

The Tensions Hidden Beneath Religious Festivities and Carnivals: A Social Analysis of Public Celebrations in Renaissance Florence

Kristen Brady

Whether it be the annual carnival preceding Lent or the feast days of their patron saint John the Baptist, Renaissance Florentines wildly prepared for—and indulged in—the splendors and exuberance that these types of celebrations fashioned. “The whole city is engaged in preparing for the feast,” said Gregorio Dati, a prominent silk merchant, on the feast of St. John the Baptist. “Everyone is filled with gaiety.”¹ Religious celebrations as such were open to the entire community, no matter if the citizens were part of the aristocracy, the clergy, or even the lower class. Not only were the festivities intended for the public, but they involved people of all trades and skills: architects, astrologists, craftsmen, painters, poets, sculptors, and more.² However, despite the unifying effect of public celebrations on the entire Florentine community, the events themselves were managed by an elite group of the aristocracy, leading to an exhibition of strong class divisions and tensions.

There were numerous festivals and feast days celebrated during this time in Florence, such as the feasts of Cosmas and Damian in September, the feast day of St. Barnabas, May Day, Epiphany, Palm Sunday, and the anniversary of the battle of Campaldino.³ While many feast days revolved around religion, others sprang from political scenarios. The anniversary of the battle of Campaldino celebrated the Guelphs’ defeat of the Ghibellines, and the feasts of Cosmas and Damian represented the reaffirmation of Medici power. What happened throughout Florence politically, and even in the rest of the nearby countries and city-states, generally affected which festivities were celebrated. Cosimo I civically celebrated the anniversary of his election, for example, and it is unlikely that this was celebrated as extravagantly after the Medici reign diminished.⁴ Due to the annual consistency of and excitement for the carnival and the feast of St. John the Baptist, there are a great deal more

documents speaking on those events than the lesser known feasts, and thus more that can be learned about the way the classes and groups interacted.

According to Gregorio Dati, Florence began preparing for the feast of St. John the Baptist at least two months in advance. Adjacent celebrations such as weddings were planned to coincide with these feast days, as joining them would bring more honor to their patron saint.⁵ Honoring the deceased was, in fact, of primary importance to these festivals. “Mass and meal,” wrote historian Richard C. Trexler, “the propitiative and assertive aspects of the affair, were viewed as equal parts of the total honor paid the deceased.”⁶ This not only helps us to understand why the processions associated with the carnival often had allegorical themes and decorations associated with death, but gives insight into why celebrations possessed seemingly hypocritical facets of debauchery, secularity, and ceremony.⁷ Bonfire dances and solemn church services all led to the same goals of respect, honor, and group solidarity.⁸ This resulted in both licentious and lavish celebratory affairs which offer insights into the conflicts that ballooned, especially considering that these events required total unity between the church and the aristocracy and among the social classes themselves.

A Power Struggle Between the Church and Community

The carnival, one of Renaissance Florence’s most anticipated celebrations, was a three-day string of festivities, games, and processions that preceded the period of Lent. Carnival typically began with the ornate masquerades of songs specific to the festival called the *bufole*. In 1546, on Shrove Tuesday of the carnival alone there were six processions, all with varying themes. A contemporary letter writer recounted some of the lavish aspects of the festivities: “This was so rich and well

decked out that I could not describe it if I tried.” However, the overwhelmed writer managed to get across his sights of red satin, gold cloth, horses, masks, shields, and pearl-laden leggings. At the end of the procession, fourteen cannons were fired and “there was so much smoke and noise that it seemed to be hell.”⁹

In 1550, there are accounts of a quintain on the last day of the carnival, ending with prizes. Following, a painter was brought in who depicted the seven deadly sins (a frequent theme among carnivals in the era), each sin painted as a man. One document mentions that, later in the evening, 400 torches were lit, and, while the procession would have normally stayed out late into the night, the citizens were ushered inside due to rain.¹⁰ Other important aspects of the carnival included pageant wagons, caccia (a battle between lions, bulls, and dogs), traditional stone-fighting (which usually resulted in many injuries, and sometimes even death), religious processions, buffalo races, soccer games, hunting, plays, torches, bonfires, jousts, masquerades, and Catherine-wheels.¹¹ The planning which went into the carnival had to be as extensive as the list of festivities themselves.

