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6 Truths and Lies of a Renaissance Murder

Duke Alessandro de' Medici's Death between History, Narrative and Memory

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Introduction

Florence, 7 January 1537, around 3.30 p.m. Scipione Romano, a servant of the duke of Florence, burst into one of the rooms of the old Palazzo Medici in Via Larga.[1] A horrid spectacle lay before his eyes: the corpse of his lord Alessandro de' Medici (1512–37), first duke of Florence, lying motionless in a pool of blood, killed by dagger and sword blows.[2] After a first moment of disorientation, Scipione and other men of the duke's entourage began to try to understand what had happened in that room. Shortly after, the Florentine criminal magistracy did the same, and in the ensuing days and years others followed, including historians, all trying their best to reconstruct the course of events. Their work produced many different 'truths', often in conflict with each other, but only one of them has been taken into consideration by modern historians. It later became the 'canonical' version, despite all the differences and the doubts still pending, and today it is almost the only narrative existing in modern historiography.

The source of this version is the *Storia fiorentina* by the Florentine man of letters Benedetto Varchi (1503–65).[3] Apparently, the guarantee of its reliability lies in the fact that Varchi had heard it directly from the two assassins: 'from Lorenzo himself in the villa of Paluello, eight miles from Padua, and from Scoronconcolo himself in the house of the Strozzi in Venice'. For this reason, Varchi maintained he could tell the whole story 'with greater truth' than anyone else.[4] Many of the modern historians and biographers who report the story of Alessandro's death use the same argument to explain why that narrative is the most reliable. The great majority of them did not feel the need to take into consideration any other version of the story, presumably because it seemed that none of those versions could claim the same label of reliability.

However, many other sources exist. These include numerous other histories and chronicles (not only Florentine), literary works, diplomatic and private letters and judicial records. Some of these tell the same tale

as the *Storia fiorentina*, while others offer a completely different story. Disentangling truth from fiction, lies and mistakes is a difficult task, but in some cases not an impossible one, and it is an integral feature of the historian's craft, as recently observed by Carlo Ginzburg.[5] The aim of this article is to reconstruct as much as possible the events surrounding Duke Alessandro's death, by distinguishing 'truth' from legend and correcting several mistakes contained in the *Storia fiorentina*'s version. Despite his claim of a 'greater truth', it will be shown that things went differently from how Varchi recounted them and that some of his errors are not completely accidental. It will be argued also that the blame for these distortions should not be placed on Varchi but on his sources. This brings us to a more general question: can we be sure that a murderer's testimony is more trustworthy than any other, just because it comes from the mouth of the best-informed person? In fact, historical reconstructions seem to be extremely problematic in the case of murders, in which the main characters are often the only ones who know the facts but whose interests often lie in hiding the truth from everybody else.

One History, Many Stories

Benedetto Varchi spent his life divided between republican affection and Medici allegiance. Being an enthusiastic republican supporter, he went voluntarily into exile after Alessandro's death in January 1537, but later on he accepted the invitation of the new duke of Florence, Cosimo I (1519–74), to come back and work in his service.[6] Then, starting in 1546, he wrote the *Storia fiorentina*, universally considered his masterpiece.[7] Varchi is widely recognised as one of the best Florentine historians of his age and he is rightly held in great esteem for the thoroughness of the research he undertook before writing.[8] The present article does not intend to question his professionalism as a historian or to cast a shadow on his *Storia fiorentina* as a whole. The old reading according to which Varchi was a traitor of the republic who became a yes-man for Cosimo I, eagerly acquiescing to his political propaganda, is now generally discredited.[9] The analysis presented here is significant precisely because it is applied to the case of a particularly scrupulous and fundamentally reliable historian.

Varchi's description of Alessandro de' Medici's murder occupies many pages of Book XV of the *Storia fiorentina*. According to it, the assassin Lorenzino de' Medici (1514–48), cousin and comrade of the duke, was helped in the cruel deed by an accomplice, one Michele del Tavolaccino also known as Scoronconcolo.[10] One night, Lorenzino lured the duke into his bedchamber inside the old Palazzo Medici, promising him a

night of love and lust with his very beautiful aunt. While an unsuspecting Alessandro was lying on the bed waiting for the lady, Lorenzino and Scoronconcolo entered the room furtively and repeatedly struck the duke with swords and daggers. During the scuffle Lorenzino was wounded in his hand, bitten by the duke while trying to keep Alessandro's mouth shut. After Alessandro's death, Lorenzino and Scoronconcolo summoned another servant, who had not been at the crime scene, to show him the body. Then Lorenzino went to knock on the door of some Florentine citizens to raise the populace and encourage them to take advantage of the duke's death. Some did not hear him knocking, others did not believe him, and eventually Lorenzino decided to give up, going to the house of Angelo de' Marzi (1477–1546), bishop of Assisi, who oversaw the Medici's postal service, to organise his flight. Lorenzino used an excuse to obtain three horses and the nighttime opening of one of the city gates; he was well known as a trusted friend of Duke Alessandro and, as such, he was above suspicion. Thus, Lorenzino and his two accomplices jumped on their horses and left Florence for good. So goes Varchi's story.[11] However, as will be shown in the following pages, many aspects of this narrative are certainly incorrect.

One could think that modern historians followed every single detail of Benedetto Varchi's version because of a shortage of alternative sources. On a closer look, however, it can be noted that there were at least nine other contemporary Florentine historians who provided their own versions of the murder.[12] To these one must add others who worked in Florence in the service of the duke but wrote their stories a few years later and were not in the city at the time of Alessandro's death.[13] In addition, many other narratives exist, some authored by prominent writers,[14] or by foreign historians who have usually been ignored by modern historiography.[15] To these sources one should add the all-important archival documents, including judicial records and diplomatic and private letters. As is evident, there are plenty of sources addressing Alessandro's death, many more than those on which a historian can normally count. No single narrative is completely reliable, unbiased and devoid of errors, and there are no versions of the story that we can entirely believe. A careful analysis of all the existing narratives, including the ones previously considered blatantly unreliable, and their cross-examination, makes it possible to go beyond Varchi's account.

