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Book Review

Cary Joseph Nederman: *The Rope and the Chains: Machiavelli's Early Thought and Its Transformations*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023. Pp. 168.)

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The book proposes a new reading of some of the contents of Niccolò Machiavelli's writings dating to the years before 1513 (namely, before the composition of *The Prince*). The author's argument—as openly claimed in several sections—is that during the chancery years, Machiavelli did not develop the main concepts and ideas (at least those under examination in the book) that later characterized his major works. To summarize with a quote, the book's thesis is that there is no "essential continuity" in Machiavelli's thought and political language "prior to and following 1513" (5).

The volume is divided into five chapters contributing to the principal thesis, each grounded on a direct comparison between a specific element of thought (or a single term associated with a particular concept) as it appears in ante- and post-1513 writings by Machiavelli.

In chapter 1, the author explores Machiavelli's concept of *virtù*. He builds on Robert Black's reading of this subject to point out the revolutionary content of this term in Machiavelli's early writings as a "rejection of the traditional conflation of moral goodness with the effective use of power" (15). Focusing on fourteen instances of this term (and related language), Nederman explains that before 1513, *virtù* was sorted into three categories: conventional moral virtue, the exercise of strength or force, and ability or skill. He therefore analyzes the links and complex relation between *fortuna* and *virtù* by highlighting the traditional example of Cesare Borgia, which brings him to provide a new reading of the 1506 *Ghiribizzi*. Using Miguel Vatter's and Gennaro Sasso's diverging interpretations of the significance of this minor writing as a point of departure, the author provides a detailed examination of the post-1513 developments in Machiavelli's view on the problem of the influence of the opposite terms of fortune and free action on man's political success and achievements. Nederman's conclusions do not depart from the traditional scholarly interpretation, stating, "*The Prince* encapsulates a discernible step forward in Machiavelli's theoretical maturation" (34).

Chapter 2, "The Road to Vivere Libero," aims to reconstruct the steps in the formation of Machiavelli's liberty-related vocabulary as expressed in the *Discourses on Livy* and *The Prince*. Nederman highlights some liberty-related expressions and terms in Machiavelli's writings ante 1513, built around three categories: the liberty of Florence, Tuscany, and/or Italy, ecclesiastical liberty,

and the freedom of German cities. In the author's view, "Machiavelli's application *ante res perditas* of *libertà* echoes an essentially conventional medieval use of the term" (41–42). Accordingly, in the subsequent paragraph, he claims that in *The Prince*, "Machiavelli foreground[s] liberty (and *vivere libero*) in a manner unrecognizable from his *ante res perditas* writings" that amounts to some kind of "factionalized conflict" (43). He thus focuses on what characterizes the post-1513 interpretation of liberty in Machiavelli, that is, the idea that any state must be prepared to admit a possible internal conflict (identified as *tumulti*). In particular, Nederman focuses on Machiavelli's discussion and treatment of French politics. He argues that it is only with *The Prince* that the Florentine develops a more complex concept of liberty. The French example provides a case of a not fully developed condition of freedom described by Nederman with the author's expression *vivere sicuro* (59–60). Briefly, Nederman argues that according to Machiavelli, the limit of monarchical rule does not consent to a full development of *vivere libero* because "the vast majority of people confuse liberty with security" (59).

Following a chapter dedicated to the Florentine secretary's treatment of impiety, which primarily concentrates on how he represents the act of praying in his writings, chapter 4 investigates Machiavelli's use of medical terminology. Central in this regard is the author's detailed study of Machiavelli's references to the theory of the humors as political philosophy. The first paragraphs of this section focus on Galen's physiological theories. Nederman makes a valuable contribution to the knowledge of the sources of ancient medical doctrines possibly used by Machiavelli. Through a survey of Machiavelli's corpus ante 1513 (together with an interesting comparison with Nicholas of Cusa's works), the next paragraph highlights twelve uses of *umori* that, as the author argues, should be divided into imperfect categories, none of which "is inherently political in nature" (91). The post-1513 vocabulary, instead, shows how Machiavelli departed from Galenism's rigorous physiology yet adopted a specific paradigm according to which the humors reflected fixed qualities beneficial to an analysis of politics (95ff.). Nederman is correct in concluding that Machiavelli may have been familiar with the Galenic humoral theory before *The Prince*, despite only making valuable use of it for political inquiry from that point on.

Finally, chapter 5 investigates the central theme of "ambition" by making substantive arguments in favor of the idea that before 1513, Machiavelli's view on this theme was traditional and morally related and that only after that year did he develop the crucial theory of ambition as part of human nature.

