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April Blood and its portrayal of Renaissance Florence

“‘Base and dirty’ it [politics] may have been, but never grey, and we push it aside at the risk of missing the key point of departure for understanding the history of Italian Renaissance cities” (page 4). Politics in Italy during the time of the Renaissance were ruthless and cruel, yes. This does not mean they should be ignored though. While ruthless and cruel, the politics of Italian cities as displayed in April Blood are an important part of their history, even oftentimes being the catalyst for the works of beauty and blossoming of rational thought that are the standard stereotypes of Renaissance history.

The competitive politics between various powerful families and city-states often contributed to the creation of works of literary and artistic greatness. For example, Niccolò Machiavelli was heavily influenced by the rise and fall and rise again of Medici power after the Pazzi Conspiracy, giving lead to The Prince. Artists, especially humanist writers, also used their crafts to curry favor with those in power. “They dedicated unsolicited translations and their own writings to the leading men in government and politics, while also looking about for classical works that would appeal to wealthy merchants, bankers, politicians, and neighboring princes” (page 3). Cities would even go on building frenzies, building bigger and more spectacular buildings until one finally fell down, all as a form of competition. Any art existed because of the darker aspects of life in the Renaissance, not as an entity separate from it.

While there was much innovation in the arts and science during the time, life was not all pleasant. At best, one could expect to live in a “republic” ruled by a council of men supposedly chosen by closed vote, and at worst under an incompetent or violent monarch. People lived in constant fear of the potential for war and the plagues and rampaging bands of “soldiers” that brought. There were no social revolutions, the people were more afraid of the loss of order than an overthrow would give than the government itself. Life in the city was tight nit and highly ordered, with the decisions of the

government going into effect almost right away, with the people having as much or as little say in the matter as the ruling group pleased. Because of all this, anyone who wanted to be anyone had to get involved in the political life of their city. The way to do this in Florence was through the power of money and banking or trading. The powerful families, such as the Pazzi and Medici, made their living through trade. Because of this, they could withstand the taxes levied on them by the government. They also had enough money to lend to others, giving the lender extreme power over the debtor. Another way to gain power was through strategic marriage. If you married into a family, you could count on them to help you and often could utilize their position somewhere to gain some sort of power or position. Combine those powers with the powers of networking and patronage, the Medici under Lorenzo were able to eventually take hold of power Florence after the Pazzi conspiracy until after his death.

Every book has a purpose, and April Blood is no different. Too often, people think of the Renaissance as a period of nothing but people sitting around and creating art and pretty-sounding poems. The book offers a solid alternative to this stereotype; it shows the violent underbelly of the time called the Renaissance. It downplays the importance of the flowering of culture to the point where it seems a small part of life, with politics and power plays being the central focus. To add on to that, most of the history is stacked against the Pazzi and for the Medici, especially because of their patronage of the arts. One of the author's goals in writing the book was to give a more balanced perception of life in Renaissance Florence and of the Medici and Pazzi.

April Blood portrays life in the Italian Renaissance as being dominated by cruel and ruthless politics, with the flowering of art and culture being a beneficial side effect of this. It is always helpful to understand history by taking in information from a variety of different sources and perceptions, and April Blood offers a view of the Renaissance not commonly found. Instead of ignoring the ignoble elements of it in favor of the art and beauty, he synthesizes them together beautifully.