

Astral magic in the Renaissance: gems, poetry,
and patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici.

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Astral Magic in the Renaissance: Gems, Poetry, and Patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici

Patricia Aakhus

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Astral Magic in the Renaissance **Gems, Poetry, and Patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici**

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Lorenzo's Ring

Florentine coppersmith Bartolomeo Masi recorded in his diary in April 1492 that as Lorenzo de' Medici lay dying, a violent storm damaged the Duomo's bell tower and buildings in the Palazzo Medici neighborhood. The storm was caused by the release of a demon that Lorenzo had kept imprisoned in a ring for many years.¹ Present at Lorenzo's deathbed, Poliziano, too, noted the storm, as well as other portents. A woman ran suddenly from Santa Maria Novella, screaming that a bull with flaming horns was destroying the church. A gilded ball, the Medici palle emblem, was blasted by a bolt of lightning. For three nights torches moved from Medici graves at Fiesole to Careggi. Flames burned on the fortress at Arezzo, and beneath the walls a she-wolf howled. One of the two lions kept as mascots of Florence killed the other. And finally, an unusually bright star loomed over the villa at Careggi, fell, and disappeared at the moment of Lorenzo's death.²

Perhaps Lorenzo il Magnifico, heir to the arts of Solomon, really had trapped a spirit and released it as his own end drew near. But, more likely for Lorenzo, the art he may have employed consisted not of drawing down demons to reside in gems, but of attracting benevolent planetary influences in preparation for his soul's ascent. In the following sonnet Lorenzo meditates on the brightness of a star whose extraordinary **[End Page 185]** appearance derives from the spirit of beautiful Simonetta Cataneo, the recently deceased lover of his murdered brother Giuliano:

Oh bright star, whose radiance
Takes the light from the stars around you,
Why do you shine so out of custom,
Why do you contend now with the sun?

Perhaps those lovely eyes, taken from us
By cruel death, who has presumed too much,
You have gathered to yourself, that by their light

You can presume to demand Apollo's chariot.

Whether you are this or a new star

Whose splendor adorns the sky,

We call upon you to grant, oh spirit, our prayer:

Take away some of your splendor

That our eyes, which want to cry forever,

Can, without harm, see you happy.³ [End Page 186]

Portents of death and apocalypse were of great interest during the late fifteenth century,⁴ and no doubt Masi knew that Lorenzo kept an extraordinary collection of Hellenistic engraved gems at the Palazzo Medici. Many of those gems, now in the Museo Nazionale in Naples, bear images described in *Picatrix*, an eleventh-century Arabic compendium of astral magic and a source for *De Vita Coelitus Comparanda—On Receiving Life from the Heavens* (1489) by Marsilio Ficino (d. 1499), the famous Florentine translator of Plato, the Neo-Platonists, and the *Corpus Hermeticum*.⁵ Ficino dedicated that book to his student, friend, and patron Lorenzo. Although lapidaries like Camillo Leonardi's *Speculum Lapidum* (1502),⁶ derived from late classical and early medieval sources, recommend gems with and without images for medicinal use, the grimoire *Picatrix* includes incantations, fumigations, and sacrifices required for binding demons and drawing planetary influences into engraved stones. Such operations appear as conceits in Lorenzo's poetry and autobiographical writing, demonstrating how magical thought infused mainstream Renaissance culture.

I propose that magical texts affected not only literature about magic —, for example, *The Tempest* and *Doctor Faustus*—but also works not explicitly about magic, works by Lorenzo de' Medici, Poliziano, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Walter Raleigh, and Cellini. For example, Michael Cole's discussion of Cellini's casting of *Perseus and Medusa* as revivification invites questions about the influence of magic on Cellini's work,⁷ particularly in that his autobiography contains a vivid account of ceremonial magic performed in the Roman Coliseum in 1532. In fact,

much Renaissance art and literature can be fully understood only by considering magical thought and operations; moreover, the scope and influence of the magical operations deepen when we examine mainstream cultural artifacts.

Masi's explanation for the storm raging at Lorenzo de' Medici's death neatly supports evidence in Lorenzo's artistic life—his collections, his patronage, **[End Page...**

Astral Magic in the Renaissance

Gems, Poetry, and Patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici

PATRICIA AAKHUS

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LORENZO'S RING

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1. *Ricordanze di Bartolomeo Masi, Caldeseio Fiorentino, dal 1478 al 1526* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1906), 249–50.

2. Peter Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 24–25. From a letter dated May 18, 1492, from Poliziano to his friend Iacopo Antiquario about the death of Lorenzo, which he had witnessed. See also Angelo Poliziano, *Letters*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Shane Butler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 227–51.

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