

Early Medici Patronage and the Confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino

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Summary: Medici confraternal patronage is usually associated with public spectacle. Nevertheless, the bonds that this family forged with smaller lay brotherhoods (though the intent was perhaps equally political as with larger groups) can reveal a contrasting view of the clan. Previous studies concerning the confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino are few and fall primarily within the field of social history. This interdisciplinary article considers the form and function of the fresco decoration in the confraternity's oratory in tandem with fresh, unpublished archival data. This, in turn, provides historical, factual information about the structure and activities of the confraternity, its cultural environment and the generosity of its illustrious patrons. Concentrating on Medici confraternal patronage from 1469 to 1492, this article explores changes in Lorenzo de' Medici's confraternal needs and ultimately demonstrates how the munificence of il Magnifico and his assassinated brother, Giuliano, was recorded and celebrated by the Buonomini.

Renaissance confraternities are commonly divided into two groups, *laudesi* and *disciplinati*.² The former expressed piety through song, while the latter used flagellation. Both were, as Ronald Weissman has established, "autonomous lay institutions [...] united by pious ideals" and had essentially corporate frameworks; they were also socially heterogeneous and governed by a self-imposed set of statutes.³ These rules allowed the brotherly obligations of socially unequal members to be standardised. With respect to the *laudesi* and *disciplinati*, the confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino is difficult to categorise. During meetings the brothers prayed to Martin of Tours, their

¹ I would like to extend my gratitude to the current Buonomini di San Martino for permitting access to their archive and their patience and help as regards my many questions. I am particularly grateful for the permission to photograph the fresco cycle inside the oratory and being present in the edifice during the recent restorations. I would also like to extend my thanks to Blake Wilson for his advice concerning the location of the San Martino performances and making a previously unpublished conference paper of his available to me.

² Although Renaissance confraternities are ordinarily divided into *laudesi* and *disciplinati*, some confraternities were subdivided further into *fanciulli*. Being aware of *sottoposti* and *potenze* also, I have chosen not to address these particular companies within the paper as they are not pertinent to the arguments herein.

³ Weissman, "Cults and Contexts," 203–211, but see also Trexler, "Charity and the Defence of Urban Elites," 83.

titular saint, but they did not articulate religious devotion either through melody or the whip.

From 1469 to 1478, Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici were involved in a number of Florentine confraternities, although their membership was mainly honorific.⁴ Surviving documentation from the laudese company of Sant'Agnese also reveals that the two Medici brothers were freed from the confraternal "duties, fees and responsibilities" — this was known as the "privilege of the House of the Medici."⁵ In a society that depended on the patronage network to circulate favours, money, and trade opportunities between citizens, the Medici would have been expected to reciprocate the confraternity's gesture. Consequently, the merchant princes endowed confraternities with honour through association and, crucially, supported them financially. For instance, on 25 March 1473, Lorenzo and Giuliano are mentioned in the debit and credit book of the confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino as having promised to give 5,250 lire to be distributed to various charitable causes.⁶ Often the Medici gave goods in kind, donating grain to the confraternity of Sant'Agnese every Christmas to feed the poor.⁷

Charity, though, was only one facet of confraternal life, especially in an age where theatre and public spectacle was thought to "profit and honour" the commune in proportionate measure to almsgiving and the distribution of bread.⁸ One of the most visually spectacular religious pageants was the procession of the Compagnia de' Magi at Epiphany, patronized by the Medici after 1426.⁹ In his study of this confraternity, Rab Hatfield describes how members would march in costume from "Jerusalem," positioned near the baptistry, to "Bethlehem," located in the Dominican church of San Marco. En route, they would pass various tableaux such as the opulent but ephemeral palace of King Herod and, from 1455, their own permanent palazzo on the Via Larga (today's Via Cavour).¹⁰ Both Lorenzo and Giuliano attended the Company of the Magi and its popularity was perhaps enhanced by a papal edict that offered to reduce members' time in purgatory in exchange for regular confraternity attendance.¹¹

Confraternal membership benefited the Medici and catered to their spiritual and temporal well-being. Pageants such as the Magi's Epiphany parade gave Lorenzo and Giuliano the opportunity to set aside the dress and behaviour adopted by Florentine patrician males and display themselves as

⁴ Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood*, 172. See also Eisenbichler, "Lorenzo de' Medici."

⁵ Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood*, 171.

⁶ Spiccianni, "The 'Poveri Vergognosi' in Fifteenth-Century Florence," 123.

⁷ Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood*, 172.

⁸ Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, 1.

⁹ Lingohr, "Palace and Villa," 263.

¹⁰ Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 112.

¹¹ Welch, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, 163.

