Julia Wood Prize Essay Submission:

Title: *"A king in all but name"* To what extent is this an accurate reflection of the nature of Cosimo de'Medici's power over Florence between 1434 and 1464?

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"A king in all but name" To what extent is this an accurate reflection of the nature of Cosimo de'Medici's power over Florence between 1434 and 1464?

On 6th October 1434, Cosimo de'Medici rode in to Florence, returning from a year-long exile, on the back of a mule. The ruling oligarchy which had banished him had collapsed and its leader, Rinaldo degli'Albizzi, had fled. Although Cosimo returned to Florence as a free man, his constitutional position remained ambiguous. *De jure*, Cosimo was a powerless citizen. *De facto*, he was the leader of a faction which, within a year, controlled Florence itself. The precise nature of Cosimo's power, between his return in 1434 and death in 1464, and how he reconciled the conflict between his *de jure* and *de facto* positions, is the subject of this essay.

Historians examining Cosimo must rely on three major primary sources, all written with different aims and consequently riddled with bias. The most prominent is Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*. Despite writing on a Medicean commission, Machiavelli viewed Cosimo as the destroyer of Florentine republicanism; his description of Cosimo returning "*as though from a great victory*"[1] is unsurprisingly militaristic. By contrast, Cosimo's biographer, Vespasiano di'Bisticci, sought to present him as a dutiful citizen; he therefore stresses the humble connotations of Cosimo returning on mule-back. However, Vespasiano was "a born flatterer",[2] writing in the pay of Lorenzo *il Magnifico*, Cosimo's grandson. A third view is presented by Aeneas Sylvius de'Piccolomini (later Pope Pius II), Cosimo's contemporary and fellow ruler. Having stayed in Florence in 1454, he described Cosimo as "*the regulator of law; less a citizen than master of his city. Political councils were held in his home; the magistrates he chose were elected; he was a king in all but name and legal status."*[3]

From these sources, two conflicting interpretations of Cosimo's power emerge: Piccolomini's traditional portrayal of Cosimo as the omnipotent but unseen puppet-master of Florentine politics; and Vespasiano's apologist image of Cosimo as a humble citizen, working for Florentine interests. Modern historians have mirrored these views, although the truth is clearly more nuanced. Cosimo has never been examined in his own context though; all previous surveys have viewed him as part of the wider Medicean dynasty, lending favour to the monarchial interpretation. Secondly, historians have tended to focus on given elements of Cosimo's regime: namely, his motives for power; his use of power; and the extent to which Cosimo relied on consent or coercion for support. This essay

[1] Machiavelli, Niccolo. *Florentine Histories*, trans. H.A. Rennert (Project Gutenberg, 2006), Book IV, Chapter VII
[2] Hole. *Renaissance Italy*, pg. 48
[3] de'Piccolomini, Aeneas Sylvius. *Commentarii*, ed. L. Totaro (Milan, 1984), pp. 352-4

will assess the rival interpretations, with reference to the given elements of the Medicean regime, before coming to a holistic synthesis on the nature of Cosimo's domestic power.

Gene Brucker is the most prominent advocate of the "monarchial" interpretation, with regards to Cosimo's motives for seizing power. She argued that Medicean control was a product of Florence's unique social structure and a desire for "social supremacy".[4] Her essentially functionalist thesis noted that Florence distinguished itself from its republican contemporaries, like Venice and Genoa, by barring its nobility from power. This left a large merchant patriciate, called the *ottimati* ("best men"), as the political class, sub-divided by allegiance to their respective families.[5] Beneath them lay the *populo minuto* ("small people"). Brucker argued that the *ottimati* were a product of the city's capitalist economic order, created by Florence's successful banking and textiles industries.[6] Characterised by risk and fluidity, the economic system "contributed to social mobility… through [a] perpetual redistribution of wealth"[7] and fostered fierce competition between rival houses.[8] Piccolomini supports this view; he wrote that "*houses rise and fall… and no ancient dynasty can exist*".[9] Brucker viewed Cosimo's rise to power as a manifestation of capitalist competition in a social context; the Medici were no different to other aspiring Florentine oligarchies, except in their success in establishing hereditary control.

