## Book Reviews

# A howler of a book on Machiavelli, Leonardo

by Michael J. Minnicino

**Machiavelli, Leonardo, and the Science of Power**
by Roger Masters
South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996
384 pages, hardbound, $32.95

Roger Masters's *Machiavelli, Leonardo, and the Science of Power* is an infuriating book which makes one want to howl out loud.

Unfortunately, I suspect that Professor Masters wouldn't see such howling as inappropriate behavior.

Allow me to explain.

The book's advertised subject is speculation on the relationship between the 16th century political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, and the polymath genius Leonardo da Vinci. "Speculation," because—despite the fact that both men were repeatedly in the same place, at the same time, and definitely knew each other—there is virtually no "hard" evidence that the two were any more than nodding acquaintances; neither man, for instance, cited the other's work. For decades, under the influence of people like the British art historian Sir Kenneth Clark, most scholars have shied away from a comprehensive investigation of the obvious Machiavelli-Leonardo link. Indeed, according to an article in the *New York Times* on Dec. 8, 1996, Masters's discussion of a strong link between the two has already been attacked by some of his academic peers as "simplistic."

To his credit, Masters argues that Leonardo's scientific and artistic outlook can be seen, albeit without formal attribution, in the younger Machiavelli's theoretical breakthroughs. Masters carefully documents the well-known points of connection between the two men, including Leonardo's preparatory sketches for "The Battle of Anghiari." This painting, never finished, was commissioned by the Florentine Republic, and was to be hung in the meeting chamber of the Republic's leaders; Machiavelli, a member of that government, himself co-signed Leonardo's commission for the painting.

Masters also highlights Leonardo's extensive study of dams, irrigation, and river diversion, which included some of the artist's most fascinating topological and hydrological drawings. The author demonstrates that Leonardo's efforts were intimately connected to attempts by Florence, coordinated by Machiavelli personally, to divert the River Arno in order to bring about the surrender of Pisa, a town which threatened Florentine interests.

In fact, the high point of this book is the eloquence with which the author compares Leonardo's plans for the technological mastery of the great waters of northern Italy, with Machiavelli's oft-repeated metaphor that Fortune is best seen as a wild river—a thing which might occasionally leap its banks and cause unexpected destruction, unless political leadership has taken the precaution of creating wise laws and an informed citizenry that will act to dam and channel the overflow.

This interesting discussion goes on for 85 pages. Then, on page 86, things get very, very strange.

### Start howling now!

Suddenly, we are asked to "consider the social organization of Hamadryas baboons," and to contemplate "exactly what does animal leadership teach us about human nature?" Professor Masters, it seems, is a political scientist with a strong predilection for that new academic peculiarity called "sociobiology." Within paragraphs, Masters is explaining to us that the effectiveness of Leonardo's sketches for "Anghiari" is partially due to the artist's depiction of "threat displays" in the faces of the portrayed soldiers, comparable to those proffered by certain primates.

Now, all this comes without much warning, so the transition from reasonable discussion to arrant nonsense is so wrenching as to be physically painful. Hence, the howling.

We find that Masters has two points on his actual agenda for this book. The first is to claim that Machiavelli is so thoroughly materialistic that he should be considered a precursor of Darwinianism and evolutionary biology. This assertion almost entirely rests on Masters's grotesque misinterpretation of another of Machiavelli's central metaphors. Masters uses Machiavelli's famous statement that society must sometimes act like the centaur Chiron—half man, and half beast—as proof that Machiavelli was trying to incorporate a crude form of modern biological determinism into his political theory.

Actually, Machiavelli's point is the opposite. As history's first, comprehensive theorist of warfare, Machiavelli insisted that citizens understand, without romantic illusion, that war is the worst and most bestial thing in which society can engage; as William Tecumseh Sherman, a reader of Machiavelli, put it: "War is hell." But Machiavelli also insisted, with St. Augustine, that this hell-on-earth may sometimes be justified. Therefore, Machiavelli's central problem was: What must a republic do to ensure that its



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young men can act almost like beasts on the battlefield, without damaging their essential humanity? Machiavelli's metaphorical use of Chiron, the intellectual creature who, according to the myth, trained mankind in medicine and other arts, points to the Florentine's understanding of the need for republican education to combat bestiality, not amalgamate it.

Masters's second point is more destructive: that Machiavelli, under Leonardo's influence, marks the transition to the modern era, because his theory is completely "scientific," by which Masters means completely secular—indeed, completely anti-religious. Therefore, Masters claims, Machiavelli is also the precursor of Enlightenment atheists such as de Mandeville and Hobbes, and was one of the first to accomplish the "transvaluation of all values" dreamed of by Nietzsche!

## On 'virtù' and morality

For reasons of space, we cannot undertake a full-scale defense of Machiavelli on this more-complicated point. Suffice it to say, that Masters again hinges his argument on a misinterpretation which is so specious that it is probably conscious. The professor makes a very big deal about the definition of one of Machiavelli's favorite words, *virtù*. The word may have meant "virtue" in the Christian sense, claims Masters, but Machiavelli "trans-valuated" it back to a pagan concept.

Nonsense! A Renaissance Italian would recognize *virtù* as a technical term. Leonardo used it to denote "power" in a physical process. Machiavelli broadened this, using the word to describe the potent mastery of an art or skill; even today, we talk about a "virtuoso"—someone who has the skill to make an instrument accomplish whatever conception the artist has. Machiavelli strictly understood that a "virtuoso" can bring an idea to reality, but that doesn't mean that the idea is "virtuous," moral, or correct—morality does not derive from power. The opposite of a "virtuoso," said Machiavelli, is someone who thinks that things can be accomplished by "half-way measures." The best modern synonym for Machiavelli's *virtù* is perhaps the German *Entschlossenheit,* popularized by a later theorist of war, Karl von Clausewitz, who wanted to describe the ability to courageously bring a conflict to its conclusion. Clausewitz was a close reader of Machiavelli; in fact, his famous dictum that "war is politics by other means," is based on one of Machiavelli's political parables.

So, despite its promising beginning, it were best to dump Professor Masters's book, and pick up a copy of the 1974 *The Unknown Leonardo,* edited by Ladslao Reti, a wonderful volume that outlines the Leonardo-Machiavelli link, and backs it up with beautiful illustrations.


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