Despite the wide array of events, Walter B. Scaife has argued that “the greatest and most original feature of the Florentine carnival was the allegorical procession.”¹² Oftentimes, the carnival masquerades focused on a theme, similarly to the painting of the seven deadly sins mentioned earlier. These themes revolved around the political, religious, and social situations that were occurring around them and affecting their lives accordingly. An example of a politically relevant theme used would be peace prevailing over discord and disunity, their interpretation and hope for the threat from the French.¹³

Given the excessive amount of elaborate and expensive physical decorations and processions, and the rhetorical and allegorical meanings behind them, it is important to question where the Florentines got their provisions and precisely whose political and religious opinions were being used to represent the mass community. Michel Plaisance believed it was an amalgamation of the government and the local duke who held vital positions in organizing and funding the carnival presentations, but contemporary letters written to and from the Medici family seem to indicate that the duke, or most noble man of the city, held almost all key responsibilities for funding and organizing the festivities of both the carnival and the feast of St. John the Baptist—a fascinating notion as both of these festivals are religious.¹⁴ Pier Francesco Riccio wrote to Cosimo de’ Medici in 1545 on the subject of fireworks ordered by

Cosimo for the feast of St. John the Baptist, and his letter includes discussions of mock battles and cannons.¹⁵ A letter from the Priori e Confalonieri di Prato written eleven years later to Francesco de’ Medici mentions his donation of forty small birds for the feast of St. John the Baptist.¹⁶ There are many other similar letters written to members of the Medici family that contain notes about donations and purchases on their behalf for the celebrations. Documents as such present a strong case for the power of men in prominent and wealthy families, perhaps even more so than the church itself. Another contemporary document from 1545 records that a successful feast of St. John the Baptist attributes honor to the duke himself.¹⁷

It might also be questioned, then, if the power of men like Cosimo de’ Medici undermined that of the church by going forth and adding vast and expensive facets to the festivals. It is obvious that the general public greatly enjoyed the additions that the Medicean legacy brought to the carnival and the feast, but there are indicators of possible tensions between the church and the community.

The ecclesiastical community exercised its control over the court and its penal system during the feast days of St. John the Baptist, keeping their judgment in constant reminder at the back of the minds of citizens and, potentially, even the Medici or other dukes and aristocratic families. It was customary that the church granted a small number of prisoners full absolution on the feast day. Records account that one year, a man named Anastasio di Ser Domenico di Ser Salvi Gai murdered his own mother with a piece of wood. He was sentenced to perpetual imprisonment for his crime. However, because he was deemed insane at the time of the murder, his punishment was reduced. This is a fascinating example of a plea of insanity in a court system where it is typically thought that insanity and fugue played little factor in punishment, especially in a time of concern for witchcraft and sorcery. The court decided that if he went along with a ceremony on the feast day of St. John the Baptist, presented himself before the Baptistry with a torch in his hands (with several other ceremonial factors), he would be granted full absolution.¹⁸ While they could have granted him absolution for insanity in the first place, the judges did not want to encourage or perpetuate any ideas among the citizens that they could be granted absolution for similar crimes. The church, it seemed, was employing its ability to grant mercy, but it can perhaps be questioned whether their “mercy” was an ease on their conscience or a way to demonstrate their power to the public.

