

Sortilegio:

COLA DI RIENZO AND THE BLASPHEMY OF DOCUMENTATION



My family name, “Di Renzo,” is derived from Laurentium, the laurel-shaded suburb of Ancient Rome. The original capital of Latium before the arrival of those Trojan upstarts, Aeneas and his men, Laurentium under the Caesars became the seat of the Empire’s most affluent civil servants, a Silicon Valley, if you will, for the *secretari* and *scribi quaestori*, the imperial secretaries and scribes, the educated freedmen, knights, and provincial aristocrats who supervised Rome’s powerful and efficient bureaucracy, and also, incidentally, composed some of its best literature. Petronius and Pliny the Younger both had villas at Laurentium.

Given this etymology, then, perhaps it is no surprise that some of my ancestors during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance worked as secretaries, chancery clerks, and scribes. The most famous of these was the fourteenth-century Roman notary, Cola Di Rienzo, better known as Rienzi, who briefly resurrected the Roman Republic in 1347. Colorful and controversial, Cola has been called everything from a failed prophet and revolutionary, to a herald of the Renaissance and the Risorgimento, to a proto-fascist and megalomaniac. He is also an important figure in the history of professional writing. Through carefully composed edicts and letters, often accompanied by stunning allegorical graphics, this self-educated son of a poor innkeeper effectively challenged the authority of the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. How was this possible? Lord Byron in *Child Harold* attributes Cola’s success solely to the force of his personality. I would like to offer an alternative explanation based



on contemporary ideas about *textuality* and *document design*.

Of course, any materialist analysis of a charismatic legend must be circumstantial and incomplete, not to mention dissatisfying to the more romantic who prefer keeping heroes in the spotlight and the backdrop of history in the dark. Lord Edward Lytton, whose overwrought novel, *Rienzi, Last of the Roman Tribunes* (1835), inspired Richard Wagner's equally overwrought opera, complained that the medieval chronicle of Cola's life “appears more like the [history] of Rienzi's clothes, so minute [are] the details of their colour and quality—so silent is everything that could throw light on the motives of their wearer” (440). Lytton surely would have been more outraged by my limiting this discussion of Rienzi to his professional writing. Nevertheless, I submit that Cola's remarkable career can be read, in part, as *a tragedy of discourse and documentation*. Cola's voracious reading of Biblical prophecy and classical Roman texts, coupled with his training as a notary in calligraphy, shorthand, and mnemonic coding, provided him with the rhetorical and technical resources to usurp the authority of church and state. These very gifts, however, caused his downfall and death—and posthumously branded him a heretic and a necromancer.

Cola Di Rienzo was born in the spring of 1313 in the squalid Rione Regola, then the most overpopulated section of Rome, a combination slum and ash heap that sprawled between the Palazzo Cenci and the Jewish Ghetto. His father Lorenzo operated a seedy tavern by



the Tiber, while his mother Matalena worked as a washerwoman. Cola came of age during the worst part of what his Roman contemporaries called the Babylonian Captivity, the Avignon Papacy. Political turmoil and international intrigue had transplanted the Vatican to

southern France, and, bereft of its temporal and spiritual leadership, the Eternal City fell apart. Churches were desecrated, murder and rape were rampant, and armed marauders roamed the streets. Rome's precious monuments, the symbols of its former glory, had crumbled into ruin, not the victims of ordinary vandals but of Rome's robber barons who plundered the forums and temples for materials for their own *palazzi*. With rapacious overlords carving up the city like a capon, gang warfare became the norm. Cola's younger brother was killed in one of these street brawls.

Given these horrible social conditions, most young men of Cola's class succumbed to fatalism and surrendered to violence and dissipation. But Cola was different for two reasons. First, he had an unshakable confidence in his own destiny. He was convinced he was actually the bastard son of Henry VII. The Emperor supposedly had slept with Cola's mother while hiding from his enemies at the family inn. Second, Cola possessed—one is tempted to say, was possessed by—a powerful, almost hallucinatory, imagination and an insatiable hunger for knowledge. By socializing with students in his father's tavern and delivering wine to the nearby Monastery of San Tomasso, Cola learned how to read. According to an anonymous medieval chronicler, the boy was something of a prodigy:

