

Daniel Woolf

Review Article

The Political Culture of the Italian Quattrocento: Some Recent Studies

Cosimo 'il Vecchio' de' Medici 1389-1464. Edited by Francis Ames-Lewis. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1992. Pp. xii, 316. \$121.50.

The Soderini and the Medici: Power and Patronage in Fifteenth-Century Florence. By Paula C. Clarke. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991. Pp. ix, 293. \$102.00.

The Florentine Enlightenment, 1400-1450. By George Holmes. Paperback edition with corrections. 1969. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992. Pp. xxvi, 274. \$40.50.

Filelfo in Milan: Writings 1451-1477. By Diana Robin. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991. Pp. xvi, 269. \$51.95.

It has been just under a century since the death of Jacob Burckhardt, the Swiss historian who more or less invented the Renaissance as a distinct period of historical study. In his most famous book, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Burckhardt identified the Italian origins of the movement and painted its outlines in broad strokes and vivid colors; at the same time, he created several memorable tags, for instance "the state as a work of art," to express the confluence of intellect and power that his variety of *kulturgeschichte* found most captivating. Himself a disenchanting liberal who grew increasingly reactionary as he aged, Burckhardt tended to stress the role of princes and despots in creating the patronage

conditions necessary for the flourishing of humanism and the arts, and especially for the great cultural monuments of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. At the very least, he made little or no distinction between signorial regimes like Ferrara, Mantua and Milan, and those republican communes such as Florence that would, in any case, succumb (with the notable exception of *la serenissima*, socially conservative, aristocratic Venice) to rule by great family dynasties such as the Medici; virtually all of these former republics would eventually take the final step of conversion to formal territorial principates, like the Medici Grand Duchy of Tuscany, that were often little more than puppets of France and Spain, the duelling transalpine superpowers of the sixteenth century. Yet *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* is not, fundamentally, a book about either politics or art (on which latter topic Burckhardt was to write a companion volume); rather, it provides a series of sketches of the Renaissance, unified by concepts such as the "discovery of man" and the "study of antiquity."

The historiography of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has moved a long way since Burckhardt's static picture, though his book maintains its reputation as a classic and has recently been reissued in a Penguin edition. The late Wallace K. Ferguson, one of the premier Renaissance scholars of this century, reviewed both Burckhardt and his early critics in a useful work, now outdated, called *The Renaissance in Historical Thought* (1948); a rather more literary treatment has recently been given the subject in a book entitled *The Idea of the Renaissance* (Kerrigan and Braden, 1989, 3-35).

Perhaps the most serious challenge to Burckhardt's picture of the development of the Italian Renaissance came from those who had ideological as well as historical reasons to criticize him: in particular, the Hitler refugees of the 1930s and 1940s, German and Austrian historians who naturally saw in Fascism an analogue for fifteenth-century despotisms, right down to their control of the fine arts and literature. Two of the leaders of this group have died within the past five years. Felix Gilbert was known as a historian of modern strategy as much as for his work on *Machiavelli and Guicciardini* (Gilbert 1965), a brilliant study of the final crisis between liberty and nascent absolutism in the waning years of the Florentine republic, and of the effects of this on the two most famous historians and political analysts of the day. Somewhat less well known

among general readers, but just as influential a scholar, Hans Baron attacked Burckhardt head on in his important magnum opus, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, in which he argued that the Swiss historian's "categories of approach fail to do full justice to the spirit of the early quattrocento" (Baron 1966, 390). It was not the despotisms, nor family authority, but the spirit of political participation and the safeguarding of ancient Roman republican values that engendered the greatest achievements of the Renaissance, achievements that, much more than Burckhardt, he was prepared to assign principally to Florence. Baron dubbed his formulation of the link between humanism and politics "civic humanism" (Rabil 1988), and focussed attention on the second and third generation, after Petrarch, of Florentine humanists, those active at the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth century, the very time when Florence, still a few decades away from Medici dominance, was struggling for her political survival against the aggression of the great Lombard despot, Giangaleazzo Visconti, duke of Milan (for Visconti, read Hitler: Baron even explicitly compares the timely death of Giangaleazzo to the British escape at Dunkirk). In Baron's account, Florentine humanists such as Leonardo Bruni (d. 1444) achieved a revitalized sense of civic identity, an appreciation of the role of the active individual in society (hitherto devalued, even by Petrarch), and of the value of republican institutions; they attained these things through their study of the history of antiquity, without, as Burckhardt would have it, becoming merely antiquarian. In turn, they revised several long-standing perspectives on the past, turning the Roman would-be emperor Julius Caesar—idealized a century earlier by Dante, a great admirer of emperors—into a heavy, and praising his assassins as guardians of liberty.

