excitement – until the friar’s sermon shook him, too. Observers of US politics and his political opponents long thought (or hoped) that voters would spurn Trump, laugh him off the stage, so that the electoral

⁴⁰ T. Mann: *Fiorenza*, op. cit., 117.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴² *Ibid.*

theater could move to its usual denouement. But they had underestimated Trump’s ability to move his audience and channel their resentment. Like Savonarola before him, Trump only rose in the people’s favor when they saw him ridiculed by the so-called elite. The understudy moved from reality TV to primetime news.

Epilogue: The Fire this Time

“Das Feuer, das du entfachst, wird dich verzehren, dich selbst, um dich zu reinigen und die Welt von dir,”⁴³ Fiore warns Savonarola at the end of the play when Lorenzo has died. The fire he ignites in others, she prophesies, will consume him to purify him and to rid the world of his influence. And indeed, five years after Lorenzo’s demise, Savonarola would inspire his followers to burn objects of art and beauty, testaments to the aesthetics he despised, in the bonfire of the vanities on February 7, 1497, the *falò delle vanità* – only to be hanged and subsequently burned on the same square. Savonarola wanted to cleanse Florence of its worldliness, only to die for the purification of the city, as Fiore foresaw.

“Ich liebe das Feuer”⁴⁴ – I love the fire, Savonarola replied to Fiore. But even though he knew that power meant suffering, he hardly believed her warnings. The risks when one plays with fire are constant companions of those who lead based on resentment. Usually, though, the risks observers and opponents make out are not for the leaders themselves but for others. In the case of Trump, the imagination of fear predicted the fire not to turn against him, but against all the varieties of ‘them,’ with the fire metaphor swiftly covered by the white cloth of nativist supremacy. The storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, showed how justified these fears were – nightmares are sometimes more pleasant than awakening to reality. However, winds can blow fires in the opposite direction. And that is exactly what happened on July 13, 2024.

More than forty years after the last attempt on a US president’s life, a young man tried to shoot Donald J. Trump at a campaign rally in rural Pennsylvania. The 45th president and candidate for the 47th presidency was speaking at length about ‘them,’ the undocumented migrants and the irresponsible elite allegedly allowing them to cross the border.⁴⁵ Suddenly, several shots rang out, one of them grazing Trump’s ear – and another killing one of the many supporters in the audience. The crowd reacted calmly, as Trump would note less than a

⁴³ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ A word-by-word protocol of Donald Trump’s speech and the ensuing chaos on July 13, 2024, in Butler, Pennsylvania, can be found at <https://rollcall.com/factbase/trump/transcript/donald-trump-speech-political-rally-butler-pennsylvania-july-13-2024/>.

week later when he described the fateful event in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention (RNC) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin:

Nobody ran and, by not stampeding, many lives were saved. But that isn't the reason that they didn't move. The reason is that they knew I was in very serious trouble. They saw it. They saw me go down. They saw the blood, and thought, actually most did, that I was dead.⁴⁶

And he added: "I'm not supposed to be here tonight. Not supposed to be here."⁴⁷ However, the brush with death has not deterred him to further walk towards the fire he ignited. While he was briefly touched by the warmth and affection of his supporters, Trump quickly directed their emotions to better-known territory. To assure his audience that he was unchanged from the assassination attempt, the second part of the RNC speech was again a speech for the resentful. The fire may burn men of resentment, but it does not always stop them from fanning the flames.

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⁴⁶ Donald J. Trump, Convention Speech, in: The New York Times (2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/19/us/politics/trump-rnc-speech-transcript.html>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.