

Contents

Foreword by Tim Parks	VII
Introduction	XIII
Apology for a Murder	I
<i>Apology for a Murder</i>	3
<i>The Death of Lorenzino de' Medici</i>	43
<i>Poems by Lorenzino de' Medici</i>	98
<i>Note on the Texts</i>	102
<i>Notes</i>	102

Foreword

What do you do if you come into the world bearing the same name as various ancestors, of whom some were considered good and others even great? Born in 1514, christened Lorenzo de' Medici, a young boy discovers that not only was his grandfather called Lorenzo, but likewise his great-great-grandfather, a man who is still revered as the good and generous brother of the even more revered Cosimo the Elder, who set up the Medici dynasty. Worst of all, there is the oppressive memory of Cosimo's grandson Lorenzo the Magnificent, whose posthumous fame is still growing despite the fact that he actually embezzled much of the wealth of your side of the family.

Well, one thing you can do is to call yourself something else. In general, Italian has two ways of altering a word or name. There is the affectionate diminutive produced by the suffix *-ino* and the insulting pejorative created by the suffix *-accio*. Hence we have *ragazzo*, a boy, *ragazzino*, a nice little boy, and *ragazzaccio*, a young hooligan. Curiously, Lorenzo came to be known both as *Lorenzino*, perhaps because he was short, perhaps because it was understood that he was bound to be less important than his ancestor namesakes, and *Lorenzaccio*, "nasty Lorenzo". Quite probably, he got this second name because of the way he reacted to the implications of the first.

Orphaned young, *Lorenzino* went down to Rome to live under the guardianship of Pope Clement VII, illegitimate son of Lorenzo

the Magnificent's brother, and hence a man on the other, embezzling side of the family. This was now very much the heyday of the Renaissance, after a century bent on rediscovering the noble gestures, artworks and writings of the ancient world, largely at the expense of the medieval Christian values of humility, poverty and chastity.

The constant search for role models in ancient Rome and Greece, and in particular the tendency to judge political leaders by comparing them with famous figures of antiquity, had a variety of consequences, both positive and negative. Certainly there was an enhanced sense of human nobility, of a greatness and beauty that could be achieved and contemplated aside from Christian metaphysics. But there was also the danger of falling into parody, or cynicism, of feeling that every action was merely the tired repetition – and what's more, out of context – of something done centuries before. On a wild night in 1534, the twenty-year-old Lorenzino went out and vandalized the bas-reliefs on the Emperor Constantine's triumphal arch, plus various fine statues from the age of Hadrian. Was this destructive act a rejection of the encumbering past, or was Lorenzino mimicking Alcibiades, who had supposedly mutilated various busts of Hermes almost two thousand years before? In any event, the young Medici was obliged to abandon Rome on pain of death. Fleeing to Florence, he wrote a play, the *Aridosio*, which begins with the complaint that it is impossible to find anything new to write about because the ancients have already done it all.

Florence at the time was itself enjoying a collective *déjà vu*. After a period of republicanism, the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor had got together to impose, once again, a Medici leadership on

FOREWORD

the city. Alessandro de' Medici – bastard son, so it seemed, of Pope Clement VII – was declared duke. Poor but resourceful, Lorenzino befriended his distant cousin – Alessandro was only four years his senior – and became his companion in debauchery, an able procurer of women, an adviser, a buffoon, a heavy drinker. Then, at a certain point, he decided to kill him. “My beautiful aunt,” he told Alessandro one night in 1537, “is at last ready to grant you her favours. You can wait for her in my bedroom.” Alessandro rose to the bait. He lay down on his cousin’s bed and shut his eyes. Together with a hired assassin, Lorenzino, now decidedly Lorenzaccio, stabbed him to death and fled before the body was discovered.

Why did he do it? There appears to have been no plan and certainly no proper preparation for replacing the Duke with either himself or the prominent republicans whom Alessandro had exiled. In the *Apology* Lorenzino sets out to explain. The things to look for as you read the piece are the passion and elegance of its arguments, the ease with which internal contradiction is ignored, the insistent sincerity of its false consciousness and the fact that at the end of the day nothing at all is really explained.

