Katherine Poole

“Medici Power and Spectacle: The Festival Book as Propaganda in Early Modern Florence”

The festival book was an art form utilized by rulers of the early modern period to record and publicize the elaborate spectacles they staged to celebrate important occasions such as births, marriages, and funerals. These “official” printed documents, first appearing in the mid-fifteenth century and growing more comprehensive and lavish over the next century, recorded these celebratory events in unsparing detail, from the appearance of the elaborate *apparati* (festival displays) erected for triumphal entries to the intricate plot points and allegorical meanings of theatrical performances. Produced in limited editions and at great expense, the primary audience for the books was a courtly one. Rulers disseminated the printed books with the aim of impressing both allies and rivals, and inventories of princely libraries from the period indicate that they were collected widely.

Following the model of the other great courts of Europe during the early modern period, the Medici, rulers of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, used nuptial celebrations to evoke their power and prestige through spectacle. The marriages of Ferdinando I de’ Medici to the French princess Christine of Lorraine in 1589 and of their son Cosimo II to Habsburg archduchess Maria Maddalena of Austria in 1608 merited two of the most lavish weddings of the early modern period, and both are known and understood today mainly through two key sources: prints and festival books. The circulation of these two art forms throughout Italy and Europe not only ensured that the glories of the grand-ducal spectacles would be witnessed by a much larger audience than had been in attendance for the actual celebrations, they also guaranteed that the ephemeral pageantry would be transformed into something lasting and permanent. In addition, they provide great insight into how the Medici viewed themselves and their power, revealing what they thought was important to advertise in terms of ruling identity, and what they wanted remembered to posterity. These festival books clearly communicate the political and cultural aspirations of the Florentine court during the early modern period.