“personifications of majesty.”¹² Indeed, correspondence between the Compagnia di San Bartolomeo and the Compagnia de’ Magi indicates that even during the organization of the Epiphany parade members of the Magi were referred to as “their majesties” while those of the confraternity of San Bartolomeo were merely given the title of “Lord.”¹³ Evidently, pageants somewhat softened the city’s usually rigid social hierarchy even if it was on a temporary basis.

Yet, Medici involvement went beyond patronage. The constructions and refurbishments of Cosimo “the Elder” de’ Medici during the mid fifteenth century quite literally came to dominate the Magi’s processional route.¹⁴ However, these projects reveal only the most conspicuous morsels of Medici patronage. As Richard Trexler suggests, if the analogy could be made between the city of Florence and a chessboard, by the time that Lorenzo and Giuliano led the city, their grandfather Cosimo and their father Piero had already created a framework for indirect republican rule. It was Lorenzo and Giuliano’s task to gather the pawns and begin playing the game.¹⁵

It is now widely accepted that Lorenzo and Giuliano gained dominance throughout Florence by using confraternities as “instruments of Medici political power.”¹⁶ For example, Lorenzo was not averse to using confraternal meeting places for his own private celebrations.¹⁷ After donating a substantial sum to the Buonomini di San Martino, the brothers “reserved the right [...] to nominate several [charitable] recipients.”¹⁸ If this clause was common in agreements, such confraternities appear to have been ideal vehicles to transfer money that was officially set aside for charity back into the coffers of family, friends, and allies.¹⁹

Founded in 1442 by Archbishop Antoninus of Florence (1389–1459) and aided by the munificence of Cosimo the Elder, the Buonomini brought

¹² Hatfield, “The Compagnia de’ Magi,” 117.

¹³ Hatfield, “The Compagnia de’ Magi,” 120.

¹⁴ Strocchia, “Theatres of Everyday Life,” 57.

¹⁵ Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, 413. John Paoletti is also currently conducting a study concerning the impact of early Medicean architecture on the city of Florence. Having traced the footprint left by the Medici clan from their relatively modest beginnings in the Via Larga in around 1385, Paoletti has conceived a visual ring of power, made up of architectural projects and artistic commissions funded by the family.

¹⁶ Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, 412.

¹⁷ See Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood*, 172 on Lorenzo’s use of the company of Sant’Agnese for his private celebrations for the feast of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ Spicciani, “The ‘Poveri Vergognosi,’” 123.

¹⁹ Trexler, “Charity and the Defence of Urban Elites,” 77 and 94. For an example of beneficence directed towards distant and perhaps poorer members of the clan, see Archivio dei Buonomini di San Martino (ABSM), 1.2.0.1, *Entrata e Uscita 1468–1477*, fol. 81. Orietta de Gregorio de’ Medici is aided twice by the good men. Furthermore in ABSM 1.2.0.2, *Entrata e Uscita 147–1482*, fol. 34, the Buonomini can be seen aiding Piero Gianfigliuzzi and fol. 131 lists a number of directives from Lorenzo de’ Medici.

relief to those who had fallen upon hard times and were considered too honourable to beg. For the first three decades after its inception, the charity helped mostly wool and silk workers rather than the poor but noble relatives of Florence's great houses.²⁰ Accordingly, during the 1440s most of the alms distributed were given in kind, generally bread, wine, meat and linen. Only 747 *lire* of alms were given out in coin.²¹ By the 1460s, the total amount of alms distributed in coin had doubled and the names of those who benefited from their charity suggest that the Medici influenced the allocation of funds. Clans such as the Bardi, Pitti, Soderini, Spini and Torregiani are all mentioned as recipients.²² Additionally, in violation of the Buonomini's constitution, which stated that highborn patriarchs were excluded from service, Lorenzo de' Medici joined the twelve good men as procurator.²³ Trexler argues that Lorenzo's decision to become involved with the Buonomini implies that "the confraternity was disposing of sizable funds by this time," and yet it is not until the 1470s that an unprecedented amount of alms in coin was distributed and recorded in their accounts.²⁴ Entries in the Buonomini ledgers dated to the fortnight before the Pazzi Conspiracy (26 April 1478) reveal that Lorenzo directed funds to a number of anonymous families in the San Lorenzo district.²⁵ The initial amounts involved are small, only several *lire* per entry, but sums increase considerably in the immediate aftermath of Giuliano's assassination.²⁶ It was perhaps the twentieth-century historian Raymond de Roover who first suggested that Lorenzo had appropriated public funds for his own use, and not Lorenzo's contemporaries. Likewise, Alison Brown's later study confirms that the *Monte Comune* became reticent subsidizers of the Pazzi Wars.²⁷ My recent work on the Buonomini archive has evinced that within a week of Giuliano's murder the confraternity had once again transferred a sizeable amount of money (160 *lire*) of Buonomini funds to "the families of San Lorenzo."²⁸

Considering the Medici's history of beneficence in return for support, one would be inclined to wonder whether these instances of charitable giving were more politically motivated than altruistic. Within a month of another plot to assassinate Lorenzo (this time in 1481), the silk weavers were given funds to

²⁰ Spicciani, "The 'Poveri Vergognosi'," 129.

