Chapter 10

Cosimo’s Black Widow

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Antibiotic Medici/ne

The San Marco altarpiece, painted by Fra Angelico between 1438 and 1440 for the Dominican monastery of San Marco in Florence, has frequently been positioned as the classic textbook example of Renaissance artistic principles and perfectionism (Fig. 10.1): ‘more completely than any work ... [it] embodies the ideals of the new phase of the Florentine Renaissance. The pictorial space ... provides place and scale for every figure and thing.’ Following the recommendations published by Leon Battista Alberti in his enormously influential Della Pittura of 1436, the central panel depicts the enthroned Madonna and Child surrounded by angels and saints, all appropriately assembled and balanced according to the rational, mathematical laws of one-point perspective and the intellectual, rhetorical devices of successful story-telling. If control of the spectator’s attention was a primary objective of the organizational principles and didacticism a goal of the compositional arrangement, the inclusion of an intercessor did much to reinforce the science and theory operating behind the scenes:

In an istoria, I like to see someone who admonishes and points out to us what is happening there; or beckons with his hand to see; or menaces with an angry face and with flashing eyes, so that no one should come near; or shows some danger or marvelous thing there; or invites us to weep or to laugh together with them. Thus

1 Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, History of Italian Renaissance Art, 5th ed. (New York: Abrams, 2003), 250. The account offered by Laurie Schneider Adams, Italian Renaissance Art (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), esp. 107, is equally celebratory and makes explicit the didactic qualities of the painting; a diagram of Alberti’s perspectival system and ‘veil’ are superimposed over the altarpiece, illustrating for the reader the tools employed to create the illusion of depth on a two-dimensional surface. For a more extensive study, see William Hood, Fra Angelico at San Marco (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 97–121; see also Dale Kent, Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron’s Oeuvre (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), esp. 131–159.

2 Situated to the Virgin’s right are Sts Mark, John the Evangelist, and Lawrence; to her left are Dominic, Francis, and Peter Martyr. Sts Cosmas and Damian kneel in the foreground, on the Virgin’s right and left, respectively.
whatever the painted persons do among themselves or with the beholder, all is pointed toward ornamenting or teaching the *istoria.*

Part stage manager, part precautionary preceptor, Alberti’s supplemental figure plays a pivotal role in determining the success of the narrative.

It may come as little surprise, then, that the intermediary, in this case, is none other than Cosimo ‘il Vecchio’ de’ Medici, the ambitious and imaginative donor of the altarpiece who had a vested interest, both personal and political, in convincing the Florentine audience of his part in the pictorial project. Kneeling conspicuously at stage right, Cosimo appears in the guise of his patron saint, Cosmas, who extends an invitation via glance and gesture to take the metaphorical leap through Alberti’s window, as, indeed, so many have always done. But whereas Cosimo-as-Cosmas directs our gaze inward, I now point downward, offering another perspective and another *istoria.*

For all its exemplarity and totality, this celebrated Renaissance altarpiece shows signs of imperfection. It has been both disfigured – the surface abraded by a botched restoration – and dismantled – the predella cut off. Further still, a closer look at Cosimo’s commission and, in particular, the detached panel that takes as its subject the miracle of the black leg (Fig. 10.2) will reveal a politics of gender and sexuality, race, and disability intertwined with Medicean identity, memory, and the anxiety of loss.

As recounted in the *Legenda aurea,* Sts Cosmas and Damian, third-century twin brothers and physicians-turned-martyrs, posthumously encounter a man, the deacon Justinian, whose leg has been badly infected by a cancer:

While he was asleep, the two saints appeared to their devoted servant, bringing salves and surgical instruments. One of them said to the other: ‘Where can we get flesh to fill in where we cut away the rotted leg?’ The other said: ‘Just today an Ethiopian was buried in the cemetery of Saint Peter in Chains. Go and take his leg, and we’ll put it in place of the bad one.’ So he sped to the cemetery and brought back the Moor’s leg, and the two saints cut off the sick man’s leg and inserted the Moor’s in its place, carefully anointing the wound. Finally they took the amputated leg and attached it to the body of the dead Moor.