Nonetheless, the religious aspects of the feast of St. John the Baptist weren’t always appreciated, and sometimes were publicly scorned by adolescents or the lower class. A piece of writing from Piero Parenti accounts the mass before the carnival began, and then delves into an explanation of several impediments that affected the morning procession led by Girolamo Savonarola. Parenti wrote of the first incident:

At the bridge of Santa Trinita, where rock-throwing ordinarily occurred, the procession was impeded, but Messer Luca Corsini, a doctor [of law], was not ashamed to draw off his mantle and reply, with stone in hand, to any who impeded the procession, that for the faith he would put his life on the line. This was accounted the greatest foolishness, since such action was neither necessary nor suitable for him.¹⁹

While it is logical that there would be plenty of people like Piero Parenti who enjoyed the religious aspects of such celebrations and felt it ignorant to even acknowledge the ruckus and distractions that others created, it is not surprising that there were also Florentines who hurled around dead cats in order to block a religious procession.²⁰ We cannot know for certain whether comparable incidents occurred in result to a lack of respect for the church, Savonarola himself, or simply as a means of mischief, but such actions did lead to a fear among the Signoria for civic disunity. Fra Timoteo Bottonio recorded that preachers could not enforce a ban on rock-throwing during the carnival, no matter how many people were killed in its participation each year.²¹ This calls into question how much control the church really had over what happened at their own religious festivals. “Lorenzo Medici and other celebrated men wrote songs to be sung with the street amusements of the day, and paid their share of the expenses of the great public entertainments someone who puts on a costume for a masquerade, and dressed in silk and gold looks rich and powerful and then, when he takes off the mask and the costume, is still the same as he was before.”²⁷

In a particular instance of disunity, during the annual carnival the clergy did not participate at all in the processions. Considering that the clergy were usually involved along with the rest of the community in the festivities, this was a sign that there were deep internal conflicts among the church, the religious orders, and the man with all the power at the time, Cosimo I. In Dati’s account, the religious procession included clerics, priests, monks, friars, religious orders, and relics.²⁸ How might the procession be affected without any number of these important religious players? And what would this

say to the townsfolk? Plaisance writes that “their absence may be a reflection of the fact that the relationship between Cosimo and the religious orders was not good at this time. The following August, in fact, the Dominicans would be expelled from the convent of San Marco.”²⁹ Looking at what may have been missing from the usual festivals year by year may give us a glance into the hints of discord among the Florentine community. Or, similarly, looking at why the festivals were cancelled could tell us just as much. For a community that planned two months in advance for a festival for which “the whole world rejoices,” it shows up as a very large red flag when the events themselves do not actually happen.³⁰

Trexler remarks that postponements and cancellations usually only happened when there was a severe disunity among the city. There was a general concern that, with such discord among the people, mass gatherings might precipitate even larger disorders or riots. “The danger that a gathering might display the weakness of the public authority was, however, only one part of a larger whole,” writes Trexler. They were also concerned that “a public scandal would not have pleased the honored saint. . . . Disorder was in some sense a demonstration of divine weakness as well as a challenge to divine and temporal authority.”³¹

The carnival and the feast of St. John the Baptist were instances when Florence presented itself not only to the direct community, but to the outside world. It is possible that “Florentine civic identity was most clearly described through the ritual presentation of the city to visiting dignitaries and ambassadors. In such cases, the presentation of a united civic front through a procession that involved the city’s multiple collectivities assumed a vital political importance in terms of the city’s credibility with the outside world.”³² In this view, impediments to a festival, such as the slinging of dead cats through a religious procession, would indicate a weakness to visitors from other countries or cities, and might even be enough to rile up questions of strength from rival states of Milan or Naples. The idea of presenting to the foreign public a strong united front of the church, the state, and the citizens could almost be seen as a militaristic defense strategy.

On a smaller scale, there was also the concern that these large gatherings would stoke the flames of tension and the communal breaking of city laws and regulations. Not only could there, at any time, grow friction between the confraternities or the old families of Florence, but there was always the potential of the common populace to get into trouble with the authorities. Sharon Strocchia remarks that crowded streets and fairs opened up grounds for same-sex encounters, which was strictly prohibited under the

government.³³ Because of these possibilities for riots and illegalities, both the Signoria and the familia played important roles in the ceremonial life of Florence.³⁴ Whether it be restlessness of the common people or questions of their public image to foreign states, Florence was very cautious to hide its inner agitations behind the masks used in their bufole.

