Inventing the Middle Ages: An Early Modern Forger Hiding in Plain Sight

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For the fake that is a scholar's work [and] contains some spurious or fictitious matter is no reason to condemn everything else he wrote as false.

Ludovico Antonio Muratori1

The subject of this essay lies hidden in one of Anthony Grafton's footnotes. I did not find my topic there, having come to it long before I realized that it was buried in the back of Forgers and Critics.2 And yet it seems appropriate to rediscover a portion of my own research itinerary snaking its way through the end matter of a Grafton book, in a Graftonian footnote on forgery no less. Perhaps I have now intrigued you—and hopefully Tony is wondering which footnote I have in mind. Turn to page 138, note 5. There you will find a brief mention of the eighteenth-century lawyer, historian, and inveterate forger Alessandro Macchiavelli (1693–1766) and his fantastic project of inventing medieval women.3 This essay transforms a passing reference to one minor act

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3 Macchiavelli remains virtually unstudied, but see Olivier Bonfait, “Le collectionneur dans la cité: Alessandro Macchiavelli et le collectionisme à Bologne au XVIIIe siècle,” in Geografia del
of eighteenth-century forgery into a full-fledged portrait of the early modern forger. It reconstructs Macchiavelli as a flesh-and-blood figure who saw the history of medieval Bologna a productive site for numerous inventions of the past.

The Strange Career of a Settecento Medievalist

By his own admission, Macchiavelli considered the Middle Ages to be a subject of great personal significance. He belonged to a Bolognese family of Florentine origins that arrived in the city in the mid-thirteenth century at the height of its medieval prosperity. Macchiavelli proudly noted references in ancient documents to his family’s arrival in the city. The fifteenth-century Dominican preacher Girolamo Borselli dated their flight from Florence to 1259 in his *Cronica gestorum ac factorum memorabilium civitatis Bononie*, one of the most carefully researched and reliable chronicles of the important events of medieval Bologna. Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750) selected and edited Borselli’s chronicle for inclusion in his *Rerum italicarum scriptores* (1723–51). Thus, the arrival of the Macchiavelli family in Bologna became a tiny piece of the vast documentary mosaic of the Italian Middle Ages that was under construction.

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