Jurdjevic, Mark. A Great and Wretched City: Promise and Failure in Machiavelli’s Florentine Political Thought

Anthony F. D’Elia

Volume 37, numéro 3, été 2014

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090678ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v37i3.22478

suggesting that the Lady’s ghost might have been played as annoyed, angry, and accusatory toward Govianus. Although Johnson’s conclusion recognizes that early modern gender can be properly understood only in relation to other social categories, such as race and class, the book might have benefitted from this analysis earlier on. At the outset, Johnson never considers how the foundational reversal of status that informs the frame of Shakespeare’s *Shrew*—in which the socially inferior Sly, together with the cross-dressed servant boy Bartholomew, become puppets of the Lord’s desires—conditions the main play’s depiction of stereotypical marital ideals, whereby husbands are the puppet-masters of their docile, obedient wives; Johnson’s discussion of the Lady’s physical bifurcation into body and soul in Middleton’s tragedy never elaborates the stakes in whether or not a given performance opts to stage the Lady’s ghost using an actor’s body; and, despite an earlier allusion to Elizabeth’s two bodies, her final chapter, by extending to women generally the subversive significance of Ana and her ladies’ performances of divine spirituality, does not acknowledge the inextricably imbricative relationship between gender and status. Minor quibbles aside, however, Johnson’s book ably demonstrates not only how pervasively the soul-body stereotype informed cultural representations of women in the period but also how creative staging could deploy the dynamic not only to confirm but also to challenge the gender hierarchy.

**Mark Albert Johnston**

University of Windsor

---

**Jurdjevic, Mark.**

*A Great and Wretched City: Promise and Failure in Machiavelli’s Florentine Political Thought.*


Mark Jurdjevic offers a convincing new interpretation of Machiavelli’s republicanism, his view of Florentine politics, and his attempts to find political solutions for Florence in the 1520s. Scholars, he argues, overemphasize Machiavelli’s dependence on ancient Rome as a model for his republicanism and read his
frequent criticisms of Florence and her politics too literally. They rely on the
heavily Roman-inspired *Discourses on Livy* (1517) and often neglect his more
Florence-focused works, namely the *Florentine Histories* (1520–26) and the
little studied *Discourse on Florentine Affairs after the Death of Lorenzo*
(1520). The scholarship on the *Histories* tends to dismiss the work as an expression of
Machiavelli’s frustration with faction-ridden Florence and his pessimism about
the possibility of a healthy republic succeeding in his native city. Certainly, the
1520s were a difficult period for Florence and Machiavelli. After their return in
1513, the Medici essentially ruled Florence, and while the family was bolstered
by two Medici popes (Leo X and Clement VII), they had no one up to the chal-
lenging task of governing Florence. Lorenzo de’ Medici (the Duke of Urbino),
to whom Machiavelli had dedicated the *Prince* in 1513, died in 1519 with no
clear successor. Yet Jurdjevic cautions scholars about assuming the inevitabil-
ity of the Medici Principate in the 1520s, when, he insists, political instability
and the strained resources of the Medici in Florence opened the way for new
theories of government.

Since 1494 Florence had had three different forms of government: the
popular republic under Savonarola, an aristocratic republic under Soderini,
and an autocratic state under the Medici. A return to any of these three was
possible in the early 1520s. There were even rumours that the Medici sup-
ported a full restoration of the republic. All this explains why Machiavelli was
so explicit with his republican recommendations in the Medici-commissioned
*Discourse*. The *Discourse* was a serious attempt by Machiavelli to prescribe his
republican ideas to the practical working of Florentine government. In this
treatise, he condemned monarchy and asserted that any kind of closed oligar-
chic regime was destined to fail. Once we acknowledge the context of politi-
cal possibilities in Florence in the 1520s, the *Florentine Histories*, which were
also commissioned by the Medici ca. 1520, appears far less a bitter, despairing
tirade against Florentine corruption and factionalism. Civic strife dominates
Machiavelli’s Florentine history but the countless negative examples serve a
serious moral purpose; they stress the need for healthy republican institutions.
In the *Histories* we see the dangers of violent, overweening nobles in the early
history of the Guelf and Ghibelline conflict and the salvific role of the right
institution, the Ordinances of Justice (1293), which literally cut the magnate
class out of the republic by disenfranchising them and thus allowing a more
popular, healthier republic—until the arrogance of the nobles returns, leading
to the tyranny of the autocratic rule of the Duke of Athens, and again resurfaces in the early fifteenth century when the oligarchs (the Albizzi regime) exclude the people from government.

Machiavelli shows how a private citizen (Cosimo de’ Medici) can corrupt the republic with wealth and subvert government through clientage. In his preface, Machiavelli declares his intention not to write a history like that of his humanist predecessors, Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini, who focused on the city’s external affairs and conflicts with other city-states. The government and internal politics of the republic are instead what warrant his full attention, since they offer the greatest lessons for organizing a new republican constitution for Florence. Written at the same time for the Medici overlords, the Discourse and the Histories must be read together as promoting two sides of the same argument for republican government, one a more practical, prescriptive treatise on the constitution and the other a record of the Florentine failure, when such a constitution is lacking or imperfectly implemented. By shifting attention from the justly lauded Discourses on Livy to the Discourse and the Florentine Histories, Jurdjevic reveals a much fuller picture of Machiavelli’s republicanism, one that was grounded in the practical workings of Florentine government. Jurdjevic expertly shows how Machiavelli’s ideas were firmly rooted in Florentine history and his particular historical context.

Anthony F. D’Elia
Queen’s University

Lepage, John L.
The Revival of Antique Philosophy in the Renaissance.

John Lepage’s book offers a new interpretation of how sixteenth-century European humanists engaged with their classical heritage. Focusing on the literary value of their works rather than the philosophical aspects, Lepage links the humanists’ approach to classical texts with their tendency for witty authorship. He argues that by using wit, the humanists moved past the “cold logic”