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# Gregorio Dati (1362–1435) and the Limits of Individual Agency

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*This article focuses on the diary of the Florentine Gregorio Dati (1362–1435) and its significance for the study of agency in pre-modern Europe. In particular, this article analyses Dati's 'abeyance of individual agency' in the context of his family affairs, business ventures, and participation in politics, as well as in relation to Dati's views on his personal development. The diary data, and in particular the private memoranda of 1404 and 1412, are corroborated with Dati's other writings and placed in the context of late-medieval and Renaissance culture. As such, this article draws attention to the role of cultural factors in the construction of agency, and aims to participate in a broader, interdisciplinary debate.*

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This article focuses on the diary of the Florentine Gregorio Dati (1362–1435) in order to explore the limits of Dati's agency as an individual. Whereas most studies point to institutions and collective forms of action—and in particular social networks—as the most immediate factors that limit individual agency, this essay focuses on the limits that the individual agents themselves place on their actions. Throughout this essay, I use agency as a concept, an analytical tool that can evoke historical realities and help us make sense of them, while also providing a basis for comparison between different societies (historical or ethnographic). Of course Gregorio Dati would not have put the matter in these terms, but although

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we strive to understand a society in its own terms—as I hope this article also does—we are not bound to explain or discuss it in those terms.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction: The Memorandum of 1412

Gregorio Dati was a Florentine businessman of modest origins who traded mostly in silk and other cloth. He frequently served as consul of the guild of Por S. Maria, one of the major guilds, and in his later life also held communal offices, culminating in his election in 1429 to the commune's leading office, the Standard-bearer of Justice. He was also the author of *A History of Florence*.<sup>2</sup>

Like the diaries ('ricordanze') of other Florentine businessmen and professionals of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Dati's *Libro segreto* records business transactions, family events such as his numerous marriages and the births of his many children, private memoranda (or 'notes to self'), and the public offices that he held. The diary entries were made at various times during Dati's life; the notes on the 15 folios of the manuscript do not follow a strict chronological order.<sup>3</sup> One of these notes, a memorandum dated 3 May 1412, is central to my analysis, and I offer it at the beginning of this article in order to highlight its importance.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Since Pierre Bourdieu, anthropologists have been sensitive to the dangers entailed in relying too much on the informants' accounts of their doings: Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*: 19. A more complete knowledge of an individual or group involves subjecting their rationalisations to a critical examination, including by means of the concepts developed by the social sciences. I fully share the perspective of the sociologist Franco Crespi, namely that the social scientists' constructs must be deployed as interpretive tools and assessed in terms of their usefulness for the understanding of the problem—'Adopting general categories does not prevent the sociologist from analysing the concrete historical and cultural forms and the specific meanings of life experience': Crespi, *Social Action and Power*: 50. For a more recent statement on the importance of combining an epistemology of intimacy (sensitive to the individuals' accounts) and an epistemology of estrangement (critical towards these accounts), see Keane, 'Self-Interpretation, Agency': 222–48.

<sup>2</sup> Dati, *Istoria di Firenze*. Hans Baron has seen Dati's *Storia* as one of the early examples of civic humanism: Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, vol. 1:140–60. Gregorio, rather than his brother Leonardo, was also the likely author of a poem, 'Sfera', part cosmographic treatise and part pilot-book: Segatto, 'Un'immagine quattrocentesca del mondo': 172.

<sup>3</sup> Gargioli (ed.), *Libro segreto*. There is a partial English translation in Brucker, *Two Memoirs of Renaissance Florence*: 107–41.

<sup>4</sup> *Libro segreto*: 71.

Dati noted that on 28 April 1412 he was drawn by lot to serve as ‘gonfaloniere di compagnia’, Standard-bearer of the Militia Company, one of the advisory colleges of the Signoria, the chief magistracy of the communal government. Dati recorded his surprise and satisfaction: he had not known whether his name was among those eligible for office, since this was known only to the scrutiny committee that selected the eligible citizens and to the ‘accoppiatori’, the powerful officials in charge of the extractions.<sup>5</sup> But he had wanted to hold office since it would bring him and his heirs honour. He thanked God for sending him the inspiration (‘spirazione di Dio’) to pay his debts just a quarter of an hour before his name was drawn for office, thus avoiding ineligibility. Finally, now that he realised he could be elected again for public offices,<sup>6</sup> Dati recorded his resolution to refrain from any attempt to manipulate in his favour the result of future elections; he would not ask anyone to intervene, but leave it to those in charge of this matter. He simply would accept the offices for which his name would be drawn. This made (some) sense: the electoral system was controlled by the influential elite of aristocratic decent. The ‘borsellino’ or little bag grouped the names of just a few citizens loyal to the regime who were given preference at each extraction for office. Furthermore, at one election in 1393, the Priors and the Standard-bearer of Justice were handpicked by the ‘accoppiatori’, in effect being appointed directly at the initiative of the political elite.<sup>7</sup>

This fragment of Dati’s diary offers a powerful statement about his ideas of participation in Florentine politics. In particular, John Najemy has interpreted Dati’s views as emblematic of the trends inaugurated by the politics of consensus that developed after the defeat of the popular government in 1382.<sup>8</sup> Although more citizens were eligible for public office after 1382, Florentine political life became dominated by the major guilds, and in particular by the major guildsmen from the families of Florence’s traditional elite. The political elite stressed the importance of

<sup>5</sup> According to Baron, in 1404 Dati’s ‘name was entered in the list of those entitled to the office of “Gonfalonieri di compagnia”’: see Baron, *Crisis*, vol. 1: 140, footnote 5 (footnote text in vol. 2, 506). This remained unknown to Dati until 1412. ‘What had been wrought by the *balìa* and the *arroti* was gradually revealed to the citizenry with each bimonthly extraction of name tickets for the Signoria’; see Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus*: 273.

<sup>6</sup> Previously, Dati had served once in a lesser magistracy: the Ten of Liberty, starting in April 1405 for four months. See *Libro segreto*: 79.

<sup>7</sup> Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus*: 276–77.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*: 303—‘In Dati are contained all the essential elements of Florentine consensus politics’.

political consensus, thus precluding the expression of dissenting political views. For the minor guildsmen as well as the non-elite major guildsmen, enlarged eligibility for public office did not translate into the power to adopt and implement policies, because the non-elite communal officers were pressured to follow the leadership of the elite, in effect being relegated to a passive role in government. But this form of political domination was rarely exposed for what it was and thus numerous Florentines identified with the elite's consensus ideology.<sup>9</sup>

I am particularly interested in one aspect of Dati's declared attitude to political participation: 'the dutiful passivity of the good citizen', 'the promise to obey and to accept the direction of one's destiny from higher powers'.<sup>10</sup> The crucial aspect here is that Dati could have resorted to the practices of other Florentines who used their networks of business associates, friends, and political allies, in order to influence in their favour the purportedly impartial election system, and have their names drawn for office more often. The terms of Dati's resolution show clearly that this option was available to him and that he gave it careful consideration. He even took into account the possibility that he might not live up to his intentions, and set for himself a financial penalty every time he should break the promise—clearly the temptation to become involved in the electoral machinations was a very real one. Indeed, the practice of 'borsellino' extractions attracted the attention of numerous Florentines and was a vividly discussed issue.<sup>11</sup> In view of the options available to him, Dati's choice assumes its full significance. In resolving to stay away from the manipulation of the electoral system, Dati undertook to place some clear limits on his capacity to act, in other words, on his agency as an individual.<sup>12</sup> Following some of the anthropological literature on the topic, we may say that Dati voluntarily placed his agency in abeyance.<sup>13</sup>

Although this aspect has not escaped the notice of historians such as Najemy or Claudio Varese,<sup>14</sup> an analysis of the full implications of

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*: 301–15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*: 303.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*: 286.

<sup>12</sup> How strict these limits—self-imposed limits, to be sure—really were, remains a debatable issue; after all, Dati's resolution allowed for the possibility that he might break it, and the self-imposed penalty for breaking it was modest: two gold florins in alms: *Libro segreto*: 73. Certainly, it is proper to speak of Dati's *intentions*, but I do not think that this qualification undermines the arguments I am about to make.