Life is only worth living if man is free, Lorenzino begins, therefore tyrannicide is a duty. The ancients always said as much. The Florentines know it in their republican blood. Alessandro was worse than Nero and Caligula put together. It’s amazing it took so long for someone to find the courage to be rid of him. The implication is that the author himself is a modern Brutus.

Up to this point the piece is no more than a vehement repetition of the principles of Roman republicanism, an exercise in finding parallels in the ancient past. But then Lorenzino enters into a fine

APOLOGY FOR A MURDER

discussion of the whole question of the legitimacy of political power. Surprisingly, now he doesn't take a doctrinaire republican position. He is flexible. Traditionally, Florence has belonged to its people, not to a hereditary duke. But even if it were conceded that the Holy Roman Emperor had the right to impose a leader on Florence, Alessandro would have forfeited any hypothetical legitimacy with his appallingly cruel and licentious behaviour. For what really gives a government the right to rule is its performance.

All this seems admirable and sensibly pragmatic. There is a discussion of Lorenzino's obligations to a member of his extended family with whom he was in a close relationship. Here he oscillates wonderfully between his supposed commitment to republicanism, which would have obliged him to kill a tyrant even if it were his own brother, and a sense of social superiority in being the true legitimate son of a Medici and not merely a bastard fathered on a serving maid by God knows who. But in any event, since the end justifies the means (Lorenzino was clearly familiar with Machiavelli's *The Prince*, published some twenty years before), then his treacherous exploitation of his special relationship with Alessandro is more than excusable: the important thing was to kill the pig.

This discussion of ends and means leads us to the core of the *Apology* and its underlying irony. For the goal of the whole project, Lorenzino claims, was to return Florence to its republican constitution. This end failed, he complains, because the people who should have risen up on the announcement of the Duke's death were so pusillanimous. The question now arises: is the means justified if the end is not achieved? And we see that Machiavelli's famous precept introduces an element of

FOREWORD

technical expertise into morality: only a correct calculation of the consequences of any action will allow us to understand whether it is morally justified. Lorenzino got it wrong. He killed Alessandro, but this led only to the installation of another Medici, Cosimo I, as duke. That was definitely not the plan. All the same, the murderer claims the justification of his intended end, which only he could really know and which, as we have said, he does not seem to have planned or provided for in any serious way.

What, then, are the intentions behind the *Apology* itself? At first glance the text seems to be a genuine political treatise and an attempt to win support, perhaps the preparation for a possible return to Florence. But Lorenzino could not have been so foolish as to have imagined that the ruling Medici would ever forgive him. He knew there were paid assassins forever on his track as he moved nervously from town to town. So what was the purpose of this eloquent piece of writing? Like the destruction of the statues in Rome, the writing of his play, the assassination of the Duke, it can best be seen as just another attempt to achieve fame. This was Lorenzino's real goal, the only explanation. He wanted to be noticed.

At this point the relevance of the *Apology* to our own times becomes evident. Renaissance humanism, with its combination of eclecticism and stress on the noble individual, offered a gallery of gestures, usually bereft of context, that would lead to fame. After centuries of a Christianity that allowed for nothing outside itself, the door was opened on the supermarket of ideas and role models we live in today. From now on, modern man could invest in this or that role to achieve notoriety, not because he believed

APOLOGY FOR A MURDER

in it, but because he believed he was capable of distinguishing himself in this way. At which point everybody begins to insist on their sincerity, precisely because we sense its absence. Immoral and aristocratic, Lorenzino de' Medici becomes famous writing a work of great morality and enthusiastic republicanism. The nineteenth-century poet Giacomo Leopardi would refer to the *Apology* as the best prose writing of its time. The fact that we are reading Lorenzino today is an indication of his triumph.

Then, in 1548, the hired killers caught up with him in Venice. To read, immediately after the *Apology*, Francesco Bibboni's colourful account of how he and an accomplice dispatched Lorenzino is to find oneself at the opposite pole of literary achievement, far away from classical reference, eloquence, propaganda or spin. Here is that recognizable figure who, for a large sum of money, carries out the brutal command without asking any questions, then tells and sells his story. Lorenzino deserved no better. The two men and their writings call to each other: deep down, they are accomplices in a pathological pursuit of notoriety, the notion that saving oneself from the oblivion of anonymity is sufficient justification for any atrocity.