Lord, what a fast reader he was! He was well acquainted with Livy, Seneca, Cicero, and Valerius Maximus; he loved to describe the great deeds of Julius Caesar. Every day he would gaze at the marble engravings which lie about in Rome. He alone knew how to read the ancient writings; he interpreted those marble shapes perfectly. Lord! How he would say, "Where are those good Romans? Where is their high justice? If only I could live in such times!" (*Life* 33)

However, Cola might have remained an idle dreamer, or an attractive sideshow novelty for his father's tavern, if events hadn't intervened. After his mother's death, the boy was sent to live with relatives in the mountain village of Anagni. Here, under the tutelage of local priests, he received a rudimentary education in the *trivium*, grammar, rhetoric, and logic, and excelled at penmanship. He became, in the words of our chronicler, "a good grammarian, an excellent speaker, and a good scholar" (33). Although his tutors were

impressed by his progress, especially his passionate love for the classics, they were puzzled by the boy's unusual taste in literature. Cola appreciated epic, lyric poetry, and philosophy, but he much preferred history, particularly Livy's glorious propaganda and Tacitus's meticulous senatorial annals, and such functional texts as Caesar's military tactics, Cicero's political and administrative letters, Frontinus's treatise on aqueducts, and Pliny the Younger's field reports. Cola treated these latter classics less like literature, in our sense of the word, than as practical models of applied rhetoric that could achieve concrete results in the real world. Perhaps, the priests speculated, this innkeeper's son was destined to become a *dictatore*, a university-based minor rhetorician who “trained students in writing every sort of letter and official document which was demanded of the notaries and secretaries of his day” (Haskins 32). In other words, a professional writing instructor! Cola, though, was destined to become an entirely different kind of dictator.

Cola's rise to power began in his early twenties, when he married the daughter of a notary, Francesco Mancini, and adopted his father-in-law's profession. For us, becoming a notary seems like a strange career move for a would-be political messiah, but at the time this profession was a proud, even a glorious one. From the twelfth to the fourteenth century, Italian notaries were the most esteemed in Europe because in them, it was said, dwelled the spirit of Classical Roman order and justice in the midst of anarchy and barbarism. “Public instruments,” these men were called, and both kings and commoners employed their services (Clanchy 52). When William the Conqueror wanted to create an efficient and centralized Norman bureaucracy by transforming England almost overnight from an oral to a written culture, he imported hundreds of Italian notaries as consultants, such as Giovanni di Bologna, who became the secretary of Archbishop Peckham. More often, though, notaries—often low-born themselves—defended the rights of the illiterate and semi-literate against their so-called betters. By validating documents, authenticating writs, and providing an official seal of witness, notaries gave ordinary citizen some measure of personal authority.

Besides legal power, fourteenth-century Italian notaries also wielded considerable cultural power. As M. T. Clanchy explains, these men

formed an elite of professional writers, who established a special status distinct from both ecclesiastics and laymen. They developed as "writers" in every sense: scribes, secretaries, law clerks, calligraphers, prose stylists, *litterati*, authors, journalists. When the writing of Latin became distinct from Italian vernaculars, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the smartest notaries added teaching the classics and expertise in rare books to their repertoire. . . . [T]he notaries' programme of classical studies became known as "humanism" in the fifteenth century, and they as "humanists." They proved excellent propagandists for their classical curriculum; so much so that their idea of an Italian Renaissance has become a commonplace. (14)

This form of cultural brokerage, however, was mostly in the service of political power, both on their behalf and that of their clients. If fourteenth-century notaries, according to Clanchy, were the poets and visionaries of the Italian professionals, the harbingers of the Renaissance, their creativity was pragmatic and material. Their "notarial art" conjured "the illusion on page that a [legal] fiction is [in fact] not a fiction" (305).

Once we understand the status and aims of fourteenth-century Italian notaries, we can better understand why Cola was drawn to this profession, and how it subsequently shaped his political philosophy. With his talent for calligraphy, his fascination with documentation, his passion for law and order, and his "obsession with antiquity," Cola was a natural notary (Barzini 117), and professional training perfected his already formidable gifts for rhetoric and composition. Like all legal scribes, Cola had to master the *ars notataria*, an elaborate system of mnemonic shorthand that simultaneously "formed one's [professional] character and furnished one's memory" (Carruthers 112). Rienzi's peers must have teased him during his training, since one of the most frequently used punctuation symbols in *notataria* was the *cola*, the precursor of the modern colon. Nobody, however, scoffed at Cola's success once he had established himself in Rome. Within five years, he had so distinguished himself as a notary that he was allowed to join the city council.

