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Review of *Jews and Magic in Medici Florence: The Secret World of Benedetto Blanis*,

by Edward Goldberg.

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*Jews and Magic in Medici Florence: The Secret World of Benedetto Blanis.*  
Edward Goldberg.  
University of Toronto Press, 2011. 312 pp. + index.

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During the Renaissance, Florence, the capital city of Tuscany, ruled by the wealthy and influential Medici family, became the European centre of art, culture and knowledge. Palaces and manors punctuated the cityscape and among these, the cathedral and baptistery were renowned for their exquisite beauty. It is on this period that Edward Goldberg focuses in *Jews and Magic in Medici Florence: The Secret World of Benedetto Blanis*. Edward Goldberg is an art historian and a founder of the Medici Archival Project, who has written a number of books and articles on Medici Florence (including *After Vasari: History, Art and Patronage in Late Medici Florence* (1988) and *Jew at the Medici Court: The Letters of Benedetto Blanis 'Hebreo', 1615-1621*) (2011). In *Jews and Magic*, the author offers his perspective that despite the association of opulence with the Medici family and their capital during this period, the members of the Florentine Jewish community typically did not enjoy such luxuries. From within the ghetto, they carved out a living through loan-sharking, gambling, and trade. Other Florentines often thought of them as little better than vermin (18). They were regarded with suspicion, as many believed that Jews possessed occult power.

In *Jews and Magic in Medici Florence*, Goldberg uses newly uncovered manuscripts and documents found in the Medici Granducal Archives to paint a careful, comprehensive, and engaging biography of a Florentine court Jew, which offers a glimpse into Medici Florence and the establishment of the Ghetto. Goldberg's historical account follows particular historical persons, primarily the ghetto resident, Benedetto Blanis, a Florentine Jewish businessman, scholar, and aspiring adept of Kabbalah, who became the close confidant of Don Giovanni dei Medici, a member of the ruling family. For six years, Don Giovanni was Blanis' patron, and they developed a fascinating relationship. Goldberg traces the friendship between Christian and Jew, aristocrat and commoner.

In thirteen chapters, Goldberg's work offers a detailed exploration of the everyday life of a Jew living and working in seventeenth-century Florence. Events, such as festivals and holidays, are explored in thorough accounts of Blanis' life. As Blanis was a court Jew, atypical of ghetto Jews of Florence, Goldberg draws on the available information and uses it to make inferences

about the life of the Florentine Jews in general, while describing episodes involving love, money, and politics that defined Medici high society. For instance, in chapter six, Goldberg offers a detailed description of frequent events within the Jewish ghetto and the Florentine market. Piecing together the events through Blanis' letters to his patron, police records, and court proceedings, Goldberg frames his retelling as though experienced by a civilian of that time, as though through Blanis' own eyes. Goldberg describes the arrest of a pickpocket, the legality of moneylenders, and the dissolution of a counterfeit ring dealing in low-quality linen. Despite his lofty social position, even Blanis was not above suspicion. He was accused of involvement in money laundering. Blanis's letters described the investigation and trial. His eventual acquittal was largely due to his patron's intervention on his behalf, as evidenced by numerous letters between Blanis and Don Giovanni. Goldberg skilfully weaves their correspondence into his narrative, and is successful in illustrating both the complexities of Florentine Jewish life in service of the ruling family, but also the context in which both lived. Goldberg is effectively telling three stories: that of Benedetto Blanis; that of the Jewish minority in Florence; and that of the Medici family. By tracing Blanis' life, Goldberg demonstrates how both communities were deeply intertwined.

Each chapter in the book details one aspect of Benedetto Blanis' life, and as the reader progresses through the chapters, the setting continuously shifts, both chronologically and spatially. This narrative technique contributes to the clarity and impact of the book. The segmented retellings form a coherent account. For example, chapter three, "The Ghetto," focuses on the Blanis family history. It also describes Benedetto's home life and his interactions with fellow Jewish neighbours and Florentines. Similarly, chapter seven, "Knowledge and Power," emphasizes a particular aspect of Blanis' life by delving into his study of Kabbalah and the stigma that surrounded its study and practice. Moreover, it highlights the serious risks that both Blanis and his patron faced in pursuing kabbalistic study.

A strength of *Jews and Magic in Medici Florence* is Goldberg's literary style. From the first page, he attempts to engage the reader into seventeenth-century Medici Florence, which he depicts as a cutthroat and Machiavellian society. Each section of the book is depicted dramatically and is then authenticated with an accompanying excerpt from a letter, a journal, or a document. Goldberg attempts to capture life as lived in Renaissance Florence with impressive detail, presented as a work of historical fiction. Assuming that he is successful in this endeavour, his book is an informative and historically

accurate account while it simultaneously offers an entertaining read. It reflects Renaissance Florence as a fascinating subject as well as Goldberg's skill as a historical author.

One flaw of Goldberg's book is the constant rotation of persons in focus. In his desire to provide the reader with as complete a picture as possible, he often introduces new individuals every few of pages. Goldberg does attempt to situate these historical persons into Blanis' life, and that of Medici Florence, though at times their introductions and backgrounds hinder the narrative and make it difficult to follow. Goldberg partially addresses this problem by including the Blanis family tree. This is, however, insufficient. Rather, a chart describing all historical persons mentioned would have been a useful reference throughout the text.

Another possible problem with *Jews and Magic in Medici Florence* is Goldberg's decision to emphasize the captivating and scandalous elements of life in Medici Florence. While his efforts to produce a book that reads as a historical fiction encourage the reader's emotional engagement with the text, it may also reduce the text's accuracy. Goldberg's narrative focuses on the sensational aspects of Blanis' life and of Florentine high society. This results in the distinct impression that some information, whether insignificant details or events of some importance, might have been neglected in favour of more eye-catching subject matter. For instance, the nature of the relationship between Blanis and his patron could have received more emphasis and discussion. Patronage seems to have been a vital aspect of Blanis' role as Don Giovanni dei Medici's court Jew, and the examination of this aspect of his life was rushed in favour of compelling storytelling.

Keeping these possible flaws in mind, Edward Goldberg's *Jews and Magic in Medici Florence: The Secret World of Benedetto Blanis* will appeal not only to scholars of history and religion, but also to curious readers, seeking more familiarity with life in seventeenth-century Florence for both the Jewish minority as well and the wealthy and powerful aristocracy. Additionally, the book offers an entertaining glimpse into the world of the Renaissance arcane. This book is overall a valuable read for scholars interested in Tuscan history, Jewish-Christians relations and Renaissance religion.

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