First, in trying to assess the truths, lies and errors of the interested parties, Alessandro's death and Lorenzino's position must be placed in their correct political, cultural and ideological context. The duke's murder assumed a particular significance in the context of the Florentine republican exiles who had left Florence after the 1530 Medici restoration and

fought against the recently created Duchy of Florence. The exiles considered Alessandro de' Medici to be a tyrant, and saw his death as a noble tyrannicide that would return Florence to republican rule. Whatever the real reasons behind his deed, Lorenzino became a hero for bringing new life to republican hopes, and many years later he was still 'worshipped as an idol' by the Florentine exiles.[16]

In January 1537, immediately after the assassination, Lorenzino fled to Venice, a hotbed of Florentine republican exiles.[17] Lorenzino was welcomed with open arms, hailed as the new Brutus, and provided with money. The production of poems, statues and medals to celebrate his act was immediately planned, and the image of Lorenzino as a hero, killing the tyrant for his homeland's liberty, soon became vital for the regeneration of the republican cause. On the other side, ducal observers did their best to persuade everybody that Lorenzino did not murder the duke for noble motives but only for personal reasons. Hence, the recognition of Lorenzino's new status depended on the credibility of his motive. Had he killed the duke for personal reasons, he would have been considered a vulgar criminal, and not the new Brutus.[18]

A few days after the murder, Lorenzino was bitterly criticised for his conduct. Most of the exiles thought he had committed a gross error in fleeing Florence immediately after the duke's death: he should have remained in town and raised the Florentine populace, taking advantage of the void of power caused by the tyrant's demise. This criticism, which at first did not question Lorenzino's good faith, soon began to feed doubts about the motive behind the murder. Many were persuaded that if Lorenzino had not tried to induce people to rebellion, it was proof that he killed Alessandro for personal reasons. On the contrary, had he done his best to make the Florentine people revolt against tyranny, his noble political purpose would have been confirmed. For this reason, the reconstruction of the events following the assassination ended up at the centre of an astonishingly sharp dispute.[19] The problems related to the reliability of Varchi's and the other sources' accounts must be analysed in the light of this scenario.

Mistakes and Deceptions

A monopoly on the truth like the one Lorenzino had after Duke Alessandro's death is a situation that does not occur very often. Apart from a few external circumstances that were generally known, nobody but Lorenzino and his two servants could know what had really happened that night. Lorenzino's two accomplices were his trusted servants and presumably not able to tell a story different from their master's.

Hence, it is not strange that Varchi's version, given that it came from Lorenzino's mouth, has never been questioned or contradicted by anybody. On a general level, David Lowenthal's observation according to which self-chronicles are not open to correction because they rely on recollections to which others lack access, is hardly disputable.[20] However, it is worth asking what happens if a self-chronicle is corrected by its author, even unintentionally, through clues spread in other writings.[21] In the present case, Lorenzino's testimony as reported in the *Storia fiorentina* could be disproved only by Lorenzino.

As just explained, one of the crucial aspects of Varchi's narration was Lorenzino's call for the Florentine people to stand against the Medici government. According to general opinion, this act would have been the proof of his will to free Florence, and so was vital for Lorenzino's recognition as the new Brutus. On this aspect Varchi is very clear: Lorenzino 'had been to the houses of many common citizens, but some of them did not hear him and others did not believe him'.[22] Thus, according to this version, the fault for the failure belonged to the citizens, not Lorenzino. However, in two separate instances Lorenzino told a completely different story, admitting that after the murder he had not even tried to raise the population. In the *Apology*, which he wrote shortly after the duke's murder, he clearly says: 'rather than making public the death of Alessandro, I sought to conceal it as much as I could at the time' explaining that he could place his hopes 'more profitably in those outside Florence than those inside the city'.[23] In the letter he sent from Venice to his Florentine friend Francesco de' Raffaello de' Medici (1505–46) just one month after the fact on 5 February 1537, Lorenzino is even more explicit and declares that he 'fled and did not call upon the citizens'.[24]

It can be argued that Lorenzino changed his own story, perhaps on somebody else's advice, to clear himself after realising that his initial defence strategy was not sufficient to appease the criticism against him. Lowenthal observed that 'we incessantly rewrite our own personal histories because at the time events occur we can seldom predict what or how much they will later signify'.[25] Lorenzino's first version of his premeditated flight is hardly questionable because he would have never omitted (or explicitly denied) a circumstance that would have exculpated him. Lorenzino was perfectly aware that his recognition as hero and the new Brutus depended on the motives behind his murder. The main aim of his own *Apology* was not to clear himself from the charge of murdering the duke, but rather to justify his subsequent actions and his flight from Florence.[26] After several months, however, he could have started providing a different version, placing the blame for the political failure of the murder on the citizens who did not follow him when he called upon

them. This second version ended up in Varchi's *Storia fiorentina*. Further confirmation of its lack of credibility is indicated by the fact that the great majority of Florentine historians did not make any reference to Lorenzino's alleged attempt, and there was not even a single witness who confirmed this version.

Presumably the creation and the early propagation of this story cannot be ascribed to Lorenzino. A newly discovered document in the Archivio di Stato of Modena reports that a few days after the murder some rumours about Lorenzino's call to the citizens were already circulating. The Ferrarese ambassador to Venice wrote that as early as 14 January 1537 he had received an *avviso* from Ferrara 'saying that Lorenzo, after Alessandro's death, went to the house of five citizens to instigate an uprising'.[27] Because the news arrived from Ferrara, its circulation could be associated with the stopover in the town, around 11–12 January, of a large group of Florentine exiles coming from Venice, including Lorenzino.[28] It could be speculated that the rumour was generated and spread by an exile after Lorenzino had left for Mirandola, to boost his credibility as tyrannicide and hero.

