

i nterpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 1988–89 Volume 16 Number 2

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Subscription payments for one volume individual \$15; institutional \$18; student (3-year limit) \$7.50; in U.S. dollars AND payable by the U.S. Postal Service or a financial institution located within the U.S. There are three issues of INTERPRETATION in a volume.

Authors submitting manuscripts are asked to send TWO clear copies, to follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 13th ed., or manuals based on it, and to place notes in parentheses in the text, without numbering.

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Machiavelli's Castruccio Castracani

THEODORE A. SUMBERG

God loves the powerful and uses them to punish the powerless. So writes Machiavelli in his slender biography of Castruccio Castracani, a soldier-statesman who in a larger setting than fourteenth-century Lucca would show himself superior to Philip of Macedon and Scipio Africanus. Praise so high and a view of God so astonishing arouses curiosity in a little-known work—curiosity heightened by the claim that it contains Machiavelli's "fundamental thought."¹ But why read it if he put everything he knew in the *Prince* and *Discourses* as he wrote in their dedications? Does he add anything in the biography? Written in 1520, after he had prepared his major works, including the *Art of War*, he must have had some purpose in narrating the life of Castruccio, which is exactly what we will try to uncover.

Of unknown parents, an abandoned newborn boy is found at dawn among high grasses in the garden of a priest by his sister, a childless widow. Himself of the noble Lucchese family of Castracani, the priest baptizes the boy with his father's name of Castruccio. No child enjoyed more loving care than that given by priest and sister, whom Machiavelli names Dianora, perhaps after the pagan goddess of fertility and easy delivery. Now, the Castruccio Castracani known to history (1281–1328) was a legitimate child orphaned when 19 years old, but in the biography Machiavelli makes him a foundling whose birth and discovery recall the legendary origins of Romulus and Moses. Machiavelli apparently wants to place Castruccio among the great founders of new political orders. Moreover, in having Castruccio rise from pit to pinnacle of leadership Machiavelli discloses the full distance of political advancement that is open to wily aspirants; some readers, starting from a higher point, may be encouraged to do likewise.

Machiavelli dedicates the biography to two dear young friends, fellow Florentines with political ambitions. His choice of youthful readers helps explain much. Of course, Machiavelli aims at bright young men throughout his writings, identified specifically as such in the last paragraph of the *Art of War* and toward the end of the introduction to Book II of the *Discourses*. He thus seems to put himself against Plato who in the *Laws* (685a, 712b, 769a) has the aged Athenian stranger call political discussions an old man's game. But the biography shows young men that politics is a serious, grim, life-and-death struggle worthy of one's best efforts.

1. Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1958) 223.

Castruccio grows up fast into a robust good-looking lad of quick intelligence and high spirit. His adopted father soon directs him toward a priestly career but in vain. Playing on the streets of Lucca, the youngster attracts the eye of Francesco Guinigi, soldier-leader of the city, who in due course invites Castruccio to join his household. Pressed by Castruccio himself, the priest gives up the fourteen-year old to his second adopted father, who brings out the youngster's natural talent for manly sports, including horsemanship.

After a time Guinigi has his adopted son join him in a battle in which the youngster excels. Guinigi, who will die shortly, puts Castruccio in charge of the military forces of Lucca which Castruccio leads with success in battle after battle. Machiavelli reports that at 18 years of age Castruccio has become so "great and honored" that he is able to contend for the leadership of Lucca which in fact amidst popular acclaim he soon gains. High-spirited young men eager for honors and glory could hardly imagine a more meteoric rise to emulate.

Young and brimming with spirit, all eyes fixed on him, Castruccio mounts his horse and passes his troops in review without a word. Such a man is born to lead. What moves him? He sees no purpose in life other than to put his mark on events. He welcomes difficulties because in stretching himself to the utmost he exercises his great strength of spirit. His fierce energy naturally captures the will of other souls for great collective enterprises.

Machiavelli stresses the superiority of ancients over moderns throughout his writings, but not here. Castruccio, a modern, is in no way inferior to the great captains of old. Great deeds lie at hand at all times. Machiavelli calls his young men to action, not nostalgia.

I

Castruccio is a born soldier: in battle he is the first to mount and the last to dismount; and he leads his fellow soldiers alongside of them, not from afar. But he does not enter battles rashly, being aware of their great risks. In fact, as Machiavelli reports, he never attempted to win by force when he could win by fraud. At Pistoia, for example, after promising safety to leaders of rival factions Castruccio betrays both at the right moment, capturing or killing the partisans of both sides. Machiavelli cites the view of Castruccio that "victory, not the manner of victory, would bring you renown." He is faithful to these words in his long string of victories.