The man woke up, felt no pain, put his hand to his leg, and detected no lesion. He held a candle to the leg and could see nothing wrong with it, and began to wonder

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4 Of the nine predella scenes, all but one, a centrally-placed *Lamentation* (Munich), are dedicated to the legend of Sts Cosmas and Damian, not coincidentally Cosimo’s patron saints: *The Healing of Palladia* (Washington), *Sts Cosmas and Damian before Lycias* (Munich), *Demons Attacking Lycias* (Munich), *Sts Cosmas and Damian at the Stake* (Dublin), *The Crucifixion of Sts Cosmas and Damian* (Munich), *The Beheading of Sts Cosmas and Damian* (Paris), *The Burial of Sts Cosmas and Damian* (Florence), and *Sts Cosmas and Damian Healing the Deacon Justinian* (Florence).
whether he was himself or someone else. Then he came to his senses, bounded joyfully from his bed, and told everyone about what he had seen in his dreams and how he had been healed. They sent at once to the Moor’s tomb, and found that his leg had indeed been cut off and the aforesaid man’s limb put in its place in the tomb.  

In abbreviated form, Cosmas and Damian, having amputated the cancerous leg of a deacon, exhume a recently buried Moor, amputate his leg, and attach it to the deacon before reburying the black body. The deacon wakes up and is unable to remember, ‘whether he was himself or someone else.’ The Moor’s body is exhumed a second time, and the presence there of the rotten white leg confirms the miracle. In more critical terms, in an effort to make whole again the vulnerable male body, the diseased white limb is compromised and replaced with the severed black limb; and vice-versa, the decayed white leg is transferred to the presumably once healthy though now dead – yet disturbingly disposable – black body.

Fra Angelico illustrates the moment of prosthetic attachment, providing an antiseptic representation of what should otherwise be a gruesome scene (Fig. 10.2). Swapping the Early Christian cemetery for a Renaissance domestic interior, discounting all peripheral elements from grave robbers to grave goods, and erasing the amputation scenes altogether, Fra Angelico parts the curtains of his simple, box-like stage-set to reveal the deacon, sleeping peacefully (even smiling), as the saints set the black leg in place. Providing more narrative details, an earlier panel by the Florentine Master of the Rinuccini Chapel, dated around 1375 and now in North Carolina, shows the miraculous attachment as well as the moments of exhumation and exchange (Fig. 10.3). This continuous narrative seamlessly fuses the disparate fragments of the story, much as the miracle scene itself successfully blends displaced cadaver with privileged amputee, yielding a scene of convalescence rather than collision. But one rupture remains literally on the surface: Occupying an awkward space somewhere between medieval quackery and modern medicine, we become sideshow spectators, intermediary witnesses much like the darkly clad crouching figure who stares intently at the black leg in the lower left-hand corner of the North Carolina panel. Disconnected yet attached, peripheral yet present, I might here ask: what becomes a widowed body most?

Further, in this story of body snatching and bodybuilding, of amputation and recuperation, of negation and negotiation, what becomes of the self? Insofar as the deacon cannot remember himself – identity and memory having been cut off – his already disabled body is again impaired. How, then, in this intersection of nobody and somebody, is the male body both re-membered and remembered? I suggest that this double deficiency is countered by the presence of the black prosthetic leg

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that does more than just re-connect the broken body. Necessarily phallic, definitively fetish, the widowed black leg also overcompensates.

Extending this narrative of absence and excess, I revisit the portrait of Cosimo-as-Cosmas, Medici as medicine man, *Pater Patriae* as patron saint who makes man whole again, body double as antibody – immune to disease, decay, and death. Consider that Cosimo, like Cosmas, also had a twin brother named Damian, although Damiano de’ Medici died in infancy. Thus, we might read the rotated representation of St Damian, opposite Cosimo-as-Cosmas in the central panel, as another body double – a reference to the deceased Damiano de’ Medici. Further, if we alter this discourse to read the black leg as Cosimo’s phantom limb, the miraculous transfusion that results in transfiguration now takes on added significance. Is the purposeful twinning by Cosimo himself with Cosmas a preventive strategy employed to re-member and remember the inevitability of the widowed self? Can the doubled portrait in the central panel, then, be read not only as corporeal mnemonic but also as corporeal supplement – pictorial prosthesis supplied to counter lack and loss and to extend Cosimo’s own *istoria*?

**Growing Old, Growing Anxious: Strategies and Methods**

I recognize both a socio-cultural phenomenon in early modern Florence – the fear not merely of growing old, nor so much of death itself, but rather of being forgotten – and the development there of a multi-dimensional memorial enterprise. My argument works with the premise that early modern masculinity was inherently anxious, and that that anxiety, ‘so endemic to patriarchy that the issue becomes not so much its identification but rather an analysis of the discourses that respond to it,’ is also ‘an instrument (once properly contained, appropriated or returned) of [patriarchy’s] perpetuation.’ Yet if the fear of being forgotten necessitated a set of ‘compensatory or transferential strategies,’ that memorial endeavor was more than just one of benign self-preservation. We also have to recognize a gender politics at work, even if it frequently worked against itself.