– Tim Parks

Introduction

One morning in 415 BC, the citizens of Athens awoke to discover that all the stone Hermae in their streets had been mutilated. Hermae were square stone pillars bearing a phallic image (intended to avert evil) and topped by a bust of Hermes; they were placed outside the doors of houses and temples, at crossroads, and as boundary markers or signposts. They were viewed with such reverence that to mistreat them verged on blasphemy, and could only be an ill omen – one of especial menace given that the Athenians, engaged in the Peloponnesian War, were about to launch their fleet against Syracuse. In the ensuing atmosphere of panic, denunciations flowed in. Although nobody knew who had mutilated the Hermae, other sacred images had previously been damaged by some young men on a drunken spree, who had compounded their crime by holding a mock celebration of the Eleusinian Mysteries at home. One of them was Alcibiades – a brilliant, erratic, dazzlingly handsome figure who was a close companion of Socrates, himself suspected of idiosyncratic religious beliefs. (It is Alcibiades who, rather the worse for wear, bursts in on the drinking party recorded or invented by Plato in the *Symposium*, where he proceeds to launch into a tipsy but eloquent panegyric of Socrates.) Alcibiades had already been appointed one of the three leaders of the Sicilian expedition. He offered to stand trial on the charges now brought against him,

but was allowed to accompany the expedition for the time being. When recalled, soon afterwards, from Sicily to face his accusers (he had in fact been sentenced to death *in absentia*), he instead defected to Sparta. After changing sides several times in the course of the war, he was eventually assassinated in 404 BC.

Let's fast-forward two millennia. One morning in 1534, the citizens of Rome awoke to discover that some of the bas-reliefs on the Arch of Constantine, and the statues of Apollo and the Muses in the portico of the ancient basilica of San Paolo, had been vandalized. This time there was much less doubt about the identity of the perpetrator: the twenty-year-old Lorenzino de' Medici, with a gang of drunken friends, had carried out these acts of defacement. The Pope, Clement VII, also a Medici, was so angered that he threatened to have Lorenzino hanged, but he was dissuaded by other family members. In any case, the vandal fled to Florence.

Why did Lorenzino commit this act of iconoclasm? Nobody knows. Some say it was jealousy of his cousin, Cardinal Ippolito (yet another Medici), who was forever enriching his collections of ancient statues from pagan Rome. Some say it was a more general act of vaguely Oedipal rebellion. And some say that it was part of the "antic disposition" that the young Lorenzino had already started to affect. "Antic" means both "madcap" and "antique". Maybe Lorenzino's eccentricity was his way of emulating an ancient model, Alcibiades, equally brilliant and well connected, but equally unbalanced and unpredictable. Lorenzino was playing a part that in some sense had been scripted for him – by Thucydides or Plutarch, perhaps, both of whom had given accounts of Alcibiades's dangerous allure and eccentric behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

The ruler of the Florence where Lorenzino took refuge was also a Medici, of course: Alessandro de' Medici. He had been imposed on Florence after one of its last outbursts of republican feeling, in which the Medici had been ousted in 1527. The armies of both Pope and Emperor (Clement VII and Charles V respectively) thereupon subjected the city to an eleven-month siege; it capitulated on 12th August 1530. The next year, with imperial and papal support, Alessandro was installed as "head of the government and of the state", soon (in 1532) to have this title upgraded to "hereditary Duke" and "perpetual gonfalonier" of the Florentine Republic – though not much in the way of republican institutions was left: Alessandro was the *de facto* tyrant. A certain rough charm won a grudging affection from his subjects, before the downsides of his character became evident: he was a lecher who preyed on the daughters and wives of his citizens; he was vicious and unscrupulous in the pursuit of absolute power; he enriched himself through extortionate taxes; he had opponents murdered or driven out of Florence. Lorenzino proceeded to become his sidekick – his companion in drinking and debauchery, his buffoon and the butt of his sarcasm. They were often seen galloping through the streets on the same horse, hurling abuse at passers-by. They frequented brothels and violated convents. They both enjoyed dressing up as women; they may have shared the same bed. There is an interesting sidelight on this period of Lorenzino's life in the memoirs of the goldsmith and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini, who was commissioned by Alessandro to make a medallion of him. Typically, on one occasion when Cellini turned up with the wax model of this medallion, he found the Duke in bed, and was told he had just been engaged in debauchery. Present at the interview was Lorenzino. Cellini told

