CHAPTER TWO
CULTURAL POLITICS IN EARLY MODERN TUSCANY

In the oration which he gave on the death of Cosimo I in 1574, Bernardo Davanzati declared that:

Florence, to speak the truth…(and not to praise her amongst we Florentines—which is easy to do, and which one could spend all one’s time doing) is the city that rules, subject to no foreign power, a colony and imitator of Rome, ruler of peoples, centre of Italy, flower of talents, honoured of letters, master of the arts, mirror of civilisation, coffer of money, wonder of buildings, beauty of the World.1

Clearly Davanzati, like the other eulogists of Cosimo, was imitating classical models of praise. Nevertheless, the picture which Davanzati painted of Florence would have been as recognisable in the sixteenth century as it is today.2

Traditionally it is the cultural patronage of the fifteenth-century Medici, especially Cosimo il Vecchio and Lorenzo il Magnifico, which has attracted attention.3 Yet if the reigns of Cosimo I, Francesco I, and Ferdinando I were not a Golden Age for arts and letters, they

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1 Bernardo Davanzati, “Orazione in morte del Granduca Cosimo recitata nell’Accademia degli Alterati,” in Scisma d’Inghilterra con altre operette del Signor Bernardo Davanzati Bostichi (Bassano, 1782), pp. 120–134 (p. 121): “Perchè Firenze, per vero dire, (e non per lodarla qui tra noi Fiorentini; ch’ agevol cosa fora, e d’uopo non ce ne ha) è Città dominante, non soggetta potenza forestiera, Colonia, e imitatrice di Roma, domatrice di popoli, centro d’Italia, fior d’ingegni, onor delle lettere, maestra d’arti, specchio di civilità, arca di danari, stupore d’edifici, bellezza del Mondo.”
2 For the panegyrics and biographies of Cosimo, see Carmen Menchini, Panegirici e vite di Cosimo I de’ Medici: tra storia e propaganda (Florence, 2005); Van Veen, Cosimo I, pp. 185–190, 235–237.
were, at the least, a Silver Age. Indeed the face of Florence was altered far more by the grand dukes than it had been by their ancestors. The historic seat of government, the Palazzo della Signoria, was transformed architecturally and decoratively after it became the ducal residence in 1540. Between 1560 and 1581 the Uffizi was built to house the administration and the outstanding art collection of the Medici. From 1565 the Uffizi was connected by the Corridoio Vasariano to the Palazzo Pitti, which was the home of Cosimo and his family after 1550. To protect the city, and to demonstrate Medici power, the Forte Belvedere was built at the top of the Boboli Hill between 1590 and 1595. To ensure that the grand dukes and their families were housed as magnificently in death as they had been in life, work began in 1604 on the Chapel of the Princes in the Basilica of San Lorenzo. The Medici court was once dismissed as “incorrigibly provincial”. Yet it created, developed, and spread cultural forms which extended from the visual arts to science, historiography, music, and linguistic study. Florentine festivals and the elaborate celebrations of Medici baptisms, marriages, and funerals had an enormous influence on theatre and on the staging of public spectacle. The cultural impact of grand ducal Florence was felt in France, Spain, and even England.