<sup>13</sup> Miyazaki, 'Faith and Its Fulfilment': 42–43.

<sup>14</sup> The apparent paradox of Dati's resolution has been captured by John Najemy: '[Dati] let himself believe that only when he turned his back on the active pursuit of his political

Dati's abeyance of agency fell outside the scope of their studies. I attempt this analysis here, in particular by incorporating the insights of anthropology. In this sense, to study the abeyance or avoidance of agency means to explore not just how individuals act and claim their actions (and the results of their actions), but also how and when they remain passive and refuse to make manifest their effectiveness in the world. This has been viewed as 'the agency play', the way in which agency is made ambiguous, is 'placed and displaced, owned and disowned and...problematised at certain sites of social action'.<sup>15</sup> In particular, two types of interpretation could be employed to make sense of the abeyance of agency, as in Dati's case. One model sees it as 'the ultimate strategic act of rhetorical manipulation', a means of coping with particularly risky or otherwise sensitive matters by de-emphasising one's involvement. The other model stresses the aesthetic dimension of placing one's agency in abeyance. Retreating from or avoiding action could be the consequence of adhering to an ideal model or form. Both interpretations are based on different ethnographic case studies, and thus are, at least in principle, complementary.<sup>16</sup> But before testing the usefulness of these models for the understanding of Dati's abeyance of agency, I suggest placing the 1412 memorandum in the larger context of his life.

## The Background: Non-action as Strategy

Business activities occupied a central place in Dati's life and were generally characterised by an enterprising, active outlook. This is consistent

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ambitions would he truly be a free man': Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus*: 303. Also see Varese, *Storia e politica nella prosa dell'Quattrocento*: 73—'Questa freddezza dinanzi alla vita pubblica come interna lotta del Comune... trova talvolta una linea di severità morale e chiusa e solitaria indipendenza' ('This aloofness vis-à-vis public life perceived as the internal strife of the commune...sometimes finds a note of moral gravity and solitary independence').

<sup>15</sup> Debhora Battaglia, 'Ambiguating Agency': 507–8.

<sup>16</sup> As Miyazaki notes, the former model has been put forward by a number of anthropologists, including Michael Herzfeld, for instance. In his study of oath-making in Crete, Herzfeld has underscored the strategic, manipulative dimension of the recourse to non-human agentive forms, in this case ritual oath: Herzfeld, 'Pride and Perjury': 305–22. In his own ethnographic context, Miyazaki suggests a different motivation for the abeyance of agency: 'The Fijian case, however, draws attention to ritual participants' commitment to completion rather than strategies for controlling risks. For Fijians, the abeyance of agency entails a three-step process—that is, ritual participants' effort to conform to an ideal model, the problematization of their efforts, and the presentation of the same ideal model as a solution'; Miyazaki, 'Faith and Its Fulfilment': 43.

with our understanding of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian merchants, and a few examples should suffice to illustrate Dati's approach to business. His early enterprises in particular show an active man willing to take risks: in 1385 Dati started his first business partnership on borrowed money, and in 1395 he was short on money because he had spent a lot in the hope of great profits that failed to materialise—in other words, he had engaged in some risky speculations.<sup>17</sup> Dati's numerous, if sometimes unsuccessful business trips are another indication of his energetic approach to business, which was required of him since he did not yet have much capital to invest and had to do more work than the senior partners. Yet, on the basis of the diary, we can also document several instances of deferment and avoidance of action.

Following his marriage to Betta in 1393, Dati noted in his diary that, from what he could judge, Betta's cousins overvalued her trousseau by some 30 florins or more. This was no trivial matter and Dati remarked that Betta's cousins should not have acted like this. To be sure, Dati made no separation between private and business life<sup>18</sup> and, like many of his fellow Florentines, he viewed his successive marriages as a source of capital. Yet, according to his report, he was polite and said nothing about the overrated trousseau.<sup>19</sup> In the next lines, however, Dati noted—with the candour expected of a private record that has its author as main audience—that he subsequently did not insure the dowry, in order to postpone paying the tax for it; furthermore, Betta's cousins would not require him to insure it, since they were indebted to him and wanted to please him.<sup>20</sup> Dati's conciliatory approach, avoiding confrontation with his in-laws, paid off. In the end, he did insure his wife's dowry, on 26 September 1402, taking advantage of the reprieve on penalties for contract taxes that were paid on that day.<sup>21</sup> But he purchased the insurance at his convenience, after a delay of nine years.<sup>22</sup> The fate of Betta's dowry is

<sup>17</sup> *Libro segreto*: 17; 29–30; 115.

<sup>18</sup> As Dati indicated in the last entries of the diary, his ultimate success was due to the financial aid of his brother Leonardo, elected Master General of the Dominican Order in 1414. On the other hand, in 1395, Dati helped his other brother, Jacopo, also a cleric, who faced financial burdens; *Libro segreto*: 118; 30.

<sup>19</sup> '[...] per cortesia me ne sono taciuto'. *Ibid.*: 37.

<sup>20</sup> 'i detti non me ne sanno sollecitare, perchè io gli ò poi serviti, e sonmi tenuti, e credonsi farmene a piacere'. *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*: 39.

<sup>22</sup> The dowry was insured just a week before Betta passed away on 2 October: it seems that Dati anticipated her death—which was probably preceded by a period of severe illness—and wanted to have all her records in good order. After Betta's death, Dati, as

instructive in yet another way. In 1402 and, as we have seen, again in 1412, Dati took advantage of the commune's pardons and paid his debts without incurring penalties. The reprieves granted periodically by the Florentine government were likely to encourage people such as Dati to wait for events to unfold and time their actions accordingly. In view of the potential effects of this institutional feature of Renaissance Florence, we can understand better some of the instances of deferment and avoidance of action in Dati's life, such as his compliance with the unfavourable terms of a business partnership in 1393–95.

As he went into business alone in February 1395, Dati noted in his diary that he had gone through difficult times during the previous two years, when he was in a partnership with Buonaccorso Berardi and others. The partnership was formed in 1393, after the company set up by Dati and Berardi in 1387 with another partner, Michele di Ser Parente, ended at the latter's withdrawal. The company of 1393 was renewed in January 1394 when a new partner, Antonio di Segna, was added—in fact, Antonio put up Dati's share, since he was short on money. Dati noted in the 1395 diary entry that he had put up with quite a lot, including working in the company office and dealing with Antonio di Segna. He particularly resented the unfair accounting practices of the successive partnerships with Berardi and the rest, going back to 1387. Nevertheless, Dati made a deliberate decision to suffer all this for two years ('dilaterai di sofferire ogni cosa questi due anni') because he did not have the money to go into business on his own.<sup>23</sup> Here, the temporary abeyance of agency is clearly a strategy, a form of crisis management.

In September 1405 Dati and his associates brought legal action at the court of the 'Mercanzia', the corporate tribunal of international merchants from five of the major guilds, against a competing company, the Serristori, over business losses in Barcelona. Dati recorded the event twice in his diary, stressing the disastrous consequences of the trial: he lost credit and suffered much damage.<sup>24</sup> In his second diary entry on this topic, Dati attempted to justify the decision to go to court with the Serristori, stressing that he had been unwilling to do it and proceeded

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tutor of their children, would dispute her inheritance with her cousins—in particular, the income of the farm she had inherited from her mother and which was part of the marriage deal, in addition to the dowry. *Ibid.*: 64–68.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*: 17; 19; 28; 46.