Lauro Martines furthered this interpretation when he labeled the Medici "social climbers".[10] Social status among the *ottimati* was determined by ancestral lineage, political office, and wealth.[11] By these determinants, the Medici were not a leading Florentine family in the early Quattrocento, and therefore had some way to climb. They married their social betters; Cosimo married Contessina de'Bardi in 1414 to link the Medici to her ancient name.[12] They lacked a distinguished family history - the rival Pazzi family, by contrast, could trace their ancestry to the first Crusader to scale the walls of Jerusalem in 1099.[13] The Medici did not possess a notable record of political office. Alt-

[4] Brucker, Gene. *Renaissance Florence*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), 1969, pg. 163
[5] Ibid. pg. 89
[6] Hibbert, Cristopher. *The Rise and Fall of the House of Medici*, (London: Penguin, 1979), pg. 28
[7] Brucker, Gene. *Renaissance Florence*, pg. 90
[8] Hale, John. *Florence and the Medici*, (London: Phoenix Press), 2004, pg. 19
[9] de'Piccolomini, Aeneas Sylvius, quoted by Burckhardt, Jacob, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore. (London: Penguin), 1990, pg. 33
[10] Martines, Lauro. *April Blood: Florence and the Plot Against the Medici*, (London: Pimlico), 2004, pg. 34
[11] Hibbert, Christopher. *The Rise and Fall of the House of Medici*, pg. 29
[12] Cleugh, *The Medici*, pg. 40
[13] Martines, Lauro. *April Blood*, pg. 62

hough the family name appears on the ruling council's membership list 28 times between 1291 and 1343, they were rarely consulted for advice - an honour bestowed only on the oldest families.[14] Both Martines and Cosimo's contemporary critics viewed his rise to power as an attempt to ascend the social hierarchy.[15] From these two arguments, a convincing image of Cosimo emerges; a man, driven by the competitive ethos of his society, who sought power to advance his family's social position.

This interpretation is flawed, however. Firstly, it places too much emphasis on impersonal forces, at the expense of personal motivations. Neither Brucker nor Martines once mention the role of the Medici bank, for example. Secondly, Brucker's analysis of the impact of social pressures is incomplete. She failed to note how the *ottimati*'s social conservatism limited Cosimo's power, just their competitive ethos created it. The *ottimati*'s goals, according to J.R. Hale, were "the protection of the privileged classes and… to safeguard their interests."[16] Decisions had to be taken collectively and any faction which sought to create an oligarchy required the support of other houses. Therefore, a permanent tension existed between social mobility, in the form of the jostling competition between houses, and social conservatism; namely, the resistance of the *ottimati* to any family which grew too powerful. For this reason, any attempt Cosimo made to control Florence would have been limited by his fellow *ottimati.* He was surrounded by rivals who were acutely aware of their relative social standing and who demanded treatment as equals. This explains both the accusation that Cosimo "*elevated himself above others*",[17] espoused by Machiavelli, and why Vespasiano portrayed him with humility. Brucker only presented one side of this conflict. The more important aspect - the *ottimati*'s limits on power - explains why Florence's social structure ruled out *de jure* power and made *de facto* Medicean control dependent on widespread support.

Medicean apologists have proposed alternative, more personal, explanations for Cosimo's motivations. Vespasiano promoted Cosimo as a herald of social change, who treated the *populo minuto* well. The acclaimed poet Anselmo Calderoni wrote a lyrical panegyric which described Cosimo as a "*true friend to all good works… kind help to all in need, succour of orphans and widows.*"[18] However, Cosimo's decision to attain power was motivated neither by social concern nor political ambition. Rather, he was driven by the imperative of protecting his growing fortune. Money was

