

The Art of Inventing Matilda of Canossa

by

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ABSTRACT

Matilda of Canossa (1046 to 1115), the Great Countess of Tuscany, was a noblewoman, a warrior, and a papal supporter who later generations adapted to satisfy a variety of cultural and ideological interests. Matilda's life as a ruler was amplified over the following five hundred years in an avalanche of words and images that served many purposes. This thesis considers the art produced during her lifetime in the context of disputes over papal authority, as well as art produced about Matilda subsequently. The study includes a discussion of her appearance in Dante's *Comedy*; her importance to Florentine artists such as Sandro Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo Buonarroti in the 16th century; and concludes with the significance of the elaborate tomb sculpted for her reburial by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in St. Peter's Cathedral. An examination of Matilda through these shifting representations from the 12th to the 17th century enables an understanding of how and why she became an impressive symbol in the visual arts. Finally, the study examines the process through which a strong, powerful woman was transformed from an historical person to a legend. Matilda's remarkable life and myth is still relevant to art historical, religious and cultural studies because of the pervasiveness of her influence a millennium after her death.

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Chapter 1

MATILDA AS A HISTORICAL FIGURE

Matilda of Canossa, the Grand Countess of Tuscany, was a remarkable noblewoman and military leader from the Middle Ages, who struggled to uphold her belief in the rights of papal authority and her claims to her ancestral estates. She ruled much of the land in north-central Italy and participated in papal affairs as well as managing relations with the emperor, Henry IV. Today, most of what scholars know about her comes from the biography written by the monk Donizone. The text and the illustrations in Donizone's biography, *Vita Mathildis*, dated 1115, emphasized important moments in her life and ensured she would be remembered by future generations.¹ Today Donizone's text serves as an essential starting place for much of the research conducted on Matilda, even though historians note its apparent biases due to its hagiographical nature.

For this thesis, I will investigate some of the events described by Donizone and the proliferation of Matilda's legendary history in Italy, culminating with her subsequent influence on Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque art. I will examine the art produced during her lifetime in the context of contemporary religious and sociopolitical events and in comparison to art created as a direct or indirect consequence of Matilda's 39-year rule. Finally, I will focus on the art produced posthumously about Matilda. The following chapters will include studying her representation in Dante's *Comedy* and the genealogical claims of the artist Michelangelo Buonarroti in the 16th century as well as the

¹ Rome, Biblioteca Vaticana, ms. Vat. Lat. 4922.

tomb sculpted for her by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. I will argue that Matilda remained relevant and revered in Italy, partially because of the legacy she left behind through art. Furthermore, her shifting legend allowed for the reuse of her figure for not just art but also for political and religious needs in Counter-Reformed Rome. To clarify her art historical importance, I consider both primary and secondary texts as I outline her history in detail. Lastly, I hope to show that an understanding of the art historical, cultural and religious contexts during her life and after her death, enables deeper insight into other historical figures and events such as Pope Gregory VII, Pope Urban VIII, Emperor Henry IV, Dante, Michelangelo, the Investiture Controversy and the Renaissance. This interdisciplinary approach will add to scholarship in art history and other disciplines.

To better understand how Matilda would come to influence 600 years of cultural history, I begin my examination of her life with the biography by Donizone, a monk of St. Apollonio at Canossa. Donizone wrote his two-volume poem to present to Matilda near the end of her life, probably either under her direction so her legacy would not be lost or as an honorary gift for her support of his monastery. Modern historians are cautious about relying exclusively on Donizone's *Vita* for factual material on the life of Matilda because the rhetoric of this highly stylized poem is not entirely accurate historically.²

² Valerie Eads, "The Last Italian Expedition of Henry IV: Re-reading the *Vita Mathildis* of Donizone of Canossa," *Journal of Medieval Military History* 8 (2010): 26. I rely on Valerie Eads' expertise extensively in this chapter and thesis. She has written numerous articles and her doctoral dissertation on Matilda and is

Donizone attempted to write his text in Leonine hexameters with Virgilian style verses.³ Donizone believed Virgil was important to the style of the poem, because Virgil was a son of Mantua, the same area where Matilda also lived and died. Donizone even praises Virgil and Plato in the first few lines.

The *Vita* was written for Matilda to construct her as an epic Christian hero. This approach can be problematic for historians when they attempt to extract historical facts from a poetic text. For example, Donizone misdated the death of Pope Gregory VII and did not mention either of Matilda's marriages.⁴ Donizone also had harsh words for Holy Roman emperor Henry IV, discounting the ruler at every opportunity, while championing Matilda in her conflicts. The author also wrote his biography 25 years after Henry IV had made his last major attempt to obtain Matilda's estates, ensuring that the details of many events were forgotten or suppressed.⁵

One of Donizone's major concerns in writing his *Vita* was to demonstrate how Matilda was a leading protagonist in the constant struggle for control of the papacy.⁶ However, he also wrote an entire chapter from the point of view of Matilda's castle at Canossa. Donizone gives the castle a voice, and the castle

an expert in the subject. I find her interpretations of Donizone accurate and well constructed.

³ Christine B Verzar, "Visualizing Politics and Authority of Countess Matilda of Canossa and Tuscany; Ideology and Myth," in *Pictorial Languages and Their Meanings* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2006), 255.

⁴ Eads, "The Last Italian Expedition of Henry IV," 26.

⁵ Donziane, *Donizone: Vita di Matilde di Canossa*, ed. and trans. Paolo Golinelli (Milan: Jaca Book, 1987). Translations of this text to English are my own, unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Eads, "The Last Italian Expedition of Henry IV," 30.

scolds Mantua for betraying Matilda and submitting to Henry's conquest.

Donizone compares the city unfavorably to ancient Troy, a city that held out for ten years against a fierce opponent, while Mantua lasted only 11 months against Henry.⁷ It is exactly this type of poetic rhetoric that makes historians wary when they attempt to extract authentic historical details from his poem.

Despite these concerns that pose a problem for modern scholars, Donizone's manuscript served as a basis for the many biographical commentaries on Matilda that were produced during the Renaissance.⁸ Donizone's *Vita* is, therefore, essential to this study and is a necessary starting point when researching the legacy of Matilda. His work insisted that Matilda be not only remembered but even immortalized in a mix of fact and fiction and this gave birth to her legend. Furthermore, Donizone's praise of Matilda claimed similarities between her and celebrated biblical women such as Deborah, Jael and Judith. This ensured that later writers would extol her virtues. Donizone was the first to praise her vigilance and strength ("*pervigil et fortis*") and laud her as a "terror" to her enemies ("*terror fuit omnibus illis*") on whom he claimed Matilda waged war, "night and day."⁹

Donizone's poem also provides insight into how Matilda herself wanted to be remembered. Matilda was lucid and active until the very last hours of her life. She knew Donizone was writing her biography and if she wanted to, she could have insisted on historical accuracy. It appears, for Matilda and Donizone,

⁷ Ibid., 30-31.

⁸ Beth L. Holman, "Exemplum and Imitatio: Countess Matilda and Lucrezia Pico della Mirandola at Polirone," *The Art Bulletin* (1999): 637, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3051338>.

⁹ Donizone as quoted in Holman, "Exemplum and Imitatio," 637.

historical correctness was less important than her portrayal as a fearsome and important ruler. Since the *Vita* was the basis of the many biographies and the principal textual source for art produced in later centuries, understanding Donizone's biases allows historians to view her legend with a critical eye.¹⁰ Although Donizone's text does not start at the beginning of her life, the poem still provides insight into aspects of Matilda's legend that developed in later years and is a necessary starting point for my research.

The essential historical facts of Matilda's life are these: she was born in 1046 to Bonifacio III, Count of Reggio, Mantua, Modena, Ferrara and Brescia and to Beatrice, daughter of Frederick II, Duke of Lorraine.¹¹ Matilda's father, Bonifacio, was a man fond of lavish displays of wealth. He had secured his place as a member of the nobility by showering German rulers with resplendent gifts and large sums of money. In Italy, Bonifacio ruled with a heavy hand and was a fearsome leader. He was effective, too, because of the ease with which he managed relations with the Germans. Maintaining cordial relations with the German Holy Roman Emperor was essential for Bonifacio because in dealing with the papacy, the emperor had to traverse Bonifacio's vast estates.

¹⁰ Some of the biographies, as mentioned in Holman, "Exemplum and Imitatio," 637, include: Benedetto Luchino's *Cronica della vera origine, et attioni della illustrissima, et famosissima Contessa Matilda* (1592), Domenico Mellini's *Dell'origine, fatti, costume, e lodi di Matelda, la gran Contessa d'Italia* (1589), Battista Panetti's "De Rebus Gestis Comitissae Matildis" (ca. 1497), Silvano Razzi's *La vita, ovvero azzioni della Contessa Matilde* (1587).

¹¹ Paolo Golinelli, *I mille volti di Matilde: Immagini di un mito nei secoli* (Milan: Federico Motta Editore S.p.A., 2003), 216.

When the emperor, Henry III, came into power in 1046, Bonifacio did what worked for him in the past and provided the king an impressive number of expensive gifts as Henry traveled through Italy. However, Henry III found Bonifacio's wealth threatening and a rivalry emerged between them. At one point, Henry III even attempted unsuccessfully to abduct Bonifacio. Their strained relationship was short lived when tragedy struck in 1052 and Matilda's father was murdered. This further divided her family from the Germans because many believed Henry was behind the killing of Bonifacio.

With Bonifacio dead, Henry III was now a serious threat to Bonifacio's heirs and land. In an attempt to protect Matilda's inheritance, Matilda's mother married her first cousin Godfrey, the Duke of Upper Lorraine.¹² To further solidify this dynastic union, at the age of eight, Matilda was betrothed to her stepfather's son, Godfrey III the Hunchback. However, she managed to resist marrying her stepbrother until age 23 when Godfrey II realized, as he was dying, that he needed to secure the inheritance of Matilda's lands for his son.¹³ The allegiances between Matilda's mother and Godfrey II and Matilda and Godfrey III were purely political from the very beginning. Each marriage was established to ensure that Bonifacio's lands remained under either German dukes or Bonifacio's heirs Italian control, thereby staying out of control of the emperor. At the time these marriages were ordained, no one would have anticipated the lengths that Matilda would take to free herself of this union.

¹² Golinelli, *I mille volti di Matilde*, 215.

¹³ Ibid.

Shortly after Matilda was married, Henry IV, the son of Henry III, ascended the throne in Germany. The animosity Henry III harbored for Matilda's family endured and was transferred to the new ruler. This certainly did not make Matilda's early years of marriage easy as Godfrey III was closely allied with Henry IV. Making matters worse, during Matilda's initial years as a wife, she was forced to live in Germany with Godfrey III. Matilda was independent and despised her husband after having been forcibly removed from her mother and her father's estates in Italy. Godfrey also had a hunchback and reports indicate she found him repellent and was extremely unhappy.¹⁴ By January 1072, Matilda had enough. She fled back to Italy after only two years of marriage. Although she was refused a divorce, she never again lived as Godfrey's wife.

To better understand Henry's opposition to Matilda and her family, it is useful to clarify the role of nobility in the 11th and 12th centuries in Europe. Dukes, counts, and other members of the nobility were explicitly privileged under the feudal system.¹⁵ Members of this class acted as independent princes and princesses, and this aristocratic privilege enabled them to oppose kings and even emperors. This is one of the main reasons why Bonifacio's power, wealth and land were threatening to Henry III and subsequently Henry IV. Like kings,

¹⁴ Michèle Spike, *Tuscan Countess: The Life and Extraordinary Times of Matilda of Canossa* (New York: The Vendome Press, 2004), 63. As a note to the nature of this source, the book, while partially a narrative, was extensively researched by the author. The translations and the vast number of primary sources consulted make it a valuable starting place for further research into Matilda's history.

¹⁵ T.N. Bisson, "Princely Nobility in an Age of Ambition (c. 1050-1150)," in *Nobles and Nobility*, ed. Anne J. Dugan (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000), 108.

members of the nobility also shared their power with their heirs. Therefore, Matilda, the only living child of Bonifacio and hailing from noble lineage on both sides, was a formidable opponent to the king while also being a potentially influential ally to the papacy.

Back at home in Italy and mostly free from her matrimonial obligations, by 1073, Matilda traveled frequently with her widowed mother to Rome. There they asserted their family's allegiance to the papacy while her mother acted as regent of Bonifacio's lands. On June 29 and 30, 1073, Matilda and her mother were present for the ceremonies of Hildebrand, the future pope, as he was first ordained as priest and then Vicar of Christ.¹⁶ Hildebrand, who took the name Gregory VII after election, was allied with Matilda's mother as they were distantly related.¹⁷ Furthermore, they both held strict Cluniac beliefs advocating that clergy should remain abstinent. The Cluniac reforms focused on the idea of restoring traditional monastic life and ridding the church of simony. Pope Gregory VII, Beatrice and other reformers also dictated that kings and nobles should not be allowed to invest bishops and abbots of their own choosing. The reformers believed that only the pope himself should make such decisions.

These reforms and the election of Pope Gregory VII would initiate the conflict of the Investiture Controversy. The Investiture Controversy was concerned with what authority should have the power to sell or appoint church offices. Usually this was for the office of bishops, and sometimes abbots. In an

¹⁶ H.E.J. Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory VII, 1073-1085* (London: Oxford Press, 1998).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

investiture, the members of the nobility or secular elites would select high-ranking church officials. As late as 1058 even the Holy Roman emperor appointed the pope in the investiture method. It was not until 1059 when a church council declared, “*In Nomine Domini*,” thereby removing the emperor’s influence and instead implementing the College of Cardinals to elect the pontiff.

The election of Hildebrand did not help the controversy. Since Gregory was not even a priest until the day before he became pope, many secular and non-secular leaders were angered by his appointment.¹⁸ Further aggravating some factions, in 1075 Gregory claimed he had the power to depose the emperor Henry.¹⁹ Gregory declared the papal power was the sole universal power and the pope alone could appoint members of the church. Henry was furious. The emperor sent Gregory a letter withdrawing his support of Gregory’s election and calling him a “false monk.”²⁰ This disagreement began a decades long struggle between reformist popes and the Holy Roman emperors.

Besides Henry’s opposition to Pope Gregory and his Benedictine, Cluniac reforms, the king also continued to strongly detest Matilda. He found Matilda to be exceedingly insubordinate and out of order in matters of land ownership (at this time, Matilda and her mother were ruling Bonifacio’s lands) and the papacy. Henry also did not support Matilda or her mother’s influence in papal matters and

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Gerd Tellenbach, *Church, State and Christian Society at the Time of the Investiture Contest*, trans. R.F. Bennett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948).

²⁰ Ernest F. Henderson, ed., and trans., *Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages*, (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific: 2004) 392.

extended sojourns to Rome. Matilda's family had a strained relationship with the emperor before, but after Gregory's election, it escalated to open hostility.

The conflict between the German emperor and the papacy reached its climax when Pope Gregory, at the Lenten synod of 1076, excommunicated Henry because he refused to back Gregory's reforms and submit to the pope as primary authority.²¹ To make matters worse for the emperor, Godfrey III, Matilda's estranged husband and an ardent supporter of Henry's campaign, was assassinated on February 26, 1076. Although Godfrey, before his death, had named his nephew as heir to Matilda's lands, the pope did nothing to ensure the land transfers were enforced despite pleading by Godfrey's nephew to intervene.²² In fact, before Godfrey's death, he even explicitly asked the pope to force Matilda to act as his wife, but Matilda was allowed to continue confirming land transfers and resolving disputes in Italy, far from her husband in Germany.²³ Henry, knowing Godfrey, his loyal supporter, was embarrassed and outraged at the actions of Matilda, considered himself even more entitled to procure his place as feudal lord of her vast patrimony.

In September 1076 the emperor and the pope's conflict reached a turning point. Pope Gregory's predicament with Henry was now volatile enough that Gregory could ask the German leaders to appoint a new king. A council of dukes

²¹ Tellenbach, *Church, State and Christian Society at the Time of the Investiture Contest*, 260-265.

²² Spike, *Tuscan Countess*, 74-76.

²³ Golinelli, *I mille volti di Matilde*, 215. According to Golinelli, the pope did intervene on behalf of Godfrey. Gregory asked Matilda to emulate the Virgin, and return to her marriage. It is my opinion this was a weak attempt by Gregory, as she didn't obey his request and he did not press the issue.

convened in late October and displeased with Henry, gave him an ultimatum. Either Henry had to find a way to reverse his excommunication or they would replace him in February of 1077.²⁴ Henry, under pressure in early 1077, had no choice but to perform a humiliating apology at the gates of Matilda's castle at Canossa, where Gregory was staying as her guest. The trip over the Alps from Germany took four full weeks because the winter was so severe that fateful year.²⁵

The exact details of how the king and pope reconciled vary. In Donizone's version, he constructs Matilda as the peacekeeper. He wrote that the abbot Hugh of Cluny, a relative of Henry, was present and when asking Matilda to speak to Gregory on Henry's behalf the abbot said, "No one can do it, if you don't do it."²⁶ To the abbot as well as Donizone, Matilda was the one who intervened graciously on behalf of the king, whom she despised, to plead with the pope she adored.²⁷ The description and illustration provided by Donizone became the most highly reproduced account of the confrontation during the following centuries. This feud and penance became legendary and even today, the term "*Gang nach Canossa*" is used in Germany to refer to an act of submission or penance.