<sup>24</sup> 'El piatto fu sforzato alla mercatanzia, perchè me ne seguitò perderne il credito e molto danno.' *Ibid.*: 59.

only because of necessity. Not having come to his own aid in the matter would have been to his ruin, Dati rationalised, but it seems that the outcome of the trial made him contemplate the merits of non-action in potentially dangerous situations.<sup>25</sup> Other diary entries suggest that the Serristori lawsuit was indeed a dramatic moment in Dati's life. The financial losses due to it, and more generally to the political climate unfriendly to business in Spain, determined Dati, in December 1406, not to renew a business partnership whose term had just ended. There are two notes in the diary about this episode, on different folios of the manuscript. Without reading too much into the terse diary, it seems that the later note (f. 11 of the diary) suggests resignation in the face of necessity ('fu nicistà racogliersi et ritrarsi') whereas the earlier remark (f. 10) puts the emphasis on Dati's *response* to crisis: 'convienci attendere a ritrarci', literally 'it suits us to apply ourselves to withdrawing [from business]'.<sup>26</sup> Dati's attitude throughout these difficult times was consistent with the spirit of the earlier diary note. Thus, Dati came up with a plan for coping with the crisis. He deferred the start of a new business so that he could focus on paying off outstanding debts. However, this strategy of abeyance and deferment was essentially limited in its scope—an aspect which needs to be emphasised. Dati, in fact, stressed the active involvement required by the other part of his plan. He and his partners had to put all their efforts into finding new lines of funding whatever the financial costs, including high interest rates.<sup>27</sup> As such, Dati defined the sphere of his agency according to the potential for success.

If Dati's choice to defer and avoid action in his dealings with his wife's cousins and with his business partners was motivated by practical considerations alone, his decision in December 1406 is a more complex case, because it also involved value judgements. Dati stressed that although his partner Piero Lana advised that they should declare bankruptcy in order to avoid financial damages and high interest rates, he insisted on his plan since he wanted to avoid the shame ('vergogna') of bankruptcy. He decided he would rather be deprived of wealth than of

<sup>25</sup> 'Cominciai a piatire con misser Giovanni di Serristori [amended in Brucker from 'ser Ristoro' in Gargioli] e compagna a di... di settembre alla mercatanzia, e male volentieri; ma fummi forza e nicistà, et è suto a me grande passione e danno; e se io non mi fossi aiutato, era mio disfacimeto' [emphasis added]. *Ibid.*: 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: 87; 80. Dati hoped that once the period of non-involvement was over, God would counsel and aid him, but the phrase is too formulaic to allow us to make much of it.

<sup>27</sup> 'operare con ogni ingegno, con danni e interessi e spesa'. *Ibid.*: 87.

honour ('onore').<sup>28</sup> But were value judgements really opposed to practical reasons? I would like to suggest that the clash was only apparent, because the values evoked by Dati sprang from business practices. If 'vergogna' resonates well with the moral values of Christianity, 'onore' does not. Rather, the reference to honour alludes to the business ethics shared by Italian merchants. A good, honourable reputation as a businessman depended on fulfilling contracts and paying off business debts, and understandably Dati preferred to preserve it, rather than the money that his partner wanted to save by declaring bankruptcy.<sup>29</sup> Good reputation brought financial credit, which in the fast-developing Florentine economy, as in modern economies, was more important than cash or property. In fact, in the beginning of the second diary note Dati made it clear that the crisis of 1406 was due to the lack of credit, listing among the reasons for this not just the troubles in Barcelona and the trial, but also the suspicions raised by the actions of his business agent, Simone, as well as the envy and the bad rumours kindled by many.<sup>30</sup>

The co-existence of both practical motivations and value judgements cautions against privileging either one of the two distinct explanatory models of agency abeyance, in complex cases such as Dati's decision in December 1406—or, as we shall see, in 1412.

## Practical Motivations and Moral Values in the Memorandum of 1412

There is enough evidence from Dati's diary to allow us to interpret his 1412 resolution, *mutatis mutandis*, in the spirit of the anthropological model that emphasises the importance of aesthetic (or, here, moral) norms. Dati framed his resolution to abstain from actively seeking further

<sup>28</sup> These notes were written not as the events of 1406 unfolded, but at a later date; as such, they are more likely to reflect Dati's subsequent rationalisation, than the initial motivations that inspired his crisis-management plan. Nevertheless, since the notes come from Dati's *Libro segreto*, it is improbable that the reference to values was intended as a justification for an audience. The Florentine *Libro segreto* was traditionally a family record and as such Dati would have expected his heirs to read it; but unlike Buonaccorso Pitti, for instance (Pitti, *Cronica*: 177; also v. infra, note 40), Dati did not specifically address his sons as the audience of the diary—he intended it for himself above all, a fact that argues in favour of putting more confidence in his self-description.

<sup>29</sup> The growing animosity between them culminated with the lawsuit Piero brought against Dati in 1411: *Libro segreto*: 90.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*: 87.

political advancements in value-laden language derived at least in part from the Christian moral theology, particularly with respect to vices and virtues. Thus, Dati associated the involvement in partisan electoral practices with the vice of ambition, which he aimed to avoid ('così schiferò il vizio della ambizione').

Although ambition was traditionally not one of the seven vices, the late medieval period witnessed an extension of the earlier list, to which new vices were now added.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, Dati's remark about the 'insatiable appetite which the more it has the more it desires' ('lo insaziabile appetito, che quanto più à più desidera') is consistent with the widespread idea, going back to the early fathers of the Church, that excess leads to excess and one vice spills over into another. Furthermore, although Dati does not use the word 'superbia' (pride), the connection between desire and ambition in Dati's resolution resonates well with that between natural impulse and a number of vices, including 'superbia', in the *Fiori di virtù*, a vernacular treatise on vices and virtues very popular in Italy throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the *Fiori di virtù*, suffering ('sofferenza'—an echo of the old monastic virtue of 'patientia') is seen as the greatest virtue ('è troppo maggiore virtù'), in opposition to the will ('volontà') that stems from any natural impulse ('alcuno naturale movimento') and can turn one into a lustful, proud, and wrathful person.<sup>32</sup> Pride itself is described in this popular vernacular treatise in terms that are easily applicable to Dati's situation in 1412. Specifically, of the different types of pride, the one linked with the desire for more status and honour than becomes one ('superbia di disconoscenza, ch'è a volere più stato e onore che non si conviene'), as well as the related vice of ingratitude vis-à-vis favours received in the past ('ingratitude, cioè a non volere essere conoscente de' beneficii ricevuti'),<sup>33</sup> are very close to one of the professed motivations for Dati's resolution not to meddle with communal elections: 'per non essere ingrato' ('so that I may not be ungrateful'). A similar discussion of pride was given in another vernacular treatise on the vices and virtues, the thirteenth-century *Trattato di virtù e di vizî* by the Florentine Bono Giamboni.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Andrew McCormick has underscored Dati's interest in 'superbia', both in his history of Florence and in his annotations on the commentary of

<sup>31</sup> Newhauser, *The Treatise on Vices and Virtues*: 124–25.

<sup>32</sup> Fabricators, *Fiore di Virtù*: 94.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*: 101–2.

<sup>34</sup> Giamboni, *Il Libro de' vizî e delle virtudi*: 141–42.

Dante's *Inferno*.<sup>35</sup> To be sure, Dati's definition of 'superbia' in the margins of the *Ottimo commento* includes no reference to ingratitude or desire, although it does contrast pride with temperance (of which the proud individual has no trace). Thus, of Dati's references to 'superbia', the one in the diary—although not by name—resembles most closely the text of the popular vernacular treatises. Certainly, the moral language of Dati's resolution should not be understood in *direct* relation to the body of medieval treatises on vices and virtues. But the tenets of this moral theology certainly filtered down. In fact, a possible cultural agent that may have influenced Gregorio Dati in matters of Christian spirituality was his own brother, Leonardo, the Dominican prior of the Florentine church of S. Maria Novella between 1401 and 1405, as well as a preacher and lecturer on theology.<sup>36</sup>

The moral character of Dati's resolution lends support to the idea that in 1412 the abeyance of individual agency was connected to the adherence to an ideal model—a Christian model, to be sure, emphasising patience as a virtue and the rejection of the vices of ambition and pride. In fact, Dati's resolution is in itself consonant with the practices and forms of Christian life, specifically the taking of vows, not just by the clergy but also by the laity—vows of pilgrimage, for instance, or of almsgiving, as in Dati's own case. Thus, the idea of calculation or strategic manipulation seems very alien to Dati's stated rationale, which in 1412 was predicated on moral judgements.<sup>37</sup>

And yet, there is also evidence to the contrary—and, not incidentally, some of it can be connected to Dati's pragmatic, calculated approach as explored in the previous section of this article. The text of Dati's resolution is quite explicit on this issue, making extensive commentary unnecessary: the purpose of resisting the temptation to resort to networks of patronage and seek political favours such as election to office, was to avoid the political debts that one usually incurred in the process.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, Dati feared that he might become the slave of his pleas for political support; so he resolved to avoid them altogether and live as a free man ('viveró libero e non servo per prieghi').<sup>39</sup> Since he recorded the resolution

<sup>35</sup> McCormick, 'Toward a Reinterpretation': 239.

