

Introduction

Piero de' Medici's life remains unstudied, despite being pivotal to the crisis faced by Italian states in the late fifteenth century. Following the French invasion in 1494, Piero was not only driven out of Florence but spent the remainder of his life in exile, drowning in 1503 in an overladen baggage train while fighting with the French in southern Italy against Spain. As Lorenzo il Magnifico's eldest son and heir, he also experienced the problems of all Italy's communal regimes as they transformed themselves into territorial states in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Since Florence was still nominally a republic, many of its citizens were alienated by the way Lorenzo – and his son Piero – were treated by other rulers as *de facto* princes and as the 'idols' of their adherents in Florence, and they later blamed Piero for the regime's collapse in 1494.¹ This created great ambivalence towards him during his years in Florence and hostility afterwards. Yet as the narrative of his life will show, he was more intelligent and talented than his critics suggest, and he provides an invaluable prism through which to view these confused years of crisis for Florence and for Italy.

Born in 1472, Piero was educated from the age of three by the humanist Angelo Poliziano, and in his youth he was praised for his precocious learning, his sportsmanship and his intelligence. But the clever and beautiful child with whom passers-by loved to converse became the man who, according to his frustrated widow Alfonsina Orsini, kept her and their son Lorenzo out of power for nearly twenty years. Why this happened is the puzzle underlying the story of his life and his short time in power, for as Renaissance historians were well aware, differing versions of events are given by winners and losers – and some losers risked disappearing from the narrative of their times altogether, as Piero

¹ On Lorenzo as 'de facto prince', Najemy, *A History*, p. 344; as *idolo*, Lorenzo, *Lettere* 7, p. 157 (intro. n.) and pp. 159–60 in this volume.

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has done.² To see how quickly his reputation was blackened before suffering this fate, we have only to compare Bartolomeo Cerretani's account of him as Lorenzo's 'warrior' son with Marin Sanudo's version, according to which Piero is the mad and bad son compared with his brothers, the 'good' Giovanni and the 'wise' Giuliano.³ Because Piero died in exile, he never returned to share his brothers' rehabilitation as princes in the new social order – one a pope, the other a duke. Instead, he remained in people's memory as Machiavelli's 'great rebel' who, as a twenty-two-year old, had apparently failed both his family and his city by not responding adequately to the international crisis of 1494.

In fact, his heritage would never have been easy, thanks to his father Lorenzo's dominant personality and the rivalries within the ruling class. Lorenzo had himself faced a series of crises similar to Piero's on the death of his sickly father in 1469, when he, too, was only twenty. Initially supported by the leading families in Florence, he had quickly faced a rebellion in the subject-city Volterra, and six years after it was put down with force, he was threatened far more seriously by the so-called Pazzi conspiracy of 1478, when he was wounded and his brother Giuliano 'cut to pieces' during the celebration of mass in Florence's cathedral. Although Lorenzo emerged from the ensuing war with strengthened powers that ensured his future success, he and his family were left with a legacy of fear and distrust, reflected not only in the paintings he and Piero commissioned, but in the savage imagery of his son's later poems.⁴ If Lorenzo, with all his foresight and authority, had scarcely been able to control his factious rivals (one Florentine reflected on Lorenzo's death), what hope was there for the young Piero, who soon after his father's death faced the rebellion of his cousins, Lorenzo and Giovanni di Pierfrancesco, and then the French invasion that overthrew his regime?⁵

Piero also suffered a Buddenbrooks fate as the third-generation heir to banking wealth. His great-grandfather, the usurious merchant banker Cosimo, had been famous as one of the richest men in Italy, and already the cultured lifestyles of his gout-ridden son Piero and his grandson, the magnificent Lorenzo, were eating away at the family's wealth, which the

² Ianziti, *Humanistic Historiography*, p. 57, citing G. A. Campana: 'aliter ab his qui vicerunt, aliter qui victi sunt, proferuntur'; Fournel, 'L'ennemi dans l'histoire florentine', esp. p. 39.

³ Cerretani, *Storia fiorentina*, p. 186; Sanudo, *Diarii* 24, 90; Pieraccini, *Stirpe*, 1, pp. 169–70, and recently Simonetta, *Volpi e Leoni*, pp. 27–57, 277 ('il Pazzo Piero', 'detto il Fatuo').

⁴ p. 110 in this volume. On Lorenzo and the Medici regime, Najemy, *A History*, pp. 278–374; Fubini, *Politica e pensiero politico*, esp. pp. 187–203; Rubinstein, *Government*; Brown, 'Between Constitution and Government'.