APOLOGY FOR A MURDER

the Duke that he would make a much finer medal of him than he had done of Pope Clement VII, and then added that Lorenzino would no doubt provide some beautiful design for the medal's reverse side – to which Lorenzino immediately assented, adding that he would like to do something that would amaze the whole world. Again we encounter the theme of statues (or medals: the aesthetic transfiguration of power) and their reverse (or underside, or potential defacement).

Nobody knows how much of Lorenzino's complicity with Alessandro's vices was real and how much was feigned, part of a long-term tactic to gain the confidence and intimacy of the tyrant so that he could eventually slay him. Having emulated Alcibiades, Lorenzino, in his antic disposition, verging on real madness, may have anticipated Hamlet, another melancholy jester with a hidden agenda: to kill a "tyrant", a "usurper", who is and is not a kinsman (just as Alessandro, with his ambiguous parentage, may or may not have been a distant cousin of Lorenzino). Despite, or because of, this apparent lunacy, Alessandro himself, who seems to have been strangely attracted to his enigmatic companion, called Lorenzino "the philosopher". The Florentines called him, more bluntly, "Lorenzaccio" – "nasty Lorenzo". (*Lorenzaccio* is the name of the 1834 closet drama by Alfred de Musset, which exploits the similarities between Lorenzino and Hamlet and forcefully brings out the extent to which Lorenzino's mask of vice sticks. Having become just as debauched and corrupt as the Duke, he can salvage his earlier republican idealism only by an act of murder that will inevitably lead to his own death.)

Lorenzino's plans crystallized at the beginning of 1537. His aunt Caterina Soderini Ginori was a conspicuously virtuous wife,

INTRODUCTION

and thus an ideally challenging target for Alessandro's powers of seduction. Taking advantage of the Epiphany holidays, Lorenzino would bring Caterina to his house, on Saturday evening (5th January 1537). Here Alessandro would be waiting. Alessandro, in a state of undress and with his sword unbuckled, was lying in a state of somnolent expectation when into his room came Lorenzino and a hired assassin, Scoronconcolo. "Are you asleep?" Lorenzino asked Alessandro, and then thrust his sword into the Duke's stomach. The ensuing brawl was prolonged. Alessandro put up a fierce resistance, biting Lorenzino's thumb to the bone; Scoronconcolo plunged his dagger into the Duke's throat. Once they were sure Alessandro was dead, Lorenzino fled to Bologna, his bleeding hand covered by a glove.

What should he have done at this juncture? In his *Apology* he deals with those of his critics who thought he should have mimicked not Alcibiades, but another character from antiquity, the republican "tyrannicide" Brutus, and taken a stand. Maybe he should have done what the Cassius of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* would later do, urging his fellow conspirators, bearing daggers red with Caesar's blood, to go "to the common pulpits and cry out 'Liberty, freedom and enfranchisement!'". Or, as Lorenzino himself sourly remarks, perhaps he was supposed to chop off Alessandro's head and carry it through the streets of Florence in an attempt to rouse the Florentines to throw off the yoke of servitude.