<sup>36</sup> For Leonardo's career, see Viti, 'Leonardo Dati': 40.

<sup>37</sup> In this sense, Dati's decision is not contingent on the specific circumstances of 1412; rather, it is a 'strong evaluation', an expression of the more durable values around which Dati organised his life: Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*: 18–21.

<sup>38</sup> On the importance of patronage in Florence and its impact on office-holding and government, see Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*: 27–30.

<sup>39</sup> *Libro segreto*: 73.

five days after his election to office, Dati could have used this time to reflect on the opportunities opened up and also on the risks that they entailed. The history of Florentine politics in the decades preceding Dati's election can help us to go beyond the cryptic words, 'servo per prieghi', and understand better what may have been implied by this formula: carried to the extreme, it could mean complete commitment to a political faction and unreserved support even in conspiracies or street fighting. Certainly, the principle of uneven reciprocity that governed Florentine networks of patronage would usually have amounted to less than armed support in internecine conflicts, although Dati's strong language—'servo': servant or even slave—seems to indicate that he had in mind some really onerous obligations. More broadly, it can be said that Dati's resolution was aimed at avoiding social conflict in its varying degrees.

This assertion is also supported by Dati's evocation of the unfortunate conflicts ('aversità') of 1405–6 (v. supra) as a preface to the memorandum of 1412. Dati seems to have intended this reference as a backdrop that he thought would explain his resolution to abstain from seeking political favours (with their attendant risks). Thus, in 1412, he thought there was still a lesson to be learnt from the misfortunes of 1405–6.<sup>40</sup> There are, in fact, further links between the memorandum of 1412, which defined the terms of Dati's approach to the newly-opened field of communal politics, and Dati's earlier business ventures. Although the connection is not made explicit in the diary, it is noticeable that in 1412 Dati replicated his approach to bankruptcy in 1406, in that he once again attempted to define the sphere of successful action. Whereas in 1406 he decided to defer the start of a new business and instead make it a priority to pay off debts and avoid the terrible consequences of bankruptcy, in 1412 he resolved to abstain from a particular mode of political engagement partly

<sup>40</sup> In contrast to isolated pieces of correspondence or records of specific transactions or events, diaries such as Dati's, which covers the greater part of his life, allow us to follow the development of the individual and discern whether he/she replicated his/her earlier approaches, or on the contrary drew lessons from the events of the past and began to rely on new patterns of social action. In the Florentine 'ricordanze' such lessons were often passed on to one's heirs. Thus, in his diary, Buonaccorso Pitti expressly urged his descendants to take example of what happens to those who try to oppose the greater and more powerful people—like he had tried, unsuccessfully, in his conflict with the Ricasoli clan over the control of an abbacy. In fact, Leonida Pandimiglio suggests that the escalation of the conflict between the Pitti and the Ricasoli in 1412 was Buonaccorso's motivation to start writing his memoirs, with the clear purpose of passing on to his sons the lessons he had learnt from the conflict; Leonida Pandimiglio, 'Pigliate esempio di questo caso: l'inizio della scrittura di Buonaccorso Pitti', *Lettere Italiane*: 170–73.

because he saw that, far from leading to success, it could lead to disaster (and partly, as we have seen, for moral reasons). But the connections between Dati's approaches to business and politics were, indeed, only partial. As we have seen, in Dati's business life the limits of individual agency were above all a function of the collective nature of his enterprises—this, in fact, was the norm in Florentine business. In this sense, Dati's persistent reliance on networks of business associates and friends<sup>41</sup> signals an important difference between his business practices and his approach, later in his life, to communal politics. The resolution of 1412 was characterised precisely by the decision to abstain from recourse to networks—in this case, of political allies and patrons.

As we have just seen, different statements in the same diary entry offer evidence both for the view of agency abeyance as the expression of the commitment to an ideal model, as well as for the view of it as strategic manipulation. This complex situation—prefigured by Dati's decision in December 1406—is mirrored by the terms of the other decision that Dati took on 3 May 1412, a closely-related resolution, to be sure, in that it was the product of the same reflection as the first one, which it immediately follows in the diary (the relation between the two resolutions is emphasised in the transition between the two entries: 'ancora detto di', 'furthermore on the said day'): 'Furthermore on the said day, knowing myself powerless to resist sins, I resolve, for the good and assurance of my conscience, never to accept, if I were drawn of for it, any office of rector, which would have the power to judge the blood.'<sup>42</sup> There are elements here reminiscent of the moral language of the previous resolution. While the emphasis on conscience relates the decision more directly to Dati's sense of self and personhood, to an inner dialogue of which there are only a few indications in the terse diary, his self-assessment as powerless to resist sin alludes to traditional Christian ideas. Dati's concern with the vice of ambition in the first resolution is paralleled in the second one by the anxiety over his weakness in the face of sin. Dati used the generic plural—sins—but he did identify the precise source of his worries:

<sup>41</sup> It was exceptional for Dati to go into business on his own. He did it in February 1395, but although he noted in the diary his individual success, he returned to partnerships in October 1395—with his earlier associate, Michele di Ser Parente. Furthermore, during the eight months of 1395 when he was not in a business partnership, he still relied on his previous business networks: *Libro segreto*: 33; 44–45.

<sup>42</sup> 'Ancora detto di dilibero per bene e sicurtà della mia coscienza, sentendomi debole a resistere a' peccati, di non volere mai, se io fossi tratto, accettare alcuno ufficio di rettore, che abbia balia di giudicare sangue'. *Ibid.*: 73.

the power to pass death sentences. The sin that he feared was a mortal one; a sin against the eternal law.<sup>43</sup> Dati's second resolution, like the first one, highlights his moral commitment to the ideal of a Christian life.

But again, as in the first resolution, it is possible to discern more pragmatic motivations behind Dati's decision to refuse appointments as rector. As Gene Brucker argues, the first two decades of the fifteenth century witnessed growing concern with the administration of the Florentine dominion. In particular, the consultative assemblies ('pratiche') of the 1410s debated the problems raised by the Florentine administrators of the dominion, the rectors appointed to the towns and villages of Tuscany. Contemporary reports quoted and analysed by Brucker convey an overall picture of the rectors' abuses, spoliation and corruption. Although this state of affairs meant that many Florentine officials got rich during their terms of office in the territory, the rectors also came under pressure from both the subjects of the dominion as well as their patrons and supporters in Florence. At the centre of these contestations and interventions was precisely the rectors' record as administrators of justice. Accusations of partisanship against the rectors were frequent.<sup>44</sup> To be sure, these problems had been around for quite a while, but it was precisely at the time that Dati made his resolution to refuse any appointment as rector that they received more public attention and, one can speculate, imposed themselves on Dati's psyche.

A near-contemporary (1419) episode narrated in Buonaccorso Pitti's diary can illustrate the sort of problems that Dati may have been contemplating when he made his resolution. As 'podestà' of Montepulciano, Pitti fined a local 600 florins. Then, at the intervention of the defendant's powerful supporters from Florence, Pitti was instructed to revoke the sentence, or else incur a fine of 1,000 florins. He complied.<sup>45</sup> The fact that the influential Pitti, member of a leading aristocratic family and one of the city's chief diplomatic agents with connections at the papal and

<sup>43</sup> The term for death sentences which Dati used, 'giudizio di sangue', was also used for homicide in general, for example, in the late thirteenth-century 'Bibbia volgare'; Salvatore Battaglia, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, vol. 6: 873. Might this semantic ambiguity also have extended to Dati's own views on the legitimacy of death sentences?

