Until recently, Alessandro de’ Medici, the murdered first Duke of Florence, tended to get overlooked by historians of early modern Italy. Scholarly work on the duchy skipped straight to the less elusive figure of his successor, Cosimo I—partly because Cosimo’s reign left a deeper and broader archival footprint, and partly because Cosimo was seen, with the help of his own propaganda machine, as the real builder, politically and culturally, of the new Medici state. As if that were not enough, Cosimo, from the relatively untainted minor branch of the Medici family, was perceived to be a judicious and disciplined monarch, while Alessandro, installed as duke on the back of the crushing defeat of the last Florentine republic in 1530, was his antithesis: at best a trivial figure concerned only with indulging his carnal appetites, at worst a brutal and fickle despot. After Alessandro’s cousin, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici, better known as Lorenzino, killed the duke in 1537, he helped to cement this unflattering portrait in his Apologia, where he claimed his actions amounted to a glorious tyrannicide aimed at restoring Florence’s republican liberty.

Yet the book has a wider agenda. Fletcher wants to partially rehabilitate the first Duke of Florence, but more importantly she wants to ask whether the negative characterizations of him amount to “racial insults.” Was Alessandro really the “black prince” of Florence? And was that partly why later he was historiographically sidelined?

First is the question of Alessandro’s parentage. Alessandro was, most accept, the bastard son of Lorenzo de’ Medici, Duke of Urbino. About his mother, all that can said with any degree of certainty is that she was a low-born woman called Simonetta from Collevecchio, forty miles north of Rome, either a servant or slave in the Medici household. The rest remains speculative, based on the possibility that Simonetta was a black African slave or former slave (most slaves in Italy were Ottoman, though black Africans were a growing minority), and on descriptions and images of Alessandro—some of them posthumous, tendentious, or both—that are inconsistently suggestive of a “mixed-race” heritage.

While Catherine Fletcher is not the first historian in recent years to reexamine Alessandro (or Lorenzino), she has produced the first full-length modern biography. Poised between conventional scholarship and popular history, Fletcher skillfully captures the volatile political world and court intrigues of early sixteenth-century Italy. Medici pope Clement VII was at the center of the machinations that brought Alessandro briefly to power, switching his support from long-time favorite Cardinal Ippolito de’ Medici and securing the all-important stamp of approval for Alessandro from Holy Roman emperor Charle V. While relations between rulers and ruled, between Alessandro and the city as a whole, are by and large neglected, she fleshes out the political education and trajectory of the young man who became prince and at the same time shapes a compelling narrative out of domestic and international politics.

John Brackett, the only other historian to systematically tackle these issues, is convinced that Alessandro’s mother was indeed a black African, yet rejects any idea that the scorn poured upon the duke by his enemies was racially tinged. It was the slave, later peasant,
status ascribed to Simonetta that was far more important for Florence’s republican exiles and others when it came to vilifying the duke. Fletcher takes a middle, more thoroughly contextualized, road, one that keeps the debate open. On one hand, she is duly cautious about the claim that Alessandro’s mother was a black African. On the other, while she acknowledges that modern ideas of “race” did not obtain in Renaissance Italy, that “black” and “white” were not identity categories familiar to the period, and that there was a general absence of comment on Alessandro’s appearance, she suggests that negative assessments of Alessandro nonetheless chimed with notions about “Moors,” a label that could be used for any dark-skinned “other,” was usually derogatory, and was later reported to have been pinned to the duke by his enemies. There are no smoking guns here, yet teasing out these issues is worthwhile, even if some of Fletcher’s suggestions—such as that Bronzino’s portrayal of Cosimo I as a nude Orpheus was designed to demonstrate how Alessandro’s successor was the correct shade of pink—are musings in search of real evidence.

Ultimately, it is the fascinating posthumous fate of Alessandro that fully justifies the book’s title. The notion of the duke’s Moorish or “half Negro” background started circulating in print in the decades after his murder, but nineteenth-century scientific racism breathed new life into the question. As Alfred von Reumont put it in 1854, the “frizzy hair and thick lips betray his origins” (p.256). In 1875, his tomb was opened and his skull was declared to be Ethiopian. Into the twentieth century, racial attributions regularly were linked to the gamut of Alessandro’s supposed negative qualities. However, that could also play out in a very different way: in 1931, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People vaunted him as a model of black aspiration, and in the wake of this Alessandro’s banner was taken up by historians aiming to correct what they saw as the omission of black leaders from mainstream historical discourse. Given the new attention to Alessandro in recent years, and to “race” in the Renaissance, Fletcher’s thoughtful biography of Florence’s first duke is unlikely to be the last word on the subject.

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