It is not strange, therefore, that sixteenth-century Medici historiography did not believe that Lorenzino had tried to raise the populace against the Medici.[29] More specifically, Filippo de' Nerli commented on the fact that Lorenzino acted 'so that what had happened was hidden from the citizens',[30] linking that behaviour to the failure of a possible offensive by the republicans. This would have been proof that Lorenzino had killed the duke for personal reasons. As a matter of fact, a sixteenth-century historian in the service of Cosimo I observed: 'if he had had liberty [of Florence] truly at heart, he would have exhorted the populace to take up arms'.[31]

Whatever Lorenzino did or did not do to cause the populace to revolt, no doubts have ever been raised about the dynamics of his flight. According to Varchi, after killing the duke, Lorenzino went to Bishop Agnolo de' Marzi's house. There he obtained three horses and the opening of the town gate and left Florence.[32] However, a document that has so far received no attention – a letter written by an unknown correspondent on 21 January 1537 and sent from Florence to Fernando da Silva, Count of Cifuentes, a man in the service of the Emperor Charles V – provides a very different version of the story.[33] According to this document, Lorenzino went to visit Marzi before killing the duke, not after. In this regard, the text is very clear: Alessandro was alive and well when Lorenzino left the room under the pretext of fetching the lady whom the duke was supposed to meet: 'As he [Alessandro] was in the house, the traitor [Lorenzino] brought him into a room and helped him lie down

in bed with tights and a jacket, and told him he was going to fetch the long-awaited lady, and left the house. Instead he went to Bishop Marzi's house in order to receive the permission for the post horses and a safe conduct to leave'.[34] After obtaining the horses, Lorenzino gave them to one of his servants, with the task of taking them to a safe place. Only after the return of the servant did Lorenzino come back to Palazzo Medici and slaughter the duke. After committing the murder, Lorenzino and his accomplices immediately took to their heels and ran away: 'they went to the horses and took off'.[35]

This narrative comes from the mouth of Lorenzino, and can be considered even more reliable because it dates to immediately after the murder. The author of the letter that contains it has noted that this story was reported by Lorenzino in Bologna, where he stopped over on 7–8 January, while travelling from Florence to Venice. On a closer look, this version sounds much more convincing than the one that has Lorenzino knocking on Marzi's door after he had killed Alessandro. In fact, it is difficult to imagine that Lorenzino could have talked with the bishop as if nothing had happened, when he was seriously wounded and physically and emotionally exhausted from the ferocious struggle with Alessandro. According to two Florentine historians, after the murder Lorenzino was 'torn apart by the pain'[36] and 'half out of his wits'.[37] Lorenzino admitted that he 'was bleeding profusely from one hand' and that if he had gone somewhere it would have been difficult to keep his wound hidden.[38]

Once again, just as in the case of the call to the populace, Lorenzino's presumed testimony reported by Varchi is disproved by Lorenzino. And once again Varchi's version is crucial to presenting Lorenzino as a hero: according to Varchi, he had not planned to flee from Florence beforehand but this was the consequence of the Florentines' inertia when he tried to cause an uprising. The story narrated in the letter sent to the Count of Cifuentes is completely different: Lorenzino had planned his flight before the murder, and this presumably means that he had never intended to raise the Florentine populace against the duke. Lorenzino told this story one or two days after the murder, when he could not imagine that he would be charged with cowardice by the exiles as a result of his flight from Florence.[39] Shortly after, as the criticism mounted, that version disappeared, giving way to a diametrically opposed story. All the Florentine historians and almost every other source agree on the fact that Lorenzino requested the horses and the safe conduct only when Duke Alessandro was already dead.

There is another detail found in Varchi that is disproved by Lorenzino, despite allegedly being based on his own words. Varchi states very clearly that the real name of Scoronconcolo, Lorenzino's accomplice,

was Michele del Tavolaccino.[40] It seems that all modern historians have unquestioningly followed this version and accepted this identification. Unlike Varchi, Lorenzino in the *Apology* mentions one 'Piero, my servant' who had helped him in committing the murder.[41] There is little doubt that this is Scoronconcolo because this name is confirmed in the sentence of the Florentine judicial magistracy, the Otto di Guardia e Balìa, a newly discovered document in the Archivio di Stato of Florence.[42] This text repeatedly asserts that one of the duke's assassins is 'Piero di Giovannabate, alias Scoronconcolo'. Excluding the hypothesis that both Lorenzino and the Otto di Guardia e Balìa were lying or wrong, even giving the same wrong name, the only possible conclusion is that the error was Varchi's. However, once again, the false information cannot be ascribed to Lorenzino, considering that he provides the correct name in the *Apology*.[43]

Another problem emerging from the *Storia fiorentina*'s narrative concerns the date of the murder. Varchi clearly states that the homicide was committed on the night 'preceding the *Befana*',[44] namely the night of the Epiphany, between 5 and 6 January.[45] This is certainly wrong, as the event took place on the following night, between 6 and 7 January. This can be demonstrated from subsequent events and is attested to in numerous sources, including the account of every Florentine historian.[46] Varchi implicitly gives the correct date when he says that the previous day was Saturday (that was 6 January) and the following one was Sunday.[47] Despite that, this inaccuracy, like all the others contained in the *Storia fiorentina*, was accepted as true by nearly all modern historians. It is almost impossible to assess the true nature of this puzzling mistake. It obviously could be due to a slip, but it cannot be ruled out that it was made on purpose because it could be read in the same light as all the other alterations, aiming at orienting the interpretation of Alessandro's murder.