George Holmes's *The Florentine Enlightenment*, the first of the books under review, is a reprint, with a new preface, of a work first published in 1969. On the spectrum between Burckhardt and Baron, it is much closer to the latter in both structure and content, but there remain some important differences. Whereas Baron's work remained Florence-centred (despite referring to an early *Italian Renaissance*), Holmes looks further afield and finds a crucial influence on Florentine cultural developments in Rome and Roman-trained humanists. In some ways, Holmes's book echoes a more radical critique of Baron by the American historian Jerrold Seigel, who argued for an essential continuity in Renaissance humanism

(and especially its rhetorical focus with a turning away from philosophy) from Petrarch to Bruni, largely reducing Baron's "crisis" of 1397-1402 to the historiographical equivalent of an optical illusion, a chimera that disappears if one simply re-dates a single key writing by Bruni, the *Laudatio Florentinae urbis*, ascribed by Baron (on evidence that is at best questionable) to 1402, the year of Florence's resurgence (Seigel 1966; Baron 212-24). Holmes does not go as far as Seigel in this regard, though like Seigel he places considerable weight on the heritage of Petrarch, and especially his disciple among the second generation, the Florentine chancellor and humanist Coluccio Salutati, whose followers included several future chancellors (among them Bruni). A linguist of limited abilities himself, it was Salutati nonetheless who indirectly turned humanism from a rather mechanical rewriting of Ciceronian Latin to a more sophisticated reconstruction of antiquity through the study of Greek, hitherto little-known in the west; he did so by inviting the outstanding Byzantine scholar-diplomat Manuel Chrysoloras to lecture in Florence in 1397, the first of several such visitors over the next sixty years.

If Burckhardt saw the Renaissance through the eyes of a nineteenth-century strongman such as Bismarck (Gilbert 1990, 85), and Baron saw it as an analogue of resistance to fascism, Holmes may picture it as an early version of the sort of intellectual and political fermentation more often associated with the eighteenth century. Beyond the "Enlightenment" of the title, various other analogies from the age of Voltaire and Montesquieu creep in: thus a term such as the "diplomatic revolution" is more than once (Holmes 71, 246) transplanted from the 1750s to the 1450s, and used to describe the realignment of Florence, now under informal Medici rule, with its traditional enemy, Milan, after that city's brief and unsuccessful experiment with republicanism in the late 1440s was quelled by a despot agreeable to the Medici, the Romagnan condottiere, Francesco Sforza.

Holmes ably demonstrates that Rome, a poorer and much neglected city that had suffered from the long absence of the papacy at Avignon in the fourteenth century and the ensuing schism, played a critical part in the "enlightenment" at Florence. For one thing, the resurgent popes of the post-conciliar period, Martin V, Eugenius IV, and especially Nicholas V were often favorably disposed to Florence (so, too, was the deposed schismatic antipope John XXII); for another, the leading professional

humanists of Florence, including Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini, often cut their administrative teeth in the most sophisticated bureaucracy of the age, the papal curia. But perhaps the most important connection was money. As Holmes shows here and elsewhere, the wealthiest bankers of Florence, the Medici, became all the richer by bankrolling the postschismatic curia, thereby cementing a connection between the two cities for the rest of the century and into the next. Ultimately, as Holmes also argues, the activities of the Graecophile Nicholas V, whose many Byzantine imports eclipsed the Latin achievements of native Italian scholars, would cause Florence to lose its position on the cutting edge of humanist study to Rome; this happened just as Renaissance humanism itself experienced a shift in focus, away from the close textual and philological study, founded in rhetoric, that we associate with *Salutati* and Bruni, and toward a revived interest in metaphysics, now liberated from its burdensome association with medieval scholasticism by a resurgent, Byzantine-influenced, interest in Plato and neoplatonism. It is no accident that the critical figure in this transformation, Lorenzo Valla (who figured similarly, incidentally, in Seigel's account), was a philologist who spent considerable time in Nicholas V's employ, after an earlier career of writing against the papacy on behalf of Alfonso the Magnanimous, the Aragonese monarch of Naples. Without Valla, the reconciliation of rhetoric and philosophy could not have occurred, and the achievements of the great late quattrocento philosopher/philologists, Ficino, Pico and Poliziano, would have been inconceivable.

