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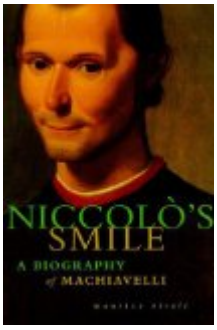
**Maurizio Viroli**. *Niccolo's Smile: A Biography of Machiavelli.* Translated Antony Shugaar. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000. xv + 271 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-22187-4.

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**Something to Laugh About**

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As the subtitle makes clear, the focus of this book is Machiavelli's life not his ideas. Viroli has little to say about either *The Prince* or the *Discourses*. Those seeking an introduction to Machiavelli's thought would be well-advised to begin with Quentin Skinner's study.[1] As a biography, Viroli admits that his work will not surpass the richness or precision of existing lives of Machiavelli, notably that written by Roberto Ridolfi.[2] Viroli aims "...to recount the same stories in a new way, to focus on aspects that were previously overlooked, and here and there to revise accepted views" (p. ix). Viroli is particularly fascinated by how Machiavelli laughed about life and other people: "I wrote these pages in an attempt to understand the meaning of his smile, a smile that emerges from his letters, from his works, and from certain portraits of him. I believe that his smile represents a great understanding of life, even deeper than his political thought" (p. ix).

The title and Viroli's stated aims raise one's hopes of an innovative approach to the writing of biography. Viroli is aware of the problems of biography: "The life of every person is composed of an infinite number of moments, states of mind, thoughts, and dreams–all of which vanish into the lightless, bottomless well of time. We can do nothing more than try to discover–through surviving letters, writings, documents, and recollections–some fragment of the life of the person whom we wish to rescue from oblivion. It is unfortunate but inevitable that what emerges often has a less-than-perfect plot and an ill-defined rhythm and pace. But even a brief moment of life snatched from the jaws of time is priceless" (p. 87). It is all the more disappointing then that the book is written as a traditional narrative, making a largely chronological progression through Machiavelli's life.

Smiles and laughter are leitmotivs that run throughout the book. Yet the results of Viroli's quest are unremarkable: "We now know that he responded with that smile to the miseries of life, to keep from being overwhelmed by grief, outrage, and melancholy and to keep from giving men and Fortune the cruel satisfaction of seeing him weep. Still, the smile was more than just a defense against life; it was also his way of immersing himself in life. In his smile, there was love of liberty and civil equality... Above all, there was a profound, sincere charity, a charity that made him love the variety of the world and that lay at the heart of his love for his homeland..." (p. 259)

Does Viroli contribute any new material? Regrettably, the answer is no. Claims are made about Machiavelli's sexual practices. Viroli chastises previous biographers for their failure to mention that Machiavelli was anonymously accused of heterosexual sodomy in May 1510. However, Viroli does not reveal that this accusation was published by John Stephens and Humfrey Butters twenty years ago.[3] Viroli argues rightly that an anonymous accusation must be treated cautiously but he is quick to say that "Machiavelli, by his own admission, engaged in homosexual relations with young men" (p. 164). This judgement is based on the doubtful evidence of

two ambiguous letters from Machiavelli's important correspondence with Francesco Vettori. A more balanced and thorough analysis of this correspondence has been provided by John Najemy.[4]. It would have been helpful if Viroli had discussed Machiavelli's sexuality in the light of recent research on Florentine sexual culture but he does not do so.[5]

Nevertheless, Viroli's enthusiasm for his subject is infectious and his lively style should attract readers. Although there is extensive quotation from Machiavelli's writings, the absence of notes suggests that the book is aimed at a general rather a scholarly audience.

Notes

[1]. Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

[2]. Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolo' Machiavelli*, trans. Cecil Grayson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

[3]. J.N. Stephens and H.C. Butters, "New Light on Machiavelli," *English Historical Review* 97 (1982), 54-69 (p. 66).

[4]. John M. Najemy, *Between Friends: Discourses of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli-Vettori Letters of 1513-1515* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[5]. Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

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