THE LIFE OF
Gian Lorenzo Bernini
by DOMENICO BERNINI

A TRANSLATION AND CRITICAL EDITION, WITH INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY,
BY FRANCO MORMANDO

The Pennsylvania State University Press
University Park, Pennsylvania
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Most Eminent and Most Reverend Lord,

If a gift acquires value from the rarity of the object bestowed, certainly in presenting to Your Excellency The Life of the Cavalier Bernini, I can assure you that it is indeed a precious gift that I give you, one of such rarity that it lacks little to render it simply unique. Singular and extraordinary was this illustrious man, and proclaimed as such by eight pontiffs, two kings of France, a king of Spain, two rulers of England, and, in general, by all the princes of Europe. They, the crowned heads of our world, all seemed to be in competition with each other in attempting to secure for themselves some work of his hand and to admire his person. The rarity and grandeur of this gift match in full the grandeur of its recipient. Your Excellency will justifiably be able to receive in his embrace Bernini, who returns in glory from the other world, satisfied to see his reputation in this world assured by Your Excellency’s invincible name. From your illustrious ancestors, you have inherited not only the splendor of your blood but also the role of protector of men of talent, as well as an innate predilection for talent. It is certainly a matter of great merit—perhaps uniquely so among all that of which any potentate of Europe can boast—to be able to claim descent, as you can, from the Emperor Constantine, whose granddaughter, Euride, daughter of the Emperor Constantius, was wed to Prince Manfred, the foundation of your ancient family.

However, this fact of your family’s origins is, in my view, by no means the element most worthy of either the greatest or the highest part of praise. Something else instead, with well-deserved admiration, seizes my mind and, with even greater reason, causes me to repeat the words of Emperor Constantius, who, after learning of the vicissitudes of his daughter, Euride, and her husband, Manfred, exclaimed in astonishment, “O res miranda!” O wonder of wonders! (from which exclamation his land of Mirandola later took its name): it is the fact that, throughout the course of your embattled fortunes, Your Excellency endured it all with the constancy and virtue of a prince, so much so that it seems as if greatness came forward to meet you, and not vice versa, and has raised you to that exalted dignity that at present you enjoy in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. May Your Excellency therefore live ever happily in the good fortune that you, through your own efforts, have so honorably created for yourself. Accustomed as you are of fixing your eyes upon the pages of learned men, may you graciously receive this gift that I now present to you. And may you continue to increase the capital already accumulated by your ancestors, by not only rendering works worthy of publication but also by protecting works that are indeed published, using that abundant profit of glory that brings acclamation to the one to whom these works are dedicated, as well as to him who publishes them. With all due respect and homage, I kiss your sacred vestments and remain Your Excellency’s

Most Humble and Most Devoted Servant,

Rocco Bernabò
Imprimatur,\textsuperscript{12}

pending approval of the Most Reverend Father Master of the
Sacred Apostolic Palace,
D. De Zaulis, Vicegerent, Archbishop of Theodosia\textsuperscript{13}

By the order of the Most Reverend Father Master of the Sacred Palace, Father Gregorio Sellari, I have read the Life of Signor Cavaliere Gio. Lorenzo Bernini recounted by Signor Domenico Bernini, his son; in this work, I have found nothing that is contrary to good morals or our holy faith. I, in fact, admired the fine way in which, in this book, the great deeds of the father find most adequate expression through the felicitous pen of the son; the former, renowned for the many things he created; the latter, famous for the many things he has written. The former deserves so worthy a writer, just as the latter deserves so worthy a subject about which to write. Thus, in the son, the great talent and mastery of the father will have renewed life, for as Solomon has said, “Filius sapiens doctrina Patris.”\textsuperscript{14} And, in the father, who is once again brought forth into the light, the learning and devoted love of the son will be perpetuated. I therefore judge this work worthy of publication, for the glory of so great a father and the praise of so learned a son, as well as, furthermore, for the inspiration that such a publication will provide for the arts and sciences and, in outstanding fashion, for the education of children in the love and gratitude owed by them to their parents. From Rome. 16 January 1712.

*Francesco Maria Guelfi of the Society of Jesus*\textsuperscript{15}

Imprimatur,

Father Gregorius Sellari, Master of the Sacred Apostolic Palace,
of the Order of Preachers.\textsuperscript{16}
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THE LIFE OF
GIAN LORENZO BERNINI

Chapter I
BIRTH, UPBRINGING, AND STUDIES OF GIAN LORENZO
IN THE CITY OF NAPLES UNTIL THE AGE OF TEN.
HIS ARRIVAL IN ROME.

(Introduction to the Book.)¹ If ever in times past Heavenly Providence Most
High has perchance desired to demonstrate how capable supreme talent² be
in securing the attainment of supreme glory, and how stable and sublime be
the foundation of merit alone in elevating persons to the plenitude of honor,
certainly that day arrived when It brought into this world the Cavalier [2]
Gian Lorenzo Bernini.³ For the excellence of his accomplishments and the
magnitude of the acclamation bestowed upon him, the Cavalier Bernini truly
had, and has, no equal in our times. His fame can rightfully count him among
the most remarkable men of genius of times past, so much so that his memory
remains glorious even in these present times and will endure as such likewise
in the future. Thus is his renown, for he was so able to equip his mind with a
marvelous composite of most exceptional talents, each of which alone could
have rendered any man great and admirable. His greatest distinction was not
that of being acclaimed as excellent merely in his profession, for he possessed
within himself, and to an excellent degree, all those elements that can produce
a man of great vision and talent. It is no wonder, therefore, that the leading
potentates of Europe, so stirred by his talent, competed with each other, as it
were, in admiring his genius and in rewarding him for the tangible expressions
of that genius with the bestowal of gifts worthy of royal magnificence.⁴ It is
our intention, therefore, to record in the present work the life of this illustri-
ous personage, whom talent alone rendered glorious and celebrated through-
out the world. It is, furthermore, our intention to do so with that accuracy
demanded of all those who describe events to which almost everyone still
Chapter II

GIAN LORENZO’S FIRST ENTRANCE INTO THE PAPAL PALACE.
HIS AUDIENCE AND INTERACTIONS WITH PAUL V
AND CARDINALS OF THAT COURT.
HIS FIRST STUDIES IN ROME.