Historically, strategies of deferral or transcendence have been consciously devised as a response to what Henry Staten calls thanato-erotic anxiety – the fear, within the dialectic of mourning, not of loss of object but of loss of self. The fear

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6 This exploratory essay is part of a larger book project entitled *Re-Membering Masculinity in Early Modern Florence: Widowed Bodies, Mourning, and Portraiture* (Ashgate, 2006).


8 Ibid.

of one’s own death and the subsequent fear of being forgotten could and did result in auto-mourning — a premature and self-inflicted process of grieving. However, this initial act is eventually and vengefully transferred onto the bodies of women, for it is the woman’s sexuality that undermines the man’s authority, an idea Staten refers to as ‘thanatoerotophobic misogyny.’ By such a process, the social designation of women as primary mourners does much to allay fears and alleviate anxiety. For example, within this cultural environment, a husband might rightfully presume that his wife will not only mourn him but also mourn him properly (read as sincerely and for the remainder of her life), comfortingly contributing to his expectations of a so-called ‘good death.’

But for all that widowhood promises — from perpetuity to transcendence — it is undermined by its very performativity and mere prevalence. A critical examination of the realities of widowhood, both during and after mourning ceremonial, reveals a marked discrepancy between the rigidity of expectation and the ambiguity of experience. The death ritual stands as a cultural mechanism designed and performed in order to reaffirm social order after a rupture in the natural order of things. As the ritual process unfolds, social structures and hierarchies, including gender roles, are re-asserted. Thus, the culturally designated primary mourners assume the greater part of public grieving, reminding the living of their duties to the dead. Yet ritual, though certainly authoritative, is, by its very nature, artificial. As carefully scripted as ritual must be and as well concealed as the subtext of this cultural maintenance program might be, it is precisely that basic, underlying element of constructedness and the inevitability of interpretation that leads to ritual failure. A more grave deficiency is the uncertainty of mourning after ceremonial, when supervision of the primary mourners, outside of the public sphere, proved more difficult. Widows simply remarried, not all of them but enough that, as Christiane Klapisch-Zuber has recorded, the consistently uncertain social, economic, and interfamilial mobility of approximately 25 percent of the adult female population in Florence caused a heightened degree of ‘anxiety among

University Press, 1995), xi–xii: ‘[The dialectic of mourning] begins with the process of attachment to, or cathexis of, an object, without which mourning would never arise ... As soon as desire is something felt by a mortal being for a mortal being, eros (as desire-in-general) will always be to some degree agitated by the anticipation of loss ... the loss of the beloved is a loss of self.’

The literature on widowhood is extensive. For two recent collections that call attention to the ambiguities of widowhood, see Allison Levy, ed., Widowhood and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe (Ashgate, 2003); and Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, eds, Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe (London and New York: Longman, 1999).

men.' Thus, if the widow simultaneously remedies and aggravates the memorial situation — her role just as tenuous as memory itself — what was the alternative? In other words, anxiety re-instated (if ever alleviated), how will the early modern subject ensure his memory?

Among those 'compensatory or transferential strategies' operating in the early modern period, I necessarily read portraiture as central to the memorial task. Of course, already in the fifteenth century, Alberti famously opined that painting 'makes the dead seem almost alive.' But before then and since then, so many, from Pliny to Petrarch to Pope-Hennessy and beyond, have understood the obvious connection between portraiture and commemorative practice. Appropriating Samuel K. Cohn Jr.'s critical response to recent scholarship, aptly entitled, 'Collective Amnesia,' I make the case for my own argument: 'With few exceptions, discussions of the instruments and strategies for family memory in Renaissance Florence have been presented in an ideological vacuum. That is to say, they have not explored the other side of the coin — forgetfulness.' It is, precisely, a rhetoric of forgetting that structures my contribution to the field. Specifically, I wish to nuance our understanding of commemorative portraiture as something complexly generated within a discourse of male anxiety and preemptive mourning, arguing that portraiture could defer memory loss or, at the very least, pictorially console the subject against his own potentially unmourned death.