<sup>44</sup> Brucker, *The Civic World*: 216–22. On the offices of *podestà* and captain in the territorial state more generally, see Martines, *Lawyers and Statecraft*: 221–23.

<sup>45</sup> Pitti, *Cronica*: 230–35. Laura De Angelis mentions this and other similar cases, noting that, in general, Florence defended its territorial officials against complaints, while also seeking to eliminate abuses; De Angelis, 'Territorial Offices and Officeholders': 175–77; 179–80.

imperial courts, would find himself under tremendous pressure over a fine, says much about the risks that the modest Gregorio Dati might have run in passing a death sentence if he served as rector. Dati had good reasons to fear the consequences of condemning a criminal to death: since kinship was all important in Tuscan society, the condemned person's family could retaliate and seek vengeance even many years after the sentence was executed. Indeed, vendetta was still practised in Tuscany.<sup>46</sup> Thus, although Dati did not explicitly state the pragmatic reasons for his decision to refuse appointments as rector, I would like to suggest that his decision can be seen as calculation, as a strategy aimed at preventing him from ever becoming the object of political pressures and, in the worst-case scenario, of vendetta. The two resolutions, made on the same day and recorded in succession in the diary, share not just a language imbued with references to Christian ethics, but also a common goal: avoiding conflicts.

To make this observation is not to reduce the significance of the resolutions to only two dimensions: one moral, the other functional. As I have already indicated, I agree with Najemy's interpretation that the first resolution underscores the absence from Dati's agenda of 'any policies to pursue or collective interests to defend'.<sup>47</sup> This political dimension adds to the complexity of the episode and, I would like to argue, relates not just to the functional—i.e., the dissociation from political networks as a strategy for avoiding conflict—but also to the moral side of Dati's abeyance of agency, the side that concerns his adherence to Christian culture. As Najemy emphasises, the first resolution is permeated by a clear sense of gratitude towards the political, and in particular the electoral, system set up after 1382 by the Florentine elite of great families.<sup>48</sup> After all, Dati was writing just days after one of his long-time hopes—election to communal office—had been fulfilled: the system had just worked for him. Thus, it was quite natural that Dati should have placed

<sup>46</sup> In Florence, where the rivalry between the magnate families posed a serious danger to the commune, vendetta had been restricted by the state since the first half of the fourteenth century: see Stern, *The Criminal Law System*: xvii; 253. Gene Brucker agrees that the practice of vendetta had declined somewhat by the early fifteenth century; Brucker, *The Civic World*: 19. High-profile cases of vendetta were exceptional, but had not disappeared—Lauro Martines discusses one such instance in 1387; *Lawyers and Statecraft*: 406. Buonaccorso Pitti exhorted his sons not to construe his narrative of the conflict with the Ricasoli clan as an invitation to exert vengeance on them ('facciate vendetta'); clearly vendetta was still present in the Florentines' imagination: Pitti, *Cronica*: 177.

<sup>47</sup> Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus*: 303.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*: 301, 303.

a great deal of confidence in the electoral system, as manifested in his decision to leave his election for future offices ‘to those in charge of this matter’.

This last aspect of Dati’s resolution is crucial. He at once de-emphasised his involvement in electoral politics *and* emphasised the role of the elite families that controlled the elections. In other words, Dati placed his agency in abeyance *and, at the same time*, reaffirmed the agency of the political elite and their electoral mechanisms. For Dati, these two moves went hand-in-hand. Furthermore, they were also complementary with his third endeavour, viz. to follow the designs that God had for him. The juxtaposition of these three elements—abeyance of individual agency, emphasis on collective agency of social superiors, and emphasis on divine agency—is revealing: ‘As regards the extractions for the Commune’s offices, I have resolved and decided that from now on *I should never solicit anyone, but leave it to those in charge of this matter, and according to what God wills for me*’ (emphasis added).<sup>49</sup> The connection between collective and divine agency is not surprising, since throughout the medieval period it had been maintained that the divine plan of history unfolded through human subjects. More interesting is Dati’s perspective on the relation between divine will and *his* agency as an individual. As Etienne Gilson has argued, the Christian doctrine of free will traditionally emphasised the role of human agency in actively co-operating with divine providence and stressed the merits of the individual who raises himself to become God’s ‘co-operator’ or ‘co-adjutor’.<sup>50</sup> To give one example among many, Galbert of Bruges, the author of an eye-witness account of the violent events at Bruges in 1127–128, emphasises that God’s plan for the punishment of Count Charles’s assassins involved divine causation but human actions, in the sense that the former prompted the latter: ‘Deus...comovit cor cujusdam militis Gervasii in exercendam vindictam’, (‘God...moved Gervaise’s heart to exercise vengeance’).<sup>51</sup> In Dati’s 1412 memorandum, however, it was the *abeyance* of individual agency that opened up a space for the unfolding of the divine plan. It was by placing limits on his capacity to act, that Dati would fulfil God’s designs for him. In other words, Dati’s ‘passivity’ characterised his relationship both

<sup>49</sup> ‘mi sono proposto e deliberato che da ora inanzi per ufici di Comune che s’ abiano a fare o a squittinare, mai non debo pregare alcuno, ma lasciare fare a chi fia soppracciò, e seguiti quello che a Dio piace che di me sia’: *Libro segreto*: 72.

<sup>50</sup> Etienne Gilson points out that this view upheld the efficacy of all of God’s creatures: Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*: 144.

<sup>51</sup> Galbert of Bruges, *De multro*: 63.

with the communal government of early-fifteenth-century Florence, and with God.<sup>52</sup>

This attitude is all the more interesting since Dati was familiar with the traditional view of divine providence. He made reference to divine providence in his *Storia di Firenze*, a history of Florence between 1380 and 1405, for instance, when he wanted to show that God was on the Florentines' side in their conflict with Pisa and Milan.<sup>53</sup> In particular, he came close to the traditional views of human co-operation with divine providence, when he endeavoured to account for Florence's success—as well as the envy of its neighbours—both by means of a this-worldly explanation ('ragione naturale') and by means of a theological explanation that emphasised divine grace.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Dati explicitly stated that nothing worthy could be acquired without divine grace, which resided in human *virtù* and good deeds; here, his view of divine providence emphasises human action, rather than non-action.<sup>55</sup>

The *Istoria* is certainly an important source for Dati's thought—as McCormick has argued, Dati's use of literary devices, particularly dialogue, in the *Storia*, offered him 'the opportunity...for subtly expressing the opinions which he and his readers presumably shared about the people and events he described'.<sup>56</sup> But there is a caveat with regard to treating Dati's historical and literary work in the same manner as the private records of his diary, and this caveat emerges with particular clarity from the references to divine providence in *Istoria di Firenze*. In the *Istoria*, Dati was writing *ad probandum*, with a clear purpose, viz. to defend the Florentine cause for an audience (which, judging by the extant manuscripts of the work, turned out to be quite broad); as such, he made use of

<sup>52</sup> To be sure, Dati lived at a time when the humanist circles of Florence were re-examining the relation between human and non-human, in particularly divine, agency. The late-fourteenth century had witnessed a proliferation of writings on the relation between fate, human virtue and reason, divine providence, and free will—by such influential figures as Petrarch and Salutati. See Poppi, 'Fate, Fortune, Providence': 643–46. In his *Storia di Firenze* Dati emphasises the role of 'fortuna' but allows that human 'virtù' is capable to oppose it; Bec, *Les marchands écrivains*: 161; Varese, *Storia e politica nella prosa dell Quattrocento*: 77. The references to fortune are rare in the terse diary, for example, 'now fortune—'fortuna'—began to strike at me forcefully': Gargioli, *Libro segreto*: 116.

