
Stefanie Solum’s important new book introduces us to a woman who is still undervalued by scholars of Renaissance Florence. Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’ Medici (1427–82) has been considered largely in terms of familial relations, as the wife of Piero de’ Medici and mother of Lorenzo “Il Magnifico” and Giulio, murdered in the Pazzi conspiracy of 1478. Yet her extensive writings—hundreds of letters, numerous laude, and five extant storie sacre—suggest that she was a tireless participant in Florence’s cultural and religious life as well as an accomplished translator and poet. Solum adds to Tornabuoni’s list of achievements by arguing that she was a patron of one of Quattrocento Florence’s most intriguing artists, Filippo Lippi. Indeed, Women, Patronage, and Salvation in Renaissance Florence makes a compelling case for seeing Tornabuoni’s hand behind Lippi’s altarpiece, The Virgin Adoring the Christ Child, in the chapel of what was once the Medici palace on Via Larga, Florence’s Broadway. Like Natalie Tomas, Solum thus greatly enhances our understanding of “Medici women.” But unlike Tomas, she devotes to Tornabuoni an entire book, creatively using Lippi’s painting as her touchstone.

The problem, as Solum readily admits, is that there is no smoking gun: no documents that prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that Tornabuoni influenced Lippi’s painting. And an odd and original painting it is, of Mary kneeling before an infant Christ nestled in the grass of an hortus conclusus of sorts. I was struck by its intense, not wholly serene nocturnal air when I recently saw the painting in its current home in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin. Behind Mary are cypress trees and an undulating river, and behind Jesus, three male figures: God sending forth the radiant dove of the Holy Spirit from above; the hermit Romuald bowed, like Mary, in prayer; and a boyish John the Baptist to Christ’s immediate right, standing on the steps of a stone path that leads to a desolate mountain. Solum rightly devotes a chapter of her book to this foreboding landscape, which would have made a fifteenth-century Medici think of the “impenetrable woods” of Camaldoli, where there was an important and remote hermitage. She spends two chapters on John the Baptist, to whom Piero and Lucrezia dedicated a private chapel at Camaldoli, and who was both Florence’s patron saint and key to understanding
Tornabuoni’s devotional and penitential practices. The boy Baptist in Lippi’s *Adoration*, one hand on a cross, another on his breast as he looks out just past the spectator — the only figure to acknowledge the possibility of any reality external to the painting itself — is a striking presence, and the axe at his feet, which bears Lippi’s signature, is for Solum a menacing reference to the grown Baptist’s insistence on penitence: “for now the axe is laid to the root of the trees” (Matthew 3:10; quoted, 29).

John’s appearance in the painting becomes an especially persuasive element supporting Tornabuoni’s involvement in the commission. Her most original *storia sacra* was probably her *Vita di San Giovanni Battista*, in which she dwelled on the apocryphal stories of John’s youth. Convinced of the necessity of living apart from his family and civilized life, he retreated into the desert when just a boy, thus becoming a model for the ascetic life. Solum unearths in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence a manuscript from the 1450s, the anonymous *Vita di San Giovanni Battista*, which depicts in its initialized letter an encounter between a young Christ and an equally youthful John. Solum identifies the artist as one Francesco d’Antonio, patronized by Piero de’ Medici on numerous occasions. Yet unlike other works commissioned by Piero, this one bears the Medici-Tornabuoni arms, with Lucrezia’s “natal arms to the privileged, right-hand side traditionally reserved for those of the husband” and interpreted by Solum as a marker of Tornabuoni’s “personal ownership” (135). Moreover, the fact that Francesco gives us the boyish Christ and Baptist in a context that would shortly be developed by Filippo Lippi attests to Tornabuoni’s direct intervention in the visual material itself.