12 David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Tuscans and Their Families; A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). The marriage pattern was characterized by a very young age for women at first marriage and a significantly later age for men at first marriage, resulting in a considerable age difference between husband and wife. Thus, Florentine women were widowed early: 18 percent of women over age 40 were widowed and 45 percent of women over age 50 were widowed. For a close reading of these statistics in relation to women's lives, see Klapisch-Zuber, 'The "Cruel Mother": Maternity, Widowhood, and Dowry in Florence in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,' in idem., Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 117–131, esp. 120.

13 Alberti, 63.

14 Even the most relevant secondary literature is vast, and space does not permit me to provide a synthesis but only a small selection of sources I find most compelling as well as complicating for the present study; specific references will be provided below as discussed in the text. A few sources, influential though not cited in the text, deserve special mention here: Patricia Lee Rubin, 'Art and the Imagery of Memory,' in Art, Memory, and Family in Renaissance Florence, eds Giovanni Ciappelli and Patricia Lee Rubin (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 67–85; Alison Wright, 'The Memory of Faces: Representational Choices in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Portraiture,' in Ciappelli and Rubin, 86–113; and Diane Owen Hughes, 'Representing the Family: Portraits and Purposes in Early Modern Italy,' Journal of Interdisciplinary History 17/1 (1986): 7–38.

My investigations engage critically with early modern male portraiture and with the more modern concept of ‘Renaissance Man.’ As such, my account is influenced by as much as it is isolated from the work of John Pope-Hennessy, whose seminal – if contrasting – study, *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, subscribes to the Burckhardtian narrative of Fame and Individualism, re-instating the notion of ‘Renaissance Man’ as self-assured, whole, omnipotent, and eternal. I will return shortly to the notion of ‘Renaissance Man,’ but for now we agree on much: ‘In the sixteenth century the Medici showed an almost morbid interest in self-perpetuation, which resulted from a dynastic insecurity,’ which, in turn, led to ‘a bias in favor of a class of portrait that was durable, timeless, and detached.’ I, too, recognize an obsessive memorial project and a discourse of insecurities and detachment. But whereas Pope-Hennessy credits political uncertainty with the development of a certain practice of portraiture, I ascribe that same pictorial project of self-perpetuation to memorial uncertainty – the fear not of loss of nation but of loss of self, the fear not of loss of fatherland though, perhaps, of loss of father.

This last phrase, ‘loss of father,’ resonates all too clearly within the amputated dialogue and fragmented discourse I have laid out here. Indeed, my simultaneous reliance upon and refusal of Pope-Hennessy’s argument has much to do with genealogies and generations, and this unavoidable gap leads me to our next (dis)agreement – the shared yet dissimilar rhetoric of detachment. The so-called ‘detached’ portrait may simply have appeared aloof and objective to Pope-Hennessy’s period eye, but to my postmodern eye it represents something altogether different. This, of course, is inevitable, as Harry Berger Jr. astutely cautions in his own work on conflict and conflation, *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt against the Italian Renaissance*: ‘Portraits tell stories ... they come to us framed within the interpretations, representations, and self-representations of art historians.’ If my own theories of ‘detached’ portraiture will not be immune to growing old, neither to forgetfulness, Berger’s assurance of a frame alleviates some anxiety before proceeding. A frame, after all, suggests to me a rigid, box-like structure that surrounds a picture, supporting and protecting it – not to mention privileging it. Despite the tempting offer, my objective is precisely to disconnect early modern portraiture and Italian Renaissance art history from these protective frames, laying out the subject – myself included – for examination, dissecting both story and story-teller.

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So, within my narrative, detachment might, first, be understood as fiction, and Renaissance portraiture as false, imaginary, invented—fabricated. ‘Commemorative portraiture,’ Richard Brilliant tells us, ‘must often reject the present in favor of a fictive image.’\(^{19}\) Emphasizing artifice and performance over both physiognomic likeness and realistic (even if idealized) referential substitution, Brilliant’s productive account of portraiture encourages us to re-read Pope-Hennessy’s ‘detached portrait’ no longer in terms of emotional objectivity and distance but now in terms of conscious and purposeful posing, suggesting an implicit discourse of power and politics operating behind the invention of the fabricated image. Invariably, however, such ‘fictions of the pose’—the act of commissioning and posing for one’s portrait—result in a particular type of performance anxiety, what Berger refers to as ‘the anxiety of self-representation,’ ‘based on the awareness that the power of representations is always contingent on the ability at once to disguise and to convey the representation of power. And it is partly an anxiety about the obligatory fictiveness or illusoriness of the “self” conveyed by the performance.’\(^{20}\)