Gender Tensions: Women Behind Windows

All of these ceremonies happened on the common, mundane, public streets of Florence: the everyday, for several days a year, became exquisite and magnificent by the passing of processions, masquerades, and animals right next to the markets, guilds, churches, and homes.³⁵ It was an extraordinary event for the entire city, but not every Florentine got to experience its splendor at the same level of involvement. During most of the processions, women were forced to watch from the windows of their homes. According to Strocchia, the vertical distance also buffered spectators in important ways and reinforced Florentine gender ideologies. The physical gap separating streets and windows protected the purity and safety of “respectable” women who listened to the bawdy Carnival songs directed at them by street singers; it further suggested a courtly elevation of women’s place in erotic contests that both constrained and enabled women’s participation in these important festivals.³⁶

Because many of the carnival songs involved mild ridicule about Renaissance personalities, and were oftentimes not entirely “appropriate” for feminine ears, women (particularly of the upper and aristocratic classes) spent most of the carnival time watching from their window or terrace. This left women almost entirely out of the more imaginative and playful aspects of the carnival and St. John the Baptist activities. It was also understood that bull fights and stone-throwing fights were no places for women, who, according to social custom, were the gentler gender.

Women were heavily involved in the religious processions. Lorenzo de’ Medici planned 8000 boys and girls for a Palm Sunday procession to march in white, giving a sense of gender equality among the church.³⁷ However, this gender equality was more prevalent among children in the processions, and sometimes women were even clumped together with them, showing their place in the culture. There are only a few available sources from the time that mention women in the religious festivities themselves, and they primarily only revolve around Palm Sunday. One account tells us the order in which people went through the procession: first children, then the religious, then laymen, and then the women, with girls following last.³⁸

Of course, not all women in this era were strictly limited to “window-watching” their lives away. It was common for the artisan and merchant class ladies to venture into the streets to peruse the markets and carts which set up shop. Likewise, it is not impossible that some women (although most likely the lower class) ignored their placement in social class and watched the elaborate masquerades from the sidelines. However, for the upper class and noble women, the streets during the more rambunctious parts of festivals were almost completely off-limits, unless a lady wanted to tarnish her reputation and dance with the lower class girls at the bonfires. For the aristocratic women, a unique type of public sphere was permitted to them; however, that sphere was primarily made up of the Medici Palace for dinners, balls, and theatricals that went along with the feast of St. John the Baptist and the carnival.³⁹ Theoretically, though women rarely ventured over their own threshold, all of these precautions were done to preserve their honor. Their enclosed domain was, in a sense, due to the fact that women were held to a far higher accountability for their piety than Florentine men at the time, although it can be questioned whether they were viewed more as “objects of furniture” or exemplars of chastity far beyond that of men.⁴⁰ No matter how male Florentines truly viewed women, there can be little doubt that these women felt left out of the majority of celebrations, and no declaration of honor can make up for the missed amusements that they only witnessed from afar in their high Florentine windows.

Conclusion

Festivals such as the feast of St. John the Baptist and the carnival preceding Lent were some of the world’s greatest religious celebrations during the time, connecting all social, religious, and political aspects of the community in one large commemoration both mischievous and solemn. While there were quite easily hundreds of tensions, quarrels, and dangers pulsing through the city during those three days of carnival, keeping the clergy on their toes, the Signoria on the watch, and the Medici staking claim over their purchased prowess, it can also be determined that, at the same time, Florence was one of the most united city-states of the time, and not only for their front of magnificence and beauty.

The glamor and glory may not be exactly what meets the eye in the accounts of star-dazzled citizens, but Renaissance Florence was a community that enjoyed celebrating together, reigning in every aspect of artisan life with games, plays, feasts, and songs. At the start of the next day, they joined in communion together for a dignified

ceremony to celebrate their passed patron saint. Despite all of their extensive misgivings with one another, in the end, Florence was still a community that could pull together, annually, creating one of the world’s most renowned and ravishing celebrations that attracted dignitaries from countries seas away.