Holmes's account is both agreeable and persuasive; it provides a welcome corrective to both the Baron and Seigel views, and the attention paid to the political background to events renders this book highly suitable as an upper-year textbook. One might wish for a more balanced assessment of some figures: anxious to demonstrate the loss of Florentine cultural hegemony in the second half of the fifteenth century, Holmes is particularly hard, in his last few pages, on the late Byzantine translator and antiplatonist, George of Trebizond, whom he regards as a third-rater; recent works have been more even-handed in their assessment of George (Geanakoplos 359) and he is now regarded as a major figure on the level of George Gemistos Plethon and Cardinal Bessarion. Although there are points such as this where the reader may question Holmes's verdicts, his

picture of Florentine-Roman humanism remains compelling, and it is good to have it back again in an inexpensive paperback.

The most important political and financial figure of the middle years of the fifteenth century, Cosimo di Giovanni de' Medici, has himself been the focus of renewed attention. Building on the solid accomplishments of his father, Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici, Cosimo "il Vecchio" (a posthumous sobriquet coined to distinguish him from his sixteenth-century grand-ducal namesakes) turned a flourishing business into a political dynamo. Narrowly escaping death at the hands of his rivals, the Albizzi, in 1433, he went briefly into exile, only to be recalled by citizens who feared an impending Albizzi tyranny as Florence's disastrous war against Lucca drew to a close. The cure, from one point of view, was to prove worse than the disease: though Cosimo always maintained the fiction that he was a mere private citizen (and in fact only served as senior magistrate or gonfalonier for three terms of two months each), historians such as Nicolai Rubinstein (1966) and Dale Kent (1978) have long since demonstrated the way in which Medici manipulation of the electoral and political process, through the creation of extraordinary councils and the staging of informal *pratiche* or "discussions," together with the granting of extraordinary powers or *balìa* to Medici-controlled committees in times of crisis, created a family rule that would only be challenged sporadically, in the 1450s, briefly after Cosimo's death in 1464, again in the early years of the rule of his famous grandson, Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449-92), and finally, with more force, in 1494 during the calamitous French invasion of Italy. Francis Ames-Lewis has assembled a strong, if rather expensive, collection of essays on Cosimo, many of which were delivered at a 1989 Warburg Institute symposium marking the six-hundredth anniversary of Cosimo's birth. The papers run the gamut of Cosimo's career as banker, politician, and patron. George Holmes demonstrates the close connection between Cosimo and the popes that benefited both Florence and Rome. Robert Black traces his influence as a patron over the long-time Florentine subject state, Arezzo (home of Brunni). A number of essays, such as those by John Paoletti on Cosimo and Lorenzo's artistic patronage, and those by Dale Kent, Crispin Robinson and Caroline Elam, treat Cosimo as a religious man and patron of churches and religious orders; as Kent shows, Cosimo's support of the Buonimini di San Martino, a lay confraternity devoted to the provision of assistance to the

poor, exemplifies the "connections and contradictions between ways of serving the glory of God, the honour of the city, and the commemoration of self" (49). Some of the papers are a bit drier and more technical, but rewarding nonetheless: Albinia de la Mare's lengthy study of Cosimo's book collection, assembled in part through his patronage of collectors and antiquaries such as Niccolò Niccoli, is a stand-out in this regard. Somewhat more speculative pieces are offered by two art historians, Rab Hatfield and Susan McKillop, respectively on Cosimo's chapel in the lavish new palazzo built for him by the unofficial family architect, Michelozzo, and on the meaning of Cosimo's tomb. Finally, for sheer entertainment, one should not neglect a brief but insightful paper on Cosimo's "wit and wisdom" by Alison Brown. While the sayings of Cosimo are relatively well-known (most derive either from Machiavelli or from the gossipy quattrocento stationer to the rich-and-famous, Vespasiano da Bisticci), Brown borrows from social anthropology and sociology, in particular from Norbert Elias, to show how such humor was deliberately used to fashion Cosimo into a sophisticated but unpretentious man of the people, and thereby to strengthen his heirs' grip on power. Among the gems repeated here Cosimo's close-to-final words are memorable; asked by his wife a few hours before his death why he was keeping his eyes shut, he is said to have replied: "To get them used to it."