²¹ Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, 288.

²² Henderson, 384 and ABSM, 1.2.1.0.2, *Entrata e Uscita 1478–1482*, fol. 131.

²³ Pugliese, "The Good Works of the Florentine Buonomini di San Martino," 119, and Trexler, "Charity and the Defence of Urban Elites," 93.

²⁴ Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, 388.

²⁵ For the direction of funds towards the families of San Lorenzo in the wake of the Pazzi Conspiracy see ABSM, 1.2.1.0.2, *Entrata e Uscita 1478–1482*, fol. 132.

²⁶ ABSM, 1.2.1.0.2, *Entrata e Uscita 1478–1482*, fol. 132.

²⁷ Lillie, "Lorenzo de' Medici's Rural Investments," 62.

²⁸ ABSM, 1.2.1.0.2, *Entrata e Uscita 1478–1482*, fol. 131.

build a new hospital, a display of the regime's continued commitment to civic life.²⁹ After the Pazzi Conspiracy, Lorenzo required support from both within the commune and further afield: he confided in Gian Galeazzo Sforza, duke of Milan, that "he and his state were in great danger."³⁰ Nevertheless, despite the concentration of Buonomini funds on recipients from the San Lorenzo district shortly before and after Giuliano de' Medici's assassination, Lorenzo continued to patronise the Buonomini during the dark months following his brother's death. He even went as far as recruiting his cousin, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, perhaps better known for his patronage of Sandro Botticelli, involving him also as a benefactor of the shamed poor.³¹ Di Pierfrancesco's donation consisted of a single, generous endowment of twenty-four florins worth of grain in 1478, whereas *il Magnifico's* philanthropy consisted of nine donations from his bank (*dal suo banco*) during October, November and December of the same year.³² These donations, which range from between 60 and 124 *lire* per transaction (roughly between 4 and 8 florins, depending on the fluctuating exchange rates) culminate in a promise, made by Lorenzo at the close of 1478, to donate more from 1 April 1479.³³

Lorenzo's consistent patronage of the Buonomini in the wake of the Pazzi Conspiracy extended until 1485, when his attendance at the Buonomini diminished, though this was not always mirrored in regards to his connections with other confraternities.³⁴ Giuliano's death was pivotal event, triggering a reordering of Lorenzo de' Medici's web of confraternal alliances. Hatfield establishes that after Giuliano's death the Buonomini's enthusiastic support of the *Festa de' Magi* tempered and that this hastened the merger between the Compagnia de' Magi and the Compagnia del Zampillo. As a result, Lorenzo may have gathered some consolation in the new confraternity as Giuliano, whose voice was apparently beautiful, had sung with the brothers of

²⁹ Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, 142.

³⁰ Kent and Kent, "Two Vignettes of Florentine Society," 252–254.

³¹ For the donation from Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici see ASBM, 1.2.1.0.2, *Entrata e Uscita 1478–1482*, fol. 19r.

³² ASBM, 1.2.1.0.2, *Entrata e Uscita 1478–1482*.

³³ ASBM, 1.2.1.0.2, *Entrata e Uscita 1478–1482*, fol. 13v.

³⁴ Spicciani, "The 'Poveri Vergognosi,'" 124, notices that within the Buonomini *Entrata e Uscita segnato* A ledger held by the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, that the accounting was completed, for a time, from 1 May 1466 by the *proposto*, Pandolfo Rucellai. Interestingly, for the next two decades mention of Pandolfo in the ledgers held in the ASBM are few. Lorenzo and Giuliano though, while the latter still lived, are acknowledged throughout like an inseparable entity. Following his brother's murder, Lorenzo's presence remains prolific until 1486 when Pandolfo once again is awarded the title of *proposto*. Correspondingly the entries concerning his confraternal activities increase significantly and his presence remains conspicuous even outside his multiple terms as *proposto*. ASBM, 1.2.1.0.1, *Entrata e Uscita 1468–1477* (which actually runs until 1488), fol. 34 verso for Pandolfo Rucellai as *proposto* in early 1486 and fol. 38 verso for a further term in November 1486.

the Zampillo. In fact, when Lorenzo himself died (1492), his body was taken to the Zampillo, now relocated from the Vallambrosian church of Santa Trinita to San Marco. Other confraternities that had previously benefited from Medicean patronage fared less well. The Compagnia di San Paolo's undertakings were halted for two years and their records show that when activities resumed Lorenzo's once regular attendance had diminished significantly.³⁵ In addition, festivities surrounding the feast of Saint John the Baptist were halted for a decade by Lorenzo de' Medici's decree.³⁶