Ultimately, the pope accepted the emperor's apologies and blessed him, thus lifting the excommunication on January 28, 1077, less than one week before the dukes were set to depose him. Although peace should have been the outcome

²⁴ Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory VII, 1073-1085*.

²⁵ Donziona, *Vita*, bk. 2, lines 79-112.

²⁶ Donziona, *Vita*, bk.2, line 93.

²⁷ Golinelli, *I mille volti di Matilde*, 215.

of this gathering, Henry did not stop in his attempts to rid the papacy of reforms and Gregory.

Unfortunately for Matilda and Gregory, Henry did not hold up to his promises to submit to the pope as supreme authority and in 1080, Gregory was forced to excommunicate Henry a second time.²⁸ After this second attempt at excommunication, however, Henry summoned a synod of bishops loyal to him and turned the tables, ultimately declaring Pope Gregory deposed. Henry then set out to have Wibert of Ravenna elected as Pope Clement III.²⁹ In an effort to defend the papacy, Matilda took up arms in a battle at Volta in October of 1080. Donizone wrote, “Only Matilda was able to resist them [Henry’s forces]. The king’s rage fell on her in terror of armed battles, sieges of fortresses, but he fought in vain: for she will never be beaten!”³⁰ Despite what Donizone wrote, ultimately, Matilda lost at the hands of the Lombard royalist supporters. The fight gave Henry the justification he needed to move against Matilda. In 1081 he accused her of treason and sentenced her to forfeit all her lands.³¹ Matilda did not obey and went on to battle against Henry whenever she could, all the while maintaining unwavering loyalty to Pope Gregory.

However, Matilda’s support of Gregory was not enough. In 1081, word reached Matilda and the pope that Henry had crossed the Alps and was on his way

²⁸ Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory VII, 1073-1085*.

²⁹ Paolo Golinelli, *Matilde e I Conossa nel cuore del medioevo* (Milan: Camunia, 1991).

³⁰ Donizone, *Vita*, bk. 2, lines 204-206.

³¹ Alfred Overmann, *La Contessa Matilde di Canossa: sue proprietà territoriali storia delle terre Matildiche dal 1115 al 1230*, trans. L. Ghirardini (Rome: Multigrafica Editrice, 1980).

to Rome. Matilda fled back to Canossa as Gregory closed the gates of the great walls surrounding the Leonine City (today called the Vatican). Henry arrived to a fortified Rome and his forces battered the city walls, isolating the city from the outside. Eventually, Henry was too powerful and manipulative. After two years of conflict, on June 3, 1083, a traitor to the papacy opened the gates to the city. Gregory feared capture and was forced to lock himself in the Castel Sant'Angelo. On March 21, 1084, the Romans, weary of what must have seemed an unceasing German opposition, betrayed Gregory and did not resist as Clement III became pope. Shortly thereafter, Pope Gregory was removed from Rome by the Normans and taken to Salerno where he died in exile, powerless and penniless on May 25, 1085.

At this point, it appeared King Henry had prevailed. On June 1, 1085, only a week after Gregory's death, Henry issued an order that denied Matilda the lands in Lorraine she claimed entitlement to as Godfrey's widow and daughter of Bonifacio.³² Matilda was in a difficult position. She was practically destitute from her ongoing defense of Rome on behalf of Gregory. The countess had even gone so far as melting the silver and gold objects her family commissioned for the church at Canossa and sending the metals as payment to Rome. Matilda knew she desperately needed an army if she wanted to try to keep any of the land she felt was hers. Donizone wrote in his typical style of hyperbole about this difficult moment in her life:

Matilda, resplendent light, ardent in her devoted heart, against the two

³² Ibid., 215-221.

adversaries of the cross of Christ, raised an army, fortified her will, solicited vassals and spent her riches righting hard battles. If I had to tell all that this woman accomplished, it would take more verses than stars in the sky; I will not speak about most of them, but you know that from little came miraculous things.³³

Despite a lack of funds or support from the new pope, Matilda continued to wage war against Henry in the years immediately following Gregory's death. Of these battles, only few remain well documented today. One of these battles was Henry's last Italian military campaign, the fight that would be the longest and most critical of Matilda's reign.

By 1090 Henry was determined to once and for all conquer Matilda's lands. He understood this would remove what little income she had left and her ability to fight against him. Donizone accounted Henry's expedition of 1090-1097 as initially successful for Henry. The king arrived in Italy in April of 1090, and he systematically pushed Matilda back, though her strongholds in north and central Italy and into the mountains. By late 1091, Henry had gained almost complete control of her territories to the north of the Po River.³⁴

In 1092, the emperor crossed the Po and laid siege at Monteveglio. This was a decisive move for Henry as in October, Matilda's army at long last defeated his forces.³⁵ Perhaps, the emperor suspected he was losing the larger battle as well, because Henry offered peace to Matilda if only she would accept Clement III as pope, effectively ending their struggles, but Matilda rejected his offer. According to Donizone, her followers were swayed by Henry's proposition, but

³³ Donizone, as quoted by Spike, *Tuscan Countess*, 161.

³⁴ Eads, "The Last Italian Expedition of Henry IV," 27-28.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

Matilda was steadfast to her cause.³⁶ Ultimately, Monteveglio was disastrous for Henry. He not only lost one of his valuable siege engines (*macchina*) but one of his own sons turned against him.³⁷

After the loss of Monteveglio in October 1092, Henry moved to Parma to establish a winter residence. From there, Henry decided to move against Matilda's most important stronghold, the castle at Canossa. The descriptions of this battle vary. Donizone began his account by cheerfully comparing Henry's attempt to take Canossa with the humiliation of Henry in the same location in 1077.

Donizone then writes that Matilda, upon hearing of the emperor's imminent approach, smartly moved with her garrison from Canossa to an outlying castle.³⁸ Strategically, she then sent a few leaders to return to Canossa, effectively surrounding Henry's troops.

Donizone then claims a miraculous event took place in favor of Matilda. A thick fog, coming from seemingly out of nowhere, settled around Canossa and Henry's army. The fog was so thick that the emperor's forces could not see where to fight or whom they were fighting. Meanwhile, Matilda's army, accustomed to such dense waves of foggiess, attacked in earnest. Next, according to Donizone, as if by divine ordination on the side of Matilda, the emperor's standard-bearer was unhorsed and Henry's royal standard was captured.³⁹ Henry, having very little choice left, retreated while being followed by Matilda's troops who regained

³⁶ Ibid., 45

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 47.

³⁹ Ibid., 48.

her lands as Henry fled. At the end of the battle, the emperor suffered extreme casualties while it is alleged Matilda suffered almost none.

The fog itself played a role beyond the battle. According to the scholar Valerie Eads, there is no reason to question that the fog could have existed, as it was a common occurrence for a fall day in the Apennines.⁴⁰ Yet, even if it was an ordinary phenomenon for Donizone and the peasants who lived in Matilda's fiefdom, it also signified to them a divine intervention. People noticed that while the fog affected everyone, it did not do so equally.⁴¹

Donizone, during Henry's attack on Canossa, was likely in St. Apollonio with the other monks and abbots, chanting prayers and psalms for their benefactress. They were seeking divine intervention on the side of Matilda and the Gregorian reformers. To the monks and to the Gregorian bishops, the success of this particular battle was divinely influenced. If it had not been for the fog and the prayers, Henry may have taken Canossa and with it Matilda's last remnants of support. According to Donizone, after the victory, Matilda's forces gained renewed confidence, believing God was truly on their side. Her forces were further empowered when Clement III, having been previously summoned north, could not travel safely back to Rome. The roads leading to St. Peter's were once again under Matilda's control. The disappearance of Clement allowed Matilda's preferred pope, Urban II to enter Rome for the first time since he was elected in

⁴⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁴¹ Ibid.

1088.⁴² In 1094 Pope Urban at last occupied St. Peter's throne in the Lateran Palace.

By 1097, when Henry finally withdrew from Italy, he had lost not only a son, Conrad, who had turned against his father, but also his wife to Matilda's cause. Donizone described Matilda's destruction of Henry's family as similar to the theological Queen Esther and her clever plot to kill Haman, the king's slanderous advisor, and his ten sons.⁴³ In this biblical story, Esther outsmarts Hamas who was insulting her fellow Jewish people.⁴⁴ Matilda was equated to the clever queen, while Henry was seen as Hamas, wishing to control the papacy. It seemed Matilda had officially secured her place in history and demonstrated to the Italian people that their faith should lie in her and Pope Gregory's reforms.

However, the struggles were not yet over for Matilda. The countess, knowing her opponent would not give up easily, had been kindling a friendship with Henry's son, Conrad. Henry, fearing Matilda's influence on Conrad, denounced his first born as heir to the German crown and instead anointed his second son, also called Henry, as the rightful heir. Events at last seemed to move in Henry IV's favor. Conrad died unexpectedly in Florence in 1101 and the dukes

⁴² Golinelli as cited in, *Donizone: Vita di Matilde di Canossa*, 146. According to Golinelli's research there is some discrepancy of exactly what transpired for Pope Clement III. I.S. Robinson, in his *Henry IV of Germany, 1056-1106*, claims that Clement did not return to Rome at any time. John Norman Davidson insists in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Popes* that Clement returned to Rome but only in the Castel Sant'Angelo as Urban II blocked further progress through the city. Lastly, Golinelli himself suggests that Clement's supporters could still be found within the Eternal City, despite Urban's rise to power.

⁴³ Donizone, *Vita*, bk. 2, lines 851-852.

⁴⁴ Leonard Greenspoon and Sidnie White Crawford, *Book of Esther in Modern Research* (London: T&T Clark International, 2003).

of Germany quickly united around Henry V. However, Henry IV's fortune was fleeting. In December 1103, Henry V deserted his father. In a quest for ultimate power and reconciliation with the Vatican, Henry V demanded that his father settle with the pope, essentially upholding Gregory's 1080 excommunication. In December in 1105, Matilda was finally vindicated. Henry IV gave up his title as king and handed over his scepter, sword, lance and crown to his son.⁴⁵ Henry IV died less than a year later on August 5, 1106 and despite ruling for fifty years, was buried in a common grave outside a cathedral.⁴⁶ Five years later, after his son Henry V obtained absolution for his father from the pope, Henry IV was reinterred at the Cathedral of Speyer.⁴⁷

Despite a few disagreements between the reformers and Henry V, ultimately Henry agreed to a pact that reconciled the kingdom and the church. The agreement detailed the pope and the emperor's respective roles and relationship to each other. Most importantly, the king promised the new pope, Paschal II, that he would obey the pope and abandon the right to invest bishops.⁴⁸ However, the exchange for Henry's loyalty to the papacy came at a price the bishops were unwilling to pay. Paschal had agreed to surrender all feudal authority over imperial lands, therefore, giving Henry the right to all the money procured from

⁴⁵ Spike, *Tuscan Countess*, 203.

⁴⁶ Francesco Maria Fiorentini, *Memorie della Gran Contessa Matilda*, 2nd ed. (Lucca: Stamperia di Vincenzo Giuntini, 1756), 163.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Luigi Tosti, *La contessa Matilde e I romani pontefici* (Firenze: Barbèra, Bianchi, e Comp., 1859), 351-352.

these properties.⁴⁹ The church would have been freed from secular influences but also powerless and poor. The bishops were indignant and would not agree to this pact. The controversy within the church encouraged Henry to call off the deal entirely, but Paschal held fast and the arrangement Henry agreed to earlier. However, after being held captive by the crown for two months because of his refusal to relinquish their pact, Paschal agreed to abandon the arrangement, and the situation returned to how it had been before the investiture controversy. Henry V retained his right to invest bishops and did not have to admit Paschal, as pope, was the ultimate power. It may seem that this would have been the decisive blow to Matilda's cause. After all her efforts, the church was no more free from the emperor than before Gregory's death, however, Matilda was not yet done fighting.

Cleverly, Matilda entertained Henry V for three days from May 6 to 8, 1111. During this time, they had a meeting to which no one was present save the two of them. One can only surmise what occurred behind closed doors, but the ultimate result was that Matilda was named "Vice Queen" of Liguria, an honorary title that allowed her to continue rulership of her patrimony.⁵⁰ By embracing Henry, Matilda secured legitimacy as Bonifacio's heir. She also knew that there were implications associated with accepting the king who disposed her enemy Henry IV. Henry V upheld the 1080 excommunication of Henry IV by Pope

⁴⁹ Tellenbach, *Church, State and Christian Society at the Time of the Investiture Contest*, 279.

⁵⁰ Donizone, *Vita*, bk. 2, lines 1254-1256. Scholars today are not sure exactly what this title signified. No documents exist showing Matilda used this title, nor are their documents indicating other rulers held this title before or after her.

Gregory, therefore admitting the pope held higher authority over the king.⁵¹ This decision by Henry V also legitimized the rule of Gregory despite his deposition. Furthermore, the truce allowed Matilda to do as she wished in the final years of her life.

Matilda took her new title and freedom seriously and understood that with the foggy battle at Canossa, most people believed God was on her reformist side. Knowing she held power over the faithful, she could implement Gregorian reforms in her own lands, hoping that the reforms would spread farther south, eventually reaching the Vatican. This plan was particularly important because, upon her death, Henry V, being her cousin and closest living relative, would inherit all of Matilda's lands. However, there was one loophole to Henry's pending scheme to obtain Matilda's lands. On May 21, 1111 he agreed to allow her to designate the Monastery of San Benedetto Polirone and all its goods and income to be given to the papacy upon her death.⁵² Therefore, Matilda spent the last four years of her life, donating and renovating this monastery to be exactly as she wanted it for her reformist purposes. Upon her death in 1115 she owned nothing for herself. Wisely, she gave it all away through artistic commissions, building of roads, churches and buildings. Gradually and year-by-year, her fortune became the property of the faithful few who would continue to fight her war against German oppression and influence.

⁵¹ Spike, *Tuscan Countess*, 233.

⁵² A. Buzzacchi and F. Migliorini, "Il Monastero di San Benedetto Polirone," in *Chiese e conventi del contado Mantovano* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1968), 13.

Matilda secretly, throughout her years of fighting Henry IV, found another way to assure that the Cluniac ideals and beliefs would be realized. Upon an invitation and a fellowship from Matilda, a scholar named Irnerius began to teach and study Roman law in Bologna.⁵³ This decision was recorded in a diary, a single entry by the Bishop Burchard of Ursberg written sometime between the years 1125 and 1137.⁵⁴ It seems odd at first why Matilda would have sent Irnerius to study law in Bologna, especially since this was a land outside of Matilda's control. However, it was a calculated decision. Matilda knew Bologna housed the only copy of *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, the Code of Civil Law.

The *Corpus Iuris Civilis* law handbook outlined the laws of ancient Rome, an area of study important to Matilda. This tome of Justinian laws recognized the right of a daughter to inherit lands from her father.⁵⁵ By ensuring that Irnerius would teach these ancient laws, Matilda set the stage for women to be property owners throughout Italy. Furthermore, Irnerius was immensely important in the future scholarly ambitions of Bologna. His students became lawyers and judges in the towns Matilda ruled and they maintained a fair standard of social justice, ensuring civil rights for men and centuries later, women. Irnerius was so important to scholarship that the University of Bologna marks their foundation as the day Irnerius first opened these ancient civil law books.⁵⁶

⁵³ Giovanni De Vergottini, *Lo Studio di Bologna: L'impero, il papato* (Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, 1996), 96.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ John Baron Moyle, ed. and trans., *The Institutes of Justinian* (Project Gutenberg: 2009), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5983/5983-h/5983-h.htm>.

⁵⁶ Spike, *Tuscan Countess*, 256.

Matilda died on July 24, 1115 at the age of sixty-nine at Rancore, Italy from complications associated with gout and old age.⁵⁷ Her body, in accordance with her wishes, was brought to San Benedetto Polirone (Po) to rest in a very elaborate tomb. Her grandfather founded this monastery in 1007 and Matilda spent most of her money, time and energy in restoring it to be a suitable resting place. Being buried there broke with the tradition in her family of being interred in the ancestral mortuary church in Canossa, but Matilda always did do things her own way.⁵⁸ Perhaps she knew that being buried in the more visited monastery of San Benedetto Po would help continue her fame and legacy in Italy.