<sup>53</sup> Dati, *Istoria*: 118; McCormick, 'Toward a Reinterpretation': 239. Bec adduces other examples as well in support of his point that the *Istoria* offers a traditional perspective on the role of divine providence. Bec and McCormick are in agreement on the pro-Florentine agenda behind Dati's reference to divine providence: 'En fait, Dati annexe la Providence au parti florentin': Bec, *Les marchands écrivains*: 160.

<sup>54</sup> *Istoria*: 54–56; Varese, *Storia e politica nella prosa dell Quattrocento*: 77.

<sup>55</sup> *Istoria*: 56.

<sup>56</sup> McCormick, 'Toward a Reinterpretation': 233.

literary devices to advance his arguments.<sup>57</sup> In view of Dati's interest in humanism it is useful to recall the doubts raised vis-à-vis the sincerity of the political positions that humanists such as Salutati and Bruni put forward in their writings.<sup>58</sup> Thus, while the *Istoria* tells us a great deal about Dati's intellectual persona and cultural baggage, and most importantly his capacity to draw on different traditions in order to make specific claims, it is not perhaps best-suited for an exploration of the terms in which Dati approached *his* life; the latter emerge more clearly from the diary. Nevertheless, the references to divine providence in Dati's history *are* relevant for the analysis of the resolution of 1412 because they show that although more traditional modes of conceptualising the relation between divine and human agency were known to Dati, in the specific context of 1412, when he referred to *his* actions, he formulated an original position.<sup>59</sup>

The intricate connection between communal politics, private business and Christian culture in Dati's memorandum shows the difficulties, perhaps even the impossibility, of deciding in favour of one or the other of the anthropological models suggested in order to make sense of the abeyance of agency. Clues such as the fact that the self-imposed penalty for violations was substantially larger for the second resolution (25 florins) than for the first (2 florins) are of little help. Clearly, Dati thought that accepting the office of rector and the power to pass death sentences was a more serious transgression of his commitments, but was it because it could lead him to commit a mortal sin,<sup>60</sup> or because it could draw the vengeance of a criminal's family? *Both* strategic calculation *and* commitment to an ideal model informed Dati's decision and we shall see that it would be hazardous to try to prioritise between them.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*: 230–47.

<sup>58</sup> Hankins, 'The *Baron Thesis*': 325–27.

<sup>59</sup> There are similarities as well between Dati's views in the *Istoria* and in the diary—for example, both texts underscore the values of charity ('l'opere della misericordia', *Istoria*: 56; 'limosina', *Libro segreto*: 69–70). Furthermore, Dati's emphasis on the virtues of *prudentia*, albeit in the context of Italian politics, is congruent with the careful planning evident in the memorandum of 1412. As Bec remarks, in the *Istoria* Dati opposes *prudentia* to rage and passion ('la prudentia, telle que Dati la définit, e tout à la fois prévoyance, prudence et persévérance'), see Bec, *Les marchands écrivains*: 162; passion rendered one incapable of anticipating the course of events—'accieavagli l'ira, e la passione propria, che non poteano antivedere', *Istoria*: 67. The 'insatiable appetite' of the 1412 memorandum seems very much in line with the passion from this passage of the *Istoria*.

<sup>60</sup> Rather than fall into vice as in the case of the first resolution ('il vizio della ambizione').

Indeed, dismissing the latter as rhetoric is too facile and ignores the factual character of our text, a private record intended just for the author (and possibly his heirs). We can only speculate about Dati's thought process during the five days between the election and the resolutions. But it needs to be emphasised that the diary entry is not an *ex post facto* rationale, a tardy attempt to make sense of an earlier decision, just as Dati's *Libro segreto* itself is not a late-life memoir. The diary entry for 3 May 1412 is Dati's resolution. And it is so because the diary entry is a memorandum, intended to remind its author not just of the general substance of the decision but also of the motivations behind it (more on this later). By attending to the text's function as a personal memorandum we can see that Dati was sincere to himself and that the terms of his resolution were the terms in which he approached life and society. Put simply, the values of the resolutions were lived values.<sup>61</sup>

On the other hand, the rejection of strategic motivations in favour of purely moral ones is equally misleading. Thus, Christian Bec sees the renunciation of profits in favour of a strict adherence to religious norms as 'typical of Dati's mentalité' (emphasis added).<sup>62</sup> By contrast, I have argued that Dati's commitment to the model of the Christian life did not involve the rejection of this-worldly objectives; rather, moral and practical considerations were complementary. Certainly with respect to his participation in communal politics, Dati did not renounce anything, for he did not resolve to refuse new elections to office—he simply redefined

<sup>61</sup> This point cannot be stressed enough, particularly in the context of a continuing scholarly discussion on self-interpretation and human agency. Thus, Charles Taylor has argued that cultural values (or inter-subjective meanings) are essential for an understanding of action as historically constituted, because they provide the terms in which the social agents make sense of their position and organise their conduct. According to Taylor, the accounts that individuals give of their actions are not far removed from the actions themselves, because the latter also came about via self-interpretation since self-interpretation is bound with meaningful action. Furthermore, both the initial self-interpretation, 'embedded in a stream of action' and the text of the individual's description of his/her actions (or the text-analogue of behaviour and the text or account) are expressed in the language and culture which one shares with one's contemporaries: Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*: 25–27. Webb Keane has brought up Taylor's theories in a more recent article: see Keane, 'Self-Interpretation, Agency, and the Objects of Anthropology'. On the other hand, Bourdieu and Giddens have each stressed the role of practical consciousness, consisting of 'forms of knowledge not immediately available to discourse': Giddens, *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*: 63. It is clear, however, that whereas Bourdieu, for instance, focuses more on routinised daily practices, Taylor refers first of all to consequential decisions that are made in a more deliberate fashion.

<sup>62</sup> Bec, *Les Marchands*: 155.

the terms of his involvement, distancing himself from dubious electoral practices.

How frequent an attitude like Dati's was among early-fifteenth-century Florentine businessmen cannot be gauged on the basis of anecdotal evidence, yet a very different example may help to put Dati's case into perspective. Thus, Dati's contemporary, Buonaccorso Pitti (already mentioned in this article) staged a moment of agency abeyance in order to advance his purposes—in sharp contrast to Dati.<sup>63</sup>

In 1399, Pitti was captain of Pistoia and became involved in a dispute with the Florentine Signoria; the latter demanded that he turn over a thief arrested in Pistoia to the podestà in Florence. Pitti refused and asked the Signoria to observe the jurisdictional privileges of Pistoia.<sup>64</sup> The Signoria insisted but so did Pitti, who in the diary emphasised his commitment to the vows he made to the people of Pistoia at the beginning of his term in office. In the end, after he narrowly avoided exile for his obstinacy when a resolution to this effect was two votes short in Florence, and after his relatives and friends counselled him to comply with the commune's demands lest the resolution be put to a vote again, Pitti reconsidered his attitude. His approach at this moment is clearly a case of agency abeyance as 'the ultimate strategic act of rhetorical manipulation'. Pitti summoned the priors of Pistoia and informed them of his tribulations and of the prospects he faced. He put the matter in their hands, asking them to decide what he should do, and reaffirmed his commitment to the jurisdictional rights of Pistoia, saying that he would suffer exile in order to observe them. If Pitti's narrative is a faithful account of his speech at Pistoia, he ended by subtly inviting the priors to give their consent to the thief's transfer to Florence, in violation of Pistoia's rights. Pitti's speech had the intended effect, as the priors, 'with tears and sighs', expressed their gratitude for what he had done and agreed that it was prudent to fulfil the Signoria's request. Pitti's success ensured that he would maintain good relations with the Pistoiesi through the remainder of his term in office—indeed, his manipulation of the events as well as of the priors probably solidified his position in Pistoia. (The episode's denouement

<sup>63</sup> As Christian Bec remarks, Pitti was truly a man of action ('Bonaccorso vit dans l'action et par elle'), *ibid.*: 86; also 84–89, for an analysis that includes Pitti's language in the diary, specifically the high frequency of verbs, most often in the active voice. Catherine Pineau-Harvey has argued that Pitti used gambling strategically, not as entertainment but as a way to make money; 'Jeu, ouverture sociale et diplomatie: à propos de Bonaccorso Pitti', Pineau-Harvey, *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*: 33–45.

