

Machiavelli. Robert Black.

New York: Routledge, 2013. xxvii + 376 pp. \$39.95.

Another review of this book previously appeared in volume 67, no. 4 of *Renaissance Quarterly*.

Writing a biography of Machiavelli is far from straightforward: every conceivable interpretation of his thought and writings has been proposed, usually with misplaced confidence. Was Machiavelli a Christian or an atheist? Was he a republican or a monarchist? Was he friend or foe to the dominant Medici family? Did he represent humanism or antihumanist vernacular culture? Did he accept or reject traditional morality? Most biographers have done their best to sidestep such issues, choosing instead to concentrate on his eventful life as a public official and diplomat, while marginalizing his thought and writings.

Robert Black has faced the challenge head on. He has rejected the tendency in recent scholarship to minimize Machiavelli's originality and importance. He has restored Machiavelli the radical. Based on a meticulous and critical reading of all Machiavelli's writings, Black demonstrates convincingly that he was no conventional Christian, indeed no Christian at all. He rejects the view that in *The Prince* the good of the state was uppermost, instead showing that the end of the prince's actions is the glory of his own regime, not the public good. He correctly observes that, though the word *tyrant* never occurs in the text, the work is preoccupied with the new prince, who, in the *Discourses*, is defined as the tyrant. Some critics have tried to deal with the Machiavelli problem by suggesting that his most startling ideas — his amorality, his misanthropy, his rejection of

Christianity — can be found among previous writers or among his Florentine contemporaries. But Black shows that their sporadic and desultory allusions do not constitute, as they did for Machiavelli, a new basis for political thinking, with the separation of morality and politics as its cornerstone.

Rhetoric is the latest buzzword in Renaissance scholarship. Black shows (against the claims of some critics) that Machiavelli enjoyed a humanist education both at school and university, and so was thoroughly familiar with the techniques of classical rhetoric, whose ethically neutral tendencies could have facilitated his amoral political values. And of course plenty of cynics had given confidential advice to governments; but Machiavelli was the first to turn cynicism into a political philosophy. It was Machiavelli — not the ruck of neo-Ciceronians — who changed the direction of modern political thought.

A particularly striking feature of Black's biography is his insight into how Machiavelli's political thought evolved. In his earliest political writings — for example, the *Primo decennale* of 1504 — he conformed to conventional thinking in condemning the immorality of Cesare Borgia. But then in his most subversive works — *The Prince* (1513–15), the *Discourses on Livy* (1515–19), *The Ass* (1517–18), and *Mandragola* (1515–17) — he rejected the moral and political values inherited from antiquity and the Middle Ages. These outrageous compositions were all written in mid-life, when Machiavelli was a political outcast. Finally, when he was reconciled with the Medici family and the Florentine establishment, his last compositions — e.g., *Clizia* (1524–25) and the renowned *Florentine Histories* (1520–25) — represented a return to more conventional morality and politics, moving close to the aristocratic conservatism of his closest friend at the end of his life, Francesco Guicciardini.

Previous biographies have failed to do justice to the breadth of Machiavelli's activities. He was not only a political thinker who changed forever the nature of political argument, but also one of the great figures of Italian literature. Black neglects no aspect of Machiavelli's achievement and importance, giving full consideration not only to Machiavelli the political thinker and historian, but also to the creative writer, offering penetrating analyses of, for example, *Mandragola*, one of the greatest of all comedies in any language, or of *Belfagor*, justifiably regarded as the finest Italian tale of the sixteenth century, ranking alongside the best stories of Boccaccio.

Black's biography of Machiavelli is thus something much more than a biography. It carries its considerable learning lightly, but it is now the place to which one should go first to find out what to think on any crucial question in Machiavelli scholarship. Do you want to understand the political context in which *The Prince* was written? Do you want to know what to make of the mysterious chapter 26 on the unification of Italy? Do you want to make sense of the relationship between *The Prince* and the *Discourses*? Go to Black. This is, quite simply, the one book that anyone interested in Machiavelli should now read, and future scholars who want to disagree with Black should do so with caution, for his judgment is excellent and his scholarship impeccable. For years Machiavelli scholarship has been a quagmire in which scholars, including many of

outstanding ability, have managed to lose their footing; Black's book is now the best guide, and the only one that most students of the Renaissance need consult.

DAVID WOOTTON, *University of York*