Among those who would have mourned Cosimo's passing in 1464 was Tommaso Soderini, scion of a cadet line of one of Florence's patrician families. Tommaso and his older brother, Niccolò, are the subject of an informative study of Florentine high politics in the fifteenth century entitled *The Soderini and the Medici*, by Paula C. Clarke of McGill University. A disciple of Nicolai Rubinstein, the leading authority on the early Medici period, Clarke has provided helpful illumination of a dark chapter in the making of the regime through the story of one of its rival families. The book is not, as one might expect, a complete study of the relations of the two clans, nor does it have much to say about Tommaso's much more famous son, Piero, elected gonfalonier for life in 1502 during the last years of the penultimate Florentine republic. The present book is instead a study of a single generation and particularly of these two siblings; actually, it is narrower still, for after the opening chapters the older brother Niccolò, newly disenchanted with Cosimo, fades from view, and the bulk of the work concerns the ups and downs in the career of his

brother who backed the Medici horse a bit later, but remained more or less in the inner circle of the regime right up to his own death in 1485, at the advanced age of eighty-two. Both brothers were the sons of an illegitimate Soderini heir, Lorenzo, whose execution for fraud in 1405 had left Tommaso and Niccolò orphans. The latter was initially drawn into the Medici orbit in the late 1420s on the principle of "my enemy's enemy is my friend," after he had unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate a Medici foe whom the Soderini blamed for Lorenzo's death. Niccolò was almost immediately caught up in the factional politics of the 1430s, only to fall out with the Medici, and with his own brother Tommaso, a late convert.

Along the way, Clarke uses her story of the brothers as a window on to the worlds of quattrocento finance, peninsular politics and interfamily rivalries, raising such as issues as the importance, or lack thereof, of kinship in determining family alliances. As Clarke shows, both the Soderini, and especially Niccolò, initially supported Cosimo because in 1434 he appeared to be the great defender of the *libertas populi* against the ineptly conspiratorial Albizzi. It is ironic that, Tommaso, a steadfast defender of the republic, would contribute so much to the power of Cosimo, his son Piero and grandson Lorenzo, a power that in the end proved the undoing of Florence's communal tradition. Clarke's account is clearly written and persuasive, though it shows signs of the original thesis from which it was drawn: the narrative bogs down in places, with a tendency to slip into lengthy recitations of foreign affairs that will be well known to the specialist audience of this book; and there is a certain narrowness of perspective in the second half of the book in which Tommaso alone emerges as the central figure. The absence from her discussion of the crucial period of the late 1460s, when Tommaso's position as a power broker peaked, of any reference to Mark Phillips's monograph on the contemporary observer Marco Parenti (for which Clarke relies on an earlier Phillips article), is also somewhat surprising. On the whole, though, this is a thoroughly competent and important study of one of the many families with whose support the hegemony of Cosimo and his heirs became possible.

As the different life-courses of the Soderini illustrate, and as one is apt to forget reading the essays in Ames-Lewis's essay anthology, not everyone loved Cosimo, even among the humanists. One who decidedly did

not was his younger contemporary Francesco Filelfo, a peripatetic humanist-for-hire, and one of the outstanding Hellenists of the mid-fifteenth century. Filelfo (1398-1481) was the long-time servant of Francesco Sforza, the *giovanni-come-lately illegitimate* duke of Milan, and eventual ally of Cosimo, but his antipathy to Cosimo, as much as lack of employment, kept him out of the city, of which he was not in any case a native, for most of his career. He had all sorts of reasons to resent the Medici. Filelfo could not, apparently, forgive one of the blackest marks on Cosimo's reputation, the gratuitous exile of the celebrated humanist Palla Strozzi, who happened to be related to a leading anti-Medicean family (and for whom Filelfo would write a poetic consolation praising his patron's stoic behavior under duress). If that were not enough, in 1433 Francesco had already been beaten up by a thug whom he believed to be in Cosimo's employ; he would be reconciled to Florence only in the last months of his life, returning to the city at Lorenzo il Magnifico's invitation in 1481, a few days before his death, and then in a condition of abject poverty.