If detachment can be understood as fabrication, it might now be understood also as fragmentation, and the portrait of ‘Renaissance Man’ as disconnected and incomplete. ‘Rather than relying on a notion of identity as a fixed, self-contained essence, Renaissance portraits of men employ a framework of multiple selves which are contextual, not universal, and suggest sexualities which are multi-layered, not self-evident.’\(^{21}\) I am neither the first to propose a new picture of the early modern male body nor the first to deconstruct the no-longer convincing concept of ‘Renaissance Man,’ as evidenced by Patricia Simons’s series of influential critiques on the subject, one of which is cited above.\(^{22}\) Yet sparked by her feminist and psychoanalytic questioning of previously accepted notions of wholeness, perfection, measure, proportion, and balance in both male and female portraiture, what I wish to do here is position that now broken body in and against a rhetoric of widowhood and disability.

Whereas the central objective of my earlier publications was to establish widow portraiture as a new genre of female portraiture and to explore the memorial function of such images, this investigation broadens the socio-cultural context,

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\(^{20}\) Berger, 142–143.


interpreting widow portraiture as only one pictorial element in a multi-dimensional memorial project that also includes the use of male portraiture to ensure masculine memory. More importantly, the rhetoric of widowhood remains central to my work, and in this new project on loss and grieving it is employed both literally (the body without a spouse) and metaphorically (the body in parts, the body fragmented; further, as socio-cultural construct, the body as irreparable detachment — without self, without identity, without memory).

My piecing together of the widowed early modern body as memorially disadvantaged may be read as an appendage to current research in disability studies within the humanities — a category of analysis that situates the body within a cultural rather than a medical framework and positions that body in and against other identity categories, such as race, gender, and sexuality; this, of course, is a body born of Foucault, yet it has since been reborn. My understanding of memorial impairment hinges upon an intersection of discourses of disability with postmodern theories of the early modern body, nuancing our understanding of fracture and fragmentation. Thus, in my account, the widowed body is always already


See, also, Katharine Park, ‘Was There a Renaissance Body?’ in The Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth Century, eds Allen J. Grecco, Michael Rocke, and Fiorella Gioffredi
disabled insofar as ‘Renaissance Man’ cannot re-member his self, nor can he remember himself. If the early modern body is both amputated and amnesiac, portraiture, then, becomes pictorial prosthesis supplied to counter lack and loss and to extend masculine memory – portraiture as corporeal supplement, portraiture as corporeal mnemonic. But this, too, is a precarious project, for just as the prosthesis can be added, it can also be taken away.

In sum, this essay presents a new picture of the early modern body, from ‘detached’ to dismembered, from fictive to fragmented, from disadvantaged to disabled. It opens new angles of vision on the experiences and definitions of widowhood and mourning, formulates new research questions about configurations of the male body and masculinity, and generates new theories of both male and female portraiture in Medicean Florence.

‘How to paint a dead man’

The central themes of this essay – pictorial practice, death, and masculinity in Florence – were already of concern at least as early as the late fourteenth century, as signaled by Cennino Cennini’s entry, ‘How to paint a dead man,’ in his practical manual, Il Libro dell’Arte:

We shall next speak about the way to paint a dead man, that is, the face, the breast, and wherever in any part the nude may show. It is the same on panel as on wall: except that on a wall it is not necessary to lay in all over with terre-verte; it is enough if it is laid in the transition between the shadows and the flesh colors. But on a panel lay it in as usual, as you were taught for a colored or live face; and shade it with the same verdaccio, as usual. And do not apply any pink at all because a dead person has no color; but take a little light ochre, and step up three values of flesh color with it, just with white lead, and tempered as usual; laying each of these flesh colors in its place; blending them nicely into each other, both on the face and on the body. And likewise, when you have got them almost covered, make another still lighter flesh color from this light one, until you

get the major accents of the reliefs up to straight white lead. And mark out all the
outlines with dark sinoper and a little black, tempered; and this will be called ‘sanguine.’
And manage the hair in the same way, but not so that it looks alive, but dead, with
several grades of verdaccio. And just as I showed you various types and styles for
beards on the wall, so on panel you do them in the same way; and so do every bone of a
Christian, or of rational creatures; do them with these flesh colors aforesaid.25