Matilda also gave the monks at the monastery detailed instructions for commemoration rituals in her honor. These are now referred to as the *Gospels of Matilda*. Contained in the illuminated manuscript is the 1109 signature of the Abbot Albericus and the monks' agreement to perform specific rites as Matilda requested. Despite it being carefully illuminated and a tangible record of her reign and importance, this manuscript, coupled with Donizone's poem ensured Matilda's legacy would not be forgotten. It is also because of these texts that Matilda's legend and fame began to grow in Italy.

⁵⁷ Holman, "Exemplum and Imitatio," 638.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

By the end of her life, through strategically placed alliances with papal authority and her use of the visual arts and architecture, Matilda prevailed in her 39-year battle to retain control of her inheritance and her estates. As I will show in subsequent chapters, Matilda's legend would live on well past her death and in time she would be celebrated as a heroic figure in medieval Italian history.

Chapter 2

MATILDA'S INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Despite her formidable military and diplomatic prowess, depictions of Matilda of Canossa were rare in the 11th and 12th centuries even though her fame spread with her biography and the gospel she commissioned. The few that survive are primarily found as miniatures in illuminated manuscripts and would have been viewed only by elites.⁵⁹ Among the key documents that survive are Donizone's biography and *The Gospels of Matilda*, a meticulous instruction manual for her ritual remembrance, signed in 1109 by the Abbot Albericus and the other monks at San Benedetto Po. However, despite the seeming absence of surviving portraiture, Matilda's power and persona are represented in other ways. Her figure, in particular, is glimpsed in allegorical imagery and her power is known through the patrimony of her architectural and artistic commissions. As a woman who ruled a vast area from southern Tuscany to the Emilia-Romagna regions, she was in control of more territories than the Medici family would govern four hundred years later.⁶⁰ In her estates, she influenced, commissioned or financed a large number of major projects. Therefore, to understand her importance to art, I will begin by examining the contributions to culture Matilda sponsored during her lifetime as well as early images of her.

⁵⁹ Christine B. Verzar, "Picturing Matilda of Canossa: Medieval Strategies of Representation," in *Representing History, 900-1300, Art, Music, History*, ed. Robert A. Maxwell (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 75.

⁶⁰ Verzar, "Picturing Matilda of Canossa," 75.

Among the earliest representations of Matilda are those from manuscripts dating from late 11th and early 12th centuries. The most important representation, for this paper, is in her biography *Vita Mathildis* (1111-1115), by the monk Donizone. This poem was not widely copied, but editions were created in the centuries after Matilda's death and some copies still exist today that date as late as the 17th century.⁶¹ It is widely accepted by scholars who study this manuscript that Donizone was the artist who painted these images, although there is no definitive way of knowing who, in fact, produced them. The manuscript contains many illuminations, but one stands out because of its significance: It depicts Matilda as she likely wished to be known. The image is on the dedication page and it represents Matilda seated on a throne between her sword-bearer and her chaplain, Donizone himself (ms. Vat. Lat. 4922, f. 7v) (fig. 1). She is swathed in regal colors red, blue and gold, and is shown out of scale as larger than her two protectors, a typical device drawn from the iconography of Roman imperial figures.⁶² As the larger enthroned central figure, this type of depiction makes her seem both ceremonial and regal while placing her firmly in the tradition of Carolingian and Ottonian miniatures of the Holy Roman emperor.⁶³ She wears a curious conical hat, a device that persists in later depictions of her. Scholars are unsure exactly what this hat signifies, but it is also seen in representations of her father and mother, so perhaps it is a type of crown linked specifically to her ancestry. According to the scholar Christine Verzar, the hat was also worn by

⁶¹ Verzar, "Picturing Matilda of Canossa," 76.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

Langobard rulers, as depicted in the tenth-century juridical manuscript, the *Liber Legum: Leges salicae, ripuariae, langobardorum, baioariorum, Caroli Magni*.

Conceivably, by wearing the hat, Matilda asserts her right as a legitimate ruler of Lombardy.⁶⁴



Figure 1. Donizone, *Dedication Foglio*, ms. Vat. Lat. 4922, f. 7v

In her right hand, grasped between her middle finger and thumb, she holds a blooming twig, called the *ramus arboris*, which is the conventional symbol of justice and mediation.⁶⁵ In this representation, by providing Matilda with these specific attributes, she is shown as a righteous ruler, following the tradition in Lombardy and Rome, as well as an opposing power to the Holy Roman emperor. Matilda's face is impassive as she gazes at the reader, yet she commands the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

space around her. With the slight tilt of her head and her large clear eyes looking outward, she asserts her legitimacy to the throne. This carefully constructed illumination not only gives the impression based on pure scale of Matilda's power, it used a visual code that strongly resonated with the text of her biography. By having herself shown in this way, she asserted the power that King Henry worked so hard to remove. Such unambiguous imagery suggests how Matilda insisted on her own legitimacy, just as she never doubted Gregory or his reforms. This is a key example of how she used art as a means to emphasize her power.

In another illustration from the Donizone manuscript, Matilda forcibly asserts her power in matters pertaining to the papacy. This illumination depicts the fateful moments as King Henry IV begs Matilda to intercede so he may receive Pope Gregory VII's blessing. The image shows Matilda, sitting under the archway of the gate to her castle (ms. Vat. Lat. 4922, f. 49r) (fig. 2). Henry's cousin and godfather, Abbott Hugh of Cluny, sits on a cushion supported by sculptural lions⁶⁶, outside of Matilda's archway. He is dressed entirely in a red robe and holds a staff in one hand while he raises one finger of his free hand towards Matilda, indicating he is speaking to her.⁶⁷ He looks intently at Matilda but his face is unemotional. Interestingly, he is larger than all the other figures in

⁶⁶ In this thesis, I examine the lion and its relation to the papacy. However, it is important to note that the lion is also an imperial symbol and also associated with Christ. The lion can also be related to Solomon's throne in the Bible. In particular, I examine the relation of the lion as detailed by scholar Christine Verzar as it is most applicable to Matilda of Canossa.

⁶⁷ Donziona, *Vita*, bk.2, line 93. Donziona writes, "Nessun potrà farlo, se non lo fai tu" (No one can do it, if you don't do it), referring to Matilda's necessary role as mediator between Henry IV and Pope Gregory.

the image, perhaps to assert clerical power above the sovereignty of the state. Matilda sits opposite him and she extends a hand, palm upward, to the abbot, as her eyes stare towards his face. It appears she is ignoring Henry, who is crouched below her, near her feet. Matilda is again swathed in imperial colored fabrics of deep blues, reds and bright gold. The color and pattern of her garments match the clothes that Henry himself wears as he kneels before her. In Donizone's text, Henry is described as barefoot in penitence, but here he retains his regal regalia. The only hint that Henry is unhappy or uncomfortable with this encounter is given away in the small downward turn of his mouth. Matilda, in contrast to the dedication page, is not wearing her conical hat to assert her place as ruler, but a simple white veil. Instead her importance and superiority over Henry is shown by her place above him in the image. He kneels before her, his eyes trained upward towards her face, similar to the deference of the three wise men kneeling before the Virgin Mary and Jesus.⁶⁸ The significance of this representation of Matilda, in comparison to a biblical theme, would not have been lost on the reader. Matilda's own theologians often compared her to the Virgin and, Donizone referred to her as the bride of Christ (*sponsa Christi*).⁶⁹ This is an image that was copied many times in other manuscripts in the following centuries and eventually found its way to frescos in the Vatican's Sala Regia painted by Federico Zuccari in 1573. Each version maintains Matilda's place literally and symbolically over the kneeling, penitent King Henry.

⁶⁸ Verzar, "Picturing Matilda of Canossa," 78.

⁶⁹ Ibid.



Figure 2. Donizone, *Penitent King Henry*, ms. Vat. Lat. 4922, f. 49r

The purpose of this image for Matilda is twofold: First it clearly shows her superior place above the king, and even more importantly it allies her with the papal powers. In her biography, Donizone insists she graciously acted as mediator for the church and agreed to speak with both the abbot and Pope Gregory in matters of the king's excommunication.

While these depictions of Matilda helped maintain her importance after her death, a substantial aspect of her legacy was based on the commissioning of churches, hospitals and monasteries, sometimes at the rate of two per year throughout her estates. She did this as a means of ensuring her Gregorian reforms were instituted. In most cases she required the beneficiaries of her generosity to

sustain the virtues she espoused and she particularly insisted on celibacy in holy orders.⁷⁰ Matilda used her money and then her patronage of art and architecture, as a means to ensure the ideals she fought for were perpetuated. There are twenty-seven documents, signed by Matilda between 1100-1115 recording her donations of property to at least fifteen churches all across northern Italy.⁷¹ It was through benefactions such as these that Matilda implemented the reforms that were the result of the Investiture Controversy. In a way, we might say she insisted the recipients of her largess continue her fight, not just during her lifetime, but also even into posterity. I discuss several examples of this here, but it is impossible to know how many more donations were made with expectations of similar results. Many records of these gifts have been lost over the last 900 years, yet even with what evidence survives, Matilda's patronage remains impressive.

Today, it is difficult to precisely ascertain Matilda's direct role in the rebuilding of the great cathedrals in the Emilia-Romagna region. Scholars are unsure if her powerful family played a financial or ceremonial role or were more involved in direct detailed commissions, because few documents remain from this period. However, with the Modena Cathedral, Matilda's prominence and influence is clearly documented because she had a specific role. Matilda is recorded in image and text as being present when the relics of San Geminiano, the patron saint of the Modena Cathedral, were reburied there during the rebuilding of

⁷⁰ Spike, *Tuscan Countess*, 247.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 246.

the cathedral from 1099-1106.⁷² An illuminated manuscript, dated to about a century after Matilda's death, contains illustrations of Matilda with Modena's bishop, Dodone, and the architect of the cathedral, Lanfranco, showing her involvement in the cathedral's renovation.⁷³ Donizone does not mention Matilda's importance to the rebuilding of this or any other large church in the region. However, knowing that Modena's cathedral was begun in her lifetime and its consecration was dependent on the arrival of her ally, Pope Paschal II, plus the survival of numerous documents describing Matilda at the consecration ceremony, it is reasonable to argue that this church received support from the countess.

Specifically, at the Modena Cathedral it is important to examine the Italian *protiro*, or porch portals. These were sculptural entrances to cathedrals and monastery's in northern Italy, built during the first two decades of the 12th century. The time of their construction also happens to be the last years of Matilda's life and the period she wielded the most power. These portals, oftentimes unsigned, are critical because many of them contain iconography important to the countess. In particular, I will examine, *Porta dei Principi* (c. 1106), at the Cathedral of Modena, which is attributed to the school of Wiligelmo.

⁷² Christine B. Verzar, "Legacy and Memory of Matilda: The Semiotics of Power and Reform," in *Medioevo: Immagini e Ideologie: Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi*, ed. A.C. Quintavalle (Parma: 2002), 435.

⁷³ I do not analyze these images in this thesis because this chapter focuses primarily on contemporary depictions and influences of Matilda. This manuscript was dated to the 13th century and while it is relevant to mention its existence, an analysis would not add to my argument focusing on contemporary art, architecture and other works directly influenced by Matilda.

He was a sculptor working in Modena around 1099 to 1110 and was innovative because of his production of large sized carvings as well as the tendency to sign his work. This portal, likely created under his direction if not actually by his hand, is important because the church was patronized by Matilda of Canossa, and like the other portals, affirmed her support of the papacy.⁷⁴

The *protiro* at Modena Cathedral was an unprecedented portal type for this region. The *protiro* was an adaptation to architecture of an illustrated motif used to decorate and frame canon tables in medieval manuscripts.⁷⁵ Canon tables were a kind of index originally used in gospels or bibles, to indicate where a particular event was described within a manuscript. In the *protiro* the doorway and projecting porch consisted of a freestanding stone canopy, with columns resting on sculpted atlantes, griffins, or lions. The jambs in the doorway itself were usually decorated with acanthus scrolls depicting interlaced humans and animals.⁷⁶ Contained within the portal area, the sculptors fashioned scenes on the lintels, inscriptions and elaborate narrative capitals.

The projecting portal came to be a papal symbol as early as the 9th century, as this architectural canopy may have been used for the first time in front of the atrium at St. Peter's in Rome.⁷⁷ The record of this porch type exists most

⁷⁴ Christine B. Verzar, "Matilda of Canossa, Papal Rome, and the Earliest Italian Porch Portals," in *Romanico Padano, Romanico Europeo: atti del convegno internazionale di studi*, ed. A.C. Quintavalle (Parma: 1982), 144.

⁷⁵ Verzar, "Matilda of Canossa, Papal Rome, and the Earliest Italian Porch Portals," 144.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (Baltimore: Hammondsworth, 1965), 7.

probably, in the papally linked sanctuary of Cimitile, which was dated by inscription to the year 900 under tutelage of Bishop Leo III.⁷⁸ The portal type is, therefore, connected to the papacy and likely used as a place for the pope to perform his civic duties for the people of Rome. By the time these portals make their way to Emilia in the 12th century, it is likely they served as a site or an architectural frame for a bishop to perform civic and religious duties as judge and mediator. Therefore, the porches, having originated for use by the pope, would not only be associated with the papacy, but also with the idea of justice being delivered by bishops properly invested by papal authority, as Matilda insisted.

In the *Porta dei Principi protiro*, the relief above the entryway in the lintel represents the hagiography of San Geminiano, Modena Cathedral's patron saint. Two snarling lions support the twisting columns holding up the architectural canopy. The weight of the *protiro* sits firmly on their sagging backs and a visitor would need to pass their fearsome countenance to enter the church. The Door of Princes, located on the south side of the cathedral, is also crucial to understanding and continuing Matilda's legacy. It has been suggested by scholars, that this particular portal form is connected to the tumultuous political situation of the time.⁷⁹ It is clear that once the link between the porch portals and politics was

⁷⁸ Hans Belting, *Die Basilica dei SS. Martiri in Cimitile und ihr frühmittelalterlicher Freskenzyklus* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1962), 132-158.

⁷⁹ The political situation refers to the events discussed in chapter 1 regarding Henry IV, Gregory VII and the investiture controversy. Furthermore, in particular importance to this thesis, The Door of Princes was sculpted during a time when the clergy demonstrated papal allegiance. I continue to explore this concept later in this chapter.

established, the importance of these portals to Matilda's support of the papal cause cannot be overestimated.⁸⁰

It is imperative to observe that these canopy porches, with columns supported by lions or other creatures, were derived from Roman Imperial conventions and were brought northward specifically by papal supporters like Matilda. By commissioning Roman inspired architecture in the towns and cities she ruled, Matilda further asserted her allegiance to the Roman papacy as part of the Investiture Controversy. The use of these Roman Imperial architectural examples reflects the Roman papacy through maintaining and appropriating motifs traditionally used in Rome in other regions of Italy.

The lion was one of the symbols taken from Rome and used in northern Italy.⁸¹ To understand the importance of lions in this particular *protiro*, first we must consider, in a link to both antiquity and the papacy, the reclining lions that supported Marcus Aurelius' statue when the massive sculpture was placed at the Lateran. The Lateran, during the Middle Ages through the 16th century, served as both the open-air court and seat of the pope in Rome.⁸² Matilda was no stranger to Rome, having made many journeys there in her lifetime. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Matilda and her mother were even present in Rome when Hildebrand became Pope Gregory VII. Surviving documents further prove that besides short visits, she even spent months there as a guest of Pope Gregory. During these long visits,

⁸⁰ Verzar, "Matilda of Canossa, Papal Rome, and the Earliest Italian Porch Portals," 144.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Adalbert Erler, *Lupa Lex und Reiterstandbild im mittelalterlichen Rom: Eine rechengeschichtliche Studie* (Wiesbaden: F.Steiner, 1972), 52.

she was likely a guest in his court as he administered papal rulings and settled disputes, especially since Henry IV often expressed distaste that she was so involved in papal affairs. Therefore, Matilda would have been familiar with the lion motif at the Lateran and its great importance as a symbol for papal justice.

Another example of a lion is found in the Apuglia region of southern Italy where a medieval court was marked by the use of a lion sculpted on a column. This was a medieval adaptation of the use of lions in Roman antiquity and is still referred to as the “column of justice” (*colonna della justizia*).⁸³ The proliferation of the lion motif through Rome and southern Italy indicates its importance as a symbol, not just of law and justice, but also of the powers of the Holy See long before it was adapted into northern Italian religious architecture and used by Matilda to cement her connections to papal authority.

To further explain the importance of the lion, it is necessary to point out that the symbol of a lion would have been particularly significant for the citizens of Mantua during Matilda’s lifetime. Medieval lords, like Matilda’s father, Bonifacio, adjudicated disputes, held court and maintained law *inter leones*, literally between the lion statues at entrances to their palaces.⁸⁴ Matilda and her father probably would have disagreed regarding investiture practices and supreme authority, as he was known as sometimes cruel and committed to the feudal power of secular princes, while she preferred to see God and the papacy first and her own ruling power as an extension of that belief system. Matilda was working,

⁸³ Franco Schettini, *La basilica di San Nicola di Bari* (Bari: Laterza, 1967), 17.