<sup>64</sup> Pitti, *Cronica*: 112–14.

also shows the limits of Pitti's professed attachment to the ideals of justice.) His success rested on a theatrical ability: first to create, and then to act out a script of disempowerment.<sup>65</sup>

## The Memorandum of 1404

To be sure, the memorandum dated 3 May 1412 was not the first Dati wrote down in his diary. On 1 January 1404, Dati recorded three resolutions which he saw as closely related—indeed, as particular aspects of a life-changing spiritual turn (the close relation among these resolutions was unequivocally marked by the use of 'ancora'—furthermore). Dati resolved to refrain from working on Church holidays, to spend Fridays in chastity, and to remember God everyday, either by alms-giving or prayers.<sup>66</sup> The memoranda of 1404 and 1412 were recorded on the same folio of the diary (f. 9), which opened with an account of Dati's disputes with the cousins of his deceased wife Betta over her inheritance. It is highly relevant that in 1412 Dati decided to write down his resolutions not on a new folio—f. 11 or 12—but on f. 9, a part of which was already taken by the record of the events of 1403–4. This shows that Dati thought the memorandum of 1412 belonged in the same category as that of 1404.<sup>67</sup>

The resolutions of 1404 marked a crucial event in Dati's life. In fact, the diary entry sets up the decisions within the overall context of his life and personal development, since he introduces his resolutions by reflecting on the 40 years since his birthday, spent with little regard to God's commandments.<sup>68</sup> Although the decision to refrain from work on

<sup>65</sup> Talal Asad discusses at some length the theatrical dimension of agency; he points out that social actors disempower themselves in numerous social settings since 'many, if not all, activities in social life are framed': Asad, *Formations of the Secular*: 77. To give a medieval example of staged disempowerment, the petty juries of fourteenth-century England, consisting mostly of the defendant's neighbours and acquaintances, framed their reports on local homicides by presenting the defendant as overpowered by, and refusing to fight against, the assailant until the very last moment. The report fitted precisely the legal definition of self-defence and thus the community was able to ensure that locals charged with homicide would not suffer a capital punishment, which—according to the villagers but not to the king's jurists—should be reserved only for truly heinous murders: Green, 'Societal Concepts of Criminal Liability': 669–94.

<sup>66</sup> *Libro segreto*: 68–71.

<sup>67</sup> On the recording of the two memoranda, also see Pandimiglio, 'Pigliate esempro di questo caso': 168.

<sup>68</sup> As Richard Trexler points out, Dati calls himself 40 in 1404 although he was 42, because 'forty was the age at which individuals were supposed to convert and prepare for death': Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*: 73.

holidays would affect Dati's employees (as he anticipated), the abstinence on Fridays would affect his partners, and the alms-giving would benefit the Florentine poor, nevertheless from Dati's perspective the resolutions of 1404 are not about his social interactions, but about his personal life. Through his resolutions, Dati hoped to produce an effect on himself, not on others. Here, the domain in which one's effectiveness is manifest is not society, but his personal life.

Although the very act of making a resolution denotes an active outlook, the memorandum of 1404 shows that Dati's confidence in his ability to follow up on his designs was not great. The specific provisions of the resolutions, as well as their nature as a *written memorandum*, recorded in the private diary, suggest the limits of Dati's confidence in his capacity to act as he planned.

The memorandum of 1404 was certainly intended to remind Dati of what he should do everyday, and of what he should not do on Fridays and Church holidays. Dati is explicit on this point: 'I have made this recording in order to bear in mind better [the first resolution]'. But there is more. The statement in the second resolution, 'if it shall happen that I fail, by not realising it, or by not remembering it', suggests Dati's awareness that he might neglect his intentions, presumably also because his priorities might change with time. This last aspect is important and it can be made clearer on the basis of the other reason that Dati gave for recording his first resolution of 1404: not just in order to bear in mind better what he had to do, but also in order that he may be ashamed if he did otherwise, if he broke his promise.<sup>69</sup> The significance of a possible transgression is described in moral, value-laden terms. Since Dati thought that the transgression should be the cause for embarrassment and shame, it can be speculated that he envisaged that it could come about not through forgetfulness or neglect—two possibilities which he had already taken into account—but because of something more dramatic.

I would like to suggest that Dati anticipated that he might deliberately break his resolution, and it was this deliberate, hence most serious, infringement that he thought should make him feel ashamed. He suspected that years after his resolutions he might change, but not in the way he hoped for in the resolutions. Dati realised he may someday have different priorities that would make him neglect his earlier resolutions, and in fact he may change so much that he would no longer share the ideals that

<sup>69</sup> 'E questa scrittura ò fatta per tenere meglio a mente, e per mia confusione, se contro a ciò facessi': *Libro segreto*: 69.

animated the resolutions of 1404 and defined him at that particular moment in time. In short, Dati contemplated the possibility of radical personal development: the possibility that with the passing of time his older self might re-emerge to replace, as it were, his 1404 self (Dati may even have contemplated the emergence of a completely new self). Yet, he at least hoped that the change would not be complete and that the values of the Gregorio Dati of 1404 could still resonate with the later Dati, *provided they could be forcefully evoked*. To meet the challenges that the ‘lapsed self’ (or a new self) might pose to the objectives and actions that characterised the earlier self, he relied on the efficacy of the moral language of the memorandum. This would explain the reference to shame, ‘confusione’. In this sense, Dati’s penalties for violations are less of an incentive to remember the resolutions—lest he incur the self-imposed fine—than to reject the temptation to change his mind at some point in the future. This is clearer in the memorandum of 1412, in which there is no reference to forgetfulness. Rather, Dati made it plain that he envisaged a moment when he might deliberately accept the office of rector—certainly, the decision to accept such a position would only be taken after careful reflection.<sup>70</sup> This implies, more clearly than in the 1404 memorandum, that Dati suspected that his future self—with its different configuration of values and priorities—could endanger his initial designs.

Thus, Dati’s recourse to memoranda in 1404 and 1412 is in and by itself revealing of the limits that he voluntarily placed on his agency, for the *raison d’être* of the memoranda was to restrict Dati’s capacity for (a particular kind of) action, at some point in the future. To attain his goals, Dati relied not on himself but on the efficacy of a particular form—the written memorandum.<sup>71</sup>

By virtue of their purpose, the memoranda acquired relative autonomy, as they were intended to remain separate from whatever evolution Dati would experience.<sup>72</sup> But their very autonomy posed another set of problems. Dati understood very well that once written down the memoranda

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*: 73.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Trexler emphasises the Florentines’ belief in the efficacy of form (as well as of objects such as relics, see Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*: 54–73), giving Dati as an example: ‘for Florentines, the ritual of diplomacy at a distance had every chance of success if done according to the best form and with strong intent. Spectacular successes could be verified by coincidences in time. Goro Dati, for example, noted with obvious satisfaction that the decline of Visconti rule in Milan coincided to the hour in 1403 with the first act of Florence’s celebration of the feast of San Giovanni’; *Ibid.*: 289.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Jack Goody on the (partial) autonomy and the fixity of the text: Goody, *The Logic of Writing*: 129; *The Power of the Written Tradition*: 10–11.

essentially escaped his control. They could end up in someone else's hands and could in fact turn against him since, regardless of his position on the matter, the memoranda had now a life of their own and could suggest that his intentions were akin to contractual obligations. To avoid this contingency Dati made sure to add at the end of the 1404 resolutions that they were not vows but propositions that he intended to keep to the best of his ability.<sup>73</sup> Dati's prudent provision notwithstanding, the risks and disadvantages entailed by the recourse to memoranda—certainly in the case of people less careful than Dati—illustrate very well, albeit in a different way, the same idea that emerges from the analysis of their advantages: namely, that the memoranda's efficacy, initially just an extension of their author's efficacy, can subsequently compete with it. Thus, the written memorandum can be viewed not just as a form, or mode of agency, but also as an agent.