⁵ Parenti, *Storia* 1, p. 25.

younger Piero in his turn did little to preserve. He must have been in Francesco Guicciardini's mind when he commented in one of his maxims on the proverb that the third generation can never enjoy its ill-gotten gains.⁶ Rejecting his father Piero Guicciardini's explanation – that since no one was totally bad, God allowed some of the money to be enjoyed before eventually punishing the family – Francesco said that it was, among other reasons, because the founder of the family's wealth knew how to preserve as well as earn money, whereas his heirs, raised in wealth, had never learnt how to earn it, and through overspending and carelessness they had unsurprisingly lost it. This is what happened to Piero and it, too, contributes to the story of his life.

Above all, Piero and his siblings suffered 'the double bind' of labouring under their father's domination while trying to fulfil their family's expectations.⁷ For them, this meant behaving as republicans in Florence while being thrust into a courtly lifestyle abroad as a result of the ambitious marriages and careers engineered for them by Lorenzo. Lorenzo is the key to understanding Piero, for the father and son not only shared many characteristics but also conducted the same double-level politics that are difficult to detect without close reading of their private as well as their public letters. The ongoing edition of Lorenzo's letters is only now beginning to reveal the extent of his father's 'acrobatic' politics that we shall see Piero imitating in his attempt to become, like Lorenzo, the 'needle' balancing power in Italy. Lorenzo left a difficult act to follow, all the more so because the French king was blaming his putative invasion on Lorenzo even before Lorenzo's death. So the young Piero was left facing a crisis that even his father might have been unable to resolve, let alone the twenty-year-old Piero.⁸

The contrasting influences on Piero's life were reflected in his temperament, which combined an extrovert personality as a sportsman and champion jousting with an underlying vein of depression, unhappiness and fear, movingly expressed in letters and poems. His love of playing football in the streets during Lorenzo's absences from Florence encouraged his father's friends in 1489 to take his political education in hand, in order to ensure he succeeded his father as an equally effective 'master of the workshop'. As a result, we find Piero left in charge during Lorenzo's prolonged absence at the baths the following summer, when his frequent autograph letters to his father throw revealing light on the

⁶ *Ricordi*, C 33, ed. Spongano, pp. 39–40. Francesco's father Piero quotes St. Augustine.

⁷ Denis Feeney in *London Review of Books*, 15 June 2017, p. 42.

⁸ Brown, 'Piero in Power', p. 118, citing Lorenzo Spinelli's probably unread letter to Lorenzo of 30 March 1492.

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wide range of activities that he undertook on Lorenzo's behalf. Although much of the daily burden was borne by his secretaries, his diplomatic activities gave him standing with Italy's other rulers, and so did his sportsmanship and his cultural patronage as a talented musician and poet like his father. They were all facets of the soft power that was becoming a feature of Renaissance rulers, not only in Italy but in England, under the young king Henry VIII, and in France under Francis I.

So, too, was the patronal influence exerted by Piero over clients in Florence's dominion, where it was easier to play the prince than in the mercantile city itself, with its family rivalries and republican tradition. The bonds he established with these clients linked him to old Guelf networks that in turn helped to support him and his brothers in exile. The failure of Piero's four attempts to return to Florence after 1494 – most spectacularly in 1497, when five of his leading partisans and relatives were executed – fatally weakened his support base in Florence, but he nevertheless remained a serious threat to the city by attaching himself to Florence's external enemies, especially Cesare Borgia and the Vitelli, making his story part of the wider narrative of Italy's turmoil in these years.

Italy had frequently been subjected to barbarian invasions – from the Vandals, Huns and Ostrogoths in the fifth century AD to the Angevins in the thirteenth century – but nothing prepared Renaissance Italy for 'the flame and the scourge' of Charles VIII's polyglot army in 1494, which not only 'overthrew states' (according to Francesco Guicciardini) but also 'changed their forms of government and their methods of warfare'.⁹ Charles VIII also changed the carefully calibrated balance of power in Italy. From the mid-fifteenth century, after the pope and emperor had ceased to compete for overall authority in Italy in divisive Guelf–Ghibelline conflicts, power was balanced between its five leading states according to a series of agreements and alliances that the Florentines liked to conceptualise in mathematical terms, as triangles of almost equidistant cities, each counterbalancing the power of the others. After 1494, one Florentine attributed the breakdown of this system to everyone playing with the abacus 'in his own way, without following the rule of counterbalancing Venice' (the only state unaffected by the French invasion until its defeat in 1509).¹⁰

⁹ Guicciardini, *Storie*, p. 92: 'una fiamma ed una peste che non solo mutò gli stati, ma e' modi ancora del governargli ed e' modi delle guerre'; Santoro, *Fortuna, ragione e prudenza*, pp. 11–21.

¹⁰ Anon. letter from Rome to the Signoria, April 1497, pp. 245–6, n. 55 in this volume.