Endnotes

- ¹ Gregorio Dati, “An Occasion of Solidarity,” in *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study*, ed. Gene Brucker (Toronto: Renaissance Society of America, 1971), 76.
- ² Michel Plaisance, *Florence in the Time of the Medici: Public Celebrations, Politics, and Literature in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, ed. Nicole Carew-Reid (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 107.
- ³ Walter B. Scaife, *Florentine Life During the Renaissance* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2005), 203.
- ⁴ Plaisance, *Florence in the Time of the Medici*, 112-3.
- ⁵ Dati, “An Occasion of Solidarity,” 75.
- ⁶ Richard C. Trexler, “Ritual Behavior in Renaissance Florence: The Setting,” in *Medievalia et Humanistica*, ed. Paul Maurice Clogan (Denton: North Texas State University, 1973), 138.
- ⁷ Scaife, *Florentine Life During the Renaissance*, 206.
- ⁸ Trexler, “Ritual Behavior in Renaissance Florence,” 137.
- ⁹ Michel Plaisance, trans., “The Bufole for Shrove Tuesday, 10 February 1546,” in *Florence in the Time of the Medici: Public Celebrations, Politics, and Literature in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, ed. Nicole Carew-Reid (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 125-6.
- ¹⁰ Michel Plaisance, trans., “The Carnival Celebrations of 1550,” in *Florence in the Time of the Medici*, 127-9.
- ¹¹ Plaisance, *Florence in the Time of the Medici*, 104-6.
- ¹² Scaife, *Florentine Life During the Renaissance*, 206.
- ¹³ Plaisance, *Florence in the Time of the Medici*, 110.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 102-3, 111.
- ¹⁵ Pier Francesco Riccio, letter to Cosimo de’ Medici I, 20 April 1545, *The Medici Archive Project Volume 1171*, Folio 265, Insert 6, Document ID 7002, accessed 13 March 2015, <http://www.medic.org>.
- ¹⁶ Priori e Confalonieri di Prato, letter to Francesco de’ Medici I, 23 June 1566, *The Medici Archive Project Volume 521a*, Folio 1097, Document ID 20641, accessed 13 March 2015, <http://www.medic.org>.
- ¹⁷ Michel Plaisance, trans., “The Feast of St. John the Baptist in 1545,” in *Florence in the Time of the Medici*, 130-4.
- ¹⁸ “A Plea of Insanity,” in *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study*, ed. Gene Brucker (Toronto: Renaissance Society of America, 1971), 170-1.
- ¹⁹ Piero Parenti, “Storia Fiorentina,” in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics*, 1490-1498, ed. and trans. Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006), 337-8.
- ²⁰ Piero Parenti, “Storia Fiorentina,” 338.
- ²¹ Timoteo Bottonio, “La vita del Beato Ieronimo Savonarola,” in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, 213.
- ²² Scaife, *Florentine Life During the Renaissance*, 204.

²³ Dati, “An Occasion of Solidarity,” 76.

²⁴ Scaife, *Florentine Life During the Renaissance*, 206.

²⁵ Dale V. Kent, *Friendship, Love, and Trust in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 125-6.

²⁶ Timothy J. McGee, “Dinner Music for the Florentine Signoria, 1350-1450,” *Speculum* 74, no. 1 (January 1999): 100.

²⁷ Plaisance, *Florence in the Time of the Medici*, 101-2.

²⁸ Dati, “An Occasion of Solidarity,” 76.

²⁹ Plaisance, *Florence in the Time of the Medici*, 118.

³⁰ Dati, “An Occasion of Solidarity,” 75.

³¹ Trexler, “Ritual Behavior in Renaissance Florence,” 139-40.

³² Stephen J. Miler, “The Florentine Piazza della Signoria as Practiced Place,” in *Renaissance Florence: A Social History*, ed. Roger J. Crum and John T. Paoletti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 94.