In fact, Lorenzino did none of these things. He merely ensured, before leaving the scene of the crime, that he locked the door and took the key with him. It was only when Alessandro's bodyguard complained about having to stand around outside Lorenzino's

APOLOGY FOR A MURDER

house that Cardinal Cybo, late on Sunday evening, had the room broken into and Alessandro's body was revealed. Perhaps Lorenzino thought he had done his bit and it was now for the Florentines, assisted by the anti-Medician exiles outside the city, to take up the cause. To some extent they did so. On the night Alessandro was murdered, Cellini was riding towards Rome and saw a strange beam of light, a "diabolical apparition", in the skies over distant Florence, and deduced that something dramatic must have occurred in the Tuscan city. News of the Duke's death duly arrived in Rome, and Francesco Soderini sneeringly told the artist that this act was indeed the reverse of the tyrant's medal that Lorenzino had promised, and that whereas Cellini had been happy to immortalize Alessandro in art, "we want no more Dukes!". Cellini retorted that, before very long, Florence would simply have another duke. He was right. After some deliberation, the city's leaders decided to nominate Cosimo de' Medici as Alessandro's successor. He routed an army of exiles at Montemurlo, near Prato, in August 1537 – a battle which, according to the disdainful report in Lorenzino's *Apology*, the rebels, under the leadership of Piero Strozzi, threw away. While Piero escaped, many others were captured. Cosimo had sixteen of their leaders executed in the Piazza della Signoria in batches of four, on four successive mornings. Cosimo himself was eventually given papal approval for his sovereign status, and was crowned Grand Duke of Tuscany by Pius V in 1570.

Lorenzino, meanwhile, began his wanderings, aware that his life was in danger from the agents of Cosimo. During the decade following the death of Alessandro, he wrote his *Apology*, justly celebrated as a fine and poignant piece of Renaissance rhetoric.

INTRODUCTION

It is a compelling work, calling on classical exempla (Alessandro is seen as worse than tyrants such as Nero, Caligula and Phalaris; Lorenzino, it is implied, is as noble as the great and disinterested tyrannicides of the past, such as Brutus), bitterly berating the Florentines who had failed to follow *his* example of republican fervour and claiming that his act had been impelled by nothing other than civic virtue.

It contrasts with the account of Francesco Bibboni (alias Cecchino da Bibbona), the killer acting on Cosimo's orders, who eventually tracked Lorenzino down to Venice and murdered him in 1548, for money. Two murders and two "apologias" for murder: how are we to judge between them? It is tempting (chiasmus is always tempting) to say that Lorenzino was just as much a mercenary thug as Bibboni, or that Bibboni at least had the honesty to portray himself as a professional assassin doing a "job" (*negozio*). We can speculate that Lorenzino was impelled by a desire for fame, or jealousy of the Duke's power, or that the murder was the result of a complex love-hate emotion he felt for Alessandro (Musset has *his* Lorenzaccio claiming to have kissed the remnants of Alessandro's orgies on his lips). The lofty republican sentiments of the *Apology* would then merely conceal this tangled knot of motives, whereas Bibboni – who at least never pretended to cosy up to his victim in the way Lorenzino did to Alessandro – was your plain and honest bruiser. (For this reason, taking my cue from the vernacular style of his report, I have not scrupled to foist on him a caricatural version of the language of a modern-day hitman, an archetypal dodgy geezer.)

Bibboni seems to have made his peace with the world: no doubt he died, when he did (in Volterra, in 1595, aged nearly eighty), in

APOLOGY FOR A MURDER

the bosom of the Church. Lorenzino, who protests fiercely against the charge that he should not have killed someone who trusted him, has to struggle against the enormous weight of condemnation associated with treachery in the minds of Italians familiar with Dante's *Inferno*. In that semi-Christianized but at times stubbornly pagan work, Dante reserves the deepest depths of hell for traitors to their lords – Judas first and foremost, but with the tyrannicides Brutus and Cassius to keep him company. One can sense where Dante, who in the *Inferno* is himself something of a cultural tyrant, with fierce and unpredictable passions and dark, irrational prejudices, might have consigned Lorenzino. And for Lorenzino to identify himself with Brutus was to act in defiance of this powerful indictment of tyrannicide as damnable.