A first general remark should be made on the methodology adopted by the author, based on what himself describes as a "discursive" approach (6). Although Nederman states that "quantitative study" is accompanied by "narrative exegesis" (ibid.), the impression is that, at least in some cases, the results seem to arise from a lexical approach to political vocabulary and expressions: a procedure that, as the author himself rightly points out, is not always apt to reveal the complexity of the deepest (often hidden) links

between the conceptual elements of Machiavelli's chancery writings and the major works, which were written later. For instance, the author compares crucial conceptual expressions such as *vivere libero* in *The Prince* and *Discourses* to the uses of single terms such as *libertà* and *libero* in minor political writings on the ground of a mere lexical association since they very often refer to the entirely different concept of being independent of foreign powers (see 39 and 43).

The results of Nederman's inquiry certainly provide useful details and map linguistic uses of some conceptual elements, by pointing out some discrepancies between ante and post 1513. However, the book tends to avoid specific questions about how Machiavelli developed his political language. In this respect, different case studies have instead shown how, gradually, Machiavelli developed specific parts of his political language thanks to his deep readings of ancient historiography as well as on the grounds of a general chancery language during his service as a secretary. One can refer, for instance, to Jean-Louis Fournel's study on Machiavelli's expression *qualità de' tempi*, used to describe the political and military crisis of his times, and to my research on the term *esperienza* (both apparently unknown to the author).

Most important, one should consider that any comparison between *ante* and *post res perditas* in Machiavelli's works should concern the conceptual contents of his writings more broadly. For instance, it is helpful to remember that already a century ago, Federico Chabod (whose study on "Il Segretario fiorentino" also is not in the book's bibliography) clearly explained that one of the errors attributed to King Louis XII of France on which Machiavelli focuses in chap. 3 of *The Prince* closely resembles the content of chancery writings. This advice is, indeed, to be compared with the letter of November 21, 1500, particularly with the famous response by Machiavelli (in person) to George d'Amboise, plenipotentiary prime minister of King Louis XII, during the first legation to France. Chabod rightly argued that the legation passage fundamentally shapes Machiavelli's vocabulary and political judgment in *The Prince.*

Further observations can be made on the sources used for the book's inquiry. In the first instance, the author does not consider that most of Machiavelli's private letters before the year 1513 are lost. Until that point, the remainder of his epistolary corpus is mainly composed of the replies sent to Machiavelli by his correspondents. It is highly likely that many of the terms under scrutiny by Nederman would have indeed been found in the lost letters. Besides, a careful reading of the ante 1513 replies by the Florentine secretary's correspondents provides arguments against some of the book's conclusions. For instance, according to Filippo Casavecchia, one of his colleagues in the chancery, Machiavelli was a "prophet" (letter of June 17, 1509, long before *The Prince*!). One would use such a term for a man engaged in politics who deeply posed questions concerning society and history from a very early stage. He did not need to wait for his dismissal from the chancery.

Additionally, the author does not take into account Machiavelli's *Scritti di governo*, his dispatches, and other documents written in Machiavelli's own

hand, although (only) formally on behalf of the city councils, which are by far the largest section of the documentation produced during his service in the chancery. (Only a very few of these are included in Corrado Vivanti's edition of Machiavelli's works used by Nederman.) Skipping any confrontation with the *Scritti di governo* limits the scope and validity of the author's research. It is, in fact, precisely in this kind of documentary production that a significant part of the traces concerning the formation of Machiavelli's political language can be found. Not to mention that the author dedicates very little space to the military theme, about which the interaction between Machiavelli's chancery experience and his later works is amply demonstrated; even the survey results on specific themes under examination in the book suffer from this lack. The use of the term *ambizione* (ambition) provides an excellent example. (E.g., see the occurrences of this word in Machiavelli, *Legazioni. Commissarie. Scritti di governo*, vol. 3, ed. J.-J. Marchand and M. M. Morettini [Salerno editrice, 2005], 255 and 269.) Besides, the limited textual basis of Nederman's study amounts to more than a quantitative problem. As explained in an article dating to almost two decades ago (A. Guidi, "L'esperienza cancelleresca nella formazione politica di Niccolò Machiavelli," *Il Pensiero Politico* 38, no. 1 [2006]: 3–23), it seems possible to add further traces of direct linguistic and conceptual links between political statements built around the role of *ambizione* in politics expressed in the very same chapter of *The Prince* as to Chabod's remarks mentioned above and this kind of minor writings dating to the times of the chancery.

To conclude, at least some of the differences highlighted by the author in the uses of specific terms and expressions in Machiavelli's language before and after 1513 must be explained primarily with the different kinds of text typology written by the Florentine secretary until that year rather than a changed intellectual attitude. Indeed, one should consider that chancery documents "offered limited scope for prolonged reflection" (R. Black, *Machiavelli* [Routledge, 2013], 57) compared to the political works *post res perditas.*

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