

# RECENSIONI

SILVIA RUFFO-FIORE

## **NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI**

Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982. 179 pp.

In her Preface the author declares, "This book intends to make better known how the literary and rhetorical dimensions of [Machiavelli's] writings contribute to their meaning — how politics, history, and literature interacted." This purpose is to be accomplished by means of a "critical overview [surveying] his writings, particularly stressing their literary qualities, in order to adjust popular, stereotyped views and to make his works more clearly understood and appreciated." Professor Ruffo-Fiore comes closest to achieving her goal in the final section of Chapter Two ("The Style of *The Prince*"), where she provides insight into the brilliant way in which Machiavelli used classical literary and rhetorical devices in the presentation of his political ideas, and the dynamism conveyed by the Machiavellian "juxtaposition of erudite Latinisms with the Colloquialisms of the Tuscan dialect." The author ends her comments by praising the concluding chapter of *The Prince* as a remarkable example of Renaissance art and the epitome of Machiavelli's political, historical and literary genius. For the most part, however, Professor Ruffo-Fiore has neglected her declared purpose, which is undoubtedly too ambitious and scholarly to fit the Twayne World Author Series format, and instead provides the reader with a synopsis of Machiavelli's major and some minor works, in their historical, political and biographical context.

The chronological order typical of the TWAS is not strictly observed in this 656th addition to the Series. Chapter One deals with Machiavelli's life and some of his political writings prior to the composition of *The Prince* (1513); Chapters Two through Five discuss *The Prince*, *The Discourses*, *The Art of War*, and the *History of Florence and Life of*

*Castruccio Castracani*; Chapter Six treats selected literary writings: *Mandragola*, *Clizia*, *Discourse or Dialogue Concerning Our Language*, *Decennali*, *Capitoli*, *Golden Ass*, *Carnival Songs*, *Belfagor*; Chapter Seven is a brief and uneven treatment of Machiavelli's *fortuna*, termed "Legacy." Some of the book's weaknesses are immediately evident. Instead of organizing her "overview" of his works around the facts of Machiavelli's life that have been so admirably set forth by Ridolfi and his predecessors, or else following a thematic pattern, the author has chosen an eclectic approach which creates difficulties for the reader, especially the "unfamiliar" reader whom, according to her Preface, she wishes to "inform." For example, it is difficult to perceive, through the minutiae of academic squabbles, the reason for the lasting importance of Machiavelli's literary, historical and political contributions, or the relationships between his works and their historical context.

The uninformed reader may, nevertheless, benefit from Professor Ruffo-Fiore's efforts where she limits them to a summary of a work or a brief paraphrase of critical opinion. This is especially true for the literary works dealt with in Chapter Six, except for her references to the *Discourse on Language* which are misleading both about the general content of the treatise and about Ariosto's use of language. But when the author attempts critical analysis in an effort to "redirect already acquainted" readers (Preface), her account is frequently bogged down in obscure, inconclusive, and sometimes contradictory statements. This is true of the disproportionately long explanation in Chapter One of Machiavelli's two accounts of Cesare Borgia and the Sinigaglia episode; of his possible influence on Francis Bacon in Chapter Two; of the discussions of his use of *virtù*, *fortuna* and *necessità*, (*stato* is missing); of his "uniquely authoritative position" in *The Prince* and *The Discourses*; of his use of the "either-or" method of reasoning (the identification of which is not properly attributed to J.H. Whitfield). The reader is left with the impression that the author may indeed have understood the problem she is discussing, but that she was in too much of a rush to give focus to her argument.

Having concluded that the author, given additional time for revision, might have prepared a more usable guide for Machiavelli's readers, this reviewer tends to be more understanding of the book's numerous errors of English diction, both lexical and syntactic. Typical of these solecisms are the incomplete sentences (p. 9); neologisms ("religicized" p. 7, "reknown" p. 95); malapropisms ("forced silence" p. 5); misuse of verbs ("epitomize" pp. 52, 54, 57, 99, etc.; "culminate" pp. 91 and 135). This type of distraction, aggravated by frequent imprecision of punctuation, qualification and metaphor, makes the reading of the text a bit of a chore.

Professor Ruffo-Fiore's text is followed by a section of Notes and

References, respectable both in the quantity and in the quality of references to her sources. The patient reader can learn much about contemporary Machiavellian criticism by a perusal of these Notes providing he or she is not sidetracked by the occasional unexplained and therefore mystifying label, as "the oblique intention of *The Prince*" (Note 18, p. 162) or Reginald Pole's "ambivalent interpretation" of Machiavelli (Note 31, p. 163). Following the Notes is an annotated Selected Bibliography. The section on English translations of Machiavelli's works is very helpful, but suggestions must be made for the section on secondary sources. The author's attempt to list appropriate English language titles would be more cogent if it included Herbert Butterfield's *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (London, 1940), Federico Chabod's *Machiavelli and the Renaissance* (London, 1958), J.H. Hexter's *The Vision of Politics on the Eve of the Reformation* (New York, 1973), and J.H. Whitfield's *Discourses on Machiavelli* (Cambridge, 1969), which according to Whitfield himself in his Preface, better represent his contribution to Machiavelli studies than his *Machiavelli* that appears on this list. The comments on the titles listed might also be revised to eliminate such tautologies as "suggestive modern biographical interpretation" to describe a book entitled *A Biographical Interpretation...*; and the title by Edward Meyer described as "outdated" should be replaced by more recent studies, as Wyndam Lewis's *The Lion and the Fox* (London, 1922) and Mario Praz's *Machiavelli and the Elizabethans* (London, 1948). Among the Italian titles most conspicuous for their absence are: Jean-Jacques Marchand, *Niccolò Machiavelli. I Primi Scritti Politici 1499-1512* (Padova, 1975), a necessary source for Chapter One; and Carlo Dionisotti, *Machiavellerie* (Einaudi, 1980), a collection of essays published over the preceding decade or so. The author also must check this list for inaccuracies of bibliographical data. For example, Whitfield's *Machiavelli* is almost forty years old instead of the twenty years suggested by citing the reissue of 1965, and Anthony Pansini's study of Machiavelli and the United States dates from 1969, not 1966, and it includes English translations for the entire corpus of Machiavelli's writings. One final suggestion concerns the author's choice of the Rathé edition of Innocent Gentillet's *Discours Contre Machiavel* which ought not to be preferred to the D'Andrea-Stewart edition (Firenze, 1974).

In conclusion I would like to say that, although I agree with the reviewer in *Choice* that there are better short introductions (e.g. J.R. Hale's *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy*, London, 1961, for a general overview; and Peter Bondanella's *Machiavelli and the Art of Renaissance History*, Detroit, 1973, for a literary orientation), we can look forward with great interest to the product of Professor Ruffo-Fiore's work-in-progress which is described in the paragraph about the Author preceding

the author's Preface, as "an annotated guide to modern criticism and scholarship on Machiavelli under the auspices of a grant from the [American] National Endowment for the Humanities." We wish her every success in supplying the need, which she herself recognizes, for "a compendium which would (1) promote synthesis rather than fragmentism [sic], (2) recognize his [Machiavelli's] interdisciplinary appeal, and (3) suggest areas which require further exploration" (p. 144).

DENNIS McAULIFFE

Scarborough College,  
University of Toronto