In the years immediately following the Pazzi Conspiracy, Florence was ripe to receive what Hegel terms as a "ritual revolution." In effect, Lorenzo spread the image of his personal sacrality by tightening his hold over the republic and sustaining connections with smaller lay brotherhoods.³⁷

The interior of the Buonomini's meeting place illustrates how an individual can become a sacred object of devotion. The Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino is situated inconspicuously half-way between Florence's Piazza della Signoria and the Duomo. Historically a private space given over to the activities of the twelve Good Men, the oratory has only recently been opened to the general public for viewing. It is not, however, just a public gallery. The current Buonomini continue the charitable activities began by their fifteenth-century predecessors and carry them out in much the same way.³⁸ The oratory's fresco decoration portrays a cycle of ten painted lunettes. Two depict scenes from the life of Saint Martin of Tours; the remainders illustrate charitable acts performed by the Buonomini, all based on the seven corporal works of mercy.³⁹ These depictions have barely been mentioned in art history circles, let alone analysed, despite cursory acknowledgements by scholars since the nineteenth century.⁴⁰ This does not necessarily imply that the painted decorations attributed to the workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–1494) are unimportant, simply that in connoisseurial terms, they are not of the same

³⁵ Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 125, 127–128.

³⁶ Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 119, and Dempsey, "Portraits and Masks," 7.

³⁷ Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, xvii and 46–47: "Backstage, onstage and audience unite and act out reality together. In the revolutionary street, mass action is a play structuring reality."

³⁸ Bradburne, *Hidden Voices*, 47. Francesco Pocci, a Buonomo and one of the six participants whose thoughts on the confraternity were recorded and recounted by Bradburne, informs us that, "the whole thing's run in exactly the same way as it was back then."

³⁹ The first scene from the life of Saint Martin depicts him dividing his cloak for the beggar. The second shows the dream of Saint Martin. The Seven Corporal Works of Mercy consist of feeding the hungry, providing drink for the thirsty, welcoming strangers or pilgrims, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the incarcerated and burying the dead. The first six works come from *Matthew 25: 31–46* and the last from the *Book of Tobit 1: 17–19*.

⁴⁰ See, however, Sebgondi, "The Congregation and the Fresco Cycle," in Bradburne, *Hidden Voices*, 73–92, Sebgondi and De Gramatica, *Confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino*, and Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, 153–173.

quality as the Sassetti Chapel murals or the Tornabuoni Chapel frescoes. Of particular interest, though, is the depiction of a debtor being released from gaol, or, as Piero Bargellini in his slim volume *I Buonomini di San Martino* titles it, *Visitare i carcerati* (Fig. 1).⁴¹

The scene in this particular lunette is set outside a prison. If it is juxtaposed to a nineteenth-century rendering of the Stinche (Fig. 2), one can safely assume that this is, in fact, the portrayed edifice. Much of the pictorial space is taken up with the looming bulk of the jail. The viewer is thus left with no uncertainty that the prisoner, who can be seen emerging from the tiny doorway, is leaving a dark stronghold for the light, airy piazza. In his poem about his incarceration in the Stinche, contemporary writer Francesco Berni specifies that the entrance was extremely low, another clue that this is the prison depicted in the fresco.⁴² It is also significant that the prison doors and cells take up the sinister side of the composition and that the prisoner is emerging from darkness into light. Given his fur-lined hat, handmade leather shoes, and dishevelled linen shirt, the released prisoner appears to have been a man of some means who has fallen from wealth. The hand gestures are also very interesting and drive the artwork's narrative. As if in a state of shameful supplication, the released prisoner cups his palm towards the gentleman standing beside him. The awkward positioning of the palms suggests that the former prisoner is embarrassed to beg and not used to being the object of charity.

The Buonomini are identifiable by their red and black costumes, not unlike the ensembles worn by notaries and Florentine males holding public office.⁴³ The brotherhood had a uniform, although in the frescoes the colour scheme is inconspicuous and sometimes visually confusing, which leads one to suspect that Vespasiano da Bisticci was well informed when he wrote that the confraternity's founder, Antoninus, "wanted those of the long cloaks [...] to blend in very closely to the background."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Bargellini, *I Buonomini di San Martino*, 32–33.

⁴² Geltner, "Medieval Prisons," 7: "O, glorious Stinche of Florence; / Celestial place, divine place, / Worthy of a hundred-thousand reverences. / To you men come with bowed heads, / And before they climb your stairs / They stoop at your door step." Translated from Berni, *Il primo libro dell'opere burlesche di M. Francesco Berni*, fols. 52r–53r. See also Becchi, *Sulle Stinche di Firenze*.

