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# Machiavellian Rhetoric: From the Counter-Reformation to Milton (Review)

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was no more rigorous than Leibniz's; second, Newton's supporters did not understand the calculus very well. The fact that Berkeley was right raises the second issue concerning the relation of science to philosophy, that is, our response to a valid criticism of a theory. The calculus has since developed in a way that clearly meets Berkeley's challenge. Arguing against both the critical and the laudatory normative judgements of contemporary philosophers of mathematics, Jesseph demands that we see Berkeley's work in its context, criticizing those philosophers who evaluate Berkeley according to their own philosophical commitments. Ironically, current philosophers of science may be committing the same error in judging Berkeley's work as Berkeley is accused of committing in criticizing the calculus, letting their philosophical commitments override whatever arguments apply in a particular case.

Jesseph has shown convincingly that issues in mathematics are central to Berkeley's philosophy and helped to put together mathematical and philosophical issues that have been artificially isolated in current academe. The only weakness of the book is that Jesseph fails to make as strong a case for the importance of Berkeley's philosophical work to historians and philosophers of mathematics. Perhaps one can only expect a historical work to appeal to those who already see some value in history. For those who do, Jesseph's book will be richly satisfying.

**David J. Stump**

University of San Francisco

**Victoria Kahn**

*Machiavellian Rhetoric: From the  
Counter-Reformation to Milton.*

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

1994. Pp. xiv + 314.

US \$29.95. ISBN 0-691-03491-5.

This densely written book discusses and theorizes about the reception and interpretation of the political and social thought of Niccolò Machiavelli by Renaissance thinkers, primarily English Renaissance thinkers. Machiavelli's name has made its way into infamy and has long been an eponym for political ruthlessness and cynicism. Yet, Machiavelli remains one of the most puzzling and paradoxical of social theorists, admired by some for his combination of unflinching realism and republican idealism, and reviled by others for his supposed amoralism, cynicism, and apologetics for tyranny. Indeed,

what makes Machiavelli such a perennially intriguing figure are the antinomies of interpretative response that drift out of the wake of his own startling reflections on the nature of political power and his controversial prescriptions for the 'successful' ruler.

Victoria Kahn's learned and detailed work attempts not only to unravel some of the particularly subtle and paradoxical dimensions of Machiavelli's insights into the human political condition but to show how Machiavelli's rhetoric was greeted and interpreted by Renaissance thinkers ranging from Giovanni Botero, one of the earliest influential commentators on Machiavelli, to the great Puritan poet and polemicist John Milton. The Renaissance readers, as Kahn notes, in their encounters with Machiavelli's works found their own humanist rhetorical tradition under the assault of a master rhetorician. Yet Machiavelli, Kahn argues, was much more than a cynical destructive critic of Renaissance humanism. Machiavelli, she writes (59), 'attempted to forge a new rhetoric of politics that was simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive — a rhetoric that would generate compelling political arguments for republicanism from within a critical analysis of the status quo.' In this simultaneity of description and prescription is the source of Machiavelli's rare ability to render his prescriptions for political success, at the same time, so compelling and so infuriating. 'Machiavelli', Kahn writes (58), 'wanted to devise a political ethic that was capable of responding to the particular without losing its critical force.'

The book is comprised of three main parts. Part One is simply entitled 'Machiavelli' and provides an interpretation of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* as well as an account of Botero's grappling with the reception of Machiavelli in his *Ragion di stato* (1589). What Kahn attempts to reveal is a fundamental and relentless ambiguity in Machiavelli's writing that is reflected in his hostility to the humanist culture of his time yet carried out with humanist rhetorical strategies. Machiavelli's genius is manifest in the profoundly dialectical nature of his writings that speaks to each generation of readers as they attempt to grapple with the complexities of appearance-versus-reality in the political rhetoric they encounter. This protean, dialectical feature of Machiavelli's thought is a persistent theme throughout the book.

Part Two is entitled 'English Machiavellism' and covers Machiavelli's reception in England from 1530 through the Restoration in 1660. In England, as elsewhere, Machiavelli was reviled as a cynical atheist and apologist for tyranny, and also valued for his insight, and hence the term 'English Machiavellism' is consistent, appropriate, and suggestive. The ambivalence of reception in England runs very deep, and, as Kahn argues, is evidence of the potency of his rhetorical approach to politics as it speaks in a relentlessly unsettling way to the moral and religious dimensions of political power: '[W]hile it was common in the seventeenth century to distinguish between religion and government in terms of persuasion and force, the Machiavellian dyad of force and fraud also constantly reappears within the sphere of religious persuasion' (155-6). Machiavelli thus not only subverts classical conceptions of political morality, but discovers the workings of 'this-world'

political ambition behind the lofty proclamations of human spirituality. Machiavelli has shown that what Kahn calls the 'indeterminacy of rhetoric' applies to religion as well as politics.

Part Three, entitled simply 'Milton', is a study of Milton's own artful rendering of Machiavelli and an attempt to counter the received view of Milton's reading of Machiavelli. In Machiavelli, Milton finds not simply the theorist of republicanism but a rhetorician who helped him grapple with the metaphysical notions that hide behind his politics with all of their deeply moral and theological ramifications. 'Milton', writes Kahn (172), 'does not read Machiavelli simply as a secular theorist; rather, he sees the *Discourses* as compatible with his own argument against "forcing religion." ' Machiavelli's discovery of force and fraud in religion is inspiration for Milton's own theatrical staging of Satan's revolt against God. Milton's encounter with Machiavelli enables him to consider human freedom in a multiplicity of aspects — as a dimension of political society and as an ultimate moral and metaphysical condition of choice and decision. More importantly, Machiavelli's lesson is another instance of the 'indeterminacy' of rhetoric itself; that is, Machiavelli's rhetorical method is an instrument of freedom that frees him to function as both a critic and an idealist.

Kahn's style is, unfortunately, often opaque. She says, for example (220), of Milton's Satan: 'Precisely because Satan's narcissistic identification with the allegorical figure of Sin precludes genuine recognition of otherness, allegory in relation to Satan figures the danger of seduction by and idolatry of literature rather than as it was traditionally presumed to do, providing armor against it.' Well, perhaps, but the task of deciphering such turgid prose might discourage all but the most determined or specialized readers. Actually, the reader of this work would be advised to read the Coda, 'Rhetoric and the Critique of Ideology', before reading the book, for in it Kahn briefly sketches a broader theoretical platform, via Ricoeur, Gadamer and Habermas, for her own hermeneutical endeavors. It is this hermeneutical tradition that sets Kahn on her course throughout the book as she attempts to examine Machiavellism as a meditation of ideology, always moving between legitimate authority and coercion and domination.

**Stephen Paul Foster**

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