Our age is iconoclastic: it loves defacing sacred monuments and mutilating the Hermae of culture. But what if its suspicions, in Lorenzino's case, were ill founded? True, we must look behind the façade of Lorenzino's self-justifying pleas and question the nobility of his motives (did he want power for himself? – though admittedly his actions, in that case, seem somewhat counter-intuitive). We need, as it were, to see through his attempt to strike a medal of liberty with his own countenance embossed on its obverse side. And we need to bear in mind how, here as often, tyrannicide fails to undermine the deeply entrenched structures of power: the death of one "tyrant" (Julius Caesar, Alessandro) leads to the installation of another (Augustus, Cosimo). Modernity is also more aware of the way that internalized tyrants can be as powerful as real political tyrants, and more difficult to get rid of. "But in here it is I must kill the priest and the king," says Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*, tapping his brow. Lorenzino's

INTRODUCTION

act was a *blow for freedom* in the most ambiguous sense. But there is no reason to deprive him of the purity of his intentions. Alessandro was not Hitler, but the peroration of Lorenzino's *Apology* uses similar language to that of people implicated in plots to remove the Führer – Count Yorck von Wartenburg, for instance, executed on 8th June 1944, whose last letters, to his mother and wife, claim: "My actions were in no way motivated by ambitious thoughts or desires for power. My actions have been determined purely by my patriotic feeling, by concern for my Germany... I too am dying for my fatherland." True, the question inevitably forces itself on us: where *is* our *Vaterland* or *patria*? But what is not in doubt is that, wherever it may be, it cannot be a tyranny, and that if it is, to assent to the status quo is wicked, while to rid oneself of that tyranny, especially by violence, is to run moral risks of the utmost gravity.

In 1504, ten years before the birth of Lorenzino, who in his youth would have passed it countless times, Michelangelo's statue of David was placed outside the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. Some years ago, when the five-hundredth anniversary of this statue was celebrated, much media attention focused on how (or indeed whether) it ought to be cleaned. Rather less attention was paid to what the statue might have meant for Michelangelo's fellow Florentines – David as a freedom fighter, struggling against superior odds: a tyrannicide, in so far as every tyrant is a Goliath. When Lorenzino asks his compatriots whether he was supposed to cut off Alessandro's head as a sign of liberty, the image of the young, vulnerable David may well have been haunting his imagination. Perhaps this is how Lorenzo himself is best seen today: as a haunting image, one very apt for our own times. We too live in a world

APOLOGY FOR A MURDER

of tyrants, and don't know how to get rid of them. Attempts to free ourselves, and others, seem inevitably to lead to some barely more legitimate power being installed, or to chaos, or to nostalgia for the dark stability of the ousted tyrant's reign. (Was Alessandro de' Medici the tyrant depicted by Lorenzino? Whose testimony are we to trust?) Our moral and political landscape is littered with ruined monuments, beheaded statues (and decapitated human beings), defaced ideals, exempla that turn out to have feet of clay. Every proud medal of liberation comes with its flip side. Even the note Lorenzino is said to have pinned on the blanket with which he covered Alessandro's corpse acknowledges the mixed motives of his action: "*vincet amor patriæ laudumque immensa cupido*" ("love of fatherland will prevail, and a huge longing for glory", from Virgil's *Aeneid* VI, 823 – a reference to the Lucius Junius Brutus who was seen as the founder of the Roman Republic). But even if Lorenzino's *Apology* is riddled with all these ambiguities, there is great pathos in the fragile, proud, lonely rhetoric of this "mad, melancholy philosopher" as Cellini called him. Like us, he lived at a time that was struggling with the question of what to do in an imperfect world, and trying to find a language in which the beginnings of an answer might be formulated.

– Andrew Brown, 2019

Apology for a Murder

Apology for a Murder

I F I HAD TO JUSTIFY my actions to those who do not know what liberty is, nor tyranny either, I would endeavour to demonstrate and to prove with reasons – of which there are many – that men ought not to desire anything more than they desire civic life, that is, a life lived in liberty, since good civic order is rarer and less enduring in any other regime than it is in a republic. I would also demonstrate that, since tyranny is totally contrary to civic life, they should therefore hate it above all things; and since this opinion has so frequently prevailed in the past, those who have liberated their

fatherland from tyranny have been considered almost as worthy of suitable honours as have those who established their fatherland in the first place. But since the reader I wish to address is one who knows, both in theory and in practice, that liberty is good and tyranny bad, I can take it for granted that this is a universal truth, and so I will speak of my own action in particular, not craving any reward or praise for it, but in order to demonstrate that not only did I perform a deed incumbent on any good citizen, but that I would have failed in my duty to my fatherland and to myself if I had not performed it.