[14] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 11
[15] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 106
[16] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 19
[17] Quoted, Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 106
[18] Quoted, Ibid. pg. 107

both the cause and main tool of Cosimo's power.[19] The Medici bank, established by Giovanni de'Medici in 1397,[20] was the largest commercial enterprise in Europe.[21] Between 1435 and 1450, the bank's total profits were 290,791 florins (19,386 *per annum*).[22] It is instructive to remember that 50 florins could buy a slave-girl and and 1,000 would build a respectable *palazzo*.[23] As Cosimo noted, it was foolish to be rich and not politically significant in a city where taxation took the form of forced loans.[24] Ruling oligarchies sought to destroy their opponents by targeting their wealth. Rinaldo degli'Albizzi proved Cosimo's aphorism when the enormous sum of 200,000 florins was demanded as a fine to complement his 1434 exile.[25] Cosimo sought power to prevent damage to his fortune, not to assume autocratic power or climb the social ladder. When James Cleugh claimed that there wasn't an "instance in Cosimo's career when he deliberately subordinated patriotism to self-interest",[26] he couldn't have been more wrong. Self-interest defined Cosimo's motives for power.

The debate over Cosimo's means of attaining and exercising power is more nuanced, because advocates of the "monarchial" interpretation make two different, but not conflicting, claims. Piccolomini, a foreigner, believed that Cosimo wielded autocratic power from behind the scenes. He indicated this in a letter; "*although Cosimo is practically Signore of the town, he behaves in such a way as to appear a private citizen*".[27] Domestic opponents focussed less on Cosimo's individual power and more on his destruction of Florentine republicanism. They claimed that Cosimo "inveigled liberty away from a republican people"[28] and, by extension, took power for himself. Medicean apologists offer no rebuttal to these accusations. Even Vespasiano could not help but allude to the concealed nature of Cosimo's power, when he wrote "*whenever he wished to achieve anything, to avoid envy he gave the impression… that it was they who had suggested the thing, not he*."[29] The debate therefore centres on the extent of Cosimo's control and to what degree Florentine republicanism suffered as a result.

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[19] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 20
[20] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 38
[21] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 32
[22] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 39
[23] Ibid, pg. 34
[24] Ibid, pg. 100
[25] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 23
[26] Cleugh, *The Medici*, pg. 97
[27] Quoted, Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 40
[28] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 196
[29] Quoted, Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 140

The basis for the opposition's indignation was that Medicean power should have been impossible, as the constitution was designed to prevent despotism. Executive power belonged to a nine-man council called the *Signoria*,[30] which proposed legislation and made policy decisions.[31] The *Signoria* constituted eight *Priori* (Priors) and a *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* (Standard-bearer of Justice), who was the figurehead of government.[32] Cosimo sought to install his supporters in the council and thus control Florence. However, in order to prevent factional dominance of the city, appointments were allocated by lot. The names of the *Signoria* members were literally drawn out of bags, called *borse*.[33] As J.R. Hale noted with incredulity, "the fortunes of the city which housed some of the wealthiest businesses and the most vivid culture in Europe depended, month by month, on a form of roulette."[34] To further prevent factional control, *Priori* served for two month periods only, whilst other government posts were held for a maximum of four months.[35] Each year, therefore, the central organs of government were staffed by 1,650 different men.[36] These term lengths were partially a consequence of the lot-drawing procedure, as a politically indecisive *Signoria* needed rapid replacement, but their true purpose was to shuffle appointments before an individual could use their power for partisan benefit. The system operated on a principle of universal distrust, at the expense of political continuity and meritocracy. If the social conservatism of the *ottimati* prevented *de jure* Medicean power, then the Florentine constitution should have prevented Cosimo's *de facto* power. Given that the city sacrificed political efficiency to guard against despotism, the opposition complaint is understandable.