⁸⁴ Spike, *Tuscan Countess*, 248.

above all else, to restore papal strength. This probable disagreement clarifies why she would have made the conscious transference from using the figures of lions at her own seat of power to church portals. It stands to reason, then, that nobles would have been able to understand the significance of using lions to support the columns at the *Porta dei Principi*. These lions are upholding the authority of the church above them. Their mouths are open, teeth showing in a snarl as they bear the symbolic and physical weight placed on their backs. Such symbolic representations signify that not even fierce beasts can escape the power and authority of the church. Modena Cathedral, in particular, was controlled by Papal Rome and consecrated by an important ally to Matilda's cause, Pope Paschal II. The lions at this church not only assert Matilda's allegiance and legitimacy but they also denote the importance of papal Rome as the foundation for all power, both sacred and secular.

To further emphasize the importance of the lion motif and the *protiro*, if we consider the drawing of Donizone examined earlier with Matilda being approached by a penitent King Henry, it is useful to emphasize two details. The drawing contains both a canopy portal as well as a lion throne. Hugh, the abbot of Cluny is seated on this particular seat as he attempts to address the conflict between the pope and the emperor. He is acting, in this image, as a kind of judge, asking Matilda to intercede and speak with the pope on Henry's behalf. The use of a canopy portal as well as a lion in this drawing and the cathedral of Modena is not a coincidence as they were crucially important symbols of Matilda's cause in northern Italy.

Besides using *protiros* and lions to ally herself symbolically with Rome and, therefore, the papacy, Matilda also strengthened her connections with Rome by reusing ancient sarcophagi for her family tombs. The sarcophagi were available nearby from the Roman necropolis located at the Modena Cathedral and both her mother and her father were buried in these *spolia*.⁸⁵ Matilda was very close with her mother, and when her mother died, Matilda interred her in Pisa in the ancient sarcophagus known as the *Hippolytus/Phaedra Sarcophagus*.⁸⁶ Even in the centuries after her mother's death, the sarcophagus was so prominently displayed that it inspired Nicola Pisano's figures carved into his baptistery pulpit.⁸⁷ The significance of using these particular ancient Roman burial structures can be traced back to the papal tradition in Rome where Roman sarcophagi (specifically, the ones lacking effigies) were used as sepulchral monuments, such as with Pope Damasus II (d. 1048).⁸⁸ Matilda's family considered themselves as having Roman heritage and were successors to the Romans and, therefore, the rightful rulers of the lands the German emperors wanted to conquer. These sarcophagi help exemplify that even the lands Matilda's father ruled were a part of former Roman cities. It is partially through the long history of Roman culture within her family and then with the reuse of these sarcophagi for many members of her family, that Matilda linked herself with

⁸⁵ Verzar, "Legacy and Memory of Matilda," 443

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Julian Gardner, *The Tomb and the Tiara: Curial Tomb Sculpture in Rome and Avignon in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 28-29.

ancient and contemporary Rome. As if further showing their importance, it was at great cost and effort that the family procured the sarcophagi for their family mausoleum at the castle of Canossa. The castle, which sits on top of an Apennine mountain, would have made transporting these heavy burial pieces very difficult. Donizone even mentions the effort required to haul up the mountain many of these ancient sarcophagi for the family crypt.⁸⁹ Despite the difficulties, her family felt their use to be important enough to incur both the cost and the effort of obtaining them. Matilda, to further solidify her allegiance with Rome and the papacy, buried her mother and father in ancient Roman sarcophagi, complete with Roman figures sculpted in relief on the outside. It became a permanent link between her parents and the ancient imperial order to which the popes claimed as their legitimating heritage. Matilda also chose an ancient sarcophagus, a simple structure without an effigy, for herself before her own death, as an expression of her undying loyalty to Rome and papal authority.

Before Matilda died in 1115, she declined to be buried in the ancestral mausoleum at Canossa but instead chose to rest in the church that received most of her benefaction, San Benedetto Polirone. Today, Matilda is no longer buried in San Benedetto Po but instead is one of the only five women to be buried in the Vatican and how this came to be will be the subject of Chapter 4. At San Benedetto Po, her original resting place, it is thought that what remains of her sarcophagus is now a sepulchral monument in her honor (fig. 3). However, before being taken to Rome in the 17th century, her body and ossuary were moved

⁸⁹ Verzar, “Visualizing Politics,” 258.

several times, so it is unclear if this is the original tomb. Making it harder to identify is the problem that the earliest description of her tomb is from the fourteenth century. This description notes only the tomb's extraordinarily large size as well as its white alabaster finish (alabaster was a term that was used interchangeably with marble in the fourteenth century).⁹⁰ By 1445, accounts of her tomb recorded that it was raised on eight columns out of respect for her importance, as this was an honor reserved for saints or nobility.⁹¹ What visitors see today in San Benedetto Polirone is an empty reconstruction.⁹² Yet, it is still an important monument when considering her legacy because the tomb bears its weight on the back of lions. Once again, the use of lions denotes the power of the political, religious and memorial program she advocated.

⁹⁰ Holman, "Exemplum and Imitatio," 638.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Holman, "Exemplum and Imitatio," 638. Matilda's tomb at San Benedetto Polirone is thought to date to sometime before 1503 because at that time it was used as a model for Lucrezia Pico della Mirandola's own tomb.



Figure 3. Tomb of Matilda of Canossa at San Benedetto Po, (photographer: Elaine Poggi)

Matilda's role as a major patroness in northern Italy demonstrates how, in her lifetime, she carefully and deliberately produced and controlled her own image. By examining Donizone's illuminations, the *Porta dei Principi*, the use of the *protiro* and lions, we can begin to understand how Matilda wanted to be remembered as an ally to papal Rome and supporter of all things Roman from antiquity to the present. Considering this visual legacy allows scholars to understand the art produced after her death with more clarity and permits a better understanding of the immensely important position Matilda played in the production of art throughout northern Italy within her lifetime. Immediately after

Matilda's death, perhaps the most significant work of art about her was the floor mosaic in front of her tomb in San Benedetto Po.⁹³ The mosaic was not finished until 1151, thirty-six years after her death, but it would have been commissioned and designed before her passing.

The centerpiece of the mosaic depicts four crowned and regal women each separated by their own archway and column. Their faces are similar but they are individualized in the type of crown they wear and the way in which their individual archways are adorned. Today the mosaic is faded and composed of mostly black and white tiles, with bits of reddish brown for adornment. However, imagining the gleaming tiles of 900 years ago, each one reflecting the light streaming through the church windows, it is easy to understand how this would have been an impressive and costly commission.

The women each hold a blooming twig, much like the one Matilda holds in the illustration in Donizone's *Vita*. Each woman also has an inscription above her head. They are the personifications of the four cardinal virtues, Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance.⁹⁴ Depicting these virtues was a purposeful choice on the part of Matilda, as Donizone described her in his biography as saying, "Her fame is large, as all four cardinal virtues are constantly with her."⁹⁵ Matilda knew that she would be allegorically associated with the virtues in this mosaic. The portrait is not mimetic but symbolic of the way Matilda wished to be remembered. Lastly, this mosaic is believed to mark the site of her original burial

⁹³ Verzar, "Legacy and Memory of Matilda," 443.

⁹⁴ Verzar, "Picturing Matilda of Canossa," 88.

⁹⁵ Donizone prologue, as quoted by, Verzar, "Picturing Matilda of Canossa," 88.

place, ensuring that those visitors to her tomb, would be invited to encounter her self proclaimed virtues.

Not surprisingly the mosaic also depicts lions. The beasts are growling and open-mouthed as they glare menacingly at the viewer from their place below the virtues. They seem to be marching past the front of Matilda's tomb as if guarding it. Their intimidating teeth snarl like the column support lions on the Modena Cathedral's *protiro*. These mosaic lions are black and white with highlights of red, similar to the depictions of the virtues. This final example of lions in art works patronized by Matilda finalizes the link between the motif and Matilda herself. Finding them in San Benedetto Po, the place that she chose to be buried, the church that was the beneficiary of most of her earthly wealth and that would ultimately honor her memory daily, is no coincidence. These lions strongly suggest that despite the absence of primary documents explaining exactly what Matilda's role was in the rebuilding of the churches of northern Italy, we can ascertain that she played an influential role in producing visual monuments that commemorate her beliefs and her alliances with the Roman papacy.

There are other examples of architecture and art commissioned by, paid for by or somehow influenced by Matilda, but I have chosen only the most outstanding examples to demonstrate her influence on art and architecture. Her influence was so prolific, even at the Modena Cathedral, another *porta*, the *Porta Pescheria*, was thought to be influenced by the countess. It is worth remembering that she also was patronizing Irnerius to promote and study ancient Roman law in nearby Bologna, and the chronicler Burchard of Hursperg even goes so far as to

credit Matilda with the foundation of the University of Bologna.⁹⁶ In this way she ensured her legacy by asserting her virtues and her link to Rome by way of symbolism as well with direct ties to the papacy. She assured through donations that her reforms would be upheld in influential churches throughout the region of northern Italy and she instigated and implemented the study of ancient law in Bologna leading to a renewal of interest in classical Rome. An examination of these monuments helps to understand why Matilda would be revived later during the Counter-Reformation to serve once again the interests of a beleaguered papacy.

It is evident that Matilda's use of Roman traditions for her own cause had significant consequences beyond the transference of lions and *protiros* from Rome. She brought north a revival of interest in ancient Roman law, art, and architecture in a region divided because of the Investiture Controversy. In this way, northern Italy was brought into a closer relationship with the power of the Roman Church. Matilda's importance would, once again, resonate with significant clergymen and major artists and writers such as Dante, Michelangelo, and eventually Pope Urban VII. Therefore, after demonstrating how the artwork produced during her lifetime was a powerful vehicle for the early revival of Roman culture and ideals, I now turn to a consideration of Matilda's importance in the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

⁹⁶ Golinelli, *I mille volti di Matilde*, 216.

Chapter 3

MATILDA AND THE RENAISSANCE

The use of visual imagery by Matilda of Canossa to establish her hegemony and importance in her estates across northern Italy determined how she would be viewed after her death. The period from 1300-1570 is particularly important as Matilda became even more celebrated than she was in the two centuries immediately following her death. It is because of the extensive role Matilda played in art and architecture discussed in the previous chapter that we can now see how her legend expanded during the early Renaissance. This chapter focuses on the evolution of her persona and its effect on art 200-450 years following her death. By exploring how Matilda moved from an actual historical person into a legend, the subsequent importance of her role in Italian cultural, religious and artistic movements can be analyzed. I will focus primarily on Dante Alighieri, Sandro Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, as they were among the most prominent figures in the arts who embraced her legacy. They were also very influential on Italian culture and, furthermore, they all ascribed to the ideal of the Matilda that she constructed for herself during her lifetime.⁹⁷

Dante was the first major figure to launch Matilda's legend in the 14th century and it began with his poem, *La Commedia*. Dante was born around the year 1265 into a family, who like Matilda shared close ties to the Roman

⁹⁷ See Chapter 2 for information regarding Matilda's shaping of her own legend through art and architecture.

papacy.⁹⁸ His parents were not particularly important or wealthy, but they actively participated in Florentine politics.⁹⁹ Dante's early experience in civic politics had a lasting influence on his art. One of the major political controversies that engaged his family was the struggle between the Guelfs and Ghibellines. The conflict between the Guelfs (papal supporters) and the Ghibellines (supporters of the Holy Roman emperor) in 13th-century Florence paralleled the conflict that Matilda had faced earlier. Dante and his family were Guelf supporters and Dante, although customarily considered primarily as a scholar or poet, fought in the Battle of Campaldino in 1289 on behalf of the Guelf party.¹⁰⁰

Dante was engaged in other political conflicts in Florence beyond his military service. He was admitted to the apothecaries' guild and documents, such as voter records, indicate his political affiliation with the Guelfs.¹⁰¹ It is from these documents that scholars have ascertained that Dante was well read and educated, although few specifics of his formal education are established. Today it is known Dante spent about thirty months in his twenties attending schools run by religious orders as well as learning, during this time, about philosophers from antiquity.¹⁰² He certainly studied the poetry of Latin antiquity with its emphasis on Ovid, Cicero and especially Virgil, who was also a prime inspiration for

⁹⁸ Paget Toynbee, *Dante Alighieri: His Life and Works*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1965), 36.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰¹ Edgumbe Staley, *The Guilds of Florence* (Chicago: Methuen and co., 1906), 238.

¹⁰² Charles Till Davis, *Dante's Italy and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 198-223.

Donizone, and this is reflected in Dante's poetic style and Neo-Platonist writings.¹⁰³

Dante's literary interests and political affiliations had major, lifelong consequences for the writer. His association with the Guelfs became a turning point in his life when between 1295 and 1300 the Guelf party split into two factions, the Black Guelfs and the White Guelfs.¹⁰⁴ According to contemporary sources, the animosity between the parties initially began with the social rivalry between the banker Vieri dei Cerchi of the Whites and Corso Donati, an aristocratic member of the Blacks.¹⁰⁵ Eventually politics entered the division and the White Guelfs declared they wanted more freedom from Rome and the pope, while the Black Guelfs supported the pope above all else, arguing for very little, if any, division between church and state. Dante was a partisan of the Whites because, while he didn't agree with the Ghibellines that the Holy Roman emperor should have all the power, he also didn't agree with the Black Guelf's stance on the absolute power of the pope. Shortly after the Guelf's division, with Pope Boniface VIII firmly on the side of the Blacks, the Black Guelf's leaders forcibly took power in 1301 and the Whites lost control of Florence. Around this time, Dante was expelled from the city he had lived in his entire life, never to return. The next year in 1302, the Blacks imposed a two-year exile on Dante and levied a heavy fine because of his political allegiance with the Whites. Dante did not pay

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Toynbee, *Dante Alighieri: His Life and Works*, 75-87.

¹⁰⁵ Diego Quaglioni, *De Guelphis et Gebellinis, Politica e Diritto nel Trecento Italiano: Il "De Tyranno" di Bartolo da Sassoferrato* (Florence: Olschki, 1983).

the fine and consequently the Black Guelfs expanded his exile from two years to life, under penalty of death should he ever return to Florence. Dante was just one of thousands of Florentines who had been exiled due to the civil conflicts.¹⁰⁶ His sentence may have been commuted, but Dante, during his exile, did not fade into obscurity. Angry about the defeat of his political party, the White Guelfs, and his subsequent exile, he began to move against the Black Guelfs and their supportive pope, Boniface VIII. In the early 14th century Dante worked to persuade Henry VII, the Holy Roman emperor, to destroy all the Black Guelfs once and for all. This conflict and the breakup of his political party, as well as his eventual exile from Florence, became an important concern in his writing.

This background in the politics of 14th-century Florence helps to understand why Dante would write *La Commedia* as he did between 1310 and his death in 1321. At the time of its conception, Dante was still angry at Florence and used his poem to proclaim the perils of those Florentines who supported the Black Guelfs. The poem follows Dante as he travels through the three realms of death, *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory) and *Paradiso* (Paradise). The poem starts on the night before Good Friday and lasts through Wednesday after Easter in the year 1300. Dante is guided by the poet Virgil when he is in Hell and Purgatory and then by Beatrice when he arrives in Heaven. Much is still to be learned about the poem despite it being one of the most important pieces of poetry from the era. It is believed the *Inferno* portion of the poem was disseminated between 1314 and

¹⁰⁶ Romolo Caggese, "Sull'origine della Parte Guelfa e le sue relazioni col commune," *Archivio Storico Italiano* 5, no. 32 (1903): 266.

1319, *Purgatorio* no later than 1319 and *Paradiso* after 1316¹⁰⁷ but besides these general dates, much is disputed and unknown.

Dante found inspiration for the poem while in exile. He traveled widely, and it is believed he went to Lucca, Verona, and Bologna, among other northern cities while he was writing.¹⁰⁸ Dante even went so far north as Milan in order to greet Henry VII, while trying to obtain Henry's influence in Florentine civic affairs.¹⁰⁹ The travels Dante made while in exile were very important because on these journeys, the poet must have encountered the allegorized legend of Matilda, which would later inspire a character in *The Comedy*.