I cite the lengthy passage in its entirety to underscore the meticulousness with
which Cennini records his step-by-step instructions on depicting the end of life.
Why such precision? We might assume that such images, whatever form they took,
were in popular demand insofar as they warranted not just a mention but also a
considerable entry in Cennini’s how-to book. And we might further assume that
this pictorial requirement/request posed a particular set of challenges to the
Renaissance artist as suggested, ironically, by the foolproof color-by-number
rhetoric employed throughout. Even Alberti expressed noteworthy concern with
the topic, cautioning in *Della Pittura*, ‘anyone who tries to express a dead body,
which is certainly most difficult, will be a good painter.’26

But why such a concerted effort to ‘get it right’ and praise for those who do?
And what was so difficult about painting a dead man anyway, as opposed to, say,
painting wounds, the next topic taken up by Cennini but with incredible concision?
Despite Cennini’s calculated formula, Alberti’s cautionary tone seems to forewarn
of a challenge far greater than potential technical difficulty. So precisely what is it
that looms so large? These practical and theoretical directives suggest to me not
merely professional advice but a pictorial preoccupation—a socio-cultural demand,
if not an urgency, to mark, in some way, the male body. Loosely interpreting
Cennini’s subtitle, ‘How to Paint a Dead Man,’ to include not just representations
of dead bodies but also portraits of dead men, I explore a variety of sixteenth-
century Medicean portrait types representative of both the successes and failures of
commemorative imagery and memorial strategy.

I might begin by calling up a well-known, though Roman, example: Raphael’s
portrait of Castiglione and its accompanying *Elegy*, which reads as follows:

Only your portrait, painted by Raphael’s hand, bringing back your features, comes near
to relieving my sorrows. I make tender approaches to it, I smile, I joke or speak, just as
if it could give me an answer. By an acknowledgement and a nod it seems to me often to
want to say something, and to speak with your voice. Your son recognizes his father,
and greets him with childish talk. This is my solace, and thus I cheat the long days.27

26 Alberti, 74.
27 Quotation from Jodi Cranston, *The Poetics of Portraiture in the Italian Renaissance*
(Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 55; see also David Rosand,
‘The Portrait, the Courtier, and Death’ in *The Ideal and the Real in Renaissance Culture,*
And ‘cheat’ it did. The accompanying *Elegy*, penned as though by Castiglione’s mournful wife, was actually his own. Thus, in an anxiety-induced, pre-meditative gesture, Castiglione hoped that his portrait by Raphael would, in his temporary absence, prolong his memory for his wife and son. This conflation of word and image, then, can be interpreted as a double strategy employed to ensure that the primary purpose of the portrait was not lost on the viewer. But what about in the ultimate absence, in death, can we read male portraiture as extending not just memory but also the illusion of life itself? If representation is nothing more than regulatory fiction, how else might one ‘cheat’ death?

If, ‘in the sixteenth century the Medici showed an almost morbid interest in self-perpetuation,’ as Pope-Hennessy has already told us, we might now return to those ‘detached’ portraits, asking not so much how to but why paint a dead man. During the sixteenth century, no fewer than 26 posthumous portraits of Cosimo ‘il Vecchio,’ who had died in 1464, were produced, including paintings, miniatures, graphics, sculpture, medals, glyptics, monumental paintings and festival decorations, and tapestries. One of those portraits on panel deserves special mention: the posthumous portrait painted by Pontormo in 1519, now in the Uffizi (Fig. 10.4). Depicted in profile, his head turned to the left, Cosimo is seated before the *broncone*, the laurel trunk with two branches – one abundant in full leaf, the other not just bare but severed – encircled by a scroll inscribed with a line from Virgil’s *Aeneid*: ‘When one branch is broken off, the other is not deficient.’ It has been suggested that the new branch may represent another Cosimo – the future Cosimo I, son of Giovanni delle Bande Nere and Maria Salvati (two Medici cousins whose marriage fused the divergent branches of the family tree). Indeed, upon his accession, Cosimo I, who ruled between 1537 and 1574, adopted the *broncone* as his *impressa*. Further, he re-dated this portrait to correspond to his political victory.