Time has been little kinder to Filelfo than Cosimo's alleged goon. Filelfo's notorious temperament and apparent willingness to "suck up" to the powerful has made him a somewhat repugnant figure—rather strangely given the exorbitant praise usually heaped on Lorenzo Valla, who exhibited many of the same characteristics. Diana Robin has set about the task of rehabilitating Filelfo's reputation by a close textual study of his works in the context of his career. A classicist herself, Robin brings greater than usual proficiency with Greek and humanist Latin to her study of Filelfo's scholarly, moral and poetic corpus, and offers a startling reinterpretation of his most infamous work of apparent obsequiousness, the *Sforziad*. As Robin points out in her introduction, "historians have long tended to denigrate the intellectuals who were attached to the great signorial courts in early modern Italy as mere tools," and Filelfo has been no exception though he was "no lackey" (Robin, 3-4). Long neglected, it will take some time fully to restore his reputation, and the present book does not pretend to be a complete biography. Rather, Robin concentrates on the years of his residency in Milan and its subject city, Pavia, during which period Filelfo wrote his most impressive works. These included, good humanist that he was, a collection of familiar letters (many of them fictitious) in the style of those by Cicero and Petrarch: Robin calls this

epistolario "a virtual manual of literary clientage," and indeed it shows Filelfo skilfully plying not one but a number of different patrons over the years, and thereby preserving a good deal more independence than if he had, like his younger contemporary Ficino, relied strictly on a single family. In her exemplary second chapter, Robin treats the *Sforziad* or, to give it its Greek name, *Sphortias*, which he commenced in 1453, two years after Sforza's successful crushing (with the collusion of the erstwhile antiMilanese cities, Florence and Venice) of the short-lived "Ambrosian republic" and investiture as ducal successor to his former employer, Filippo Maria Visconti. Filelfo's poem, as is well known, is an epic modelled on Virgil's *Aeneid* (and drawing on more recent humanist imitators such as Petrarch's *Africa*), that recounts Sforza's rise to power. What has been unappreciated before Robin's careful scholarship is that the work is far from being thoroughly complimentary to Sforza, who comes off as a bit of a butcher. In fact, the poem was not aimed at the rough-hewn condottiere, who would not have appreciated its subtleties, but at more sophisticated patrons, including another ex-mercenary of an altogether more cultivated disposition, Federigo da Montefeltro, titular duke of Urbino in the papal states—at least Federigo (most famous for the portraits, all in profile, that disguise the mangling of his face in a tournament) had a humanist education. Robin shows how Filelfo's version of the 1447 siege and sack of Piacenza, a client city of Milan, falls well short of being a panegyric of the duke; in this regard it contrasts well with the work of a paid Sforza chancery official like Giovanni Simonetta, whose own history of Sforza Milan completely ignores the sufferings of the Piacenzans. As it turns out, by 1455, Filelfo was growing genuinely disenchanted with Milan and with his unreliable Sforza patron; at one point he sought to leave the city for employment elsewhere, preferably with the king of France, Charles VII. But Sforza proved reluctant to let him go, and only the lack of support from the duke's son and heir, Galeazzo Maria Sforza, compelled him finally to leave, for Rome, in 1474. Even then, he had to leave his family behind, and the absence proved brief; he returned to Milan in June, 1476, two days after the pathetic death of his third wife, Laura and a few months before the assassination of Galeazzo Maria.

The sequence of events in Robin's account can be a bit confusing in places, partly because the work focusses on individual works and has to

slide forward and backward in time in order to contextualize them; it is as well that she has provided a chronology, along with an appendix of extracts (in Latin and Greek) from Filelfo's principal works. This is not a book for beginners, probably not even for undergraduates; but it is a beautifully crafted and original work of scholarship that repays careful reading. Like the others under review, it sheds much new light on the century in Italian history that hundreds of scholars since Burckhardt's time have found endlessly fascinating.

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