However, the opposition's accusation that Cosimo destroyed Florence's republicanism was disingenuous, because it was a republic in numerical terms only. Although the city had the largest political class in Europe, qualification for offices was almost exclusively limited to the *ottimati*.[37] In order to be included in the *borse*, membership of one of the seven *arti maggiori* (major guilds) was required, thus limiting the franchise to the city's wealthiest men.[38] When Leonardo Bruni wrote in

[30] The *Signoria* was assisted by two advisory councils, the *Buonuomini* (The Twelve Good Men") and the *Gonfalonieri* (The Sixteen Standard-bearers). Together, these three councils proposed legislation. This was passed to two legislative assemblies, the Council of the People and the Council of the Commune, to be passed or rejected by a majority vote. The *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* had no greater power than his fellow *Priori*, except that he was the custodian of the city's banner and therefore represented the pinnacle of political control. The role came to take on greater significance over time.

[31] Brucker, Gene. *Renaissance Florence*, pg. 134

[32] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 15

[33] Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, pg. 16

[34] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 17

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 18

[38] Ibid.

1428 that "*the hope of attaining public office and rising to higher status is equal for all*",[39] he was either lying or being idealistic. The opposition were similarly unjust to suggest that "*the tyranny practised by the party favourable to the Medici*"[40] was unique. Factions routinely twisted the system to increase their chances of representation. Men in arrears could not be elected, for example, so other party members payed their debts.[41] Vespasiano tells us that Rinaldo degli'Albizzi resolved the financial difficulties of Bernardo Guadagni, the *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* who exiled Cosimo.[42] Party members in administrative posts spared their friends from punitive taxes.[43] The Medicean party used techniques which were familiar to all factions, so Cosimo was no more guilty of damaging Florentine republicanism than Rinaldo or his political forebears.

Nonetheless, factions who held power with these techniques alone were reliant on luck; Rinaldo himself was exiled when, by chance, a pro-Medicean *Signoria* voted to recall Cosimo.[44] Aware of this threat, Cosimo acted to reduce, but not eliminate, the likelihood of an opposing faction gaining control. Openly dismantling the constitution or removing notable families from the *borse* would have fermented rebellion. Therefore, Cosimo's coup d'état lay not so much in changing the composition of the electoral lists as how they were used. Every five years, scrutinies of the electoral bags took place; deaths, retirements and changing financial fortunes necessitated their alteration.[45] In the meantime, officials called *accopiatori* (meaning "he who brings together"[46]) created lists of as few as 74 names, whereas there were normally 2000.[47] These short lists were also used in times of government-declared crisis, as they almost guaranteed political homogeneity. By declaring the existing electoral lists to be void and routinely delaying the results of the new scrutiny, Cosimo used the crisis of 1434 to guarantee Medicean interests in government.[48] The regime argued international uncertainty meant that the constitution should be periodically suspended. Between 1434 and 1440, the exiled Albizzian faction threatened to invade Florence - the danger of which necessitated strong governance.[49] Between 1444 and 1454, Cosimo's exiled opponents returned, prompting further

[39] Quoted, Ibid. pg. 9
[40] Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, Book V, Chapter 1
[41] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 21
[42] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 94
[43] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 21
[44] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 23
[45] Ibid, pg. 36
[46] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 139
[47] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 37
[48] Ibid.
[49] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 140

constitutional suspensions.[50] Piccolomini himself wrote that "*in our change-loving Italy, nothing stands firm*".[51] As long as Italy was in (interminable) crisis, the Medicean *stato* allowed no further scrutinies and Cosimo was able to fill the *Signoria* with his supporters. The irony of Cosimo's position was that he desired international stability, which provided good business for bankers, but simultaneously needed international chaos to perpetuate his domestic power.