Cosimo I’s appropriation of his namesake’s image did not stop there. Just as Cosimo ‘il Vecchio’ had a personal and political interest in the purposeful twinning of himself with St Cosmas, so, too, did Cosimo I understand the significance of perpetuating – and performing – the family *istoria*. Of the 26


30 Ibid., 387.

31 Ibid. To clarify, Cosimo did not commission this posthumous portrait of his ancestor, painted around the time of his birth in 1519; still, he made sufficient use of it during his lifetime.

posthumous portraits of Cosimo ‘il Vecchio’ produced during the sixteenth century, 19 of those were commissioned during Cosimo I’s reign. One of those, a portrait of Cosimo ‘il Vecchio’ as St Cosmas, was paired with a portrait of Cosimo I as San Damiano (Fig. 10.5), both painted by Vasari around 1558 and flanking Raphael’s Madonna dell’Impannata in the chapel of the apartment of Leo X in the Palazzo Vecchio. The portrait of Cosimo ‘il Vecchio’ is unmistakably based on Pontormo’s 1519 portrait (Fig. 10.4), but here Pater Patriae becomes patron saint. Of course, ‘il Vecchio’ had already positioned himself in that role during his lifetime in the central panel of the San Marco altarpiece. What had not previously occurred was a double doubling. In this detached diptych, the two Cosimos are transfigured: each holding a large book and palm branch and portrayed with a nimbus. Moreover, Cosimo I plays the part of the dead twin brother, ambiguously standing in for both St Damian, the dead twin sibling of the posthumous miracle-worker, and Damiano, the deceased infant twin brother of his ancestor. This is more than just name-dropping; it suggests to me a double dosage of preventive medicine. But why the insistence on immunity, if ‘when one branch is broken off, the other is not deficient?’ On the contrary, Cosimo I seems to have been quite susceptible to deficiency. As a short aside, in a portrait painted by Bronzino between 1538 and 1540, contemporaneous with his appropriation of ‘il Vecchio’’s motto of Medicean infallibility, Cosimo I poses as Orpheus, the widowed mythological figure who would be ripped apart, dismembered limb by limb – a striking reversal of his namesake’s miracle-work. Is the double doubling of the two Cosimos as Sts Cosmas and Damian a preventive strategy employed to re-member and remember the inevitability of the widowed self?

If Cosimo’s memorial deficiency was remedied by overcompensation, the following pair of prosthetic portraits further contributed to his commemorative project. In 1545, Bronzino painted a portrait of Cosimo I that would be copied dozens of times and would become a prototype for a series of official ruler portraits (Fig. 10.6). The composition is somewhat familiar: Cosimo is shown


33 Working with Langedijk’s calculation (see note 29 above), I have included only those portraits that have been securely dated, discounting many undated, anonymous portraits, even if they appear in sixteenth-century inventories.

34 See Langedijk, 389 and 435; and Ludovica Sebregondi, ‘Cosma e Damian. Santi Medici e Medicei,’ in Giannarelli, 75–105, esp. 92.

35 There is disagreement concerning which portrait served as the prototype and how many copies were made. See Robert B. Simon, ‘Bronzino’s Portrait of Cosimo I in Armour,’ Burlington Magazine 125 (1983): 527–539; and Langedijk, 407–530. I am less concerned with numbers and more concerned with iconography and socio-cultural function. For the sake of consistency, I have relied on Langedijk for dating and attribution. I should mention here that Simon, 531, disagrees with Langedijk, 412–414, that the portrait in Kassel (Fig. 10.6) was the prototype; in addition, he assigns the Kassel portrait to the Workshop of
standing before the broncone, just as Cosimo ‘il Vecchio’ had been positioned by Pontormo some 25 years earlier. But here the inclusion of the truncated branch may have less to do with Cosimo’s politico-ancestral father than with his actual father, Giovanni delle Bande Nere, who had died in 1526. A posthumous portrait of Giovanni, painted during this same period and attributed to Francesco Salviati, contains a specific borrowing from Bronzino’s prototype: the deceased father is depicted in the same costume as his son – machismo armor (despite the effeminate pointed breast plate) and virile codpiece.  

36 Consider another father and son pairing: portraits of Giovanni by Carlo Portelli (Fig. 10.7) and of Cosimo by Alessandro Allori (Fig. 10.8). Here, as before, the strategic inclusion of fetishistic props and attachments, specifically the swollen codpiece, in these two portraits clearly contributed to the already padded discourse on memory and masculinity in early modern Florence.  