And so, to begin with the most well-known facts, I will recall that there is no one who does not doubt that Duke Alessandro

APOLOGY FOR A MURDER

(so-called de' Medici) was a tyrant of our fatherland – no one, that is, except by flattering him and supporting his party, grew rich; and even they could not be so ignorant, or so blinded by their own interests, as to fail to recognize that he was indeed a tyrant. But since they themselves gained greatly from his power and cared little for the public good, they threw in their lot with his fortunes. They were, truth to tell, men of little quality, and few in number, and so simply cannot outweigh the judgement of the rest of the world, which considered him to be a tyrant – nor can they outweigh the truth. The city of Florence, after all, has from ancient times been the possession of its people; it thus ensues that all those who rule it without being elected by the people

to do so are tyrants, as was the case with the Medici family, which gained control of our city for many years with the consent and participation of a minority of the people. But for all this, they never had more than a limited authority until, after many vicissitudes and changes in regime, Pope Clement came, with that violence known to everyone, and deprived his own fatherland of liberty, making that same Alessandro its master.*

Alessandro, on his arrival in Florence, took steps to ensure there could be no doubt that he was indeed a tyrant, by sweeping away all public virtue and every relic of republican life, even the very name of "republic"; and, as if it were a necessary condition for any tyrant to be no less evil than Nero, no less a hater of mankind and lecherous than

APOLOGY FOR A MURDER

Caligula and no less cruel than Phalaris,* sought to surpass all of them in wickedness. For, over and above the cruelties he inflicted on the citizens, which were no less appalling than those inflicted by the former tyrants, he surpassed Nero's wickedness in killing his mother. Nero, after all, committed the deed since he feared he might otherwise lose his power and his life, and thus acted so as to forestall the plot he feared was being hatched against himself; but Alessandro committed that infamy out of mere cruelty and inhumanity, as I will shortly relate. And he was in no way inferior to Caligula in the contempt, ridicule and torment with which he oppressed the citizens, with his adulteries and his acts of violence, his coarse, harsh words and his menaces, which are, to men

who esteem honour, harder to bear than the death which he eventually inflicted on them. He greatly outdid Phalaris in cruelty, since, whilst Phalaris punished Perillus quite justly for the cruel device the latter had invented, designed to inflict agonizing torture and death on his victims in the bronze bull, it is easy to imagine that Alessandro would have actually rewarded the inventor, if he had lived in his time.* He himself was always dreaming up new kinds of torments and death, such as walling up men alive in such confined spaces that they could not bend or turn or change position, but were, so to speak, as much imprisoned in the wall as the bricks and stones; and in this state he kept them alive, feeding them the bare minimum and prolonging their agony to an impossible

APOLOGY FOR A MURDER

degree, since the mere death of his citizens was not enough to sate this monster. So the seven years that he spent as ruler can be compared, for lust, avarice, cruelty and wickedness, with any seven years of Nero, Caligula or Phalaris, even if one were to choose the most wicked years of their whole lives – bearing in mind the proportionate size of the cities and realms involved. For even in this brief time, very many citizens were driven out of their fatherland, great numbers of them subsequently being persecuted and killed in exile; very many were beheaded without trial and without cause, merely on the pretext of empty fears and words of no importance; and others were poisoned or killed by his own hands or by his henchmen, simply so that he need not feel

ashamed in front of certain men who had witnessed the conditions of his birth and upbringing. Furthermore, deeds of extortion and rapine and acts of adultery were so rife, and such widespread violence was committed against things both secular and sacred, that it will seem difficult to decide whether the tyrant is more blameworthy for his evil and wickedness, or the people of Florence for being meek and cowardly and putting up with such dire calamities for so many years – as it was, at the time, much more dangerous to accept the status quo than to embark, with some hope of success, on the task of liberating the fatherland and making their lives safe for the future.