To this end, Cosimo was able to rule *pro tempore* but without a firm constitutional basis. This "power" cannot be conflated with the autocratic image presented by Piccolomini and Machiavelli, however. The representation of Cosimo's interests was guaranteed but Medicean control of the *Signoria* was not. Indeed, both Piccolomini and Machiavelli exaggerated Cosimo's ability to influence political appointments. Piccolomini noted that "*the magistrates he chose were elected*",[52] whilst Machiavelli wrote that the Medici "*resolved that the magistrates… should always be chosen from the leaders of their party, and that the accopiatori… should make the new appointments.*"[53] Both were referring to the process of picking names from the *borse* "*a mano*" (by hand). During times of crisis, the *accopiatori* were allowed to install competent individuals in government positions.[54] Although this was normal constitutional practice, Cosimo's opponents alleged he simply instated his own men. They rightly observed that he took up government posts when it suited him; Cosimo was 'elected' *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* three times: during the crisis year of 1434, during the Council of Florence in 1439 (the pinnacle of his foreign policy) and during 1458.[55] However, they were wrong to imply that he always had arbitrary control over appointments; only between 1458 and 1464 did the *accopiatori* pick out names by hand.[56] This confirms the inaccuracy of Piccolomini's assessment. Cosimo did not wield autocratic power; rather, it was limited, temporal and reliant on the support of others. In fact, the constitution reverted back to its pre-Medicean form between 1441-3 and 1445-52, demonstrating the transient nature of his control.

Having established his regime, Cosimo faced substantial domestic complaint. Given the inherent insecurity of his position, eliminating or mitigating the impact of this opposition was un-

[50] Ibid. pg. 141

[51] de'Piccolomini, Aeneas Sylvius, quoted by Burckhardt, Jacob, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore. (London: Penguin), 1990, pg. 33

[52] de'Piccolomini, Aeneas Sylvius. *Commentarii*, ed. L. Totaro (Milan, 1984), pp. 352-4

[53] Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, Book V, Chapter I

[54] Cleugh, *The Medici*, pg. 57

[55] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 140

[56] Vernon, Dorothea, "The Constitutional Position of Cosimo de' Medici", The English Historical Review, Vol. 15, No. 58 (Apr., 1900), pg. 321. JSTOR. Web. Accessed 14th June 2015.

doubtedly one of his domestic policy aims. Advocates of the "monarchial" interpretation argue that Cosimo behaved like a tyrant in doing so; Machiavelli details how his relation, Girolamo, was "*tortured for days before being exiled*".[57] Apologists, like James Cleugh, reject these reports as exaggerated and claim that Cosimo had widespread support. Therefore, the extent to which Cosimo relied on consent, in the form of popular support, or coercion, by destroying the opposition, forms the third area of debate. Naturally, evidence from Cosimo's opponents tends to magnify his crimes, especially because the complaints originated from the disenfranchised *ottimati*. Even the subject of their complaint is contentious. They supposedly protested in the name of Florentine republicanism. Marco Parenti, the son-in-law of an exile, wrote "*on* [Cosimo's] *death everyone will rejoice, such is the desire for liberty*."[58] It is more likely that Cosimo's opponents were resentful at being excluded from the government process. This was the sentiment of a hostile mid-century commentator, who wrote that "*many were called to office, but few were chosen to govern*",[59] alluding to the powers of the *accopiatori*.

When Piccolomini reported that "[Cosimo's] *tyranny was intolerable*",[60] he was referring to the charges of oppression levelled against Cosimo. James Cleugh stresses that Cosimo "did not sanction the execution of a single Florentine"[61] during his 1435 *gonfalonier*ship and claims he "genuinely hated violence and bloodshed".[62] However, Cosimo was aware that martyring his critics, as Albizzi had done, would only create proof of his supposed tyranny. This did not prevent him from exiling 70 leading Albizzians in 1434,[63] including the prominent Palla Strozzi,[64] and requisitioning property. The assets of exiled families were seized and distributed among Medicean supporters.[65] Even exile was too provocative for regular use, however, so punitive taxation was used too. Giannozzo Manetti, a prominent humanist and diplomatic envoy, is an example of such financial victimisation. The Medici *stato* took 135,000 florins in forced loans from him, in retribution for unfavourable comments made to foreign dignitaries.[66] Cleugh claims that these techniques were "not