³³ Sharon T. Strocchia, “Theaters of Everyday Life,” in *Renaissance Florence*, 61.

³⁴ Gene Brucker, “Bureaucracy and Social Welfare in the Renaissance: A Florentine Case Study,” *Journal of Modern History* 55, no. 1 (March 1983): 5.

³⁵ Crum, Roger J. and John T. Paoletti, “Introduction: Florence—The Dynamics of Space in a Renaissance City,” in *Renaissance Florence*, 7.

³⁶ Strocchia, “Theaters of Everyday Life,” 62.

³⁷ Scaife, *Florentine Life During the Renaissance*, 204.

³⁸ Girolamo Savonarola, “Palm Sunday Procession,” in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, 227.

³⁹ Judith Bryce, “Performing for Strangers: Women, Dance, and Music in Quattrocento Florence,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 4, part 1 (Winter 2001): 1075.

⁴⁰ Sandra Weddle, “Women’s Place in the Family and the Convent: A Reconsideration of Public and Private in Renaissance Florence,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 2 (November 2001): 64-66.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- “A Plea of Insanity.” In *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study*, edited by Gene Brucker. Toronto: Renaissance Society of America, 1971.
- Bottonio, Timoteo. “La vita del Beato Ieronimo Savonarola.” In *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics*, 1490-1498. Translated and edited by Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006.
- Dati, Gregorio. “An Occasion of Solidarity.” In *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study*, edited by Gene Brucker, 75-8. Toronto: Renaissance Society of America, 1971.
- Parenti, Piero. “Storia Fiorentina.” In *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics*, 1490-1498. Translated and edited by Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006.
- Plaisance, Michel, trans. “The Bufole for Shrove Tuesday, 10 February 1546.” In *Florence in the Time of the Medici: Public Celebrations, Politics, and Literature in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth*

Centuries. Translated and edited by Nicole Carew-Reid. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008.

Plaisance, Michel, trans. “The Carnival Celebrations of 1550.” In *Florence in the Time of the Medici: Public Celebrations, Politics, and Literature in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*. Translated and edited by Nicole Carew-Reid. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008.

Plaisance, Michel, trans. “The Feast of St. John the Baptist in 1545.” In *Florence in the Time of the Medici: Public Celebrations, Politics, and Literature in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*. Translated and edited by Nicole Carew-Reid. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008.

Priori e Confalonieri di Prato. Letter to Francesco de’ Medici I. 23 June 1566. *The Medici Archive Project*. Volume 521a, Folio 1097, Document ID 20641. Accessed 13 March 2015. <http://www.medici.org>.

Riccio, Pier Francesco. Letter to Cosimo de’ Medici I. 20 April 1545. *The Medici Archive Project*. Volume 1171, Folio 265, Insert 6, Document ID 7002. Accessed 13 March 2015. <http://www.medici.org>.

Savonarola, Girolamo. “Palm Sunday Procession.” In *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics*, 1490–1498. Translated and edited by Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

Secondary Sources

Brucker, Gene. “Bureaucracy and Social Welfare in the Renaissance: A Florentine Case Study.” *Journal of Modern History* 55, no. 1 (March 1983): 1–21.

Bryce, Judith. “Performing for Strangers: Women, Dance, and Music in Quattrocento Florence.” *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 4, part 1 (Winter 2001): 1074–1107.

Crum, Roger J. and John T. Paoletti. “Introduction: Florence—The Dynamics of Space in a Renaissance City.” In *Renaissance Florence: A Social History*, edited by Roger J. Crum and John T. Paoletti. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 7.

Kent, Dale V. *Friendship, Love, and Trust in Renaissance Florence*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009.

McGee, Timothy J. “Dinner Music for the Florentine Signoria, 1350–1450.” *Speculum* 74, no. 1 (January 1999): 95–114.