⁴³ Ludovica Sebgondi, one of the six participants whose thoughts on the confraternity were recorded and recounted by Bradburne, *Hidden Voices*, 42, also mentions that the Buonomini are identifiable from their red and black costumes, although our thoughts on this have evolved independently: "Black and red. That's an important point because they're all dressed like representatives of the highest-ranking social classes in Florence [...] If they'd gone around town wearing a white cap like members of other confraternities, everybody would have realised that they were going to help that specific family, whereas it was imperative for the Buonomini not to be identifiable as such."

⁴⁴ Bargellini, *I Buonomini di San Martino*, 12: "Furono molti — narra il suo biografo, Vespasiano da Bisticci — che lo volevano consigliare che facesse la cappa lunga con la coda; non ne volle fare nulla; ma volle che fusse rasente terra e non piu, e di perpigliano. Avendola fatti due dita piu lunga, che non era quella de' frati, la fece mozzare."

To the right of the scene stand three figures bathed in natural light. The first appears in full profile and the right hand side of his body is painted down the central axis of the fresco. He is attired as one of the Buonomini would be although it has been suggested that he is in fact a creditor as he holds a promissory note in his left hand.⁴⁵ With his right, he points towards the bag of money which is held by an aged, white haired Buonomo, who in turn, motions towards the emerging prisoner.⁴⁶ These gestures reassure the viewer that the coins exchanged are in fact, payment for the convict's release.

Previous attempts to read the fresco however, appear not to have taken into consideration that, although commissioned paintings were often staged on a realistic *Quattrocento* set, they were also what Patricia Lee Rubin calls "operative fictions, versions of desired ends — not portrayals of actual conditions."⁴⁷ Within these visual hybrids of reality and fantasy, the living and the dead can come together to remind contemporary viewers of the moral, civic, and spiritual values expected of them. For example, as Rubin notes of Botticelli's *The Wedding Feast*, painted c. 1483 for the Pucci family, the dead Giuliano de' Medici is included with members of the living Florentine elite as a warning that violence endangers both the republic and the moral imperatives that underpin such a regimen.⁴⁸ If one takes Botticelli as a model, then the figure to the left of the Buonomini's *Releasing the Debtor from Gaol* fresco (Fig. 3) could be a posthumous portrait of Giuliano de' Medici, and the figure central to the scene may be a depiction of his brother, Lorenzo (Fig. 5). When compared, Botticelli's Giuliano (Fig. 4) and the man in the Buonomini fresco share striking physical similarities. Both are in profile (which alone is unremarkable given that the *Quattrocento* saw the creation of countless profile portraits) and their expressions are haughty, heavy-lidded eyes lowered. Additionally, both portraits share the downward curving, rosebud mouth, the aquiline nose and the dark page-boy haircut — all features characteristic of Giuliano.⁴⁹ Including Giuliano or a

⁴⁵ Sebregondi, "The Congregation and the Fresco Cycle," 88.

⁴⁶ A number of locals and some tour guides believe to this day that the white haired man shown in the *Releasing the Debtor from Gaol* mural is Piero Capponi, the statesman and soldier who refused to bow to Charles VIII's exorbitant demands when the French king and his troops entered Florentine territory en route to the Kingdom of Naples. Given that Charles did not reach Florence until November 1494 and the frescoes were executed sometime between 1486 and 1490, the link appears somewhat tenuous. Nevertheless, the attribution is interesting and perhaps requires further investigation.

⁴⁷ Rubin, *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, 56.

⁴⁸ Rubin, *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, 262.

⁴⁹ Sebregondi, 'The Congregation and the Fresco Cycle'. 88, identifies the figure whom I propose is Giuliano de' Medici, as one of the Stinche's municipal officers. However, given the capacious nature of the figure's red tunic, the fine linen shirt which is visible through his fashionably slit sleeves, and the expensive, handmade, fur-lined boots, this man does not appear to represent a modestly paid member of the prison staff. In "Coping in Medieval Prisons," Geltner notes the small amount of staff present at the Stinche during the fourteenth century and remarks that they often had to take on other manual tasks within the gaol in order to survive financially. He also

likeness of Giuliano in the Buonomini fresco was a visual promotion of civic stability. The plot on which the Stinche was built had, after all, been confiscated from the Uberti clan as a result of their infamous support of the Ghibelline faction during the thirteenth century.⁵⁰ The origins of the prison's name, too, would perhaps have served to remind the *Quattrocento* viewer that grave consequences awaited those who upset the city's status quo.⁵¹