It is reasonable to assume Dante would have encountered the story of Matilda of Canossa as a benefactress and ally of the papacy above tyranny on his travels through northern Italy in the early 14th century because, at that time, she was a dominant symbol of virtue and national identity.¹¹⁰ She was the most influential, powerful and legendary female ruler of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and in the centuries following her death, she became pervasive in Italian folklore and legend.¹¹¹ Matilda had been elevated to the position of a saint-like figure that always defended the authority of the papacy. Furthermore, she symbolized an embodiment of virtuous devotion to the papal cause in the face of great conflict. Contemporary commentators on Matilda during Dante's life lauded

¹⁰⁷ Toynbee, *Dante Alighieri: His Life and Works*, 198.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 89-91.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹¹⁰ Verzar, "Picturing Matilda of Canossa," 74.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

the countess as “most magnificent” and “excellent” and it is reasonable to assume that a learned scholar such as Dante would have been familiar with her.¹¹²

Dante introduced Matilda (written as Matelda in his poem) as a flower girl who leads him and Virgil from Purgatory to Paradise.¹¹³ Although there is similarity in name with the countess Matilda, there is some dispute as to whom the character Matelda was actually modeled after. Jerome Mazzaro indicates that some scholars, such as Edward Moore, believe she was nothing more than an allegory and not fashioned after any real person, while Mazzaro himself presents evidence that during the 18th century she became associated with saints named Matelda, who lived within a few hundred years of the time Dante was writing. It is impossible to know exactly what Dante was thinking when he wrote Matelda into his poem and the subject is still disputed.¹¹⁴ Yet, despite these differing theories, there is ample evidence that Dante was, indeed, using Matilda of Canossa as a model for his character.

One of the primary reasons Matelda is likely a symbolic reference to Matilda is because Dante equates the character of Matelda to the biblical Leah. Leah, with her sister Rachel, symbolized the *vita attiva* and *vita contemplativa*,

¹¹² As quoted by, Jerome Mazzaro, “The Vernal Paradox: Dante’s Matelda,” *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 110 (1992): 115, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40166454>.

¹¹³ Verzar, “Picturing Matilda of Canossa,” 74.

¹¹⁴ According to Mazzaro from “The Vernal Paradox: Dante’s Matelda” on page 108, Matelda has been associated with Saint Matilda (c. 895-968) who was the wife of Henry the Fowler and the mother of Saint Bruno and Emperor Otto; Machtildis of Hackeborn (d. 1298); St. Mechtildis of Magdeburg (1207-1282) who was a poet. Presumably, the proximity of dates of birth and death, first names and link to emperors or Catholicism is what led to these assumptions.

the two sides of a pious life. In *The Comedy*, Dante sees, as in a dream, the beautiful biblical figure of Leah gathering flowers to make a garland. As she collects flowers, she tells Dante how her sister Rachel is unable to stop observing herself in a mirror, always absorbed in an inward reflection. Dante writes:

Giovane e bella in sogno mi pareva, Donna vedere andar per una landa,
Cogliendo fiori; e cantando dicea: Sappia qualunque'l mio nome dimanda,
Ch'io mi son Lia, e vo movendo'ntorno Le belle mani a farmi una
ghirlanda. Per piacermi allo specchio, qui m'addorno; Ma mia suora
Rachel mai non si smaga Dal suo miraglio, e siede tutto giorno. Ell'è de'
suo'begli occhi veder vaga, Com'io dell'addornarmi con le mani; lei lo
vedere, e e l'ovrare appaga. (*Purgatorio*, Canto XXVII, 97-108)¹¹⁵

(Young and beautiful in dreams I thought, I saw a lady walking in a meadow, collecting flowers; and singing she said: "Know who may demand my name, that I am Leah, and I go moving round, my beautiful hands to make myself a garland. To please myself in the mirror I adorn myself, but my sister Rachel never leaves, her reflection, and sits all day long. To see her own beautiful eyes she is as eager, as I am to adorn myself with my hands; her seeing, and me, doing satisfies us).¹¹⁶

The two women are distinct in the poem, as well as in the Bible, in that one is doing and the other is seeing. They are symbolic of the active and contemplative life, respectively.¹¹⁷ Dante's Matelda leads, like Leah, a *vita attiva* or an active religious life and in the poem, Dante's dream vision becomes a reality when he encounters Matelda performing the same behaviors as Leah. Dante wrote:

...e là m'apparve, si com elli appare, Subitamente cosa che disvia, Per

¹¹⁵ Dante Alighieri, *La divina commedia di Dante Alighieri*, ed. D. Lodovico (Parma: Giambatista Bodoni, 1796), 166.

¹¹⁶ My translation, errors are my own.

¹¹⁷ Max C. Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera': Some Observations on Botticelli and Dante," *Artibus et Historiae* 24, no. 48 (2003): 206, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1483739>.

maraviglia tutto altro pensare, Una donna soletta che si gia, E cantanto e scegliendo fior da fiore, Ond'era pinta tutta la sua via (*Purgatorio*, XXVIII, 37-42).¹¹⁸

(...and there appeared to me there, as appears of a sudden a thing that for wonder drives away every other thought, a lady all alone, who went singing and culling flower from flower, which all her path was painted).¹¹⁹

It can be said Dante clearly chose Matelda to be a personification for the *vita attiva* when he compared her to Leah, and therefore, it stands to reason that he must not have used one of the sainted Matilda figures as his inspiration. This is further exemplified by the commentary written by humanist and scholar Cristoforo Landino. He lectured on Dante for twenty years before disseminating a magisterial commentary in 1481. The commentary was received with great approval, especially in Florence where all of the artists I discuss later in the chapter also worked.¹²⁰ Landino not only identifies the Earthly Paradise with the *vita attiva* but he also argues that Matelda is the spirit of the Earthly Paradise and, therefore, the true incarnation of the *vita attiva*.¹²¹ He writes:

Per questa donna intende la vita activa et chiamala Mathelda...Adunque...In questo principio del paradise delle delitie, nel quale costituisce la vita activa, finge trovare Mathelda, la quale in quella congiunse le virtù civile con la vera religion christiana. Pone che sia sola non perché la via activa sia in solitudine, ma per dimostrare, che anchora in queste è disbisogno assidua meditatione...¹²²

(By this lady he means the vita active and he calls her Matelda...Thus... at the beginning of the paradise of delights, in which he situates the vita active, he has us find Matelda, in whom are conjoined civic virtue and the true Christian religion. He says she is alone not because the vita active is

¹¹⁸ Dante, as quoted by Marmor, "From Purgatory to the "Primavera,"" 204.

¹¹⁹ Dante, as translated by Marmor, "From Purgatory to the "Primavera,"" 204.

¹²⁰ Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 204.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹²² As quoted by Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 206.

solitary, but to show that in this, too, there is need of assiduous meditation).¹²³

The concept of the active life was frequently associated with Matilda of Canossa partially because of Pope Gregory VII. Gregory was a firm believer in the *vita attiva*, opposed to *vita contemplativa* as the best method of supporting the church for the aristocracy. On February 16, 1076 he even wrote to Matilda explicitly asking her to serve as an agent of his papal policy in the manner of *vita attiva*, instead of entering the nunnery (as she had threatened) where she would have lived a *vita contemplativa*.¹²⁴ Gregory felt so strongly about the *vita attiva* for nobles, he even went so far as to write a rebuke to the Abbot Hugh of Cluny in 1079 for accepting Duke Hugh I of Burgundy as a monk. Gregory wrote, “those who seem to fear and to love God flee from Christ’s war, disregard the safety of their brothers and, loving only themselves, seek peace....”¹²⁵ Gregory had a different vision for nobles. He invited them to act as “vassals of St. Peter,” in a military practice outside of monasticism, as the term vassal itself suggests, and in that way they could expiate their sins.¹²⁶ According to scholar Paolo Golinelli, the association of *vita attiva* as a choice for the character Matilda provides evidence that Matilda was likely modeled after the countess. Based on the evidence amassed regarding Pope Gregory’s ideals as well as Landino’s commentary, I

¹²³ As translated in Marmor, “From Purgatory to the ‘Primavera,’” 206.

¹²⁴ Spike, *Tuscan Countess*, 75.

¹²⁵ Pope Gregory VII as quoted by, Patrick Healy, “Merito Nominetur Virago; Matilda of Tuscany in the Polemics of the Investiture Contest,” in *Studies on Medieval and Early Modern Women 4. Victims or Viragos?*, eds. Catherine Lawless and Christine Meek (Portland: Four Courts Press, 2005), 50-51.

¹²⁶ Healy, “Merito Nominetur Virago,” 51.

think the concept of Matelda as a representation of an “active life” is very well established.

Furthermore, if Dante were familiar with Donizone’s description of Matilda, liking her to Martha “for her actions,” he would have seen additional reason to use Matilda as the basis of Matelda and the “active life.”¹²⁷ This is further supported by the idea that Martha was the New Testament equivalent to Leah.¹²⁸ Scholars such as Christine Verzar highlight the importance of Matilda’s qualities defined by Donizone as, chastity, piety, generosity and wisdom.¹²⁹ She described how these virtues combined in later centuries to demonstrate the concepts of the *vita attiva*.¹³⁰ It is also important to point out that during Dante’s time Matilda was described as a woman of “perfection of the active life” by scholars that also studied Dante and because of her extreme virtuosity, she could “teach and show the purged souls how to cross over the waters, through the church.”¹³¹ Pope Gregory also writes that the *vita attiva* was a way to reach heaven and Dante’s character Matelda is literally leading Dante to heaven. Dante would have likely known these commentators on Matilda who lauded her praises and virtuosity. They included influential people such as Pietro di Dante, Benvenuto da Imola and Jacopo della Lana. These scholars were certainly familiar with Dante because Benvenuto da Imola went on to lecture on Dante in Bologna and Florence after the poet’s death. Jacopo della Lana wrote a

¹²⁷ Mazzaro, “The Vernal Paradox: Dante’s Matelda,” 115.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 111.

¹²⁹ Verzar, “Legacy and Memory of Matilda,” 442.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Mazzaro, “The Vernal Paradox: Dante’s Matelda,” 115.

commentary of *The Comedy in volgare*, the Italian vernacular, that was widely read and studied. Lastly, it is too much a coincidence to recall that Dante chose Matelda to literally lead him into paradise, much as the real Matilda was believed to do the same for “purged souls” crossing into the sanctuary of the church.

To further emphasize how important Matilda of Canossa had become by the 14th century and how likely it would have been that Dante was familiar with her legend, I turn to a consideration of the feast day of St. Matilda. According to scholar Jerome Mazzaro, people may have assumed Matilda the countess was actually a saint despite the fact that Matilda of Canossa was never sainted. Furthermore, Mazzaro states this idea was so common that many were under the impression that on St. Matilda day on March 14th, that they believed they were actually celebrating the great countess.¹³² Dante likely knew of this belief, since while exiled he lived in locations that were familiar with and absorbed in the legends of Matilda. This observation serves as an example of the importance of Matilda to the masses and argues that Dante must have been more than casually aware of her reputation. While this is not definitive evidence that Dante knew of this common misconception, it does help exemplify how prolific Matilda’s legend had become in areas Dante visited.

Much as Matilda influenced the art and architecture of her estates in northern Italy during her lifetime, by being represented as a figure in Dante’s *La Commedia*, she influenced a later set of allegorical depictions. It is largely because of Dante’s use of Matilda that her legend would swell even more in the

¹³² Mazzaro, “The Vernal Paradox: Dante’s Matelda,” 118.

14th and 15th centuries. Her growing importance for the Renaissance began with Dante, and as the fame of the poet's work spread, the legend of Matilda of Canossa also expanded. This was particularly true in Florence where artists such as Leonardo, Botticelli and Michelangelo admired Dante's verses.

Dante, despite being exiled from Florence during his life, increased in popularity after his death. To highlight their new support of the poet, in 1396 the first request was made by Florence to obtain his remains from Ravenna.¹³³ Florence had proposed to provide a monument in his honor inside of the cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiore, but they were refused. This movement in favor of Dante started with continued political strife in Florence during the 14th century.¹³⁴ The Guelfs and Ghibellines lost significant power in Italy because of their continued battles and strife imposed upon the people. Pope Benedict XII, tired of the constant feuds, announced excommunication to any person caught using either name and, therefore, quelled much of the unrest between the parties. Then, in the 15th century a new power arose - the Medici family. Once a strong interest in art and literature began to flourish in the city under the patronage of the Medici's, Dante's poem received considerable recognition as a masterpiece of poetic literature. This is further exemplified by Lorenzo de' Medici who made the third effort to obtain Dante's remains in 1476 but was also denied.¹³⁵

The Florentines were obviously interested in Dante, but to examine Matilda's influence on Florentine culture because of Dante, the place to begin is

¹³³ Toynbee, *Dante Alighieri: His Life and Works*, 112.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

with Sandro Botticelli. Today, it is widely acknowledged that Botticelli was fascinated with Dante and had a lifelong engagement with the poet, as a reader, artist and exegete of *La Commedia*.¹³⁶ He was so interested in Dante that Giorgio Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists* described Botticelli as wasting too much of his time reading and illustrating Dante's work.¹³⁷ Vasari wrote, "per essere persona sofisticata commentò una parte di Dante, e figurò lo inferno e lo mise in stampa, dietro al quale consumò dimolto tempo: per il che non lavorando, fu cagione di infiniti disordini alla vita sua."¹³⁸ This is generally translated as: "being a man of inquiring mind, he made a commentary on part of Dante, illustrated the *Inferno* and printed it; on which he wasted much of his time, bringing infinite disorder to his life by neglecting his work."¹³⁹ The art historian Kenneth Clark also commented that for twenty years Botticelli was obsessed with scrutinizing Dante.¹⁴⁰ Botticelli's two-decade obsession probably began in the 1470's and resulted in an extensive set of illustrated drawings on the poem, some of which still survive today in Berlin and the Vatican.¹⁴¹ The drawings are likely based on the commentary on Dante written by Landino.¹⁴²

Matelda's appearance in Botticelli's drawings began when Botticelli, "painted and worked with stories [on] a Dante on vellum, for Lorenzo di

¹³⁶ Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 200.

¹³⁷ Giorgio Vasari as quoted by, Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 200.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Kenneth Clark, as quoted by, Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 201.

¹⁴¹ Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 201.

¹⁴² Ibid.

Pierfrancesco de' Medici, which was held to be a marvelous thing (sic),” according to the contemporary source, Anonimo Magliabechiano.¹⁴³ These drawings are thought to be the set of 92 drawings now split between museums in Berlin (85 of the drawings) and the Vatican Library (seven drawings).¹⁴⁴ According to Max Marmor, these drawings have many similarities to the painting *Primavera*.¹⁴⁵ The *Primavera* was probably commissioned for a Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, a cousin of the better known, Lorenzo il Magnifico. Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici appears to have shared Botticelli's intense and enduring interest in Dante.¹⁴⁶ The exact date and the reasons for commissioning the painting are less important than knowing that both the probable patron as well as the painter himself were well versed in the *Commedia*. I will argue, like scholars such as M. Marmor and P. Barolsky, that the painting could actually depict the moment when Dante encounters Matelda in the Earthly Paradise.

The painting features a personification of wind or Zephyr on the far right as he struggles with a woman spewing flowers from her mouth.¹⁴⁷ It appears she is turning into Flora before the viewer's eyes and, indeed, the figure slightly overlapped by the struggling woman is Flora herself.¹⁴⁸ In the middle is a woman, sometimes identified as Venus, calm in nature, gently haloed by the trees and

¹⁴³ Anonimo Magliabechiano as quoted by Marmor, “From Purgatory to the ‘Primavera,’” 201.

¹⁴⁴ Marmor, “From Purgatory to the ‘Primavera,’” 201.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁴⁶ Marmor, “From Purgatory to the ‘Primavera,’” 203.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

plants that surround her.¹⁴⁹ To her right are three dancing women, clad in gossamer fabric and symbolizing the three graces or possibly charity, hope and faith, three theological virtues according to Landino.¹⁵⁰ To the left is a man stirring the clouds in the heaven and he is normally thought to be Mercury.¹⁵¹ Above all the figures flies a small, blindfolded cupid with a burning arrow that he prepares to shoot into the three dancing women.¹⁵² Comparing this image to the description of Matelda's encounter with Dante in his poem, there are suggestive similarities despite the fact that Matelda enters Dante's poem alone as this can be seen as a culmination of events encountered in the Earthly Paradise.

Dante's description of Matelda in a sylvan paradise translates easily into the terrestrial landscape of his painting because of the abundant and detailed foliage. Scholar, Levi d'Ancona suggests there are more than forty different kinds of flowers throughout *Primavera*, which would further link the painting to the terrestrial paradise in Dante's poem. In Dante's text, Matelda gathers flowers in a place that Matelda describes as, "qui primavera sempre" (here it is always spring).¹⁵³ Therefore, to place Matelda in a location profusely blooming, would fit well if Botticelli was alluding to this passage in *The Comedy*. Also, Landino in his commentary explicitly identifies the Earthly Paradise with the *vita attiva*.¹⁵⁴ Since Matelda, and Matilda, were identified with the active life, there is another link

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 207.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 203.

