#Nardo di Cione (?), \*The Judgment of Brutus\*, ca. 1345#

##Dante Society (ex-Palazzo del Arte della Lana, Sala d’Udienza)##

The lunette fresco of \*The Judgment of Brutus\* has received practically no serious attention from students of Florentine art and history, yet it is one of the more interesting pictures of the mid-fourteenth century (figure 1). Produced for the \*Sala d’Udienza\*, or Audience Hall, of the headquarters for the [Arte della Lana](insert link) probably sometime in the middle of the 1340s, the allegorical painting was originally adorned with a series of inscriptions on scrolls that made clear the identities of each figure. We know that the central character, seated on a bench, represents the First Consul of Rome, Junius Brutus, famous for his wisdom and staunch defense of Republicanism in the face of tyranny. Not to be confused with his more infamous descendent (the assassin of Julius Caesar), Junius Brutus led the uprising in 709 BCE that resulted in the dismantling of Rome’s decadent monarchy and the creation of a Republican government that fourteenth-century Florentines took as the predecessor of their own. It comes as no surprise, then, that the painting’s composition, attributed recently to [Nardo di Cione](insert link), follows closely the groundbreaking template produced by Ambrogio Lorenzetti for his equally political picture, the \*Allegory of Good Government\*, completed in 1338 for the Room of the Nine inside Siena’s Palazzo Pubblico.

In the Wool Guild’s painting, the four Cardinal Virtues of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance – all of them depicted as women, as was the custom – flank the seated judge, forming a kind of buffer so that the two pairs of finely dressed male petitioners cannot get too close to him. The men spit bitter accusations and threats at the Virtues and, through them, at Junius Brutus: they have axes to grind and wish to make clear that the wisdom of Brutus is not to their liking. The Virtues, by contrast, defend Brutus’ actions and dare the petitioners to follow through on their threats. They will not be cowed by the aggressions of self-important, but ultimately petty, complainants.

To the lower right, however, we see a different exchange, and one that seems to catch the eye of Junius Brutus (who looks down in that direction). There we see Temperance engage with a seemingly deferential man, who actually pulls away from the Virtue: she urges him to approach the judge and guarantees that he will receive a fair hearing as long as he shows some respect. The man, in turn, humbly acknowledges his own shortcomings and worries that he is not worthy of Brutus’ attentions – when, in fact, he clearly is the ONLY one among the group of four men who merits a hearing.

The painting’s message seems clear to any member of the Wool Guild who might have gazed upon it while waiting his or her turn to file a grievance or receive judgment from its consuls. The rule of law, it says, must be acknowledged; judges must be respected; and all those who appear before it with the proper attitude will be welcomed before the court. But, of course, it also illustrates clearly that those who oppose that court and its commitment to objective jurisprudence will be met with the wrath of its administrators.

The timing of the fresco’s production, arguably initiated and completed during the middle years of the 1340s, corresponds to a major crisis that threatened the status quo of the Florence Republic. In the spring of 1343, Walter of Brienne, the Duke of Athens, permitted wool-workers normally excluded from the Arte della Lana to form their own guild, which in turn threatened the economic potency of the Wool Guild and the stability of a city that had traditionally relegated laborers to positions of inferiority with respect to their mercantile superiors. Walter’s ouster that summer was directly connected to this move, demonstrating both the depth of the Wool Guild’s concern over this matter and the power it wielded across the city. When the Duke of Athens fled into exile in August, 1343, the woolworkers’ trade association that he had supported was quickly dismantled and its members were either folded back into the Wool Guild in subordinate roles or were disenfranchised altogether.

However, simmering animosities lingered. Some of these now-disenfranchised laborers wished to revive the guild that had been demolished by the wool merchants, and cells of malcontents were formed in 1344 to plot some kind of revival of the corporation that had been taken from them. These movements, when discovered, were suppressed quickly and mercilessly: ringleaders were arrested on charges of treason and sedition, tried within 72 hours, and hanged shortly thereafter. It is in the context of these bitter arguments that the \*Judgment of Brutus\* must be considered, for the will of the guild – expressed through the positioning of the Roman judge and his virtuous guardians – is here celebrated as omnipotent, merciful, and benevolent: precisely the things that many of those on the outside believed it wasn’t.

In a very real sense, then, the \*Judgment of Brutus\* is a picture of pure political and economic propaganda. It attempted both to teach and to control viewers who saw it during times of controversy in the Audience Hall of the Arte della Lana, but did so by promoting itself in ways that, in part, defied credulity.

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