Machiavelli describes battles in so much detail that the biography reads almost like a sequel to the *Art of War*, but he rarely explains why Castruccio leads Lucca into war. To free it of tyranny? No. To free it of foreign domination? No. He is merely carrying out at the right moment the prescription of the *Art of War* (II) of giving the law to others instead of receiving it from them.

Since all governments are presumably so animated, you win only if you are smarter, faster, stronger.

Moral scruples never stand in his way, as if he never heard of the century-old doctrine of just war. Nor does he show mercy to the vanquished; nor does he respect neutrality. He marches easily into the fortified town of Serravalle, Machiavelli reports with detail, after inducing one of its principal citizens to kill the leader of the town long left alone by rival towns. Those who stand above the battle in contempt, contempt and death be their reward.

Castruccio does not spare anybody, according to Machiavelli, in protecting positions gained. Hence his ruthlessness in putting down conspiracies directed against him in Lucca and occupied towns. On one occasion he even wipes out whole families in Lucca who in his judgment might aspire to its leadership. Several ambitious families in Pisa suffer the same fate.

Only death defeats him. Covered with sweat after a hard day's battle, he catches a chill from a strong wind coming off the Arno and dies of fever a few days later. His death is remarkable in being the only banal event in his life. It is also remarkable because it is the only time in 44 years that fortune abandons him. Perhaps having a premonition of early death he pushed himself into a life of ceaseless action. All restless young men will understand the sentiment.

Machiavelli stages a deathbed scene in which Castruccio instructs Pagolo, his lieutenant and nonadopted son of Guinigi, former leader of Lucca. This extensive speech is remarkable in at least one respect: looking back, Castruccio expresses no remorse over anything done or even said. How many people can take leave with so easy a conscience? Unburdened, he joins company with Machiavelli's other great founders of new orders; the act may accuse but the result will excuse (*Discourses* 1 9). And so Machiavelli excuses Romulus of blame for killing his twin brother. Castruccio, in contrast, visits not death but a great favor on his nonconsanguineous brother, as we see presently.

Upon his deathbed Castruccio does admit, however, the tactical error of weakening Lucca's security by expanding its dominion too much. The error may be forgivable however as the product of an exemplary leader's overflowing energy. But Castruccio does urge prudential withdrawal in order that Pagolo may strengthen Lucca's security; how far to withdraw is left to Pagolo's unprincipled estimate of political advantage.

At death's threshold Castruccio also makes a brief speech to fellow soldiers binding them by oath to loyalty to his chosen successor. And so Castruccio gets Pagolo off to a good start. In fact, Pagolo's rule continues in his son, grandson and even great grandson, which is a very long period of dynastic continuity and political stability for the notoriously faction-ridden towns of Tuscany. So Castruccio is eminently successful in solving the great problem of orderly succession—a problem that has tripped up many great captains of old and modern times.

The Castruccio Castracani of history married and had children. Why in the

biography does Machiavelli kill him off childless? Having a son, Castruccio would name him his successor, which would require killing Pagolo, his family and his partisans, very probably causing civil war in Lucca. So to crown Castruccio's success, even after his death, Machiavelli makes him a bachelor who nevertheless starts a new dynasty. An exclusively political tie is meant when Machiavelli has Castruccio refer to Pagolo as *figliuolo mio* and of *sangue nostro*. Like Romulus and Moses, the Castruccio of the biography leaves as his sole progeny a new political order of long life.

Machiavelli narrates that upon dying Francesco Guinigi had entrusted Pagolo to the care of Castruccio, five years his senior. And upon his death Castruccio keeps his word, an action morally so praiseworthy as to be out of character. But Machiavelli's account includes several occasions in which Castruccio, in not keeping his word to living men, brought about their death. Political advantage alone seems to determine faithfulness. At the outset of the biography Machiavelli tells the two young dear friends that he will place them before the *azioni virtuose* of Castruccio. Such actions are simply what profits the leader.

II

Machiavelli claims that writers conceal events that reflect ill on their country (*Discourses* II Int.). The opposite tactic informs his biography: he castigates Florence without mercy in order to open it up to new leadership. His audience, his principal audience, his immediate audience at any rate, was the Florence of his time that he admits loving more than his soul.² How does he punish Florence? He shows that puny Lucca, Florence's perpetual rival, defeats in battle, no less than three times, the superior forces of Florence, even when aided by the troops of the King of Naples. Lucca even forces Florence in its self-defense to pay annual tribute to that unloved King. Machiavelli even gives exact casualty figures for the one-sided victories of Lucca: in one battle, for instance, Florence lost 20,231 soldiers and Lucca only 1,570. What could be the source of such detail? Not military records of course; the figures simply reveal the intention of Machiavelli, in his time, to sting Florence to action in being reminded of its defeats by Lucca two centuries earlier.