Thus back to that smoking gun. “Married women in fifteenth-century Florence rarely acted — legally and on paper — on their own behalf” (159). It is our good fortune that there are no documents that tie Tornabuoni to Lippi’s painting, or to any of the Medici’s major commissions. In their absence, Solum tells a fascinating and largely persuasive story about Lippi’s work and Tornabuoni’s many good deeds, weaving into her rich narrative topics such as gendered devotion, stairways to heaven, and the impressive but forgotten studies of a handful of early twentieth-century women historians such as Janet Ross (as well as more recent scholars, such as Marilyn Lavin and Frederick Hartt, both of whom confidently assert Tornabuoni’s patronage). Thus does she argue for a new approach to patronage studies in general and to the Medici chapel in particular, as Gozzoli’s famous mural in that chapel, *Journey of the Magi*, becomes a “gloss”
on Lippi’s altarpiece, oriented in such a way as to “guide visitors toward the true ‘path’ of Lippi’s Baptist” (215). Solum sees both contrast and continuity between Gozzoli’s sumptuous procession and the “divine realm of the altar enjoyed by none of the male members of the Medici clan, who magnificent in their worldly finery, trail far behind the women back on the east wall” (228) — including Tornabuoni, who Solum identifies on the west wall along with her teenage daughters.

Two minor questions arise from this fine analysis, at least for this reader. Is Tornabuoni’s disappearance as patron from the historical record a function of gender or generation? Piero and his wife have been sandwiched between Piero’s famously rich and influential father, Cosimo Vecchio, and Piero’s and Tornabuoni’s less wealthy but equally influential son, Lorenzo. Gout-ridden throughout his short life, hampered by ongoing dissension from Florence’s other wealthy families — the Strozzi and the Pitti, to name just two — Piero himself has tended to recede from view, and in fact he ruled on his own for only five years, from Cosimo’s death to his own in 1469. To what extent might the devout and often bedridden Piero — known for the chapel he sponsored, among other places, in the hilltop church of San Miniato — also have had some say about a religious painting that was commissioned for his own home?

Perhaps more significantly, I wonder if Tornabuoni was in fact as comfortable in her role as pious first lady as Solum makes her out to be. Clearly works of misericordia were central to her daily life, and it is no accident that one of her five storie sacre is the story of Tobias, the pious Jew who performs charitable acts in exile. Like Tobias, Tornabuoni gives to the poor, tends to the sick, assists the dying; unlike Tobias, she has special affection for convents. Yet one may not want to exaggerate what Solum calls “Lucrezia’s rigorous spiritual life” (245), or underplay Tornabuoni’s irony and attachment to earthly things, as seen in her lengthy and loving description of the banquet held by the pagan king Ahasuerus in The Story of Esther or in the relish she takes in listing all of the goods that come to Tobias at the end of his long trials: camels, oxen, money. In the same spirit, I’m not sure I can agree with Solum that finally, “the message [of Lippi’s painting] for a Medici viewer must have been a threatening one” (194). Unless, that is, we can see Tornabuoni as a target of the threat as well, a Tornabuoni who — perhaps like Piero, or Lorenzo, or her father-in-law Cosimo — may have been torn between the conspicuous wealth to which she had ready access and the mandate of a John the Baptist or the Florentine Archbishop Antoninus to place devotional practice above all else. Key to Solum’s argument is a letter in which Antoninus observes
that Tornabuoni must labor alone to “maintain a devout mind” in what Solum refers to as a “spiritually inhospitable familial environment” (98). Yet as Peter Howard has made clear, even the future Saint Antoninus believed in the role of magnificence in rendering glory to God as well as to the city of Florence. The Medici were powerful people with multiple allegiances, and the religious figures who tended to them (and whom the Medici supported in turn) would often try to ensure that those allegiances did not have to work at cross purposes. And who is to say that Piero, sponsor of that chapel in San Miniato, was not a pious man as well?

The fact that Solum’s book provokes such questions is testimony to its many strengths. While focused on a single painting, it never feels too narrow or constrained. Indeed, Lippi’s *Adoration* becomes the entry point to a world of Florentine religious culture that we still know too little about, especially in regard to its women. Solum is an engaging guide and discerning reader of paintings and manuscript illuminations as well as of letters and poetry. Her book merits reading and rereading, as she brings one of Renaissance Florence’s invisible patrons to light.

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This slender and interesting volume of poems by Veronica Gambara is a welcome addition to the celebrated “The Other Voice” series edited by Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr. and now published by the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies of the University of Toronto. The publications of this series have done a great deal in making known to the scholarly public the work of women writers who were for long neglected or totally lost in the traditional perspective of male-oriented culture.

Veronica Gambara, daughter of Count Francesco Gambara of Pratalboino and wife of Giberto X, Lord of Correggio, has since her times been considered the personification of the Renaissance high ideal of womanhood: a lady of noble