Remarkably, the Buonomini fresco expands on this political message to include the notion of clemency, an ideal from ancient Roman law. Thus Giuliano oversees the release, and in doing so reveals his authority, which the ancients believed was only accorded to the powerful.⁵² Likewise, Giuliano's actions also correspond to contemporary notions of piety. He dispenses one of the duties passed down from God to man in the *Pater Noster*: "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Giuliano, of course, had been "trespassed against" in the most violent and personal manner by Francesco de' Pazzi and Bernardo di Bandino Baroncelli. It is perhaps because he was a victim of betrayal that his likeness performs this act of clemency.⁵³ That he releases a debtor from gaol is of no small consequence, as bankruptcy preyed on the honest merchant's virtue and an individual's fiscal relationship with God himself. To cite another example, Giannozzo Manetti, the fifteenth-century politician and diplomat, referred to God as the "master of commerce," a silent but powerful partner to the Renaissance entrepreneur.⁵⁴

Real power, however, lies with the figure central to the scene, the one who has initiated the financial transaction and who literally holds the debtor's future in his hands.⁵⁵ I propose then that this figure is Lorenzo de' Medici, and that if the Buonomini portrait is compared to Botticelli's likeness of *il Magnifico* in his 1475 painting *Adoration of the Magi* (Fig. 6), the same dominant

calculates that the wages of the warders and officials were so low that the prison odd-job man could earn more than they.

⁵⁰ Wolfgang, "A Florentine Prison," 155. Najemy, "Florentine Politics and Urban Spaces," 22, reminds the reader that the Uberti also lost control of the land on which the Palazzo Vecchio now stands.

⁵¹ Wolfgang, "A Florentine Prison," 57–58: The Stinche prison was named after the Castello delle Stinche in Chianti, once the stronghold of the Cavalcanti clan who became enemies of the Florentine state due to their support for the *Bianchi*. Interestingly, members of this family subsequently became the Stinche's first inmates in 1304.

⁵² For a discussion on authority, power and civic stability see also Rubin, 267.

⁵³ The impact of the Pazzi conspiracy is evident from the writings of Poliziano and Machiavelli, although the latter wrote his version of events some decades after the event. Interestingly, through the *Ricordanze di Messer Bongianni di Bongianni di Giovanni Gianfigliuzzi*, ABSM, 4.2.1, fol. 44 we are privy to an entry written on 26 April 1478 which not only informs us of Giuliano's death but reveals the pathos experienced by Bongianni, friend and ally of both Medici brothers.

⁵⁴ Wolfgang, "Crime and Punishment in Renaissance Florence," 580.

⁵⁵ The figure of Lorenzo de' Medici holds a piece of rolled up parchment which could be a promissory note or release papers. Either way the future of the criminal is in *Il Magnifico's* hands.

features will be found to be constant: his dark overhanging brow, the heavy square jaw, the broad squashed nose and the thin serious mouth. Moreover, if Giuliano's portrait from the same *Adoration* (Fig. 7) is also considered, it becomes apparent that we are meant not only to recognise Lorenzo and Giuliano, but also to recall them at the height of their glory. *Releasing the Debtor from Gaol* was possibly meant to record an actual deed performed by the Buonomini, since their records contain a single entry pertaining to the release of ninety-eight prisoners from the Stinche in December 1479, twenty months after the Pazzi Conspiracy and the assassination of Giuliano de' Medici.⁵⁶ Significantly, on 29th of that very same month, Lorenzo finally fully avenged the killing of his brother by executing Bernardo di Bandino Baroncelli. At this time, Lorenzo's presence within the Buonomini was still strong and would remain so until 1486.

Lorenzo's personage in the Buonomini fresco reflects not only his actual magnanimity, but also reminds the viewer of his power as a civic symbol. By accepting positions within the *Otto di Guardia* and the *Dieci di Balìa* in 1478, Lorenzo would have briefly played a significant part in the condemnation of criminals.⁵⁷ As one of the Eight, he had the power to rescind a citizen's liberty, but his confraternal role as one of the twelve procurators of the shamed poor allowed him to simultaneously assume the role of liberator. Following his short term among the Eight, Lorenzo appears to have remained the "soul and mind" of Florentine government through a number of carefully crafted bills and through the appointments of Medici supporters to high office.⁵⁸ Given the secrecy that traditionally surrounded the Buonomini's charitable activities (and still does), one might assume *prima facie* that Lorenzo's involvement in the release of prisoners from the Stinche would have gone unnoticed. Furthermore, the liberation of the ninety-eight prisoners in December 1479 would likely have been achieved through private negotiations between prison officials, the Buonomini, and perhaps a number of creditors.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ ABSM, 1.2.4.0.1. *Entrata et Uscita del Proposto March 1479–1481*, fol. 34. "Prigioni 98 delle Stinche — y 21.13.4 adi 25 di detto grossoni."