In Dati's memoranda (both of 1404 and 1412) we can discern the interaction of socio-cultural factors that shaped his development as an individual, the interplay between the shared values and norms of Christian culture—including developments specific to the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, such as vernacular elaborations of the traditional scheme of vices and virtues—and the particular social and political context of late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth-century Florence. The latter's importance cannot be stressed enough, but in view of an ongoing trend in historical studies of agency,<sup>74</sup> I would like to draw attention to the former,

<sup>73</sup> Dati's resolution seems close to what John Peter Olivi, writing during the *usus pauper* controversy that divided the Franciscans at the end of the thirteenth century, had theorised as indeterminate vows. 'For Olivi, the vow is less a promise to do a series of specific things than a promise to embark on a certain path toward an envisaged goal': Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*: 52.

<sup>74</sup> Historical accounts of agency have traditionally focussed on institutional structures and relations of power, or more recently, on networks of support, as in the case of practitioners of historical social network analysis (HSNA). 'Culture'—for example, in the form of questions about the reception of ideas, or the internalisation of norms, or intellectual creativity—is often neglected in such studies. In fact, Barry Wellman has formulated the first characteristic of network analysis as '[the interpretation of social behaviour] in terms of structural constraints on activity, rather than in terms of inner forces within units...that impel behaviour in a voluntaristic, sometimes teleological, push toward a desired goal': Wellman, 'Structural Analysis': 20. On the contrary, Anthony Giddens has articulated a theory of the 'duality of structure' which rests on the adoption of a notion of structure as 'an absent totality' derived from post-structuralism, and on the explicit rejection of any theories that posit structure 'as a constraint which is 'external' to action': Giddens, *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*: 61. I intend my study of Dati's abeyance of agency as a complement and corrective to the HSNA approaches.

viz., to the ‘cultural construction of agency’.<sup>75</sup> As I have attempted to show, the reference to the ideals of the Christian life was not limited to Dati’s self-reflection or inner dialogue, but was constitutive of his (abeyance of) agency as well. The norms and values of Christian culture were invoked at the moment when Dati made his resolutions and wrote them down as memoranda.

Certainly, to acknowledge the role of cultural and social factors in the construction of agency, should not lead to the view of the subject—here, Gregorio Dati—as not more than an exemplar of culture, an instantiation of the values and attitudes shared by his contemporaries. The evidence reviewed here points to a specific cluster of values, and furthermore one that Dati internalised in his own way. Self-interpretation was crucial. Indeed, Dati’s adherence to the ideals of a Christian life was accompanied by specific provisions that reflect Dati’s knowledge of himself, hence the anticipation that he could depart from these ideals. That he did so in one instance that we can document—and for very good reasons—is further proof of the individual’s role in renegotiating his relation to culture and society.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, in 1422, Dati took up the office of podestà in the territory, in effect breaking the second resolution of 1412. But this departure from the resolutions was not the expression of a radical personal development; rather, it was a response to an extraordinary circumstance. The diary record of this event is very different from the records of Dati’s other public offices. Whereas Dati would normally note that he was drawn for office (‘fui tratto a l’ufficio, etc.’) he now stated that he *accepted* the office, and he also gave the reason, and a very good one at that—to run away from the plague: ‘Podestà del Montale e Agliana accettai per fuggire la mortalità’ (emphasis added).<sup>77</sup> The untypical account makes sense in the light of Dati’s written memorandum. The way the diary entry for 1422 was framed shows that Dati was very much aware of his earlier

<sup>75</sup> I have borrowed the expression from Sherry Ortner’s work. Ortner, an anthropologist, argues that agency is also ‘a source and an effect of ‘culture’ and calls for an approach to agency that would take into account *both power and meaning* (in the tradition of Foucault and Edward Said, and Clifford Geertz, respectively): Ortner, ‘Thick Resistance’: 146.

<sup>76</sup> Lyndal Roper has drawn attention to the limits of the approaches that privilege the historical subjects’ culture over the individuals’ particular ways of situating themselves vis-à-vis their culture and making a contribution to it. Her work has highlighted the individual’s creativity in social and cultural interactions: Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil*: 230.

<sup>77</sup> *Libro segreto*: 106.

resolution—which of course was recorded in the same diary, just a few folios before—and felt the need to explain the violation (to himself, first of all, but perhaps to the other possible readers as well).<sup>78</sup> In the same spirit of the ideals he embraced in 1412, he added that the six-month term of office brought him little wealth, but a lot of gratitude from the locals. There is no record of a donation to the poor in the amount of 25 gold florins.<sup>79</sup>

## Conclusion

Specific institutional features of early fifteenth-century Florentine society, such as tax reprieves, probably influenced Dati's option to abstain from taking actions, in various contexts. Furthermore, by committing his designs to writing, in private memoranda—so popular in Florentine society—Dati deliberately restricted his freedom of action, fearful of the changes that his personality might suffer in the future. The abeyance of agency characterised not just his approach to familial matters and to business, but also to politics—more so, in fact, than another feature of Dati's activities, his use of networks of friends and associates, because he rejected the network approach to politics.<sup>80</sup> As strategy, the abeyance of agency was assessed on the basis of its merits and potential for success in specific contexts, and was not fundamentally—i.e., on aesthetic or

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Jack Goody's observation—made in the context of an analysis of legal reasoning—that the written text brings contradictions into sharp relief: 'contradictions become more 'obvious' and more 'exact' when placed side by side': Goody, *The Logic of Writing*: 163; also *The Power of the Written Tradition*: 142–43.

<sup>79</sup> This is the only violation of the resolutions that we have been able to document; Dati's term in office at Montale is confirmed by the Florentine archival record: De Angelis, 'Territorial Offices and Officeholders': 169, footnote 23. Dati's appointments as officer of the New Gabelles in 1413 and as *provveditore* of The Five of Pisa in 1417 (*ibid.*) did not carry the power to pass death sentences. Dati did serve again in communal offices but there is no indication that he procured his elections through the tactics that he condemned in the memorandum of 1412. The proceedings of the consultative assemblies of Florentine citizens, the *consulte e pratiche*, show that Dati took part in the political debates in 1430–33, but not necessarily that he aligned himself with one faction. Viti, 'Gregorio Dati': 36.

<sup>80</sup> I hope that the comparison between the various episodes of Dati's life has addressed, in some way, the important question, 'How much does one's conduct vary according to different social contexts or practices?' See Paul Veyne's classic argument that one's behaviour and activity vary a great deal within the different co-existing social practices: Veyne, 'Foucault Revolutionises History': 153–63; also see Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms': 530, 537, for the contrast between the *autonomy* and the *articulation* of

moral grounds—opposed to active involvement. Non-action and action could be practised concomitantly on different fronts, as in 1406, and in the end the latter was more frequent in Dati's life. In other contexts, in 1404 and 1412, moral considerations determined in part Dati's abeyance of his agency and in this sense this was not just a strategy but also, *and at the same time*, the expression of the adherence to an ideal model—a fundamentally Christian one, to be sure. As such, this article aims to contribute both in terms of its empirical findings about Florentine society, as well as in a broader sense, by suggesting that the models of agency abeyance as either strategic or aesthetic/moral, each documented for different ethnographic contexts, are truly complementary. They can be deployed together, in order to make sense of the different facets of one and the same case study. Furthermore, Dati's successful experience suggests that the confluence of strategic interests and moral ideals can serve to sustain and reinforce the religious experience.

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practices. In comparing the memoranda of 1404 and 1412 with other episodes of Dati's life I have also hoped to avoid the pitfalls of what Philippe Buc has called 'the microscopic view' of history, in which a specific example is endowed with a revelatory quality, as if it encapsulated 'a culture's essence, values, or structures': Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual*: 253.

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