¹⁵³ Alighieri, *La divina commedia*, Canto xxviii, line 143. My translation.

¹⁵⁴ Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 205.

between the painting and Matilda. Furthermore, the woman Flora who holds flowers and the woman who is spewing flowers from her mouth are similar to the description of Matelda culling flowers in an Earthly Paradise. Even Mercury swirling the heavens can be found in the passage with Matelda. Mercury himself is not mentioned explicitly in the final cantos, but there is a metaphor used by Matelda in Canto xxviii that reminds a reader of Mercury's actions in the *Primavera*.¹⁵⁵ Matelda, in explaining the nature of the Earthly Paradise, offers to “dispel the cloud” (*disnebbiar vosto intelletto, Purg. xxviii, 81*) from Dante and Virgil as they make their way to heaven.¹⁵⁶ She then says, “I will clear away the mist that offends you” (*purgherò la nebbia che ti fiede, Purg. xxviii, 81*).¹⁵⁷ Other scholars such as Yves Batard,¹⁵⁸ who have seen Botticelli's surviving illustrations of *The Commedia*, frequently note the similarity in style and imagery between *Primavera* and the drawings. It is very suggestive that aspects of Dante's encounter with Matelda can be seen in visual metaphors in Botticelli's painting.¹⁵⁹

Lastly, to return to the Landino commentary, he suggests the entire composition of the scene, with its reference to mythology can be found directly in

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 206.

¹⁵⁶ Dante, as quoted and translated by, Marmor, “From Purgatory to the ‘Primavera,’” 207.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Yves Batard suggested that the figure of Flora herself could be inspired by Dante, as quoted by, Marmor, “From Purgatory to the ‘Primavera,’” 203.

¹⁵⁹ For extensive information linking the *Primavera* to the Earthly Paradise, see the essays by Paul Barolsky, “Botticelli's *Primavera* and the Tradition of Dante,” “Botticelli's *Primavera* as an Allegory of Its Own Creation,” and “The Ethereal *Voluptas* of Botticelli's *Primavera*.”

Dante in Cantos xxvii-xxviii of *Purgatorio*.¹⁶⁰ Venus, for example, is referenced three times in these cantos with Matelda.¹⁶¹ Also, Dante alluded to Proserpina, who was taken by Pluto as she collected flowers.¹⁶² This myth could be represented on the far right of the painting, where a woman is carried away by a blue winged creature as flowers spew from her mouth. Dante even discusses three maidens dancing in these particular Cantos whom Landino suggests are the virtues of faith, charity and hope.¹⁶³ The scene painted by Botticelli can, therefore, be very closely linked to the poem as if Dante had been illustrating a particular set of Cantos.¹⁶⁴

The importance of Matilda and her place in Dante's *Commedia* was further exemplified by Leonardo da Vinci. He was a close friend of the Medici family in Florence and would have likely been familiar with Botticelli and his obsession with Dante's poem. Leonardo's interest in Dante has not been thoroughly considered by scholars, but surviving documents and drawings suggest that, like Botticelli, Leonardo began his study of *The Comedy* during the 1470's.¹⁶⁵ Leonardo may have even seen Botticelli working on the preparatory drawings for the *Commedia*. It is likely that Leonardo could have studied

¹⁶⁰ Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 207.

¹⁶¹ Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Complete, The Vision of Paradise, Purgatory and Hell, Purgatory*, trans. Rev. H.F. Cary (Project Gutenberg, 2005), canto xxvii-xxviii, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/8800/8800-h/8800-h.htm>.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 207.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 208.

Botticelli's *Commedia* drawings from the 1490's.¹⁶⁶ Leonardo may have seen them through either Botticelli or possibly through Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, whom Leonardo was in contact with between 1500-1503.¹⁶⁷ If Leonardo did likely encounter Botticelli through Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, he surely saw *La Primavera* and would have understood it to be a painting of Matelda and the Earthly Paradise.

It is considered that Leonardo's interest in Botticelli's drawings and Matelda culminated with Leonardo's *Pointing Lady* drawing.¹⁶⁸ Marmor states that the drawing was traditionally described as being a female masquerader, but suggests, based on research by P. Meller and an endorsement by Kenneth Clark, it could be, in fact, an allegorical illustration of Matelda in Dante's Earthly Paradise. Besides the likely fact that Leonardo and Botticelli would have been privileged to see each other's work, it was suggested by Marmor that Leonardo made this image to assert his artistic prowess over Botticelli's and prove that he was a better illustrator of *The Comedy*.¹⁶⁹ In appearance, the drawing is very similar to Botticelli's drawings, but Leonardo's is more naturalistically rendered and the landscape is very complex. The woman in his depiction wears flowing robes, and there appears to be a light breeze that presses them seductively against her body, outlining her feminine form and lifting her hair off her neck. She smiles sweetly and looks out at the viewer, while she points to a far off place, not yet

¹⁶⁶ Peter Meller, "Leonardo da Vinci's Drawings to the *Divine Comedy*," *Acta Historiae Artium* 2 (1955): 140.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 207.

¹⁶⁹ Meller, "Leonardo da Vinci's Drawings to the *Divine Comedy*," 140.

committed onto the paper. Faint outlines of trees and sylvan wilderness surround her, but the details of her figure stand out in sharp contrast with the hazy background, yet it is clear she is surrounded by nature much like Botticelli's women are in *Primavera*. The idea these two men had shared a friendly competition arises from the similarity in the depictions as well as commentary by Leonardo. Specifically, Leonardo wrote in some of his manuscripts about Botticelli's lack of ability to paint landscapes. Therefore, it would make sense that this was Leonardo's attempt to surpass Botticelli's Dantesque landscape in the *Primavera*.¹⁷⁰ It could be said that Leonardo's involvement with Matilda has more to do with his perpetual rivalry, but the outcome of his interest is the same.

Another major artist who took an interest in both Dante and Matilda of Canossa was Michelangelo. Michelangelo was a Tuscan and spent much of his apprenticeship with the Medici family and he would also have been familiar with Leonardo and Botticelli's works and perhaps encountered their competitive drawings. Furthermore, Michelangelo was reported to have illustrated in pen a copy of the Landino Dante.¹⁷¹ It is believed Michelangelo would have been well versed in Dante, like his contemporaries, especially if he was reading and illustrating a copy of the Landino commentary.¹⁷²

Michelangelo also was a rival with Leonardo, as both were prominent painters in Florence during the same period. A popular and well known story

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 208.

¹⁷² Alessandro Parronchi, "Come gli Artisti Leggevano Dante," *Studi Danteschi* 43 (1965): 131-134.

about Leonardo and Michelangelo suggests that both artists were very well learned in *The Comedy* and their rivalry may have extended beyond painting to who knew more about the epic poem.¹⁷³ Leonardo, according to Anonimo Magliabechiano who relates the story, was asked to help clarify a particularly difficult section of the poem for a group of men. However, when Michelangelo showed up a few minutes later, Leonardo defers to Michelangelo's immense knowledge of the poem (what is assumed to be sarcastically) and declines to help with the interpretation.¹⁷⁴

Knowing that Michelangelo had an interest in Dante, as well as a rivalry with Leonardo, and that Michelangelo, too, would have illustrated scenes from *The Comedy*, Michelangelo probably drew (now lost) drawings of Matelda when he made the pen illustrations for the Landino Dante. Meller claims that Michelangelo's Landino illustrations were owned by the sculptor Antonio Montauti, who died in 1740, but were lost in a shipwreck that happened off the coast of Italy.¹⁷⁵

As I described earlier, by the 14th century the legend of Matilda had become well established for contemporary readers of the *Commedia*. It is likely they already assumed, that Matelda was Matilda, the Tuscan countess. It seems plausible based on the historical evidence that Michelangelo, as well as Leonardo and Botticelli, would have known of this popular association. Perhaps this is why,

¹⁷³ Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 208.

¹⁷⁴ Parronchi, "Come gli Artisti Leggevano Dante," 129.

¹⁷⁵ Marmor, "From Purgatory to the 'Primavera,'" 212.

despite documents indicating Matilda of Canossa had no surviving heirs, Michelangelo went so far as to claim himself to be an actual heir of Matilda.

The best evidence of Michelangelo's interest in Matilda appears in his biography by Ascanio Condivi. In 1553, Michelangelo, frustrated with the treatment of his biography in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Painters*, decided to dictate his own biography to Condivi. He was a pupil of Michelangelo and someone he trusted to write down only what Michelangelo deemed appropriate and important. In the very first sentence of *Life of Michelangelo*, Condivi writes, under his master's careful direction:

Michelangelo Buonarroti, the unique painter and sculptor, was descended from the counts of Canossa, a family from the region of Reggio which was noble and illustrious as much for its own merits and antiquity as for its connections with imperial blood. For Beatrice, the sister of Henry II, was given in marriage to Count Bonifazio of Canossa, then lord of Mantua, whose issue was the Countess Matilda, a woman of rare and singular prudence and devoutness. After the death of her husband Gottfredo, her holdings in Italy, besides Mantua, included Lucca, Parma, and Reggio and that part of Tuscany which nowadays is called the Patrimony of St. Peter. And having done many memorable deeds during her lifetime, when she died she was buried outside of Mantua in the Badia of S. Benedetto which she had built and liberally endowed.¹⁷⁶

Besides describing how important it would have been to Michelangelo to be considered part of Matilda's family, the beginning of his biography also highlights the perception of her by the mid-16th century. It appears Michelangelo was trying to assert his greatness as a link to the illustrious countess and thereby staking a superior claim over the other artists of the Renaissance.

¹⁷⁶ Ascanio Condivi, *Life of Michelangelo*, trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl, ed. Hellmut Wohl (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 4.

I argue that through the poetry of Dante and his use of Matilda, her legend gained a renewed currency in the Renaissance. His poem allowed Botticelli, Michelangelo and Leonardo, arguably the best known artists of the Italian Renaissance, to illustrate and study Matilda. One of these important historical figures, Michelangelo, goes so far as to explicitly extoll her. The use and association of Matilda by these important men ensured that her legacy was not extinguished. In fact, the opposite seems to have happened, as Matilda's influence following the Renaissance expanded further during the next hundred years. I intend to show how the broadening of her legend ultimately led to her being interred in the Vatican in a tomb designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the most important sculptor of the 17th century.

Chapter 4

MATILDA IN BAROQUE ROME

The biography in which Michelangelo claimed to be descended from Matilda was written while he was in Rome, under patronage of the papacy. This claim would not have gone unnoticed, as the artist was renowned and his work was in demand until his death on February 16, 1574. Despite Michelangelo's outward successes, such as being the chief architect of Saint Peter's Basilica, having two biographies published about him and maintaining relations with the eight different popes that ruled during his time there, his final years were not without conflict and complication.¹⁷⁷ Michelangelo's late work was decisively influenced by the Counter-Reformation.¹⁷⁸ This reformation would lead to monumental changes within the Catholic Church and its need for art. The Reformation movement would also bring changes for Matilda as her continued use as a legendary and exemplary woman through the Middle Ages and Renaissance reached its peak in Baroque, counter reformed, Rome.

The Counter-Reformation was a response to the Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther and John Calvin that began in 1517 when Luther vehemently opposed doctrinal practices in the Catholic Church. The reformist Luther was appalled by the morals, the selling of indulgences and other questionable practices of the church. A list of complaints against the Roman church continued to grow until it included disputes over taxation, upset over papal

¹⁷⁷ Ascanio Condivi, *Life of Michelangelo*.

¹⁷⁸ Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press: 1985).

favoritism and other even imaginary abuses.¹⁷⁹ With these injustices, Luther rapidly gained support against Roman Catholicism in Germany, and soon the Netherlands, Scotland, parts of France and Scandinavia followed.¹⁸⁰ In particular, the Protestants questioned their obedience to Rome under, what they considered, unfair circumstances and practices, and this led to their break from the Roman Catholic Church. It was because of this rupture that the Roman papacy had no choice but to address the conflict.¹⁸¹

The causes of the Protestant Reformation were complex. In part, it emerged from years of social and religious unrest.¹⁸² The movement was foreshadowed by the Peasants' War in Hungary (1514), lower class uprisings in Germany in 1524, and other revolts in Spain, Flemish Communes and France were part of the larger historical context that culminated with Martin Luther's and other protestant leaders' demands for Reformation.¹⁸³ The emergence of national identities and secular states further undermined the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Complicating affairs were conflicts and controversy within the papacy itself and the continuous refusal of German princes to accede to papal authority, a disagreement that Matilda knew first hand. Many events, including

¹⁷⁹ A.G. Dickens, *The Counter Reformation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 9-10.

¹⁸⁰ Thomas M. Lindsay, *A History of the Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1959).

¹⁸¹ A. Hyatt Mayor, "The Art of the Counter Reformation," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, New Series* 4, no. 4 (1945): 102.

¹⁸² H. Daniel-Rops, *The Protestant Reformation*, trans. Audrey Butler (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1961).

¹⁸³ James MacCaffrey, *History of the Catholic Church: From the Renaissance to the French Revolution* (Dublin: St. Patrick's College, 1914), 32.

the German clergy's complaints about injustices such as high taxes in 1479 and the complaints launched against the Holy Roman emperor Maximilian I in 1510, all led to rebellions that culminated with the Protestant Reformation.¹⁸⁴ In this larger political and cultural context, the figure of Matilda would once again reemerge as a potent symbol reinforcing papal authority.

As the Protestants demands for reform grew stronger, the Holy See was forced to announce a council to be held in the Holy Roman city of Trent in northern Italy. The Council of Trent was intended to redefine church doctrine, correct morals and restore the peace among the faithful. The council met in 1545 and took 18 years to finish its work.¹⁸⁵ In 1563 the council met for the last time and announced plans for reforming the Catholic Church. Importantly for art, a decree was issued supporting religious art as a means for instructing and inciting piety among the masses. Art that was deemed frivolous or overly enticing to the senses was condemned. Specifically regarding images and art the council decreed,

...and the sacred use of images, every superstition shall be removed, all filthy lucre be abolished...all lasciviousness be avoided...figures shall not be painted or adorned with a beauty exciting to lust; nothing seen that is disorderly, or that is unbecomingly or confusedly arranged, nothing that is profane, nothing indecorous...¹⁸⁶

It was as a result of these pressures on the church by the Protestants and the doctrinal changes mandated by the Council of Trent that the Baroque style first emerged in Rome. Art was now to focus on bringing the faithful back to the

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 32-33.

¹⁸⁵ Mayor, "The Art of the Counter Reformation," 102.

¹⁸⁶ J. Waterworth., ed. and trans., *The Council of Trent: The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent* (London: Dolman, 1848), 235-236.

Catholic Church and was to be purposeful, meaningful and elicit devotion from those who saw it. No artist was exempted from these reforms. Even Michelangelo was affected by these decrees and some of his later work was attacked as inappropriate. In particular the nude, muscular bodies depicted in his *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican were considered immodest and some figures were painted over. It was during this unstable climate in Rome that Matilda's legend came forcefully into play once again.

As shown in earlier chapters, Matilda of Canossa had gained fame as a supporter of church reform. Although the reforms she advocated were somewhat different than those decreed by the Council of Trent almost 500 years later, her importance as a reformist fighting on the side of the Catholic Church took on a renewed currency in the late 16th century. Michelangelo's celebrity and his claims to be descended from her stimulated renewed interest in her persona. The veneration of Matilda in earlier periods as a proponent of the papacy and as an embodiment of religious devotion fit well in the reformist agendas of the Counter-Reformation Roman papacy. The struggle that Matilda had waged on behalf of the Roman Church made her legend a perfect exemplar for religious and political renewal. For the Holy See, Matilda's legend as a fierce supporter of the Roman papacy could be re-appropriated to support the claims of a newly reformed Catholic Church.

The earliest use of Matilda in the Counter-Reformation church can be found in the commission by Pope Paul III for the adornment of the Sala Regia at the Vatican (fig. 4). The room was intended as a reception room for ambassadors

seeking audiences with the pope. The room was also intended to emphasize the pope's lofty role as Vicar of Christ. The paintings in the hall included images of historical figures deemed important to the church during this tumultuous period.¹⁸⁷ Many artists, including Daniele da Volterra and Perin del Vaga, decorated the room, which was architecturally designed by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger.¹⁸⁸ A succession of eight popes from Paul III to Sixtus V meant that the work progressed somewhat slowly from 1565 to 1573.¹⁸⁹ Ultimately Federico Zuccari, after the death of his brother Taddeo on September 1, 1566, completed the fresco in 1573 that represented an episode from Matilda's life.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Paola Guerrini in Golinelli, *I mille volti di Matilde*, 82.

¹⁸⁸ Bernice Davidson, "The Decorations of the Sala Regia under Pope Paul III," *The Art Bulletin* 58, no. 3 (1976): 395. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3049532>.

¹⁸⁹ Guerrini in, Golinelli, *I Mille Volti di Matilde*, 83.