⁵⁷ Hegarty, 'Laurentian Patronage in the Palazzo Vecchio: The Frescoes of the Sala dei Gigli', 267.

⁵⁸ Hegarty, 'Laurentian Patronage in the Palazzo Vecchio', 266–268 informs us that "forty-one individuals who served as *Operai* between 1479 and 1492 were virtually without exception Lorenzo's loyalists. Eighteen (44 percent) had been members of the *Balia* of 1471 that had consolidated Lorenzo's power through a series of constitutional reforms [...] Twenty eight (68 percent) were members of the *Balia* of 1480, which further strengthened Lorenzo's power through legislative reforms [...] This legislation created the *Consiglio dei Settanta* [...] the most powerful council of the Florentine government of the Laurentian era, to which the *Tre Maggiore* and even the *Cento* became subordinate."

⁵⁹ Geltner, "Isola non Isolta," 15–16, informs us that debtors could be either private or public, depending on individual circumstances. Private debtors could be brought into custody by the creditor or commune officials. Either way, the creditor was taxed on every *lire* that they were owed. However, public debtors were charged fees by the prison administrators which were calculated "according to the inmate's fines or debts."

Nonetheless, given the prison's geographical location in downtown Florence and the well-documented "permeability of the Stinche's walls," it would be judicious to consider whether this considerable and extensive act of charity was in fact a clever tool that Lorenzo employed to convey both his generosity and his authority as *de facto* ruler of Florence.⁶⁰ The Stinche was, after all, an urban prison that operated in close proximity to local businesses, residences, and places of worship; the mass release of ninety-eight of its residents just in time to celebrate the birth of Christ is unlikely to have gone unnoticed.⁶¹ Subtler than the Medici *palle* news of the prisoners' release would perhaps have travelled across the city swiftly and in hushed tones via the *pancaccieri*.⁶²

Despite having pointed to the importance of the mass release of prisoners in relation to the Medici brothers' personal sacrality, one should also consider the notion of the confraternity as a microcosm of Florentine society.⁶³ Dale Kent mentions that philanthropy was the Christian expression of patronage. In a community like that of fifteenth-century Florence, reciprocity was the universal hub around which the various wheels of society turned.⁶⁴ The Buonomini appear to have exceeded the duties expected of similar lay confraternities and performed actions that reflected those carried out by the city's political administration. Rather than labouring the obvious parallel between the titles of the Buonomini's twelve procurators and the Florentine magistracy, one should let deeds speak for themselves. If we examine the events surrounding the Duomo's consecration in 1436 and compare them to the events of 1479, an interesting and informative analogy emerges. Following the construction of the cathedral's *cupola*, an event that encouraged celebratory decrees from both the Curia and the Florentine magistracy, the latter complemented the program of civic ceremonies by liberating prisoners from the Stinche.⁶⁵ Likewise, the Buonomini's part in the liberation of 1479

⁶⁰ Geltner, "Isola non Isolta," 21.

⁶¹ The name of the street which flanked the Stinche to the south was and is still named the Via dei Lavatoi, which reminds us that this area was concerned with manufacturing, specifically the washing of wool or cloth. For further details on the San Pier Scheraggio wool route see Atwell, "Ritual Wool Trading," 204. The Via del Mercantino, now known as the Via dell'Isola della Stinche, which ran along the west side of the prison, indicates that there was once a thriving flea market in this area. Geltner, "Coping in Medieval Prisons," 152, states that the church of San Simone also bordered the Stinche to the south.

⁶² Elet, "Seats of Power: The Outdoor Benches of Early Modern Florence," 451, lists the nicknames and epithets given to those who congregated on public benches. *Pancaccieri* denotes a philosopher of the community benches.

⁶³ Weissman, "Cults and Contexts," 209.

⁶⁴ Kent, *Friendship, Love and Trust in Renaissance Florence*, 45.

⁶⁵ Kent, *Friendship, Love and Trust in Renaissance Florence*, 40–41.

coincided with the capture and hanging of an enemy of the state, likened to Judas Iscariot, who had been at large for more than a year.⁶⁶