Fortune finally smiled on Cola when he visited the papal court in early 1343 to

report on a failed insurrection to the newly elected Clement VI. At Avignon Rienzi first cultivated the friendship of his idol, Petrarch, whose poetics of antiquity and passionate belief in a united Italy would prove so influential, and first established himself as a political figure. A senatorial delegation had preceded Cola by two months to petition the Pope to visit Rome, as his predecessor had promised, and to consent to celebrate the Church Jubilee every fifty years, rather than every hundred. Both actions, said the ambassadors, would raise the city's morale, and Cola passionately added his voice to theirs, comparing Rome to the widowed Jerusalem in the Book of Lamentations. The urbane and evasive Clement had no intention of crossing the Alps and, moreover, already had resolved before the delegation's arrival to convert the Jubilee into a semicentennial. Nevertheless, the Pope was so impressed with Cola's speech that he asked the young man to compose the official letter communicating the good news to Rome. Cola wrote the following announcement, imitating the prophet Isaiah:

Let the mountains rejoice together, let the hills be adorned with joy! Let the city of Rome arise from her long prostration and return to her ancient majesty; let her cast aside her mournful widow's raiment, and put on the purple of a bride! For the most Holy Roman Pope, the Father of the City, her spouse and her lord has agreed—for the renewal of this city, for the glory of her people, and for the happiness and welfare of the whole world—to grant unto you his mercy and grace. (quoted in Origo 70)

He signed this letter: "Nicolaus Laurentii, *consul orphanorum, viduarum et pauperum.*" Nicola Di Rienzo, Consul to Widows, Orphans, and Paupers.

This daring and eloquence pleased Pope Clement, and he granted the young man many audiences. Impetuously, Rienzi used this opportunity to denounce the tyranny and corruption of Rome's barons and to promote government reform for the plebs. His audacity earned Cola powerful patrician enemies within the delegation, who stripped him of his powers and purse. Moved by his plight, the Pope appointed Cola apostolic notary to the Roman municipal chamber, so that the young plebeian could be honored and protected "under the Papal aegis" (80). Henceforth, Clement declared, Cola would be known as

Notary of the People.

When Cola returned to Rome in 1344, he must have been elated. At last, he was in a position to instigate legislative reform on behalf of the people! His ultimate goal, however, was nothing less than resurrecting the Roman Republic. This paper cannot hope to do justice to Rienzi's bizarre political ideas, which Luigi Barzini calls “a self-taught mind’s strange confusion of medieval mysticism and Roman glory” (118). A medievalist would be better qualified to



draw parallels between Cola’s mystical populist revolution and the radical theology of Joachim of Fiore and the Fraticelli, a splinter sect of the Franciscans. Instead, as a professional writing instructor, I will discuss how Cola’s duties and privileges as an apostolic notary, coupled with his knowledge of classical rhetoric, helped him to aggrandize his authority, stage a successful coup, and expedite “his sudden, though transient, reformation” of Roman law (Gibbon 830).

Cola’s duties as Rome’s municipal notary included ordering the city’s finances, recording the minutes of the city council and the Senate, maintaining the city’s ancient archives, and inspecting and writing reports on the city’s streets, granaries, aqueducts, and sewers. In Ancient Rome, as Cola well knew, these same duties were performed by *aediles* and *quaestors*, civic magistrates and junior senators. Therefore, to add more distinction to his office, Cola designed for himself an elegant silver stylus, possibly the world’s first metallic pen. He also kept with his seals a collection of authentic Roman coins and cameos, portraits of Scipio, Caesar, Metellus, and Fabius. Cola’s daily stipend of five gold florins allowed him to purchase these antiquities, but the real perquisite of his job was unlimited access to ancient Roman documents: memoranda, annals, statutes, reports. These he studied

diligently, copying their attractive format and clear style. Just as Petrarch, with whom Cola corresponded, used classical models to rethink his creative writing, Rienzi used classical models to rethink his professional writing. As biographer Iris Origo notes, the two friends in their different ways were both poets, shapers:

Both were inspired by the same cult of Rome . . . and were moved by the same resolve to deliver her. Both . . . had been influenced by the same studies: . . . the same interest in Roman history, the same passionate admiration for eloquence and rhetoric. . . . If the young Roman's learning was a little superficial---if his phrases, which he strove so hard to shape on the Ciceronian model, were marred by scholastic elaboration, a medieval clumsiness, Petrarch could forgive this fault. From the first he realized that Cola---his inferior in birth, intellect, and culture---yet possessed what he had not: practical ambition, and with it some simpler quality, at once earthy and fiery, that would enable him to awaken the enthusiasm of the people. (75)

Rienzi kindled this popular enthusiasm in 1347. His private research had uncovered a text that would inaugurate a new social order and legitimize his own authority. On an altar in the Basilica of St. John Lateran Cola had discovered a bronze tablet containing the famous *Lex Regia*, the decree by which the Roman Senate, on behalf of the people, confirmed to Vespasian his imperial power. Cola ordered this slab to be mounted on the wall at the back of the choir, framed by a fresco he had sketched depicting the coronation of Vespasian and accompanied by a vernacular translation printed on a placard. The entire city came to the basilica to marvel at the tablet, and Cola scheduled a special meeting in which he explained the document, section by section, to the illiterate. His presentation was not flawless. At one point he translated *pomoerium*, the right to enlarge city boundaries, as *pomararium*, apple orchard. Nevertheless, the audience understood his key point: Even in the days of the Caesars, the authority of the Emperor required ratification by the Roman people; theirs was "the true sovereignty" (Origo 88). The commons cheered. Notary Cola Di Rienzo, in effect, had composed a charter on their behalf.

Throughout that Lent, while allegorical murals announcing the return of the Republic appeared on Rome's most prominent public buildings, Cola recruited a small army

of mercenaries. On Pentecost weekend, he seized control of the Senate, publicly drafted and ratified a new constitution, consecrated himself as a Knight of the Holy Spirit in the Lateran, and assumed absolute power. Although his official title was Tribune of the Roman People, because of his zealous championing of the plebs against the patricians, Rienzi was actually *consul*, *praetor*, and *pontifex maximus* rolled into one: legislator, judge, and high priest. After crushing the barons and forcing them to pledge their allegiance, he completely rewrote Roman law. Perhaps his finest achievement was his reform of the Roman courts:

His years of legal practice had made him acquainted with all the abuses that were prevalent; he had met with corrupt lawyers and venal judges, he was familiar with forgery of documents and false accusations, to say nothing of an intolerable slowness and complication of procedure. His reforms were firm and swift: corrupt judges and lawyers were removed from their posts, or heavily fined; false witness was punished with the penalty that would have fallen upon the accused; and finally a “court of conciliation,” established on the Capitol and presided over by reliable citizens, attempted to bring to a conclusion—sealed by a kiss of peace—minor contentions which might otherwise have produced interminable lawsuits. It was the Tribune's boast that this last measure succeeded in reconciling no less than eighteen hundred litigants. (Origo 102)

Although the Tribune's reforms were backed by force of arms and state pageantry, they also succeeded because they were well written. Clear, streamlined, and accessible, Cola's edicts were composed in the vernacular and could be understood even by laborers and artisans. His revolutionary constitution, the Fifteen Points of the Good Estate, is a model of compression and demotic plainness. This austere beautiful language, ideally suited for administrative writing, reconnected Roman government to its classical heritage, reinstating the Ciceronian concept of *res publica*—public service on behalf of the common good—amid anomie and feudalism. Henceforth, Cola began “dating his missives according to a new era, Year One of the Restoration of the Roman Republic” (Barzini 124).

