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## Book Review: The Black Prince of Florence: The Spectacular Life and Treacherous World of Alessandro de' Medici by Catherine Fletcher

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**Fletcher, Catherine. *The Black Prince of Florence: The Spectacular Life and Treacherous World of Alessandro de' Medici*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xxviii + 308 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.**

In *The Black Prince of Florence*, historian Catherine Fletcher relates the improbable rise to power of Alessandro de' Medici, born illegitimate to a mother of low social status circa 1511. Known as "il Moro" ("the Moor") because of his skin color, Alessandro was the first to govern Florence as a hereditary monarch. Yet his tumultuous reign was brief, lasting only from 1531 to 1537, brought to an end through his assassination. The duchy of Florence subsequently passed to Cosimo de' Medici and the family's junior branch.

The book is divided into three parts: "The Bastard Son," "The Obedient Nephew," and "The Prince Alone." Part one, which introduces the reader to the political and social world in which Alessandro lived, largely focuses on Western European politics and the histories of the Medici family, the papacy, and Florence during the early sixteenth century. Alessandro enters the narrative only periodically, primarily because sources for his early years are lacking. As he gained an increasingly important role in family patriarch Giulio de' Medici's (Pope Clement VII) bid for Medici grandeur (due to the lack of males in the senior Medici line), so too did his presence in historical records. Part Two focuses on Alessandro's early years as ruler of Florence, during which time he was influenced by his "uncle" Pope Clement VII. In part three, Fletcher examines how Alessandro's rule was tested in the wake of Clement VII's death. Although supported by his father-in-law, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Alessandro faced complex external and internal challenges, including enemy conspirators, republicans' plots to restore the Florentine Republic, and intrigues from family members and supporters. His cousins Cardinal Ippolito de' Medici and Lorenzino de' Medici each conspired against him, the latter assassinating Alessandro in 1537.

Alessandro de' Medici is often portrayed in contemporary works as a European Renaissance figure of black African descent, a conception highlighted by the book's title. There have been relatively few scholarly books on the black presence in Europe in its earlier historical epochs. Some of them—such as T.F. Earle and K.J.P. Lowe's *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (2005) and Eric Martone's *Encyclopedia of Blacks in European History and Culture* (2009)—have included Alessandro. Nevertheless, greater awareness (or at least depictions) of a black African presence in Renaissance Europe has entered into popular culture, as demonstrated by the black prince and noble characters in ABC Studio's *Still Starr-Crossed* (2017), set in Verona and perhaps influenced by Alessandro's story. Yet a modern, full-length book in English on this significant figure has been lacking. Whether Alessandro can be regarded as "black," however, is subjective. Not only is race a social construct, it dates from an era later than that of Alessandro's time. Furthermore, as Fletcher details in an afterword on Alessandro's ethnicity, his full parentage is obscure. His father is often cited as Lorenzo, duke of Urbino, or his cousin, Pope Clement VII (Fletcher argues for the former). Most accounts claim that his mother was a servant or slave of Moorish or black African descent. The first recorded instance claiming that his mother was black comes from a sixteenth-century French account written after his death, as Alessandro's probable half-sister Catherine de' Medici (1519-1589) was a controversial and influential Queen of France. During his lifetime, Alessandro was often slighted, not because of his mother's ethnicity, but because of her low social status. Similarly, most accounts describing Alessandro's dark complexion and kinky hair, and portraits portraying him in this fashion

(including the famous 1550s or 1560s portrait made in Agnolo Bronzino's workshop and held by the Uffizi Gallery), generally occur after his death. Interest in Alessandro's race gained momentum in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. African Americans, in particular, seeking to reclaim a black history lost because of slavery and its legacies, sought to identify past figures of merit, including Alessandro, to demonstrate that people of black African descent were not "inferior" to whites in the decades after the Civil War.

Fletcher's book, targeted at the general reader, is based on research that includes a balance of archival sources, contemporary accounts, and previous academic literature. She particularly makes use of Alessandro's account books listed under the *Guardaroba Medicea* (Medici Wardrobe) to draw conclusions about him and his world. In keeping with the expectations of the target audience, footnotes are used judiciously, and critical engagement with Alessandro's political policies as duke of Florence is kept to a minimum. Alessandro has traditionally been viewed as a "villain" for his anti-republican politics. Even French writer Alexandre Dumas, famed author of *The Three Musketeers* and himself of biracial descent, cast Alessandro as the villain in his celebrated play *Lorenzino* (1842) and novel *One Night in Florence* (1861). While Fletcher refutes this reputation, her focus is on Alessandro's court, detailing the fashions, customs, gossip, and intrigues surrounding him. The book also includes a family tree, glossary of key figures, timeline, map, and note on money to help contextualize the events it covers. For scholars, the book includes a note on sources.

Well-researched and engaging, Fletcher's compelling biography on Alessandro de' Medici is a welcome addition to works on the Medici, Florence, and the Renaissance era. General readers fascinated by these topics should have great interest in this book and enjoy its narrative style. Historians and social scientists interested in the social history and politics of elites in Renaissance Florence should also find the book useful.

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