Milner, Stephen J. “The Florentine Piazza della Signoria as Practiced Place.” In *Renaissance Florence: A Social History*, edited by Roger J. Crum and John T. Paoletti. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Plaisance, Michel. *Florence in the Time of the Medici: Public Celebrations, Politics, and Literature in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*. Translated and edited by Nicole Carew-Reid. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008.

Scaife, Walter B. *Florentine Life During the Renaissance*. Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2005.

Strocchia, Sharon T. “Theaters of Everyday Life.” In *Renaissance Florence: A Social History*, edited by Roger J. Crum and John Paoletti. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Trexler, Richard C. “Ritual Behavior in Renaissance Florence: The Setting.” In *Medievalia et Humanistica*, edited by Paul

Maurice Clogan. Denton: North Texas State University, 1973.

Weddle, Sandra. “Women’s Place in the Family and the Convent: A Reconsideration of Public and Private in Renaissance Florence.” *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 2 (November 2001): 64–72.

From the Bottom Up: Influence on the Upper Class by the Florentine Underground in the Renaissance

Keri Heath

Lorenzo Medici, Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Boccaccio, Leonardo da Vinci: these great men paved the way toward artistic and societal revolutions of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries and serve as symbols of the power of Renaissance Florence. But the real history of the city was not solely held by the artists, merchants, and wealthy. Contrary to popular belief, the Florentine “underground” had a considerable influence on the politics of the ruling citizens as an increasingly drastic gap between the rich and the poor created class tensions that forced the ruling class to consider the demands of the working class. Although the upper and lower classes of Renaissance Florence led physically and socially separate lives, the ruling class’s preoccupations with the demands of the poor underground played a significant role refocusing the political attention of the elite towards the lower classes.

Upper Class Attitudes

To understand the class divisions within Florence, it is important to take note of the social and economic structures prevalent within the city. Florentine social classes were primarily based on constructions of wealth, with the rich magnate occupying the ruling seats, and a middle and lower class occupying a spectrum of economic statuses falling beneath them. The individuals making up this “underground” came primarily from the Ciompi class who were “the most numerous class of day-laborers (dismissible without notice) in Florence’s chief industry” of cloth manufacturing, among other occupations.¹ The term “underground” also denotes a lack of direct connection to the popular proceedings within the city, an association that includes criminals and members of the popolo minuto, or lower-middle class. For this reason, the term “underground” will be used here to refer to Florentine individuals who had no formal representation or influence on the politics or proceedings within the city.

The first significant demonstration of the power this “underground” possessed came during the Ciompi revolt of 1378. During the events of that summer, when the wool workers managed to gather their power together to overthrow the government, the Signoria and other magnates became acquainted with the power the lower classes had when bonded together. For the first time during the Renaissance, the ability of the popolu minuto to “make certain demands by means of petitions, which were just and reasonable” became apparent.² While the events itself shook the magnate, the demonstration of mob power within Florence firmly stamped terror into ruling minds, a fear that continued throughout ensuing centuries as the effects of this revolutionary event continued to reverberate in the magnate’s minds. The revolts of 1378 demonstrated, among other things, the strong sense of identity that the lower classes could create, an identity that Samuel Cohn, Jr. describes as similar to that of working class unions during the industrial revolution.³ Indeed, the growing communal identity of the lower classes was an increasing concern of the magnate, a threat of uprising and social disorder that had to be worked into their policy planning.

Now more on the minds of the oligarchy, the poor began to create anxiety and fear for the magnate, who were already dealing with political strife within their own social class and threats from outside the city. This fear aggravated a more and more prejudiced view of the lower classes, whose “evil” and “laziness” increasingly became a matter of fact in the minds of the ruling class. By the end of the fourteenth century, the oligarchy began to “assimilate the undisciplined and undisciplinable poor to the familiar image of the rogue” and to associate poverty with criminal intentions.⁴ Labor soon became the only role that upper classes believed the lower classes should possess, a mindset that led to increased class tensions later in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. This pervasive view of evil trickled into court records, public