Perhaps the final and most important question to ask with regard to Lorenzo, Giuliano, and the Buonomini is the purpose of including recognisable portraits in a room that was essentially closed to the public. Despite general acceptance that the oratory may have been intended for the sole use of the Buonomini, there is compelling evidence that suggests otherwise. In his study of the confraternity's activities, Amleto Spicciani describes how recipients of charity were recorded in the confraternity's ledgers and given a *polizza* or token that, on Wednesdays, could be redeemed for bread.⁶⁷ He does not make it clear as to exactly where the distribution of food took place, but perhaps evidence can be found in the visual documents on the oratory's walls. In the *Giving Food to the Hungry and Drink to the Thirsty fresco*, (Fig. 8) the scene is set within the *oratorio's* vaulted space. Given Ghirlandaio's attention to accurately reproducing detail, this would indicate that at least on a Wednesday, a portion of the Florentine public, the *poveri vergognosi*, were in fact allowed to enter this otherwise private room. The remains of a trumpet window, which, during the plague of 1522, was used to distribute bread without necessitating personal contact, likewise indicates that it was inside the oratory that such transactions took place. Accordingly, the shamed poor would have formed one of the audiences able to view the oratory's newly painted lunettes. Moreover, there is no proof to preclude the public's presence in this space during the Feast of Saint Martin. It was and still is accepted practice throughout Europe for confraternities to open their doors, however briefly, to all walks of life on certain dates of the liturgical calendar, and especially on the feast day of their patron saint.

Prior to the Pazzi Conspiracy, the Medici had already blurred the boundaries between public patronage and contemporary concepts of honour associated with their person. Furthermore, in hindsight the events of 1478, although depriving Lorenzo of a brother, provided a different stage on which the Medici could "merge family history with city history" almost without question or hindrance.⁶⁸ This was achieved in part by the forging of confraternal bonds.⁶⁹ As a result, a chimera made up of civic history, visual images, and folklore spilled outside the confraternity and onto the piazzetta where the people who congregated there would recognise it at a Medicean animal, made tame by admiration during times of plenty and ferocious and danger-

⁶⁶ Rubin, *Images and Identity*, 118. The epitaph — which was to have accompanied the portrait of the executed traitor and is said to have been composed by Lorenzo de' Medici — reads: "I am Bernardo Bandini, a new Judas. I was a murderous traitor in church, a rebel deserving an even more brutal death."

⁶⁷ Spicciani, "The 'Poveri Vergognosi,'" 125.

⁶⁸ Emison, "The Replicated Image in Florence," 434.

⁶⁹ Gavitt, "Corporate Beneficence," 149.

ous in times of discontent.⁷⁰ Many Florentines might have caught a glimpse of the oratory's painted interior as the brothers entered and exited. Needless to say, visiting traders regularly walked along the San Martino wool route and may have been aural or visual witnesses to the cult of Lorenzo and Giuliano.⁷¹ One can think of the Medici as earthy intercessors between the impoverished and the wealthy. Their confraternal brothers acted as "participants in the new ritual forms and spaces that [were subsequently] created."⁷² The Buonomini's oratory is thus an example of a new Medicean ritual space, a construct given meaning by the socio/political impact of the Pazzi Conspiracy. The political munificence of Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici was translated into a more perceptible medium, one preserved in plaster and paint and eulogised, albeit discreetly, by their confraternal brothers, the Good Men of Saint Martin.

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⁷⁰ The piazzetta that I refer to here is now known as the Piazza San Martino. It is not to be confused with the former Piazza San Martino, famous for performances that were held there. Blake Wilson, in "Dominion of the Ear" scrutinizes late-medieval primary sources, and establishes that with the building of the church of San Martino del Vescovo, the rectangle of land of the site (and was in its entirety known as the Piazza San Martino) effectively became divided. The space to the west of the church, now called the Piazza de' Cimatori, was the performance site, and the smaller piazzetta to the east flanked the Buonomini's oratory.

⁷¹ Atwell, "Ritual Wool Trading," 201–205.

⁷² Najemy, "Florentine Politics and Urban Spaces," 47.

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1. The workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio, “Releasing the Debtor from Goal” (1486–90). Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino, Florence. (By permission of Antonio Quattrone, Firenze).



2. Fabio Borbottoni, “Isola delle Stinche e via del Fosso dal lato di levante” (19th Century). Since 1996 in Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze Collection. (Public domain image from <http://eng.archinform.net/projekte/4315.htm>).



3. Portrait of Giuliano de' Medici (?). Detail from the workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio, "Releasing the Debtor from Goal" (1486–90). Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino, Florence. (By permission of Antonio Quattrone, Firenze).



4. Sandro Botticelli, "Portrait of Giuliano de' Medici." (c. 1478–80). National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. (Public domain image).



5. Portrait of Lorenzo de' Medici (?). Detail from the workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio, "Releasing the Debtor from Goal" (1486–90). Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino, Florence. (By permission of Antonio Quattrone, Firenze).



6. Portrait of Lorenzo de' Medici. Detail from Sandro Botticelli "Adoration of the Magi" (1475). Florence, Uffizi. (Public domain image reproduced courtesy of The Yorck Project: *10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei*. DVD-ROM, 2002. ISBN 3936122202. Distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH)



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8. The workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio, “Feeding the Hungry and Giving Drink to the Thirsty” (1486–1490). Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino, Florence. (By permission of Antonio Quattrone, Firenze)