[57] Quoted, Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 104
[58] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 107
[59] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 40
[60] de'Piccolomini, Aeneas Sylvius. *Commentarii*, ed. L. Totaro (Milan, 1984), pp. 352-4
[61] Cleugh, *The Medici*, pg. 55
[62] Ibid, pg. 97
[63] Hibbert, *The Rise and Fall of the House of Medici*, pg. 58
[64] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 100
[65] Cleugh, *The Medici*, pg. 54
[66] Martines, *April Blood*, pg. 58 Remarkably, Vespasiano is the source for this figure, despite being the prime source of the apologists.

used as much as [was] later claimed".[67] Machiavelli and Martines beg to differ; the former wrote that men were "*oppressed with taxes imposed for the occasion*".[68] The "monarchial" interpretation seems more likely. Although accusations of tyranny are hyperbolic, it remains a fact that, after the battle of Anghari and the destruction of the exiled Albizzian force in 1440, there was never a rival faction which threatened Cosimo. The taxation used to cripple isolated voices of opposition therefore seems disproportionate. However, the collapse of opposition was not due to its total destruction, as Martines argues, but rather the grudging realisation that working with Cosimo was more profitable than opposing him.

The means by which Cosimo attained support are similarly contested. The "monarchial" advocates claim that Cosimo dispensed so many financial favours that he effectively bribed Florence into submission, whereas Vespasiano views Cosimo's benevolence as purely charitable. Cosimo certainly spent vast sums; Lorenzo *il Magnifico* calculated that his grandfather gave away 663, 755 florins in donations.[69] Some of this money was definitely used for bribery, leading a critic to note that "w*hoever keeps in with the Medici does well for themselves*".[70] However, J.R. Hale notes that "there is no evidence that they could buy supporters into… the leading offices."[71] Instead, the money went towards "offering protection and sponsoring lesser men".[72] In one instance, a director of a Medici-owned wool-manufacturer became *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia*.[73] Cosimo was therefore more guilty of introducing "base new men"[74] to the echelons of power than buying off the opposition.

Cosimo's funding had a broader purpose in cultivating his image as a benevolent citizen, working to glorify the city. He established the *Good Men of San Martino*, a philanthropic confraternity, in 1442. It sought to help the "*shamed poor*"[75] by offering free handouts of wine and meat, at the substantial cost of 500 florins each time.[76] This was the equivalent of three bank managers' salaries.[77]

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[67] Cleugh, *The Medici*, pg. 54
[68] Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, Book V, Chapter VII
[69] Hibbert, *The Rise and Fall of the House of Medici*, pg. 74
[70] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 39
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid. pg. 107
[74] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 106
[75] Ibid.
[76] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 108
[77] Ibid.

Similarly, he spent 10,000 florins rebuilding the church of San Marco[78] and contributed towards projects in Santa Croce, Santa Annunziata and San Bartolommeo.[79] Vespasiano argues that such generosity was motivated by religious devotion. He has Cosimo declare "*Never shall I be able to give God enough to set him down as a debtor*."[80] Predictably, Cosimo's critics identified different motives in both cases. They observed that the establishment of the *Good Men* coincided with the first period of constitutional relaxation, between 1441-3, when Cosimo's position was most insecure. The organisation therefore served to lessen the risk of complaint from the poor, whilst enhancing Cosimo's image as a public servant. Opponents also saw his architectural patronage as a statement of ownership and ambition. The Medicean patron saints, Sts. Cosmas and Lorenzo, adorned the old sacristy's Martyrs' Door[81] and the family emblem of golden balls (the *palle*) decorated the *Badia* palace.[82] "*He has even put his balls in the monks' privies!"* exclaimed one outraged abbot.[83] Nevertheless, Cosimo seemingly intended his patronage to preserve his legacy. Vespasiano records him saying "*I know the humours of my city. Before fifty years have passed we shall be expelled, but my buildings will remain*."[84] The "monarchial" interpretation is right to see multiple motives behind Cosimo's actions, but is wrong to assume that they were deceitful.

