and his incomplete vernacular history or memoir. Together these three documentary sources create a particularly rich mosaic of Renaissance Florence. Because the purposes, literary traditions and perspectives of these various documents are so varied, we are left with an unusually textured view of the period they discuss. Moreover, the very personal nature of such material and the curious position Parenti occupied as a keenly interested but somewhat removed player and observer in the midst of great events result in a clear and honest insight into the most difficult of Renaissance experiences to study or reconstruct with confidence or full understanding: kin and factional relations.

Indeed, among the most useful aspects of the book are those relating to family matters. Parenti’s letters concerning his connections with the Strozzi, his role as a go-between in the negotiations for an appropriate wife for his brother-in-law in exile, and his associations of personal, family and factional concerns all add greatly to our understanding of how the society of Medicean Florence actually worked.

The book is divided into three sections: the first is based on the ricordanze of Parenti and deals with personal matters reflected in this intimate source; the second is drawn from the correspondence with his Strozzi relations and deal largely with the years 1464-1466; the third is a study of the vernacular history which Parenti left, a study which places the document in its temporal and historiographical context. All of these sections must be seen, however, to function interdependently, except perhaps the last which on occasion leaves Parenti behind as the author exercises his own interest—and profound knowledge—of Florentine Renaissance historiography in a way which sometimes blurs the focus of the study at hand.

An advantage of this paperback edition of the book is that it provides a cheap ($9.95 US) and very useful classroom text from which students interested in the social and political history of Renaissance Florence can learn a great deal. However, if the paperback edition was intended as a teaching text, it is unfortunate that fuller explanatory notes (or a biographical appendix) were not added and that a bibliography was not included to assist students working independently.

Still, Mark Phillips has made a substantial contribution to our understanding of mid-quattrocento Florence by bringing back to life Marco Parenti as a guide to the complex period in which he lived.

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Awarded the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1990, this volume makes a significant contribution to Machiavelli scholarship. The author de Grazia adopts a novel approach: he sheds light on his subject in part by interweaving personal experiences with the more salient external events of the period and by utilizing the relevant evidence provided by contemporaries, but he draws the greater portion of his information from Machiavelli’s own words. All of his works are taken into consideration; only the dialogue on language, commonly attributed to him, has been omitted. On the basis of these verbal data, de Grazia attempts to determine what must have been both Machiavelli’s frame of mind and feelings at various moments in his life as well as his thoughts and ideas on many subjects.
Like other modern biographers, de Grazia has interpreted Machiavelli’s life as revolving around his loss of position in 1512. More particularly, it is the psychological impact of this misfortune which provides the focus for his account. Citing Machiavelli’s poetry, he stresses what is described as a series of blows which pound Machiavelli on the head, cloud his identity, and lead him to despair (39–46). Using this method, he traces Machiavelli’s life from his early years to his death, clearly delineating along the way the features of the family man, the politician, the lover, the moralist, the political philosopher and, ultimately, the teacher.

As a biography of Machiavelli the man, this work is quite successful. Especially effective is the lively colloquial prose which makes frequent use of the present tense and the first- and second-person pronouns, and thus engages the reader in a direct relationship with Machiavelli. This style is especially prevalent in the first part of the book, which is interspersed with phrases such as “let us refer to him as Niccolò” (3) and “we take leave of the young man” (21). Similar techniques are to be found towards the end also, as when de Grazia observes, “But now, time to be quiet. Niccolò is dying . . .” (340). The many illustrations included in the book, like the photograph of Machiavelli’s study, add to the sense of actually being there.

Although a basically chronological development is followed for the overall design, the study is in fact organized along thematic lines. The chapters are conveniently divided into subsections, all bearing specific and often catchy titles that pinpoint the topics under discussion; for example, Chapter 7, entitled “The Point of it All,” deals with “Country and State,” “War and Peace,” “Happiness,” “The Common Good,” “Equality,” “Liberty: The Free Way of Life,” and “Justice.” De Grazia attempts to ascertain what Machiavelli’s views were on many issues, especially on politics, religion, and morality, by juxtaposing quotations from different writings. He concludes that the thrust of Machiavelli’s life and works is devotion to country—a type of service which can lead to loss of one’s soul, however, since some evil is unavoidable; nonetheless, condemnation to hell is acceptable if it allows Machiavelli to be in the company of great predecessors in the political realm. This assessment, though phrased in more religious terms, is, on the whole, in line with the standard views. And although there are no references to other critics, no bibliography, and no notes for the quotations from contemporary sources, the author has clearly kept all the literature in mind and has found the opportunity to include the results of previous analyses which highlight the elements of theatricality and spectacle along with the stylistic features that characterize his writings.