The night of Epiphany is different from all others. A mixture of religious and lay traditions has laden it with a multiplicity of highly symbolic meanings. Among others, in Italy the night of the Epiphany is one of change and renewal, miracle and transformation, due to the irruption of foreign forces into everyday life.[48] No better date could have been chosen for the night that was supposed to change Florentine history forever. Still today, the *Befana* that visits Italian homes on that night is considered the bearer of a gift to the good and a punishment to the bad.[49] No night could have been more appropriate to punish a duke who had taken away the old Florentine liberty and had allegedly acted as a bloody tyrant.

To this one could add that Epiphany was particularly important for Florence and for the Medici, being the day of the baptism of St. John, the patron of the city. Starting from the fifteenth century, the Medici

adopted the feast and linked it to their own self-representation, identifying themselves with the Magi who that day brought their gifts to Christ.[50] Once situated on that date, the Medici duke's death obviously assumed a highly symbolic significance, that of a miracle heralding political and social renewal and bringing about justice against a Medici tyrant, on the very same day as a Medici feast. As has been shown, the real date of the assassination was 7 January. Whatever the reasons for the error, giving that date instead of the night before the Epiphany would have cast a very different light on the event, especially because Varchi stressed that the moment of the murder had been chosen by fate.[51]

The many inaccuracies contained in the *Storia fiorentina*'s account prove that Varchi's narrative is not the completely reliable source it has always been considered. According to that account Lorenzino killed the duke on the night between 5 and 6 January with the help of his servant Michele, then tried to raise the populace and finally went to knock on Bishop Marzi's door. On the contrary, now there is reason to believe that the event occurred on 7 January, that Lorenzino was helped by his servant Piero, and that after the killing he visited neither the Florentine citizens nor the bishop, but instead took the horses he had previously prepared and fled from Florence.

Casting a doubt on the *Storia fiorentina*'s version means that it is no longer possible to believe blindly all of it, as has been done in the past, and every aspect of Varchi's reconstruction of the murder can legitimately be brought into question. For example, there is no reason to believe that only Lorenzino and Piero took part in the assassination, and that the other accomplice was called up only after Alessandro's death. Varchi admits that this fact was completely inexplicable,[52] and there are plenty of sources according to which the murder was committed by all three men. These include an iconographic source: the drawing contained in a sixteenth-century manuscript of the Archivio di Stato of Florence. In it, three men, and not two, are represented at the crime scene and the text clearly mentions the involvement of the third man in the assassination (Fig. 6.1).[53] We do not know much about the authorship and the date of the drawing, but the text that accompanies the picture (entitled 'Lorenzino de' Medici's betrayal of Duke Alessandro de' Medici') is inspired by Paolo Giovio's *Istorie* and apparently dates back to the late sixteenth century. Whenever there were discrepancies between various accounts, modern historiography has always trusted Varchi, believing his claim that he had recounted the events 'with greater truth' than any other historian. However, if we stop giving his reconstruction the primacy that it has always enjoyed, no part of the *Storia fiorentina*'s version can any longer be taken for granted.

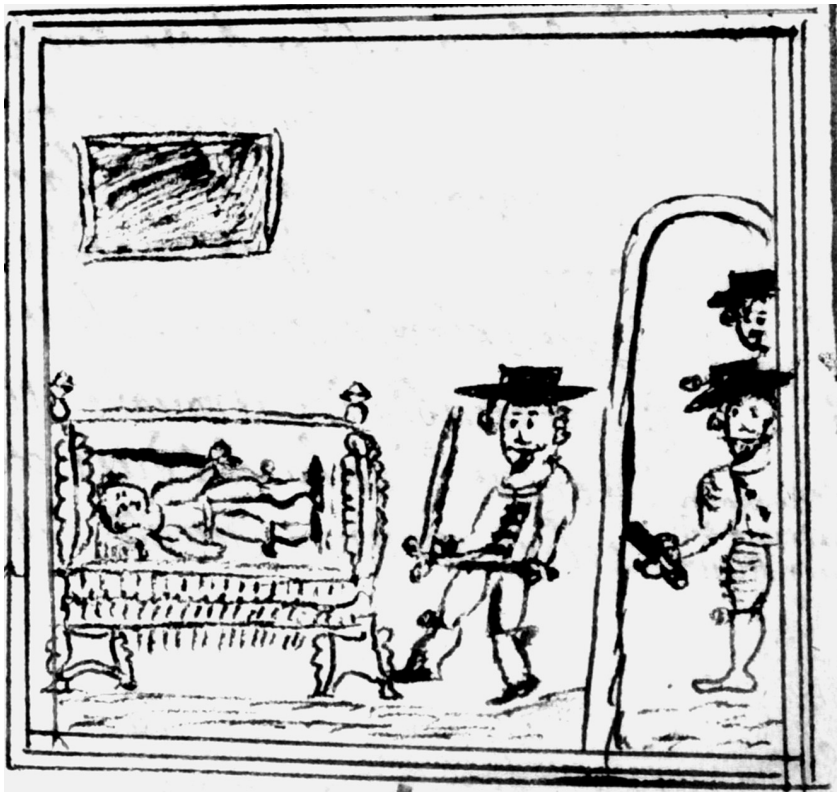

Figure 6.1 Death of Alessandro de' Medici. In 'Tradimento di Lorenzino de' Medici contro al duca Alexandro de' Medici'. Florence, Archivio di Stato, Carte Strozziane-Appendice 1, ins. 6, fol. 19r. By permission of Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo.