The worst humiliation that Lucca visits upon Florence is the celebration of a victory but two miles from Florence—so close that its proud citizens could hear the drunken carousing of Castruccio's troops in dividing the booty. Feel shame, Florence, and restore sharpness to your sword!

Needless to say, Machiavelli weaves much imagination into his report of

2. Letter to Vettori 16 April 1527.

Florence's defeats. The account he gives in his *History of Florence* (II 6) is very different. Florence loses some and wins some, including once when even without battle it forces retreat upon a Lucca led by Castruccio. Machiavelli chooses his facts carefully in the biography.

One reason for the victories of Lucca, also according to the biography, is that it fights with its own citizens; Castruccio Florentinus never admits mercenary soldiers into his army. Here is another piece of deliberate falsification: the Castruccio of history served as a mercenary to Venice, Lombardy, France and England. Machiavelli knows when to be silent.

Upon becoming the leader of Lucca, Castruccio changes its military organization—the only reform he carries out, presumably because it is the only one he deems important. Laws and institutions he leaves untouched, without any suggestion however that they merit praise. The traditionally unstable autocracy of Lucca before Castruccio could even be set down as radically defective. It certainly lacks the republican tradition of liberty that was the pride of Florence. But what counts in battle is military spirit and skill under adroit leadership.

Nor does Castruccio try to reform the people of Lucca because as they are they go with him to victory after victory. Elementary passions, violent images, brutal appeals, booty—all this carries the people forward in obedience to a strong-willed leader. Yet a large mass of infantry, heavily engaged in frequent combat, will in time make people politically assertive. Machiavelli does not discuss this development, but he creates a leader it would not embarrass. After all, there is nothing of the snob in Castruccio, his origins are “low and obscure”, and he fights shoulder-by-shoulder with his fellow soldiers. Moreover, in putting down conspiracies, he wipes out several noble families, which would certainly endear him to the commoners, as well as strengthen their obedience in fear. True, the Castruccio-Pagolo line may one day be overturned, but such changes are a common, if not inevitable, part of the mutability of human affairs. In any case, the biography contains no hint of the emergence of a constitutional republic of stability. It is about how to get to the new order rather than about its character.

Machiavelli also reports that Castruccio grew up to be a *gentile uomo*. As such he would appeal to readers who also are gentlemen; and as a gentleman he would also gain political allies among the good families willing to tie their fortunes to him. Everything is good, we remember, that leads to political advantage. But Castruccio is very different from the courtiers of his time. Machiavelli may even have portrayed him as a deliberate rival of Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–1492), ideal at the time for young Florentine noblemen. Lorenzo's courtly manners, thirst for learning, support of the arts, poetizing, mania for collecting manuscripts and art objects, civilized use of leisure, and passion for festivals are all alien to the austere, single-minded Castruccio. Florence needs a man of the sword, not a man of letters, unless the second calls for the first.

III

While only fourteen years old Castruccio enjoyed an *autorità regia* among his playmates. The expression is odd for one so young. Machiavelli may be suggesting that nature has a part in making Castruccio fit to rule. Machiavelli also points out that the priest gave up Castruccio because of *la natura del fanciullo*. If nature is indeed present in Castruccio's rise to leadership, then title to rule rests with the wellborn by nature, not with the wellborn by convention. The biography is about a deserted infant of unknown parents who challenges and conquers kings and nobles. All ambitious newcomers will be encouraged that a nobody favored only by nature starts a new line of rulers.

Working in mysterious ways, nature is arbitrary, giving much to some, little to others. Fortune governs the distribution of its gifts, which is one reason why fortune counts for so much in our lives. Castruccio gets high cards throughout his life, but what is remarkable about him is his ability in exploiting to the utmost the opportunities that come his way. It is his *virtù*, his personal force, working with fortune, that carries him to the summit of leadership. Fortune and virtue, working together or at cross purposes, fix the life of all people.