¹⁹⁰ John A. Gere, *Taddeo Zuccaro: His Development Studied in his Drawings* (London: Faber, 1969) 102-106.



Figure 4. Federico Zuccari, *The Reconciliation of a Penitent Henry IV with Pope Gregory VII and Matilda at Canossa*

Zuccari represented Matilda in the memorable scene described by Donizone that depicts the penitent King Henry IV kneeling before Pope Gregory VII. Matilda is standing to the left of the pope, dressed in elaborate Venetian fashion, which was popular at the time. She has one gloved hand while the other ringed hand is bare and lifted towards her white neck. Her eyes are intently fixed on the viewer while the pope turns his eyes on Henry. Henry is lightly dressed in only a robe as he leans forward and kisses the pope's foot. The abbot, Hugh of Cluny, is also present, and he looks down at Henry's humiliation while reading the papal absolution. The painting is titled *The Reconciliation of a Penitent Henry IV with Pope Gregory VII and Matilda at Canossa*. This is the pivotal moment

when Gregory allows Henry back into the church and lifts his excommunication at the behest of Matilda. The Latin inscription below the painting reads, “Gregorius VII Henricum IV Imp. male de ecclesia merentem postea supplicem et poenitentem absolvit.” Translated it describes the scene as, “Gregory VII absolves the penitent and suppliant Emperor Henry IV after he had done wrong by the church.”¹⁹¹

The episode is located on the back wall of the Sala Regia to the right of the entrance into the Pauline Chapel. Zuccari took advantage of the small cramped space and used it strategically to depict a carefully composed scene. The message of this image was meant to be threefold for the spectators. First, it asserts the supremacy of the pope over kings and emperors; secondly it displays the victory of the church over secular leaders who challenge the church’s dominance; and finally it emphasizes the legitimacy of the possession of lands by the pope (in this instance, thanks to Matilda’s numerous donations). The entire composition holds a special relevance in light of the Protestant break with the Roman Church much as Henry had defied the pope’s reforms earlier.

Two further considerations can be deduced from this painting. Since the painter was under orders to represent a scene that would be iconographically recognizable and understood by viewers, the legend of Matilda was evidently still very much alive in the late 16th century. Second, the choice of depicting this episode from the life of Matilda shows how her legend could be revived to serve renewed papal interests. She was a long established ally of the church who had

¹⁹¹ This is my interpretative translation; any error is my own.

helped it overcome earlier adversaries. In the tense political climate of Rome, the meaning of the painting with Matilda clearly emphasized, was significant. Matilda had been a staunch proponent of the authority of the church, who fought for it when other German princes, such as Henry IV, sought to defy papal power. Perhaps not too surprisingly, awareness that she was interested in reforming the church was conveniently overlooked. The Matilda of the late 16th century was constructed as a woman only interested in preserving the authority of the Holy Roman papacy.

This painting helps to understand the best known and arguably most important artwork commissioned in the Vatican featuring Matilda: the funerary tomb by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Before considering this major commission, it is useful to examine the context leading to its completion. In August 1623, Bernini's great patron Maffeo Barberini was elected as Pope Urban VIII.¹⁹² This was a decisive moment in Bernini's life because at the time of the election, Bernini was nearly twenty-five years old with fifteen years of experience. Bernini was at this point in his career an emerging artist, eager to take on what would be termed today as an opportunity of having a papal patron.¹⁹³ The sculptor would work incessantly for Barberini to glorify the Roman Catholic Church and bring a Counter-Reformation perspective to artwork commissioned by the pope.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² John Pope-Hennessy, *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture: Introduction to Italian Sculpture* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), 3:519.

¹⁹³ Charles Avery, *Bernini: Genius of the Baroque* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1997), 73.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Pope Urban, born in April 1568 as Maffeo Barberini, was a well educated cleric. He hailed from noble Florentine lineage, and as a result, had the funds necessary to obtain extensive schooling. He graduated from Pisa University with a doctorate in law degree in 1592 and then worked and taught in various scholarly and noble circles throughout Europe before being named cardinal-priest by Pope Paul V in 1606.¹⁹⁵ Barberini's rise to power climaxed on August 6, 1623 when he received enough votes in the conclave to become the next pope.¹⁹⁶

Pope Urban was fond of the classics, which was an appreciation he likely fostered during his humanistic education under the Jesuits in the Collegio Romano.¹⁹⁷ The poet pope composed poems and verses that were redolent with classical style.¹⁹⁸ He also was a patron of the arts, having shown an interest in Bernini for several years before his papal reign. How the pope became interested in Matilda is unclear, but he certainly was familiar with her depiction in the Sala Regia by Zuccari painted 50 years earlier. Urban also may have encountered Michelangelo's biography by Condivi, and having a great interest in Michelangelo, sought to learn more about the countess. Pope Urban did not hide his feelings that he wanted Bernini to be the new Michelangelo in Rome and was

¹⁹⁵ Leopold Ranke, *The History of the Popes, Their Church and State and Especially of Their Conflicts with Protestantism in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans., E. Foster (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), 2:263-271.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Peter Rietbergen, *Power and Religion in Baroque Rome: Barberini Cultural Policies*, (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 98.

¹⁹⁸ Salvatore Settis, ed., *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican* (Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini Editore Spa, 2000), 10: 706.

willing to commission the necessary sculptural work to ensure that to happen.¹⁹⁹

As it turned out, one of his early commissions to Bernini was to be a memorial in St. Peter's for Matilda.

Urban's interest in Matilda led him to move her remains to St. Peter's.²⁰⁰ It is likely he saw Matilda as a way to re-emphasize the need for increasing possession of land for the Papal States. Urban would have recalled how the church's lands grew considerably with Matilda's donations of extensive sections of Italy. In the political climate of the 17th century, the control of lands was a right the popes fought for vehemently.²⁰¹ The acquisition and ownership of vast quantities of land was one of the greatest power plays the reformed Roman Church undertook under Urban's leadership.²⁰² It was crucial for the papacy to control territories because land was wealth and supremacy. Indeed, in the year he first commissioned Bernini to sculpt Matilda (1633), Urban expressed a desire for a new Holy War against the infidel Turks.²⁰³ To further exemplify Urban's interest in papal lands, he commissioned the restoration and aggrandizement to the *Galleria delle Carte Geografiche*, a room in the Vatican with floor to ceiling frescoed maps of the world emphasizing papal territories.²⁰⁴

The pope's obsession with Matilda was so strong that early in 1633 he paid six thousand ducats (a substantial sum of money) to the abbot of the

¹⁹⁹ Avery, *Bernini: Genius of the Baroque*, 74.

²⁰⁰ Settis, *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican*, 706.

²⁰¹ Rietbergen, *Power and Religion in Baroque Rome*, 106-107.

²⁰² Land was acquired in various ways including, donations, won through battles and though forcible acquisitions.

²⁰³ Rietbergen, *Power and Religion in Baroque Rome*, 106-107.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

monastery of San Benedetto Polirone to covertly and secretly obtain her remains.²⁰⁵ She had been buried there for 500 years, and while the abbot agreed to give her up, the citizens of Mantua, despite being under religious authority of the papacy, were outraged once they discovered what had happened. The duke of Mantua sent a group of messengers to Rome to request her return, but when the embassy met with Cardinal Guido Bentivoglio, he told them, “recovery would be impossible, as the pope is too attached to the memory of that most serene princess, having made verses and compositions in her honor.”²⁰⁶

In one of these poems, from Urban’s book, *Poesie Toscane del Card. Maffeo Barberino Hoggi Papa Urbano Ottavo* disseminated in 1635, he wrote of Matilda in the poem titled, “In Praise of the Countess Matilda.” Urban describes her honor in great detail, as not burning up like frankincense and myrrh, but instead, in the manner of a parched phoenix rising, her renowned fame repeating through history. The pope also described how she went from being buried in the dark oblivion to standing live in a grand work in marble, which is surely a reference to her new tomb.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Michèle Spike in her book, *Tuscan Countess*, suggests that Matilda’s body was taken at night, while the monks of San Benedetto Po slept. She also claims that Matilda’s skeleton was intact with some hair still remaining on her skull. In her estimation, the remains were taken in subterfuge to Rome. Based on the Bentivoglio commentary on the reaction to her reburial, I agree with Mrs. Spike’s account of the events.

²⁰⁶ Rosolino Bellodi, *Il monastero di San Benedetto in Polirone nella storia e nell'arte* (Mantova: Eredi Segna, 1905), 136.

²⁰⁷ Maffeo Barberini, *Poesie Toscane del Card. Maffeo Barberini, Hoggi Papa Urbano Ottavo* (Rome: Printing Office of the Apostolic Chamber, 1635), 96. “Non con incense, e mirra, come nel rogo fuo d’arsa Fenice, Fama antica

Despite these declarations in favor of re-entombing Matilda's body, Bentivoglio agreed to address the matter with Pope Urban. Ultimately to the Mantuans disappointment, Bentivoglio reported that the pope was "resolute in his determination to honor the memory of the countess, as an example to other princes of the protection they may afford to the Apostolic See."²⁰⁸ This comment from Bentivoglio exemplifies clearly the pope's intent to reuse Matilda's legend.

The decision by Pope Urban to keep and venerate Matilda's remains marked the beginning of the construction of the first monument in the new Saint Peter's to a person who was neither a saint nor pope.²⁰⁹ As suggested by Bentivoglio's comment, Urban thought the tomb would honor Matilda and allow the beleaguered Counter-Reformation church to appropriate her as a symbol of resistance to forces seeking to diminish the powers of the Vatican. Her land transfers and her military defense of the papacy provided an example that Urban hoped others would emulate, especially during this period of religious war and strife. By constructing a warrior-like tomb for Matilda inside St. Peter's, Urban dramatically reaffirmed her usefulness to the church. It is clear that Matilda was intended to be used as an instrument of papal interests. Her reuse for papal power was further augmented in the biography published by Fiorentini in 1642, as well

ridice...In cupo oblio sepolte erge, e rauuiua, L'opere e gregie...." Translation my own.

²⁰⁸ Barberini, *Poesie Toscane del Card. Maffeo Barberini*, 96.

²⁰⁹ Settis, *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican*, 707.

as the comments of Bentivoglio stating Urban's desire to use her "as an example" of how princes may protect, and, therefore, work for, the Holy See.²¹⁰



Figure 5: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Tomb of Matilda of Canossa*

²¹⁰ Bellodi, *Il Monastero di San Benedetto in Polirone*, 136.

Matilda's tomb is located in Saint Peter's Basilica on the southern wall of the dimly lit north aisle flanking the passage between the Chapel of Saint Sebastian and the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament (fig. 5). It is comprised of multiple parts and is complex in its construction as Bernini's autobiographical account from 1644 details, "a great deal of time was spent setting up the said tomb, because there are many things centered and up in the air, as can be seen."²¹¹

The sarcophagus, the lowest part of the monument, depicts on the front, the submission of Henry IV to Pope Gregory VII at Canossa (fig. 6). Since Matilda's actual sarcophagus was lost sometime in the centuries following her death (her remains however, were not lost), it is unknown if Bernini modeled the new sarcophagus after the original or started with a new design. The sculpted relief shows the pope seated in the center while many attendees look on at the events unfolding before them. The posture of Henry is similar to the pose Zuccari depicted in his frescos. The excommunicated emperor has one bare arm outstretched touching the throne of Gregory as he bows his head to kiss the pope's foot. The pope's arm is raised to absolve the excommunication ordered on the king. Matilda looks on from Gregory's left, her arm extended as if leading the viewer's eyes directly to the middle of the scene. The work was carved as high and bas-relief to give it depth and dimension. The surface is not entirely smooth but left with small, etched lines that catch the light and shadows giving the relief greater depth and conveying the sense that something is left unfinished within the scene. Some suggestions have been made that this portion of the tomb was left

²¹¹ Pollak as cited by, Settis, *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican*, 707-708.

undone, but Bernini’s autobiographical statement on the tomb suggests otherwise. Bernini wrote that he, “retouched with his own hand all the said works of sculpture and in particular the bas-relief.”²¹² If his account is to be believed, then the etched surface of the figures on the sarcophagus was purposefully constructed to give the illusion of a still unfinished encounter between sacred and secular authority.

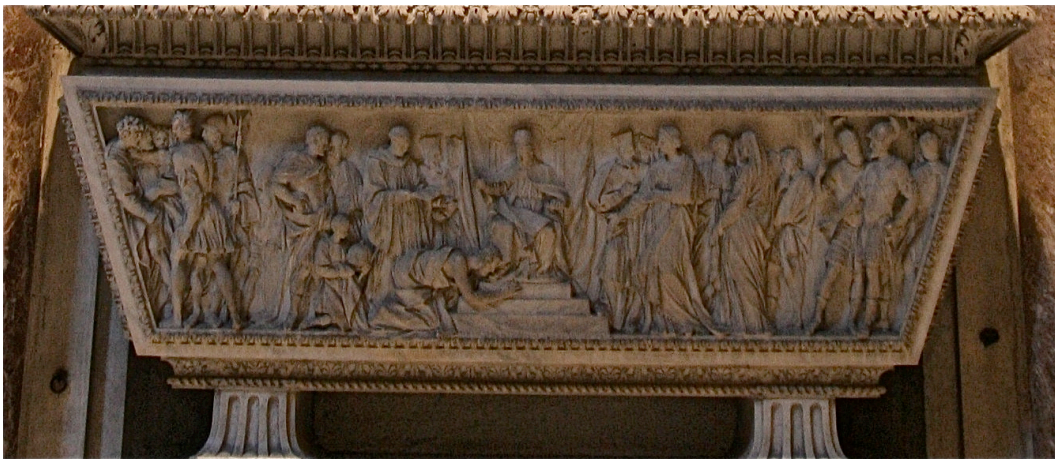


Figure 6. Bernini, *Tomb of Matilda of Canossa*, sarcophagus, detail

Directly above the sarcophagus two angelic putti flank a dedicatory cartouche. The putto on the left gazes at the viewer while the one on the right kneels and thoughtfully stares up at the standing Matilda towering above them.

Between the angels the oval inscription in Latin reads:

URBANUS VIII PONT. MAX. COMITISSÆ MATHILDI VIRILIS
ANIMI FÆMINÆ SEDIS APOSTOLICÆ PROPUGNATRICE
PIETATE INSIGNI LIBERALITATE CELEBERRIMÆ HUC EX
MANTUANO SANCTI BENEDICTI CÆNOBIO TRASLATIS
OSSIBUS GRATUS ÆTERNÆ LAUDIS PROMERITUM MON. POS.
AN. MDCXXXV.²¹³

²¹² Inscription as quoted by, Settis, *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican*, 706.

²¹³ Ibid.

Urban VIII, pontifex maximus, having translated the bones here from the Mantuan monastery of St. Benedict, set up in 1635 this well deserved monument of eternal glory to the Countess Matilda, a woman with a man's soul, a champion of the Apostolic See, eminent in piety, most famous for her liberality.²¹⁴

In the niche above the inscription looms the imposing figure of Matilda herself. The depiction of her standing above her own tomb is in a style often seen on tombs of *condottieri*, or military soldiers or leaders contracted by Italian city-states and the papacy.²¹⁵ Tombs with this precedent can be found in Florence, Venice and Naples so it is likely her military history dictated this unusual positioning.²¹⁶ Matilda stands facing forward but her head is turned to the left towards the Chapel of the Sacrament and the Confession. On her head she wears a diadem, asserting her significance as a princess of the papacy. Her face is subtly masculine, and without the contours of her breasts she might at first glance be mistaken for a man. Bernini may have sculpted her this way because, in her lifetime and after, she was described as possessing characteristics of a man. Donizone first used masculine adjectives to describe the countess, writing that she was “virile” and therefore superior to most women.²¹⁷ Two hundred years after her death, sometime in the 14th century, Benvenuto Rambaldi, who was also a commentator on Dante, lauded Matilda for her “male virtues.”²¹⁸ In the next century, “Platina” (Bartolomeo Sacchi, 1421-1481) an important Italian humanist

²¹⁴ Settis, *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican*, 706.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 707.

²¹⁶ John Beldon Scott, *Images of Nepotism: The Painted Ceilings of Palazzo Barberini* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 122.

²¹⁷ Donizone as quoted by Holman, “Exemplum and Imitatio,” 637.