Moreover, Varchi wrote his narrative many years after the murder and after he met the two assassins (initially the *Storia fiorentina* was to include only the events up to the year 1532), and it is hard to believe that the passing of time did not affect at all the transmission of the account. According to Varchi, Lorenzino told him the story of the assassination near Padua while his accomplice Scoronconcolo did the same in Venice, and we know that starting from the summer of 1537 Varchi and Lorenzino were probably in contact in Venice or Padua. The encounter between them could not have taken place in the immediate aftermath of the murder, as the paths of the two men did not cross before late August, when Lorenzino returned from his trip to Constantinople.[54] Many other

accounts of Duke Alessandro's assassination were written shortly after the event, much sooner than Book XV of the *Storia fiorentina*, even if the shorter lapse of time is no guarantee of reliability in itself.[55] While working on his *Storia*, Varchi certainly read several writings including versions of the murder, such as those by Iacopo Nardi, Filippo de' Nerli, Lorenzo Strozzi and Paolo Giovio.[56]

The primacy that has always been accorded to Varchi's description of the murder originated from the fact that he had heard it directly from the mouth of the protagonist. However, there are at least two other sources with versions allegedly coming directly from Lorenzino's narrations: the previously mentioned Spanish report and a letter by an unknown author that was sent from Florence on 15 March 1537.[57] Moreover, other narratives could have stemmed directly from Lorenzino's accounts, such as that of Margaret of Navarre, who may have met Lorenzino while he was in exile in France, and that of Iacopo Nardi, who was in close contact with Lorenzino in Venice. Some other versions rely on Lorenzino's testimony for single aspects, such as the one reported by Cosimo Bartoli, who refers to an account made by Lorenzino in Venice.[58] To conclude, it can be argued that the privileged status accorded to the *Storia fiorentina*'s narrative cannot be justified either by its alleged internal soundness or by the presumed exceptional nature of its transmission.

Hiding the Truth

After the murder, Lorenzino found himself in the enviable position of writing his own narrative of Alessandro's death. He was aware that nobody would have been able to contradict his story. The privilege of writing our own history is rare and fraught with pitfalls for truth. Long ago Marc Bloch had warned about the dangers embedded in any 'intentional evidence'. In his view, this is the peculiar kind of historical evidence that implies the author's consciousness of informing posterity. In this case there is always a biased perspective, not to mention the possibility of the author wanting to deceive the reader or the hearer.[59]

The question is strictly connected with the problem of misrepresentation in ego-documents: these can give a great deal of information about their authors and their self-representation, but can hardly be considered reliable as historical documents.[60] The unreliability of personal memories is brilliantly synthesised by Lowenthal in the phrase 'self-chronicles alter facts and invent fictions in ways that would ban historians from academe'.[61] This is especially true of murders and the accounts provided by culprits or other people involved. The true actions and motivations of the author of a homicide are usually overlaid by a self-representation that

aims at hiding any legal or moral responsibility. In this case lies are the rule, not the exception, and the truth is much more difficult to discover.

The nature of Lorenzino's self-testimonies and self-justification is very similar to that examined by Natalie Zemon Davis for the letters of remission sent to the king in sixteenth-century France to seek the royal pardon.[62] Just like their authors, Lorenzino did his best to persuade his audience of his innocence and be pardoned. He was not interested in denying killing the duke; his only concern was to give his own version and defend his behaviour after the deed before the tribunal of history. Thus he had to turn the real event into as persuasive a story as possible. Scholars of legal logic have explained that, when there is a lack of evidence, a convincing story is generally preferred to any other, regardless of its truth: 'a good story can and often will win over a true story'.[63] As Zemon Davis observed with reference to the French case, the story had to be 'well narrated' to be successful, and the creation of a fiction did not necessarily imply falsity or forgery according to sixteenth-century criteria.[64] The letters of remission sent to the king did not have to tell the truth: they had to create a sense of the real and seem plausible enough to be believed.[65] Not long ago, with reference to the *Apology*, Nicholas Baker rightly noted that Lorenzino created his own fiction of the duke's death, a 'carefully constructed narrative' certainly containing some lies and aimed at defending himself from the criticism of Florentine exiles.[66]

In another work Zemon Davis has stressed how the Renaissance was characterised by a propensity to deception and a nonnegative opinion of dissimulation.[67] Lorenzino's case is a very good example of what Stephen Greenblatt has called Renaissance self-fashioning: the construction of an identity to fulfil external expectations.[68] Long before him, Montaigne had already made reference to a similar concept, and had shown that in the sixteenth century the lie was a crucial component of an individual's self-representation. In this regard, he asserted that 'our truth of nowadays is not what is but what others can be convinced of'.[69] For the story of Duke Alessandro's murder, verisimilitude and persuasion could be more important than adherence to reality.

It can be argued that after the duke's murder a deliberate attempt was made to condition the circulation of news about it. The attempt aimed at spreading a version of the story consistent with a scenario according to which Lorenzino had killed the duke for noble, political, antityrannical motives, and was presumably concocted in the milieu of the Florentine republican exiles. At a particular point, after coming back from his trip to Constantinople in August 1537, Lorenzino started to divulge a different version of the story from the one he had

previously told, and provided it to Benedetto Varchi. An alternative truth was created and a counternarrative was handed down to present and future readers.

In the long run the attempt proved to be successful and that version affected many narratives of the homicide, including Benedetto Varchi's *Storia fiorentina*. As observed by C. Behan McCullagh, biased sources produce biased history, even if the historian is quite unbiased.[70] Lorenzino's self-representation had prevailed. In 1721 the *Storia fiorentina* was printed for the first time and from the eighteenth century onwards Varchi's narration prevailed over all others. Modern historiography failed to realise the plurality of sources existing on the matter, the many different stories circulating at the time in and outside Florence, and the inaccuracies contained in Varchi's narrative. This became the one and the only version taken into consideration.

When other versions of the reconstruction of the event came to light, the general attitude of historians was seemingly affected by what psychologists call 'confirmation bias'. This is the tendency to prefer those pieces of information that confirm what is already thought rather than those that contradict it. The undisputed primacy of Varchi's account was accepted by later historians, understandably inclined to put their trust in one single source than to seek out, read and compare many different ones. It has been noted also that historians tend to rely on previous knowledge because they have inherited it from past scholars and trust the process of verification to which it has already been subjected.[71] In some cases modern historians also mention some other Florentine historians' narratives of the 1537 murder, but they usually consider them reliable if they coincide with Varchi's account, and they assume they are wrong when they diverge from it. For the reconstruction of the duke's death, the *Storia fiorentina* has become the yardstick for the trustworthiness of all the others.