Although Florence was smaller than the other powers, the city had been able to punch above its weight (the Florentine ambassador in Rome declared in 1500) because it had always been ‘the nerve of Italy’, and if not ‘first or equal in terms of power’, ‘it’s been considered the first for anticipating events and providing adequate remedies better and more quickly than anyone else’; for this reason, he said, the other princes of Italy had always vied for its friendship and alliance.¹¹ He must have been referring to the years between 1470 and 1492, when Lorenzo acted as the needle of the balance in the Triple Alliance with Milan and Naples, and later as the mediator between the pope and his recalcitrant vassal King Ferrante of Naples.¹² Although Piero was blamed for no longer acting as Italy’s fulcrum, in fact – as his allies acknowledged – he attempted to continue his father’s role in acting as mediator between the powers until the balance was destroyed by the French alliance with Milan, which led to the collapse of the two remaining allies, the Medici in Florence and King Alfonso in Naples.

This was the immediate crisis faced by Italian states, since it resulted in successive foreign invasions and wars that continued until 1559.¹³ Underlying it was the more fundamental problem of how these newly consolidated territories could give themselves ‘an aura of legitimacy’ to justify their control of previously self-governing communes within their dominion. This has given rise to the still unresolved debate about whether to contrast signorial regimes as ‘despotisms’ or ‘tyrannies’ compared with self-governing ‘republican’ communes, or whether these traditional and value-laden terms are inadequate to describe the new territorial states emerging from both lordships and republics.¹⁴ Piero encapsulates the problem of defining the status and power of these new states according to the old terminology, for once he had been condemned as a tyrant by his republican critics, it has been difficult to view his life dispassionately. But from the wider perspective of his

¹¹ Antonio Malegonnelle in Rome to the Signoria, 10 January 1500, Signori respons. 11, fols. 2v–3r, ‘il nervo de Italia ... la prima di antivedere le cose e di fare e’ rimedii sufficienti e presti più che tucte l’altre’.

¹² Gentile Becchi (24 November 1470, MAP 61, 30): ‘examen della bilancia’, Bernardo Rucellai, *De bello italico*, p. 4: ‘examine aequo penderent’, Santoro, *Fortuna*, p. 151; Guicciardini, *Storie*, p. 72, ‘quasi una bilancia di tutta Italia’, v. Fubini, ‘The Italian League and the Balance of Power’.

¹³ Aubert, *La crisi degli antichi stati italiani*, I, pp. 1, 61–91; *The Italian Wars*, ed. Mallett and Shaw, esp. pp. 1–5, *Italy and the European Powers*, ed. Shaw, esp. 3–21; Pepper, ‘Castles and cannon in the Naples campaign’.

¹⁴ Chittolini, ‘Dominant Cities’, p. 18 and Varanini, ‘Medicean Florence and Beyond’, essays in *Communes and Despots*, ed. Law and Paton, esp. Philip Jones, pp. 3–24, and in *The Origins of the State in Italy, 1300–1600*, ed. Kirshner, esp. Schiera, ‘Legitimacy, Discipline and Institutions’, pp. 11–33.

influence outside Florence – as patronal boss in Florence's territory (the subject of Chapter 9) and as an ally and arbiter of the Italian powers (Chapter 11) – he was already enjoying the role of an early modern sovereign rather than that of a tyrant. The old terminology would soon be made irrelevant by the pragmatism of political thinkers like Machiavelli in the wake of the foreign invasions, after Piero's death. But even before then, the terms used by Florentines to describe his role – as an 'idol', 'a more than citizen' or city 'boss' – suggest he may have represented for them the pragmatic sovereignty that people wanted from their secular head of state, that is, not legitimacy *ex titulo* (as Bartolus defined it) but an elevated status (to command respect) combined with patronal power and protection.¹⁵

To reconstruct Piero's life from the traces he left behind nevertheless presents a challenge – to the reader as well as to his biographer – especially in view of the Medici henchmen's constant refrain, 'cover the tracks' (*nettare i segni*). For the devil lies in the detail, and it is only through the close reading of letters and other evidence that we can detect the double politics and manipulations of the Medici regime, which used many of the same techniques as late republican Rome to transform the constitution and its position in Italy. The contemporary histories of the Florentine citizens Piero Parenti and Bartolomeo Cerretani also contribute valuable evidence, for although they are critical of Piero, they are less biased than the writings of the better-known Francesco Guicciardini, who has long shaped our view of Piero's 'tyrannical and arrogant' nature. In acknowledging the difficulties he faced, his contemporaries show him trapped in the dilemma described by his old tutor, Gentile Becchi, who told Piero on the eve of his exile how difficult it was 'to play the role of prince in a republic unless you appear to be a wholehearted republican in the eyes of the people'.¹⁶ Neither one nor the other, Piero could, perhaps, have provided Florence with a figurehead without a princely title had he not been faced with the crisis of the French invasion.

¹⁵ Cf. Brown, 'Piero in Power', pp. 124–5, and Chapter 20 in this volume.

¹⁶ Brown, *ibid.*, p. 114, n. 2.