

Machiavelli: From Radical to Reactionary. Robert Black.

London: Reaktion Books, 2022. 256 pp. \$25.

Drawing on his *Machiavelli* (2013) and its updated Italian translation (2022), Robert Black here joins Machiavelli experts who offer recent biographies of the Florentine aimed at nonspecialist Anglophones, his writings treated as expressions of his personality and *Sitz am Leben*. Black's Machiavelli has a distinctive look. He was not an ideologue of any stripe, or a political realist—indeed, he was not even a realist as a careerist, often misjudging the effects of his self-promotion and unwanted advice on his addressees. He was not just an economically strapped job seeker, or a patriot whatever the cost. He was not a witty, ironic man of letters who kept his sense of humor, come what may. Rather, Black's Machiavelli had a single, unswerving goal undergirding the shifts argued for in the first four chapters of this book: owing to his illegitimate birth, Machiavelli's father Bernard was excluded from public service, thereby interrupting a longstanding family tradition. Machiavelli's quest for political office and patronage, whatever regime governed Florence between 1498 and 1527, was thus motivated by the compulsion to remove this blot from the family escutcheon.

Hanging this thesis on the paternal illegitimacy idea is problematic, given that it was disproved some time ago. Instead, Black could have capitalized on a key point he makes about a well-documented situation affecting Machiavelli's actual and would-be activities *post res perditas*, one involving a stigma imposed on Machiavelli himself. The false accusation of plotting against the restored Medici rule in 1512 that led to his torture and incarceration pending trial did not give Machiavelli his day in court; he was released thanks to the amnesty occasioned by Pope Leo X's election. While Machiavelli was neither condemned nor exonerated, the Medici prudently replaced him in the second chancery and required his internal exile. That *The Prince* and the hoped-for intervention of his friends failed to yield favor with the Medici is no surprise. When Machiavelli did gain their patronage in the 1520s, it was largely as an accomplished littérateur and erstwhile republican functionary, one of several whose views on the polity could be invited as a means of scoping out the opposition. This is not the version of Machiavelli's story that Black chooses to develop.

Machiavelli's transition from radicalism to conservatism as Black presents it reads as opportunistic pivoting, consistency be damned. *The Prince*, for Black, is a post-humanist work, although sharing with the *Discourses*, the *Art of War*, and the *Florentine Histories* the humanists' tactics of fast and loose appeal to sources, examples ancient and modern, and a malleable connection to historical truth. Black's Machiavelli waffles in the *Discourses*, where he is both “an unequivocal republican” (101) and “a political, sociological, geographical, and historical relativist, . . . not a monochromatic champion of any particular political regime” (119). But in the 1520s, terminally disillusioned with *governo largo* republicanism, he arrives at a *governo stretto* position in line

with that of Francesco Guicciardini, if less disabused than the latter on the constitutional difference his opinion could actually make.

There is one major way in which Black's Machiavelli did not pivot. Throughout his life he was and remained a virulent anti-Christian, a devotee of "atheism or Lucretian proto-atheism" (183). So important to Black is this claim that he sees anti-Christian blasphemy as the main point of *Mandragola*, *Clizia*, and *Belfagor*. Black deals with Machiavelli's confraternity membership, his *Exhortation to Penitence*, and his burial without ecclesiastical demur in the family tomb in Santa Croce by omitting any reference to them. With respect to the selective and manipulative use of evidence in support of his desired conclusions, Black appears to have taken a leaf from Machiavelli's own book. There are also some selective omissions in his slender bibliography of English titles and, in his fifth and last chapter, on Machiavelli's legacy. There we meet many of the usual suspects, from the amoral Old Nick to the proponent of *raison d'état* to the godfather of modern republicanism. Absent are Machiavelli the proto-democrat and Machiavelli the consigliere of the wily business executive. In all, *RQ* readers looking for an introductory biography of Machiavelli to recommend to undergraduates may well prefer another of the available alternatives.

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In the Footsteps of Antonello Da Messina: The Antonelliani between Sicily and Venice. Charlene Vella.

Malta: Midsea Books, 2022. xviii + 428 pp. €120.

This is a book about the followers of Antonello da Messina (ca. 1430–79), with a sustained focus on his nephew Antonio de Saliba (1466/67–ca. 1535). Like the older and more famous Antonello, De Saliba was well traveled, working in Venice, where he found some success trading on the name of his illustrious uncle. He returned to Messina in 1497, where his workshop produced polyptychs, *gonfaloni*, and painted crucifixes for patrons in this great Sicilian city as well as for its hinterland, winning notable popularity with the Franciscan Order.

The first chapter sets the context for the rest of the book, presenting the generations of relations that worked in and later inherited Antonello's shop, from his brother Giordano to Antonello's son and immediate heir Jacobello, as well as four individuals who continued their older relation's school of painting well into the Cinquecento. The second chapter explores the presence of *Antonelliani* in Venice (particularly Antonio), where they were exposed to the art of Giovanni Bellini's circle, whose innovations had a deep impact upon them, as testified by their surviving paintings from this period. Chapter 3 focuses on Antonio's return to his homeland, and the ways in which the production of his workshop