Therefore, any who might think that Alessandro should not be called a tyrant

APOLOGY FOR A MURDER

since he was given power over Florence by the Emperor – who is deemed to have the authority to appoint whichever men he sees fit to rule over any state – are wrong. For even if the Emperor does have such authority, he does not have the authority to act in this way without just cause, and as far as Florence in particular is concerned, he had absolutely no right to do so, since in the agreement he drew up with the Florentine people at the end of the siege of 1530,* it was expressly declared that he could not place that city under the dominion of the Medici family. And quite apart from that, even if the Emperor had indeed had the authority to act in this way, and had done so with every reason and justification in the world, so that Alessandro's legitimacy as

ruler had been greater than that of the King of France, Alessandro's dissolute life, his avarice and his cruelty would have made of him a tyrant. This is evident if we consider the example of Hiero and Hieronymus of Syracuse:* one of them was called "king" and the other "tyrant", the reason being that Hiero led such a holy life, as the writers relate, that he was loved as long as he lived, and his citizens missed him when he was dead; but his son Hieronymus, who might have seemed more securely ensconced in power, and more legitimately established by rights of succession, was throughout his villainous life so hated by those same citizens that he lived and died as a tyrant; and those who assassinated him were praised and celebrated, whereas, if they had killed his

APOLOGY FOR A MURDER

father, they would have been censured and held to be parricides. The lesson is this: it is their way of life that leads rulers to become tyrants, in spite of all the investitures, all the justifications and all the rights of succession in the world.

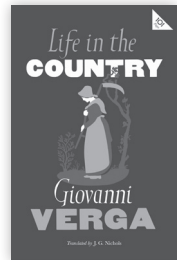
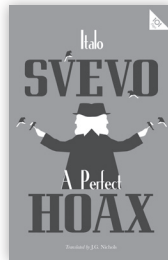
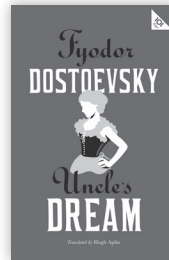
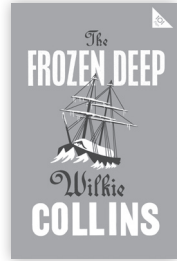
But so as not to waste any more words proving something that is clearer than the noonday sun, let me now turn to those who claim that, even if he were indeed a tyrant, I should not have assassinated him, since I was a servant of his, a member of his family, and a man he trusted. I would not wish to see such men punished for their envy and ill-will in any other way than by God making them kinsmen, servants and confidants of the tyrant of their fatherland – if it is not too wicked to wish so much suffering on a

city for the fault of a few. They try to blacken my good intentions with these calumnies, but even if the latter were true, they would not be strong enough to prevail, especially since I maintain that I never was a servant of Alessandro, nor he a member of my family or any kinsman of mine; and I will prove that he never willingly took me into his trust. There are two senses in which a man may be said to be a bondsman or servant of another: either because he is rewarded for serving him and staying loyal to him, or because he is his slave, since subjects are not usually included in this category of bondsman and servant. That I was not Alessandro's slave is perfectly obvious, just as it is equally obvious (to anyone who takes the trouble to think about it) that I not only received no reward

APOLOGY FOR A MURDER

or wages from him, but paid him my portion of taxes, as did the other citizens; and if he believed that I was his subject or vassal, since he had more power than I did, he should have realized that he was mistaken, once we were on an equal footing; as a result, I never was, nor could ever be called, his servant. That he was not a member of the Medici family or any kinsman of mine is evident, since he was born to a woman of the lowest and basest class, from Collevocchio, near Rome; she was a housemaid of Duke Lorenzo, performing the humblest household tasks, and was married to a coach driver.* So far, all this is absolutely clear. It may be doubted whether Duke Lorenzo, who was exiled at the time, had anything to do with this woman; and if it did happen, it happened

MORE 101-PAGE CLASSICS



FOR THE FULL LIST OF
101-PAGE CLASSICS VISIT
101pages.co.uk