Simultaneously, Rienzi consolidated his position by courting powerful allies through sophisticated and erudite letters, written in flowery Latin. “His pen,” reports Edward Gibbon, “was not less eloquent than his tongue, and his numerous epistles were delivered to swift and trusty messengers. On foot, with a white wand in their hand, they traversed the

forests and mountains; enjoyed, even in the most hostile states, the sacred security of ambassadors” (831). A rhetorical chameleon, Rienzi always adjusted his style and approach to his audience. Defending his actions against the barons to the Archbishop of Prague, he argues like a theologian: “Keeping the crucifix of charity before your eyes, which of the following two will your paternity consider the defender of the church: him who, when the sheep are abandoned, yes, afflicted, admits and fosters the wolves; or him who leads back and gathers together into one fold the sheep scattered by discord?” (quoted in Cosenza 123). Convincing foreign mercenary captains to be more generous with their pay, he tells an exemplary tale from Roman military history. Like St. Paul, the Tribune could be all things to all men—a gift he claimed to have received from the Holy Spirit.

Whether or not Cola was divinely inspired, his reign seems to have ushered in a brief Golden Age. A contemporary chronicler descants: “The forests began to flourish because no robbers were found in them. Then the oxen began to plow; the pilgrims began to seek out sanctuaries” (*Life* 46-7). Edward Gibbon, though far less lyrical, is no less impressed. Whenever Rienzi’s messengers traveled through the countryside, he states, “the highways along their passage were lined with kneeling multitudes, who implored Heaven for the success of their undertaking” (831). The approaching Jubilee only increased this religious fervor, as did the appearance of the documents themselves. Studded with seals and decorated with colorful ribbons, they resembled papal bulls. For his followers, Cola’s edicts were divine relics. For his enemies, the powerful Colonna family and their ecclesiastical allies in the Curia, they were an abomination.

It was inevitable that Rienzi would be accused of blasphemy and sorcery. He had not only usurped temporal and spiritual authority, but his very method of composition smacked of *sortilegio*, black magic. The Tribune would sit at his desk before a metallic three-way mirror, engraved with the signs of the zodiac, and contemplate his multiple reflection stretching down the corridor of time. Falling into a kind of trance, he produced his edicts and letters through a kind of automatic writing. Cola claimed to commune with the ghosts of

Cicero and Livy and sought advice from a “tutelary spirit” named Fiorone, his Roman genius (Origo 121). This form of free writing and active imagination was fairly common among fourteenth-century men of letters. Petrarch habitually wrote epistles to dead figures from antiquity, and scholars and rhetoricians, trained in the discipline of artificial memory, sometimes used zodiacal signs as mnemonic devices. These writers, however, had never wielded Cola’s power. Rienzi’s enemies considered his reviving classical texts for practical ends necromancy, raising the dead. Eventually, Clement VI excommunicated him for being “the precursor of the anti-Christ” and “a child of the devil” (quoted in Origo 122).

Cola Di Rienzo was neither a warlock nor a magician, but he had become bewitched by his own rhetoric. Always naive and self-dramatizing, not to mention a little unbalanced, the notary turned tribune started taking himself literally. “His titles,” says Luigi Barzini, “became more sonorous and florid, and embraced more and more territory as . . . time passed” (123). He called himself NICHOLAS, THE SEVERE AND MERCIFUL: DELIVERER OF ROME; DEFENDER OF ITALY; FRIEND OF MANKIND, AND OF LIBERTY, PEACE AND JUSTICE; TRIBUNE AUGUST. “The Gracchi,” Gibbon comments, “would have frowned or smiled, could they have read the sonorous title of their successor” (833).

Rienzi’s documents were no longer reader- but writer-centered, and his regime became as extravagant, self-indulgent, and ineffective as his prose. Worse, according to his contemporaries, he began confusing his own words with those of the Word Incarnate. While unveiling new legislation, Cola dared to compare himself to Christ. After all, was he not too a thirty-three-year-old savior who had given his people a new commandment?



At this remark, a venerable old monk, who had been one of the Tribune’s most ardent supporters, wept bitterly. “Now is our master cast down from heaven!” he declared. “I never saw a prouder man. By the aid of the Holy Ghost he has driven the tyrants from the city without drawing a sword. Why is he so arrogant and ungrateful to the Most Holy?” (quoted in Barzini 127)

This blasphemy, the ultimate act of logocentrism, cost the young dictator public support. Within six months, his enemies forced him to resign.