Conclusion

Benedetto Varchi was not the only one claiming to tell the *true* story of Alessandro de' Medici's death: the authors of many other narratives maintained that they told 'the *true* event of Alessandro de' Medici's death' or the '*true* information of the case of Florence'.[72] Their desire to give credit to their own versions was the consequence of the proliferation of accounts and of the incongruities between them, a fact that was remarked upon even by Varchi: 'people spoke and wrote about it in many different ways'.[73]

The tension between different 'truths' is particularly acute in the case of murders, especially political murders, when there is a great deal at the stake in legal and historical terms. When he is the only available witness, the assassin finds himself in the privileged position of shaping his own version of the story, well aware that he can hardly be contradicted. But persuading judges and posterity is not always easy, as the more a witness is involved in the case the more his words are received with scepticism. Bloch observed that the first question raised by both historians and judges dealing with a witness is whether he has any reason to disguise the truth.[74] Varchi seemed to be much more naïve when he affirmed that his witnesses were reliable simply because they were the best-informed people: 'only from them [Lorenzino and Scoronconcolo] could one know the certainty of that event, if they did not want to lie, and I did not have the impression that they were lying'.[75]

That said, it is one thing to be wary when facing the testimony of an assassin or a murder's witness, and it is another to believe that all the stories contain the same mixture of fact and fiction, as a postmodernist approach would suggest. The present study considers more than twenty different stories of the duke's murder and it would be wrong to assert that all of them are equally correct or believable. As both Hobsbawm and Ginzburg have recently observed, not all truths can be put on the same level regardless of the evidence.[76] In response to the postmodernist idea that the past is not discovered but represented and that the narrative is created by the historian, Mary Fulbrook observed that even if an infinite number of partial narratives exist, not all of them are equally acceptable, illuminating or true. Historians can develop and apply the criteria for 'disconfirming' one or more accounts by means of empirical evidence.[77] The narratives of Duke Alessandro de' Medici's death are no exceptions.

Notes

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2 On Alessandro de' Medici's life, see now C. Fletcher, *The Black Prince of Florence: The Spectacular Life and Treacherous World of Alessandro de' Medici* (London, 2016), and G. Spini, 'Alessandro de' Medici', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (Rome, 1960), vol. II, pp. 231–3. The most significant recent articles on Alessandro are J. K. Brackett, 'Race and rulership: Alessandro de' Medici, first Medici Duke of Florence 1529–1537', in T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe (eds.), *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 303–25; N. S. Baker, 'Power and passion in sixteenth-century Florence: The sexual and political reputation of Alessandro and Cosimo I de' Medici', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 19 (2010), pp. 432–57; and M. Gallucci, 'Mistaken identities: Alessandro de' Medici and the question of "race"', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 15 (2015), pp. 40–81.

3 The latest book on Benedetto Varchi is S. Lo Re and F. Tomasi, eds., *Varchi e altro Rinascimento. Studi offerti a Vanni Bramanti* (Manziana, 2013). For a detailed bibliography see B. Varchi, *Lettere 1535–1565*, ed. V. Bramanti (Rome, 2008), pp. xxxviii–xlii.

4 B. Varchi, *Storia fiorentina con aggiunte e correzioni*, 3 vols., ed. L. Arbib (Florence, 1843–44; reprint, Rome, 2003), vol. III, p. 250.

5 C. Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces: True False Fictive*, trans. A. Tedeschi and J. Tedeschi (Berkeley, 2012), p. 6.

6 On Cosimo I see G. Spini, *Cosimo I e l'indipendenza del principato mediceo*, 2nd ed. (Florence, 1980); R. Cantagalli, *Cosimo I de' Medici granduca di Toscana* (Milan, 1985).

7 V. Bramanti, 'Viatico per la *Storia fiorentina* di Benedetto Varchi', *Rivista storica italiana*, 114 (2002), pp. 880–928, esp. p. 880.

8 On the impressive research work Varchi undertook for the writing of his *Storia*, see ibid.

9 The criticisms levelled against Varchi have been discussed and efficiently countered in S. Lo Re, *Politica e cultura nella Firenze cosimiana. Studi su Benedetto Varchi* (Manziana, 2008), pp. 14–29.

10 Many biographies of Lorenzino de' Medici exist, but the only ones based on new research are L. A. Ferrai, *Lorenzino de' Medici e la societa' cortigiana del Cinquecento, con le rime e le lettere di Lorenzino e un'appendice di documenti* (Milan, 1891) and P. Gauthiez, *Lorenzaccio (Lorenzino de Médicis) 1514–1548* (Paris, 1904). See also S. Dall'Aglio, *The Duke's Assassin: Exile and Death of Lorenzino de' Medici*, trans. D. Weinstein (New Haven, CT, and London, 2015) (original Italian edition: S. Dall'Aglio, *L'assassino del duca. Esilio e morte di Lorenzino de' Medici* [Florence, 2011]).