On specific questions de Grazia makes some keen observations. He aptly labels the prince’s art of only appearing out of necessity to be evil, when he is in fact fundamentally good, a “rhetoric of imposture” (295). He also provides insights about the figure of the prince who is depicted not only as a redeemer but also as a dragonslayer, and he offers elucidations for a number of phrases and concepts, like Machiavelli’s reference to poverty as his witness, which de Grazia traces back to Plato (252). Among the key notions he singles out, that concerning the “friends of God” invoked by mediaeval mystics (50–53) and which he relates to a phrase in the last chapter of The Prince about God favouring the Medici, appears to be less pertinent.

An unusual assessment is given for Machiavelli’s view of history: it is fundamentally Christian, not cyclical, since, de Grazia argues, Machiavelli pays only lip service to Polybius’s ideas about the origin of man (294–95). Fortune, often mentioned by Machiavelli, is actually subject to God and God is not indifferent to man. A similarly
unconventional analysis is given for Machiavelli’s religious and moral thought. And
it is this part of the study which is perhaps overstated. Assertions made by Machi-
avelli on the subject of religion are cited with the purpose of demonstrating that he
upholds the superiority of Christianity as the true religion, and that, if he is critical of
the Church, it is because he acknowledges the decline of Christianity not an inherent
weakness in it. He even interprets the call for reform as Machiavelli’s advocating
moral education to be provided by none other than the clergy (104). His explicit
praise of pagan religion in the Discourses is interpreted by de Grazia as meaning
simply that pagan religion is better than none (101–103). On the other hand, he finds
that Machiavelli lavishes genuine praise on ecclesiastical states in The Prince, where
other critics have detected irony, and he quotes a passage on the “qualità” of such
principalities, attributing to the term definitely positive features (92, 149), when in
context it would appear to have a more neutral meaning.

Moreover, to argue the case for Machiavelli’s profound religiosity, much use is
made of the minor works, like the “Esorazione alla penitenza,” a sermon which was
addressed to a lay confraternity and composed at the end of his life. Some doubts
consequently arise: should some consideration not be given to the specific audience
targeted and the circumstances of composition of this religious tract? Moreover,
should such weight be given to this more marginal text with respect to the principal
works? And, furthermore, can Machiavelli’s idea of poverty really be linked to
Franciscan ideals (244–245) and can his concept of the imitation of models be referred
to Christian imitation (286)? Other objections could be made to the analysis given
of Machiavelli’s views on morality. De Grazia tends to interpret the key term virtù
as meaning at most times goodness. And to support his reading of Machiavelli
the moralist, a passage from one of his letters is cited as being about “good” and
“bad” (72), when in context it actually has to do with favourable and unfavourable
developments that a prudent politician has to prepare for.

Such readings seem to derive from a quite literal rendering of Machiavelli’s words.
There are many instances of this type of translation throughout the volume: to wit,
“facts” instead of ‘deeds’ for fatti (266); “reasons” instead of ‘types’ for ragioni (20);
“make a head” instead of ‘appoint a leader’ for fare . . . uno capo (235); “Rules for a
Pleasure Party” for Capitoli per una Compagnia di piacere—actually a parody of the
rules of religious confraternities (125), and the like. A certain unevenness of style
ensues, since Machiavelli is made to speak stilted English (the more obscene phrases
are given good up-to-date equivalents, though) whereas de Grazia’s own narrative
uses flowing modern conversational idiom; as an instance, Machiavelli’s work as
Florentine secretary is discussed in a section entitled “On the Job” (16).

Precisely because this study is grounded in a reading of the texts and in an exami-
ation of the themes and key words found in them, the translation from the originals
would have benefited from closer checking. (So too would the Italian passages given
in the endnotes which are not free of typographical errors). Yet it is probably de
Grazia’s fresh readings which enable him to present new interpretations. In spite of
the less convincing details, therefore, this study remains on the whole a stimulating
experiment in the writing of biography.

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