The rest of Cola’s life fatally embodies the chief bane of professional writing, what John Frederick Reynolds calls “the danger of float and bloat” (20). Over the next six years, he drifted from Abruzzi, to Prague, to Avignon—a fugitive, a vagabond, a prisoner, and a pensioner. Drink and inactivity swelled his once limber body to the size of a heldentenor’s. After obtaining a pardon from the new pope, Innocent VI, Rienzi returned to Rome in August 1354 and resumed his duties as Tribune.

But the magic was gone. His edicts were as flaccid and gross as his body, and he soon degenerated into graft and judicial murder. His severe taxes on salt and wine led to insurrection. On October 8, 1354, a mob stormed the Capitol and dragged the Tribune into the piazza. He had tried disguising himself in the clothes and dialect of a commoner, but his fancy jewelry and fancy words had given him away.

For an hour, nobody dared to touch him, so great was the memory of his former glory. Finally, an incensed nobleman, Cecco dello Vecchio, drew his dagger and plunged it into Cola’s huge belly. But the next blow, significantly, was struck by a notary, Laurentio de Treio. Other notaries and scribes, brandishing pen knives and styluses, followed suit. Betrayed by Cola’s apostasy and tyranny, they avenged themselves by practicing penmanship on his body. They dotted his eyes, they crossed his T-bone, they divided his syllables. The plebs, less concerned with the finer points of punctuation, finished the butchery. Cola’s mangled, headless body was dragged by the feet to Piazza San Marcello

and strung upside down from a balcony. For two days, it hung there, with its guts dangling, like the carcass of a carnival ox. Passersby threw stones, while urchins played soccer with the Tribune's skull. On the third day, the corpse was dragged to Campo dell' Austa, near the Ghetto, and burned on a huge bonfire. Cola's ashes were then scattered to the wind.

Cola's tragedy was one of discourse and documentation. Straddling two worlds, the medieval and the Renaissance, he was oblivious to the contradictions in his ideology and could not fully understand, much less control, his own rhetoric. He never completely realized that his writing secularized public authority. Instead, he believed it sanctified his own private authority. Like many artists, Rienzi worked through intuition and imagination. Also, like many artists, the Tribune fell victim to mystification by forgetting his audience and denying the material matrix of his work. As a genius of documentation, Cola was particularly susceptible to what Norman O. Brown calls “the fetishism of the document,” mistaking a document's format for its function (198). Nevertheless, Cola's legacy had a powerful impact on his and future generations, not simply as a thrilling legend but as positive social reform:



The feudal power of the Roman nobles was broken for ever. Thenceforth the Roman Senator appointed by the Pope was obliged to conform to the Statutes of the city and to submit to the control of a democratic council similar to that of Florence. The new municipal laws of 1363, which incorporated a large part of Cola's legislation, decreed that the 20th of May, the day of his revolution, should be celebrated as marking the beginning of the new freedom. (Origo 251)

With only a silver stylus, a young notary had given medieval Rome a taste of democracy and had nudged her into the modern era. Perhaps this was magic after all.

Works Cited

Barzini, Luigi. "Cola di Renzo, or the Obsession of Antiquity." *The Italians*. New York:

Atheneum, 1964. 117 - 32.

Brown, Norman O. *Love's Body*. New York: Random, 1966.

Carruthers, Mary J. *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*.

Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.

Clanchy, M. T. *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066 - 1307*. Oxford: Blackwell,

1993.

Cosenza, Mario Emilio. *Francesco Petrarca and The Revolution of Cola di Rienzo*. Ed. and

intro. Ronald G. Musto. 2nd ed. New York: Italica Press, 1986.

Gibbon, Edward. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. III. New York: Modern

Library, 1937.

Haskins, Charles Homer. *The Rise of Universities*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1957.

The Life of Cola di Rienzo. Tr. and intro. John Wright. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of

Mediaeval Studies, 1979.

Lytton, Lord Edward Bulwer. *Rienzi, The Last of the Roman Tribunes*. London: George

Routledge and Sons, 1836.

Origo, Iris. *Tribune of Rome: A Biography of Cola Di Rienzo*. London: Hogarth, 1938.

Reynolds, John Frederick. "What Adult Work-World Writers Have Taught Me About Adult

Work-World Writing." *Professional Writing in Context: Lessons from Teaching and*

Consulting in the Worlds of Work. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995. 1-31.