11 Varchi, *Storia*, vol. III, pp. 250–66.

12 I. Nardi, *Istorie della città di Firenze*, 2 vols., ed. A. Gelli (Florence, 1858), vol. II, pp. 281–4; B. Segni, *Istorie fiorentine dall'anno MDXXVII al MDLV*, ed. G. Gargani (Florence, 1857), pp. 313–19; G. Ughi, 'Cronica di Firenze o compendio storico delle cose di Firenze dall'anno MDI al MDXLVI', *Archivio storico italiano*, App. 7 (1849), pp. 97–241, esp. pp. 191–2; F. de' Nerli, *Commentari dei fatti civili occorsi dentro la città di Firenze dall'anno 1215 al 1537*, 2 vols. (Trieste, 1859), vol. II, pp. 240–2; A. Lapini, *Diario fiorentino dal 252 al 1596*, ed. G. O. Corazzini (Florence, 1900), pp. 100–1;

Lorenzo Strozzi, *Vita di Filippo Strozzi*, in G. B. Niccolini, *Filippo Strozzi. Tragedia corredata d'una vita di Filippo e di documenti inediti* (Florence, 1847), pp. vii–cxxiv, esp. p. xcv; C. Bartoli, *Discorsi historici universali* (Venice, 1569), pp. 311–12; F. di Andrea Buonsignori, *Memorie (1530–1565)*, ed. S. Bertelli and G. Bertoli (Florence, 2000), p. 23; E. Coppi, ed., *Cronaca fiorentina 1537–1555* (Florence, 2000), pp. 1–3.

13 P. Giovio, *Istorie del suo tempo*, 2 vols., trans. L. Domenichi (Venice, 1560), vol. II, pp. 499–501 – I have checked also the Latin version in P. Giovio, *Historiarum sui temporis*, 2 vols. (Strasbourg, 1556), vol. II, ff. 64v–7v; S. Ammirato, *Istorie fiorentine*, 11 vols. (Florence, 1824–27), vol. X, pp. 228–30; G. Adriani, *Istoria de' suoi tempi*, 8 vols. (Prato, 1822–23), vol. I, pp. 19–20.

14 Marguerite de Navarre, *Heptaméron*, ed. R. Salminen (Geneva, 1999), pp. 110–16; M. Guazzo, *Historie di tutti i fatti degni di memoria nel mondo successi dell'anno MDXXIIII sino a questo presente* (Venice, 1546), f. 216r–v; G. Cardano, *De sapientia libri quinque*, ed. Marco Bracali (Florence, 2008), pp. 225–6; G. Borgia, *Historiae de bellis italicis ab anno 1494 ad 1541*, in Biblioteca Marciana, Venice, MS Latino 3506, ff. 253v–5r.

15 G. Paradin, *Histoire de nôtre temps* (Lyons, 1558), pp. 329–32; A. de Santa Cruz, *Cronica del emperador Carlos V*, 5 vols., ed. A. Blázquez y Delgado-Aguilera and R. Beltrán y Rózpide (Madrid, 1920–25), vol. III, pp. 429–30; P. de Sandoval, *Historia de la vida y hechos del emperador Carlos V*, 3 vols. (Madrid, 1956), vol. III, pp. 29–31; W. Thomas, *The History of Italy (1549)*, ed. G. B. Parks (Ithaca, NY, 1963), pp. 102–3; J. Nestor, *Histoire des hommes illustres de la maison de Médici* (Paris, 1564), ff. 189r–92v.

16 Florence, Archivio di Stato (hereafter ASF), Mediceo del Principato 2967, f. 512r.

17 On the Florentine exiles in Venice see P. Simoncelli, 'The turbulent life of the Florentine community in Venice', in R. K. Delph, M. M. Fontaine and J. J. Martin (eds.), *Heresy, Culture and Religion in Early Modern Italy: Contexts and Contestations* (Kirksville, MO, 2006), pp. 113–33.

18 On Lorenzino as a new Brutus, see M. Piccolomini, *The Brutus Revival: Parricide and Tyrannicide during the Renaissance* (Carbondale, IL, 1991), pp. 79–94.

19 See P. Simoncelli, *Fuoriuscitismo repubblicano fiorentino 1530–54 (volume primo 1530–37)* (Milan, 2006), pp. 175–84.

20 D. Lowenthal, 'History and memory', *The Public Historian*, 19 (1997), pp. 30–39, esp. p. 34.

21 See, e.g., the case mentioned in M. Bloch, 'Critique historique et critique du témoignage', *Annales Économies-Sociétés-Civilizations*, 5 (1950), pp. 1–8, esp. p. 7. The article contains the transcription of an unpublished paper given in 1914.

22 Varchi, *Storia*, vol. III, p. 260.

23 L. de' Medici, *Apologia e Lettere*, ed. by F. Erspamer (Rome, 1991), pp. 52, 49. The English passages can be found in L. de' Medici, *Apology for a Murder*, trans. A. Brown (London, 2004), pp. 14, 12.

24 Lorenzino de' Medici to Francesco di Raffaello de' Medici, Venice, 5 February 1537, in Dall'Aglio, *L'assassino*, p. 291.