37 For instance, the illusion of a perpetual erection simultaneously exaggerates manhood and alleviates castration anxiety. Yet the anxiety of loss and the analgesic prosthetic might have held a more particular and personal meaning for Cosimo. Despite the purposeful incorporation of Sts Cosmas and Damian into the self-generated Medici myth, the family intercessors would fail to repeat their medical miracle when Giovanni, having suffered a botched amputation to his right leg, died in battle. Yet in his posthumous portrait, the leg is ‘miraculously’ reattached – no thanks to the family saints nor to any ancestral or filial performances but courtesy of the artist’s brush; thus, the posthumous, prosthetic portrait both re-members and remembers the lame, dead male body. Moreover, Cosimo, posing in what he presents anachronistically and incorrectly to be his dead father’s never-detached armor, re-claims the amputated leg and, in so doing, pre-meditatively recovers – at least pictorially – the inevitability of his own widowed body.  

38 These were not the only fabricated, prosthetic representations of fragmented, widowed bodies to serve the Medicean istoria of (re)generation and commemoration. Culminating my narrative of portraiture as both corporeal supplement and corporeal mnemonic, I turn to another suggestive pairing that makes explicit my notion of the literal and metaphorical widowed body. If the

Bronzino.

36 Again, there is disagreement between Langedijk, 1031, and Simon, 534, who assigns the Turin portrait to an anonymous painter.


38 As a short aside, Cosimo I became a widower in 1562, when his first wife, Eleonora of Toledo, died. He remarried in 1570, at that time to Camilla Martelli; she would mourn him upon his death four years later.
precariousness of widowhood, as I have suggested, both remedies and aggravates the memorial situation, widow portraiture— insofar as representation, as regulatory fiction, fixes the ambiguous role of the primary mourner— plays an obvious key role in recording masculine memory. Yet if such pictures promise the perpetuation of memory, the overcompensatory inclusion of male portraiture seems to guarantee it. Take the double posthumous portrait of Maria Salviati and Giovanni delle Bande Nere, commissioned by Cosimo I’s sons and painted by Giovanni Battista Naldini around 1585 (Fig. 10.9). Maria, though truncated and distanced (even ghost-like), did actually outlive her husband by 17 years; in this regard, her status as Giovanni’s widow is appropriately commemorated; yet he (not surprisingly, depicted with both legs intact supplemented by a stiff baton and codpiece) is portrayed as though alive during her mourning of him.\textsuperscript{39} But even more curious is the double portrait of Cosimo II, grandson of Cosimo I, at the age of six months with his governess, the widow Costanza della Gherardesca, of 1590, which discloses a similar project of pre-emptive mourning (Fig. 10.10). The long, black walking stick depicted here is not Cosimo’s only crutch. In an anticipatory gesture, his widowed cousin/governess is appropriated as his own. Another premature imposition of widowhood, perhaps, although in this case, if she stands in as his eventual widow, predeceasing him, that role would never be fully realized. Still, in these two double portraits, the widowed, mourning body— both male and female— remains signal to the memorial task. These performative pictures, while preventative to some degree, are highly problematic. In other words, the inclusion of the widow might protect against memory loss but her presence also complicates masculine memory insofar as widowhood presumes male absence. That is to say, if such commemorative pictures ensure mourning and (ideally) memory, they also necessarily acknowledge the end of life— and, thus, perhaps herein lay the difficulty of Alberti’s task.

The Big Stiff

If, ultimately, this essay suggests the death of masculinity, it also acknowledges the inevitability of its resurrection insofar as ‘dismantling and assembling are inseparable.’\textsuperscript{40} The Medicean istoria— from Sts Cosmas and Damian to Cosimo ‘il

\textsuperscript{39} Of course, none of these sitters was alive when the portraits were painted in 1585. Giovanni had been dead for 59 years, Maria for 42 years, and Cosimo I for 11 years. Maria’s grandsons, Francesco and Ferdinando, were approximately 41 and 36 years old, respectively, when they commissioned the double portrait. See Langedijk, 357 and 1043–1044; 1028 and 1262; and Levy, ‘Framing Widows,’ 2003, 227.

Vecchio’ to Cosimo I to Cosimo II — offers up the male body that refuses death, and that insistence on re-claiming the male body is supplemented and reinforced through portraiture. Yet, if re-membering and dismembering are one and the same, the prosthetic picture both contributes to and betrays that recuperative narrative.
10.7 Carlo Portelli, Portrait of Giovanni delle Bande Nere. Minneapolis Institute of Arts
Giovanni Battista Naldini, *Portrait of Maria Salviati and Giovanni delle Bande Nere*. Uffizi, Florence
Cosimo II, G. Princ. di Tosc. in età di sei mesi il 12 di Nov. 1590.

10.10 Florentine School, Portrait of Cosimo II de' Medici at the age of six months with his governess, the widow Costanza della Gherardesca. Uffizi, Florence