(Paul V, Lover of Talent; Conditions in Rome During This Period.) Reigning at that time in the city of Rome under the name of Paul V was Camillo Borghese. This was a pontiff among the most blessed in centuries past, the most meritorious in the present, and whose memory in the future will remain ever illustrious. Under this pontiff, a most vigilant promoter of men of talent, that great court was flourishing more so than ever before, through the great abundance of excellent individuals in every profession, the majesty of its edifices, and everything capable of procuring exceptional fame for that pontificate. In the heart of this great prince, occupying a place equal to any other expression of creative talent, were sculpture and architecture and by these two means Paul greatly amplified the ecclesiastical and secular magnificence of Rome. For the adornment of the city, Paul spent perhaps more than five million scudi, but did so to no detriment whatsoever to the states under his care. These matters are well known and, hence, there is no need to go into further detail about them here. Equaling Paul’s love for all things beautiful and glorious was that of his nephew, Cardinal Scipione Caffarelli, son of one of the pope’s sisters, who, when promoted to the cardinalate, assumed the name and coat of arms of the Borghese family. He, too, held in the greatest esteem those same arts and likewise kept in continual occupation the talent of their practitioners. It was therefore commonly believed that perhaps the only factor preventing this period of history from being considered equal to the most illustrious and most renowned epochs of antiquity was simply age.
Chapter III

SOME OF GIAN LORENZO'S WORKS EXECUTED AT THE REQUEST OF PAUL V. THE ACCOLADES HE RECEIVED FOR THEM.

(Other Works of the Cavaliere During the Pontificate of Paul V.) The pope had already been informed of the progress that Gian Lorenzo was making in his studies and of the applause that he received for the aforementioned works. Greatly pleased by these reports, Paul therefore summoned Gian Lorenzo to his presence and first requested that he execute his portrait in marble. He then ordered him to create, according to his own inspiration, four noble statues that were to adorn the palace of his Villa Pinciana, where they were to be placed.¹ In little time Gian Lorenzo produced a finished portrait of such fine style² that the pope kept it in his own room until the day of his death.³ But of greater concern in Gian Lorenzo's mind was his work on the statues destined for the palace in the pope's villa.⁴ He was well aware of the significance of the commitment he had undertaken, that is, the execution of the orders of a pontiff involving the adornment of one of the most famous villas of Europe.

(Villa Pinciana and a Description.) This villa is located outside the ancient city gate, Porta Collina, also called Pinciana, and is completely surrounded by walls that embrace the expanse of a most noble garden, five miles in circumference. In its very center rises a palace whose exterior is entirely decorated with ancient bas-reliefs, constructed according to the architectural design and supervision of Giovanni Vasanzio the Fleming.⁵ The palace is home to a veritable population of ancient statues, almost all intact, preserved for us against the fury of the barbarians amid the very ruins of Rome. Among the principal works of highest quality in that collection are the Seneca in the Bath and the
Chapter IV

DEATH OF PAUL V AND ELECTION OF GREGORY XV.

THE NEW POPE'S DISPLAYS OF ESTEEM TOWARD
GIAN LORENZO. HE BESTOWS UPON HIM THE
TITLE OF CAVALIERE. GIAN LORENZO'S ACTIVITIES
UNTIL THE DEATH OF THIS PONTIFF.

(Gregory XV Assumes the Papacy.) In the meantime, at the end of January of the
year 1621, the pontiff, Paul V, arrived at the end of his days. Provoking great
agitation throughout the Roman court, however, was not the memory of the
deceased prince (which always diminishes with the subsequent succession of
new events), but rather the anticipation surrounding the future government.
To the collective mourning over this loss, Gian Lorenzo added his own per-
sonal tears, acknowledging that pontiff as his first benefactor (for this is the
name that he afterward would always use to address him). At the same time,
he worried about the outcome of the imminent election of a new pope. His
fears were very soon quieted by the elevation of Cardinal Alessandro Ludovisi
to the papal throne. This prelate had been in the past among the greatest as far
as esteem accorded him, while, in the present, he was so outstanding in merit
that he faced no competition whatsoever within a full conclave of fifty-two
cardinals. He was thus proclaimed pope on the second day of the conclave
by the common consent of all. It is not to be believed how greatly Bernini
rejoiced in seeing elected as his prince the same person who had shown such
enthusiasm for his artistic efforts and who just a short while before, as already
mentioned, [22] had been a guest in the artist's own home with that liberty
and open familiarity with which the prelate would have obligated unto him-
self not only Bernini, but his blocks of marble as well.2

(Affection and Esteem of the New Pope Toward the Cavalier.) Gian Lorenzo
requested, and was immediately admitted to, the kissing of the papal feet with