²¹⁸ Benvenuto Rambaldi as quoted by Holman, “Exemplum and Imitatio,” 637.

wrote in the 1460's that Matilda and her mother Beatrice "overcame the inconstancy of the female sex" by building many monasteries and churches.²¹⁹

Matilda holds in her right hand a military commander's baton (made of wood and painted white to match the marble). Tucked under her left arm, the countess holds a papal key and the papal tiara. Matilda was given these important symbols to represent her as a strong ally with the Vatican. Depicted as a warrior, she proudly and deliberately guards the most iconographic and important symbols of the papacy. To further her image as a military leader, Matilda wears flowing robes and a breastplate as if she is preparing for battle. She is positioned in a *contrapposto* stance, with the toes of her feet partially visible under her billowing drapery. Bernini likely spent an extensive amount of time on this portion of the monument, as he wrote, "regards the statue of Matilda one could say that he [Bernini] did almost all of it, because there is not a part of it which he did not go over and finish."²²⁰

Surrounding Matilda on the five panels in the embrasure of her niche are reliefs of military trophies.²²¹ Each individual and differing trophy was sculpted to completely surround her standing figure adding further emphasis to her military prowess and the representation of her as a noble warrior. Above this niche are two more angelic putti holding a coat of arms. The coat of arms depicts a pomegranate, as well as the motto, "TUETUR ET UNIT" (protects and unites).²²²

²¹⁹ Platina as quoted by Holman, "Exemplum and Imitatio," 637.

²²⁰ As cited by, Settis, *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican*, 706.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Settis, *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican*, 706.

Besides holding her heraldic badge, the angel on the left is lifting a metal crown as if to place it atop the badge itself. In all, there are three crowns in the image, one representing the papacy, one diadem likely representing her noble lineage and the metal crown up top presenting her role as a daughter of St. Peter and princess of the papacy.

It is also important to consider the construction of this sculpture to fully understand the monument. Bernini wrote of his commission, “drawings, models and marbles which Bernino has made with his own hand for the tomb of Matilda: first, he made the design for the whole work, not only in little, but also in big, with the plans, profiles, sections and everything necessary to make the work out of marble.”²²³ By examining documents published by Pollak in 1931, the tomb’s early development can be ascertained with some certainty.²²⁴ The first exchange of money from the papacy to Bernini and his workshop was made in December 1633 in the amount of 2,000 scudi to begin work on the tomb. In April the following year, marble work began as well as preparations to the wall where the tomb would be placed. Luigi Bernini, the brother of Gian Lorenzo, sculpted the angel below Matilda on the right and, Andrea Bolgi, a member of Bernini’s workshop, sculpted the second angel below Matilda on the left as well as the inscription plaque.²²⁵ Other artists, including Lorenzo Flori, Matteo Bonarelli and Stefano Speranza sculpted the additional adornments surrounding Matilda.

²²³ Pollak as cited by Settis *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican*, 707.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Valentino Martinelli, *Scultura Italiana: dal Manerismo al Rococò* (Milano: Electa, 1966), 143-144.

Bernini himself was working on the statue of the Countess, which he began in 1634. He finished his work on Matilda three years later. On March 20 1637, Pope Urban VIII inaugurated the funerary monument even though final finishing continued until 1644.²²⁶

Some early biographers of Bernini emphasized the use of assistants for the monumental work, leading to the incorrect assumption that Bernini had little to do with carving the figure. However, Bernini claimed:

He made with his own hand all the models for the carving, of the trophies as well as the plaque, the cartouche for the inscription and all the carving for the sarcophagus; 3rd, he made with his own hand all the models for the sculpture, this is to say, the statue of Matilda, the bas-relief and the four angels, two holding the inscription and two the plaque²²⁷

His claims are substantiated by the existence of six bronze models, one of them still in the possession of the Barberini family, as well as drawings indicating his intense involvement in the design and construction of the tomb.²²⁸ The drawings depict a sarcophagus more ornate than the one finally constructed. The cartoon sarcophagus included an elaborate frontispiece with a voluted pediment supported by female personifications of Justice and Faith.²²⁹ The bronze *bozzetto* of Matilda was probably presented to Urban and contains markings indicating it was likely

²²⁶ Oskar Pollak, *Die Kunsttätigkeit unter Urban VIII*, vol. II (Vienna: P. Filser, 1931), 204-215.

²²⁷ Pollak as cited by Settis, *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican*, 707-708.

²²⁸ Michael P. Mezzatesta, *The Art of Gianlorenzo Bernini: Selected Sculpture* (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1982), 2-4.

²²⁹ Avery, *Bernini: Genius of the Baroque*, 76.

constructed using clay and wooden tools.²³⁰ This model is a miniature of the statue that was eventually completed.

While the extensive preparations that went into the fashioning of Matilda's tomb are impressive, closer attention must be directed at the reasoning behind the design of the tomb as well as considering Pope Urban's use of Matilda in Rome. Sometime during his reign, Pope Urban became increasingly interested in Matilda's legend. As noted previously, he even composed poems lauding the countess and wrote one to commemorate the arrival of her body to Rome. He wrote, "Thus I crown thy tresses, and sound the / Trumpet, from which reverberates in the Vatican / Eternal praise to thy generous hand."²³¹ The pope's repeated public veneration of Matilda surely spurred the biography written about Matilda in 1642 by Francesco Maria Fiorentini. The book, *Memorie di Matilde la Gran Contessa*, was dedicated to the duchess of Massa and Carrara, Ricciarda Cibo Malaspina Gonzaga, with an additional dedication to Pope Urban VIII.²³² The text lauds Matilda and describes the events that took place during her life and how they benefitted the Catholic Church. The publication of this book, of which copies were still being produced well into the 18th century, further demonstrates how useful Matilda was to the church so many years after her death. Among the specific interests served by this publication were praising Matilda as an example of proper behavior for nobles, a warning against considering kings and emperors

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ As quoted by, Settis, *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican*, 707.

²³² Francesco Maria Fiorentini, *Memorie della Gran Contessa Matilda*, 2nd ed. (Lucca: Stamperia di Vincenzo Giuntini, 1756).

above the law of the pope, and a call to defend the papacy in any way necessary against Protestants or infidels.

For the papacy, the part of Matilda's life that resonated the most was her unflagging support of Pope Gregory. This aspect of her legend became the focal point of her story under the pontificate of Urban. This can best be seen when considering the inscriptions on her tomb that emphasizes the "eternal glory to the Countess Matilda, a woman with a man's soul, a champion of the Apostolic See, eminent in piety, most famous for her liberality."²³³ It is clear this monument was meant to serve as an example to nobility and a call for them to uphold the authority of the church. Furthermore it was a reminder against erastianism, the idea that the state is superior to the church and the source of Matilda's earliest battles,²³⁴ as the bas-relief carving of the penitent King Henry exemplifies.

Urban was particularly interested in Matilda's financial connections to the papacy. He references her "generous hand" in his poem, which alludes to her donation of lands to the Catholic Church. His comparison of her to other military leaders celebrates her actual defense of the papacy. Matilda's statue alone is an example of this, as she is represented iconographically as a condottiero and surrounded by attributes normally assigned to captain-generals of the church.²³⁵ It is further interesting to consider that the window embrasures in the façade of Palazzo Barberini depict military trophies similar to the ones sculpted into

²³³ Settis, *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican*, 706.

²³⁴ See chapter 1 for detailed information on Matilda's battles against Henry IV and erastianism.

²³⁵ Settis, *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican*, 707.

Matilda's niche at St. Peter's.²³⁶ The owner of Palazzo Barberini was a captain-general of the church. Therefore, it is not surprising that the papal tiara held under Matilda's left arm shows the bees of the Barberini coat of arms. The use of his coat of arms as well as the combined military iconography highlight Urban's desire to use Matilda as a call to arms for defense of church authority.²³⁷

Other commissions Pope Urban requested while Bernini was finishing Matilda's tomb further illustrate the depth of Pope Urban's political and religious propagandizing of the countess. He hired Giovan Francesco Romanelli to fresco the episodes of Matilda's life²³⁸ in the Vatican and he even considered commissioning a statue of Matilda to serve as an allegorical representation of the defense of the papacy for the Salone of Palazzo Barberini.²³⁹ The combined effect Matilda's tomb inscriptions, Pope Urban's poetry to the countess and what he hoped would be her high visibility in the Vatican demonstrate how Urban understood the benefits of using Matilda's legend for the papal cause. Scholar Rudolf Wittkower described that the glamour of the new papal court was also

²³⁶ Beldon Scott, *Images of Nepotism*, 122.

²³⁷ Settis, *The Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican*, 707.

²³⁸ This was an extensive commission. I do not discuss the details of it in this thesis as the complexity and the inclusion of many preparatory drawings are interesting, they did not occupy a public space in the Vatican. The area painted was a private hallway that served as a way for Urban to walk from the Gregorian and Sistine apartments to the older section of the Vatican without having the need to pass through the loggia (Golinelli, *I mille volti di Matilde*, 97). I feel the images I have chosen best demonstrate how Matilda's legend was reused in the new reformed church, while the images from this private hallway are better served to understand Urban VIII intense fascination with Matilda and therefore can be mentioned circumstantially.

²³⁹ Beldon Scott, *Images of Nepotism*, 124-125.

ving for power from the monarchs,²⁴⁰ which when considered historically, is similar to the struggles between the pope and emperor in Matilda's time during the 11th and early 12th centuries. This observation further exemplifies how apt the use of Matilda was for the papacy.

In this chapter, I have examined how Matilda's figure was useful to the reformed Catholic Church and how the importance of her legend became fully evident in the production of her tomb in the Vatican. This culminating event demonstrates that Matilda continued to be an important source of artistic inspiration and that her legend was repeatedly revived through art and literature. Of particular importance when considering Bernini's sculpture, is how esteemed her persona became and how valuable she was for papal interests. Just as the great arms of the colonnades in Saint Peter's Square were designed to welcome people back to the embrace of the Catholic Church, Matilda was a powerful symbol of respect for papal authority. Her legend cannot be fully understood without considering the monumental importance of her Baroque tomb and her seemingly unending utility for the Roman Catholic Church.

²⁴⁰ Rudolf Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600-1750* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 138.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

The history of Matilda and her importance as a figure subject to repeated reinvention does not end with her tomb by Bernini. In fact, in the same century as her reburial, Matilda's image was changing yet again. The notion, perhaps carried over from the 14th century, persisted that Matilda was a saint and the perception of her as woman warrior gave way to calls for her beatification, although she was never actually canonized, but hagiographies were published that appeared to suggest the contrary. These all date from the 17th century and include the *Catalogus generalis Sanctorum* by Filippo Ferrari, the *Natale Sanctorum Belgii* by Molanus, the *Martirologio Gallicano* by Andrea Saussay and lastly the *Emerologio Sacro di Roma* by the abbot, Carlo Bartolomeo Piazza.²⁴¹

Matilda's image shifted again in the 19th century with further veneration. Instead of being described as a saint, Matilda became romanticized and poeticized, as exemplified by Tommaseo's *Matilde di Canossa* (1836), which functioned mostly as an ode to her earthly honor. Frivolous tributes such as Tommaseo's were retired, when in the first half of the 19th century the Jesuit, Antonio Bresciani Borsa, reinvented Matilda as a symbol of Italian nationalism in the period leading up to the Italian Risorgimento. Further inciting interest in Matilda, on May 31, 1877, ruins were found of the temple of Sant' Apollonio in Canossa, the place where her biographer Donizone was once a monk. According to Paolo Golinelli, a leading Matilda scholar from Verona, it was also during this

²⁴¹ Golinelli, *I mille volti di Matilde*, 217.

time in the 19th century that a renewed interest in Dante was spreading through Europe. Golinelli noted that in the same period, the British Pre-Raphaelite painters observed that their role model, Sandro Botticelli, had found inspiration in Matilda's history for his illustrations on the *Comedy* and also that he painted Matilda as Flora in the *Primavera*.²⁴² Thus, Matilda's importance to art was reborn yet again.

While these events were occurring, mostly in favor of the great countess, there was a growing animosity towards her from the Germans. Just as in her lifetime, Matilda continued to be a source of inspiration against German oppression. Amédée Renée wrote *La grande italienne (Mathilde de Toscane)* in 1859 as an example of the French struggle against the Germans. He used Matilda's history to exemplify this stance and ignite passion for Napoleonic and Italian causes for freedom.²⁴³ Then in 1872, Otto von Bismarck, the German chancellor, during a parliamentary session uttered the now infamous words, "Gang nach Canossa!" ("We will not go to Canossa!"). These words were forcibly announced during a dispute over investiture of cardinals between the German Reich and the papacy.²⁴⁴ In this case, the chancellor apparently was referring not only to Matilda but that he had no desire for history to repeat itself, especially if it ended with German acquiescence at the hand of the pope.

As the 19th century drew to a close, Matilda lost none of her importance. In particular, the 20th century brought two translations of Donizone's epic

²⁴² Golinelli, *I mille volti di Matilde*, 218.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

biographical poem that were published within only a few years of each other. Then, political and gender equality movements taking place during this time meant Matilda's legend changed yet again, this time to represent the idealized persona of a liberated woman. As such, two biographies were written about her by British women in the early 20th century; Nora Duff's *Matilda of Tuscany: La Gran Donna d'Italia* (1909) and Mary Huddy's *Matilda: Countess of Tuscany* (1910).²⁴⁵ In Italy, the idea of Matilda as an enlightened woman persisted as suggested when a woman's magazine, first published in Milan in 1911, was named, *Matelda*. This may have been inspired by the cult-like movement that was taking shape at the same time in Reggio Emilia where young girls called themselves "Matildine" (small or little Matildas) and self consciously acted in the manner of the countess.²⁴⁶

The early 20th century also marked the publication of the play *Henry IV* by Luigi Pirandello (1922) in which Matilda played a starring role as a marchioness. In the play the protagonist thinks he is King and Emperor Henry IV after suffering a head trauma. Matilda's character bolsters the madman's delusions as she is meant to incite a connection to Matilda of Canossa within his mind. This play led to great success for Pirandello in Paris and Italy and further served to perpetuate Matilda's story in Europe.

These impressions forged in the 20th century persisted into the 21st century and have been no less remarkable for its interest in Matilda. Two doctoral

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

dissertations were published in 2000 on her military campaigns, one by Valerie Eads, “Mighty in War: The Role of Matilda of Tuscany in the War Between Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV” and the other by David John Hay, “The Campaigns of Countess Matilda of Canossa (1046-1115): An Analysis of the History and Social Significance of a Woman’s Military Leadership.” In recent years there have also been numerous exhibits featuring the illustrious countess throughout Mantua (2006 and 2009), Reggio Emilia (2009) and at San Benedetto Po (2008). The 21st century also witnessed the scholarly work of Paolo Golinelli, a leading Matilda scholar. He is known worldwide and is responsible for much of the recent consideration and exhibitions related to Matilda. Outside of Italy, attention was drawn to Matilda again in 2004 when lawyer turned author, Michèle Spike’s English language book on Matilda, *Tuscan Countess: The Life and Extraordinary Times of Matilda of Canossa* was published. Another scholar responsible for important recent research on Matilda is Christine Verzar, professor emerita from Ohio State University who has studied Matilda for over 30 years and produced significant new discoveries about her.

These examples indicate that Matilda is still considered worthy of attention and research today. Although almost 1,000 years have passed since she died, her shifting importance, myth, legend and influence make her a significant figure in European history, largely because of the texts and images analyzed in this thesis. These historic documents and past scholarly attention to her persona has led to numerous insights and understanding into art, culture and religious history throughout Italy and elsewhere in Europe. Given the fact that Matilda of

Canossa has been an enduring figure in art and literature for over a millennium, there seems little doubt that she will remain a woman whose heroic accomplishments will continue to inspire and interest artists and scholars for many years to come.

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APPENDIX A
IMAGE PERMISSIONS

Figure 1: Donizone, *Dedication foglio, Vita Mathildis*, 1111-1115, Vatican (ms. Vat. Lat. 4922, f. 7v). Public Domain Image.

Figure 2: Donizone, *Penitent King Henry, Vita Mathildis, 1111-1115*, Vatican (ms. Vat. Lat. 4922, f. 49r). Public Domain Image.

Figure 3: Tomb of Matilda of Canossa at San Benedetto Po, unknown date, Monastery of San Benedetto Po, Manuta, Italy (Photographer: Elaine Poggi). Permission given from photographer.

Figure 4: Federico Zuccari, *The Reconciliation of a Penitent Henry IV with Pope Gregory VII and Matilda at Canossa*, 1565-1573, Sala Regia, Vatican. Rights bought by Rachel Smith in the amount of \$30.00 from Art Res NY / Alinari for a one-time, non-exclusive English language rights for the use of the image for up to twenty print copies and electronic distribution via ProQuest Dissertations & Thesis (PQDT) database.

Figure 5: Gian Lorenzo Bernini and workshop, *Tomb of Matilda of Canossa*, 1633-1644, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican (Photographer: Alan Howard, editor of www.stpetersbasilica.org). Permission given from photographer.

Figure 6: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Tomb of Matilda of Canossa*, Sarcophagus (detail), 1633-1644, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican (Photographer: Alan Howard, editor of www.stpetersbasilica.org). Permission given from photographer.