Cosimo's attempt to create disguise the discrepancy between his *de jure* and *de facto* positions ultimately failed, though. Although Hale notes that the list of his political appointments "did not look like the record of a ruler"[85] and Cleugh emphasises that Cosimo did not enter the *Palazzo Signoria* unless asked to,[86] a comment from a mid-century opponent illustrates why; "*the commune was governed at dinners and desks rather than in the Palace*."[87] This explains Piccolomini's assessment that "*political councils were held in his home*".[88] Tim Parks recalls the phrase "*the secret things of our town*",[89] used by ordinary Florentines to refer to the "embarrassing gap between how things ought to have been done, and the way they really were."[90] Cosimo's corruption of the constitution and use of bribery were open secrets and no 'image maintenance' could hide them. These "secret

[78] Ibid, pg. 122
[79] Hibbert, *The Rise and Fall of the House of Medici*, pg. 73
[80] Ibid. pg. 64
[81] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 31
[82] Ibid.
[83] Quoted, Hibbert, *The Rise and Fall of the House of Medici*, pg. 48
[84] Quoted, Ibid. pg. 73
[85] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 39
[86] Cleugh, *The Medici*, pg. 96
[87] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 40
[88] de'Piccolomini, Aeneas Sylvius. *Commentarii*, ed. L. Totaro, pp. 352-4
[89] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 103
[90] Ibid. pg. 138

things" define the extent of Cosimo's power; he could twist the system, but only to an extent acceptable to the populace.

The only successful instance of Cosimo's image cultivation was the impression he gave to foreigners. The centrality of foreign policy to Medicean interests meant that he needed authority on an international stage. Therefore, a conscious attempt to present himself as a king can be seen in his treatment of guests. Pope Eugenius IV and Emperor John Palaeologus were both Medicean guests, not Florentine ones.[91] The Venetians were encouraged to approach Cosimo directly for foreign policy decisions.[92] The Milanese ambassador permanently resided in the Medici *palazzo*.[93] Indeed, the most controversial of Cosimo's symbolic aspirations towards kingship lay inside his palace, where they could only be viewed by family and foreign guests. He celebrated his greatest foreign policy achievement, the Council of Florence in 1438, in the famous Gozzoli fresco, *The Procession of the Magi*. Despite being painted in his private chapel, Cosimo intended princes to see it; he met Galeazzo Sforza of Milan and the marquis of Mantua there in 1459 and 1461 respectively.[94] However, in the only contemporary likeness we have of him, Cosimo still rides a mule. We should therefore be wary of equating Cosimo's patronage to the ostentatious display which his grandson, Lorenzo *il Magnifico*, would epitomise as the mark of a the Renaissance prince. Much as his opponents rightly denounced him for behaving like king, there is some truth in Vespasiano's depiction of Cosimo's humility.

As a description of Cosimo's power, Piccolomini's *"king in all but name"* comment is entirely inaccurate. Piccolomini was beguiled by Cosimo's "king" image - one of the few truly successful elements of Cosimo's regime. Cosimo did never desired, nor could ever achieve, autocratic power; his control was *pro tempore* and reliant upon a game of electoral roulette every two months. The monarchial interpretation misinterprets Cosimo's motives, overstates the extent of his governmental control and exaggerates the injustice of how he dealt with opposition. Its only creditable features are that it is more accurate than the apologist interpretation and that it indicates the dual motives for Cosimo's patronage - one of Florence's "secret things". The most surprising aspect of Medicean rule is that these "secret things" were openly discussed, but never challenged, by the populace. The discrepancy between Cosimo's *de jure* and *de facto* positions was never resolved; it

[91] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 113
[92] Hibbert, *The Rise and Fall of the House of Medici*, pg. 79
[93] Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, pg. 40
[94] Parks, *Medici Money*, pg. 151

was merely covered over with copious quantities of money. That such an ardently republican people should so easily surrender their values should worry us, because the "*secret things*" of Florence reflect troubling aspects of our own time: the relationship between money and political influence; politicians' ability to tinker with government procedures; and the growing importance of image, over substance in politics in general. Piccolomini's assessment is therefore a useful reflection of both Medicean power and of power in our own times, as it serves as a warning of "*secret things*" and our willingness to accept them.

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3,997 words.

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