25 D. Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 207.

26 On this matter see N. S. Baker, 'Writing the wrongs of the past: Vengeance, humanism, and the assassination of Alessandro de' Medici', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 38 (2007), pp. 307–27.
27 Letter of ambassador Giacomo Tebaldi to Duke Ercole II d'Este, Venice, 16 January 1537, in Modena, Archivio di Stato, Ambasciatori, Venezia 20, ins. 9/VIII, doc. 8.
28 See the copy of a letter of Alessandro Landriani to Cardinal Marino Ascanio Caracciolo, Parma, 15 January 1537, in Milan, Archivio di Stato (hereafter ASMi), Cancelleria dello Stato di Milano 13bis, f. 66r.
29 See Nerli, *Commentari*, vol. II, pp. 238–46; Giovio, *Istorie*, vol. II, pp. 499–501; Ammirato, *Istorie*, vol. X, pp. 228–30.
30 Nerli, *Commentari*, vol. II, p. 242.
31 C. Menchini, *Panegirici e vite di Cosimo I de' Medici. Tra storia e propaganda* (Florence, 2005), p. 102.
32 Varchi, *Storia*, vol. III, p. 259.
33 The letter is in Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, MS 3825, ff. 203r–6r, and published in P. de Girón, *Crónica del Emperador Carlos V*, ed. J. Sánchez Montes (Madrid, 1964), pp. 87–92.
34 Ibid., p. 88.
35 Ibid., p. 89.
36 Nardi, *Istorie*, vol. II, p. 284.
37 Segni, *Istorie*, p. 318.
38 Lorenzino de' Medici to Francesco di Raffaello de' Medici, Venice, 5 February 1537, in Dall'Aglio, *L'assassino*, p. 292.
39 A passage of the *Apology* shows how, according to Lorenzino, any possible criticism for the flight from Florence was unthinkable immediately after the murder: Medici, *Apologia*, pp. 56–7.
40 Varchi, *Storia*, vol. III, p. 254.
41 Medici, *Apologia*, p. 50.
42 The document, dated 20 April 1537, is in ASF, Otto di Guardia e Balìa del Principato 15, ff. 78r–80r.
43 Varchi's Michele del Tavolaccino is not the only name existing in the historical sources for Scoronconcolo. According to some others, his real name was, respectively, Giovanni del Sale (Nardi, *Istorie*, vol. II, p. 282), Antonio (Coppi [ed.], *Cronaca*, p. 1), Baccio (Segni, *Istorie*, p. 315), and Vincenzo da Fiesole (A. Lazzari, *Motivo e cause di tutte le guerre principali successe in Europa, Asia et Africa dall'anno 1494 sino al tempo presente*, 2 vols. [Venice, 1669], vol. II, p. 111).
44 Varchi, *Storia*, vol. III, p. 250.
45 In one of Varchi's notes preliminary to the writing of the *Storia*, the reference is to the 'night of the Epiphany': Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS II. III. 103, 50.
46 The correct date is given by Segni, Ughi, Nerli, Lapini, Ammirato, Adriani, Baroncelli and the anonymous author of the *Cronaca fiorentina*. For two archival sources, see ASMi, Cancelleria dello Stato di Milano 12bis, f. 32r, and Mantua, Archivio di Stato, Archivio Gonzaga 1112, f. 4r. The most detailed and reliable chronology of events is that in Girón, *Crónica*, p. 89, which fixes the death at 7 January after 3.30 a.m.

47 Varchi, *Storia*, vol. III, pp. 250, 264.
48 C. Manciocco and L. Manciocco, *L'incanto e l'arcano: per una antropologia della Befana* (Rome, 2006), p. 148.
49 Ibid., p. 185.
50 R. Hatfield, 'The Compagnia de' Magi', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes,* 33 (1970), pp. 107–61.
51 Varchi, *Storia*, vol. III, pp. 250, 263.
52 Ibid., vol. III, p. 258.
53 ASF, Carte Strozziane-Appendice 1, ins. 6, f. 19r.
54 Before going to Constantinople, Lorenzino was in Venice for around two weeks until 16 February 1537, but in those days Varchi was elsewhere. On Varchi's movements in this period, see Lo Re, *Politica e cultura*, pp. 102–3, 122, and D. Brancato, 'Una "costituzione" dei fuoriusciti: La silloge di Benedetto Varchi per Piero Strozzi e Lorenzino de' Medici', in Lo Re and Tomasi (eds.), *Varchi e altro Rinascimento*, pp. 23–46, esp. pp. 31–32.
55 This is the case of the narratives of Cardano and Borgia, the former presumably written not later than August 1537, and the latter in the early months of 1538.
56 See Bramanti, 'Viatico', pp. 905–10; A. Moyer, '"Without passion or partisanship": Florentine historical writing in the age of Cosimo I', in J. Rudolph (ed.), *History and Nation* (Lewisburg, PA, 2006), pp. 45–69, esp. pp. 50–1.
57 The former is now in Girón, *Crónica*, pp. 87–92. The latter is a letter between two Florentines sent from Florence to Rome on 15 March 1537, published in G. Ruscelli, *Sopplimento nell'Istorie di monsignor Giovio* (Venice, 1608), pp. 30–7.
58 Bartoli, *Discorsi historici*, p. 312.
59 M. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. P. Putnam (New York, 1953), pp. 60–4.
60 On ego-documents, see M. Fulbrook and U. Rublack, 'In relation: The "social self" and ego-documents', *German History*, 28 (2010), pp. 263–72, and the bibliographical references therein.
61 Lowenthal, 'History and Memory', p. 33.
62 N. Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA, 1987).
63 F. Bex, *Arguments, Stories and Criminal Evidence: A Formal Hybrid Theory* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2011), p. 77. See also pp. 230–40.
64 Zemon Davis, *Fiction*, pp. 4, 18.
65 Ibid., pp. 45–51.
66 Baker, 'Writing', pp. 308, 326–7.
67 N. Zemon Davis, 'On the lame', *American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), pp. 572–603.
68 S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980).
69 M. de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, ed. D. M. Frame (Stanford, CA, 1958), p. 505.
70 C. B. McCullagh, 'Bias in historical description, interpretation, and explanation', *History and Theory*, 39 (2000), pp. 39–66, esp. p. 47.

71 See D. Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 120.
72 The two quotations are taken respectively from Girón, *Crónica*, p. 87, and the copy of a letter from Bernardo Sanzio da Rieti to Francisco de Los Cobos and Nicolas Perrenot de Granvelle, Bologna, 13 January 1537, in ASMi, Cancelleria dello Stato di Milano 12bis, f. 32r. The italics are mine. For other claims of truthfulness, see ASF, Otto di Guardia e Balìa del Principato 15, f. 79r, and Ruscelli, *Sopplimento*, pp. 36–7.
73 Varchi, *Storia*, vol. III, p. 250. Another writer observed that 'this story is being told with many lies by this person and that one' (Ruscelli, *Sopplimento*, p. 36).
74 Bloch, 'Critique historique', p. 5.
75 Varchi, *Storia*, vol. III, p. 250.
76 See E. Hobsbawm, 'History: A new age of reason', *Le Monde Diplomatique—English edition* (December 2004); Ginzburg, *Threads*, p. 128.
77 M. Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (London, 2002), p. 29.