Fortune is the only suprapolitical force in human affairs. The divine does not appear in the biography. Entering battle Castruccio never pleads for divine help, and winning he never thanks God. The absence of prayer and thanksgiving was certainly not common in fourteenth-century Italy. Yet God does appear once, but only in irony, almost as a joke, in a slight incident reported at length. Allied to the Emperor, King of Rome, Castruccio helps him suppress a revolt in that city. The Emperor rewards him, putting onto his brocaded toga the claim that Castruccio served the will of God. The word of the Lord cometh indeed out of Rome but via the Emperor, not the Pope, who, Machiavelli reports, is at Avignon. Absent the Pope, Rome is a city of divine sanction.

The episode contains a second piece of Machiavellian wickedness. The only prince his hero admires and serves is German, not Italian. And Machiavelli makes him redheaded, hardly a common trait in Tuscany, and hence no basis for local pride.

IV

Even nature's darling needs the right kind of education, and Castruccio is exemplary in this respect. While fourteen years old he abandons "*libri ecclesiastici*" for weapons. It is the turning point in his life, his first step in scaling the heights. It may also be the step that Machiavelli wants others to take, and so could also be the turning point in European life.

In putting aside churchly books for weapons, Castruccio exercises his body, not his soul. Emptied of conscience, the soul shrinks and even tends to disappear. We are thus on the road to the materialist doctrine that there is nothing but body. In regard to education, the statesman fashioned by Machiavelli can do without the long period of training, moral and philosophical, that Plato prescribed for political leadership. Young men in a hurry will not choose Plato over Machiavelli.

If Castruccio ever read anything, Machiavelli reports, he read of wars and of the deeds of the greatest men. By reading about them he himself becomes like them. The biography itself has this purpose. Its author calls Castruccio a "*grandissimo esemplo*." He is politics as Socrates is philosophy. The biography is a persuasively vivid portrait of a model man.

Writing history is like writing a manual for actual or would-be princes, and as such it troubles itself less with recording the past than with guiding the future. The whole truth of the past being unknowable in any case (*Discourses* II Int.), it is even legitimate to subordinate the writing of history to didactic motives. The biography is certainly innocent of any rigid fidelity to the facts.³ Of course, Machiavelli is no innovator here: the Gospels, for example, were probably written to create and guide Christians, not as a literal record of the deeds and words of Jesus. The success, not the truth, of the Gospels probably impressed Machiavelli.

Famous is Machiavelli's boast—casting a stone at traditional philosophy—that he will avoid telling people how to live in favor of presenting the real truth of things (*Prince* 15). But the central thrust of the biography is to show actual or aspirant princes that a new education will lead them to gain and hold power. So if exhortation is deprecated, Machiavelli sins no less than Plato. Machiavelli can yet point out that Plato's *Republic* never saw the light of day while Castruccio was at one time a man of flesh and blood; but the didactically imaginative element in Machiavelli's account is not to be overlooked.

If both philosophers are hortatory, a real difference yet exists. The reader of the *Republic* will be sad that its beautiful scheme will almost certainly never exist, while the reader of the biography, where one man does so much in so short a time, will be uplifted in hope—a hope that will sustain attempts at imitation. But Machiavelli is not naive: an extraordinary man is needed—one akin to legendary figures—for great and longlasting political success. Yet lesser figures seeking more modest success should not be discouraged.

3. The real Castruccio died at 47 years of age but Machiavelli puts it at 44. Why? He gives Castruccio the same span of time he gives to King Philip of Macedon and Scipio in order to show that his hero did more in no more time. Other differences between the biography and the known facts are pointed out by Pasquale Villari, *The Life and Times of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Scribner's, New York, 1891) II, 302–8 (translation).

V

The ending is curious. It consists of sayings that Machiavelli attributes to Castruccio. Almost all are brief, trivial, anecdotal. When someone was boasting that even drinking much he did not get drunk, Castruccio noted that an ox does the same. To a man wordy in asking a favor Castruccio suggests sending another man when another favor is sought. Most sayings are of the same tenor, making one wonder about their function in the book.

The most curious aspect is that taken together, the 34 sayings bear little relation to the man. Castruccio is great for his deeds, not his words, Machiavelli points out, so either give him no words or only words of an uncommon tone. The lightheartedness of most of them is even radically out of character with the heroic ambition and military glory of the man. It can be argued, of course, that great captains also have their light side. If this is correct, Machiavelli added the sayings simply to fulfill the biographer's role of drawing a rounded portrait. Of the same motive perhaps is Machiavelli's attention to the physical appearance of his hero. All this suggests a book meant for a wider audience than Machiavelli's tracts. After all, it costs no more than one hour's easy reading.

In appending the sayings Machiavelli fits his biography into the humanist mold that ruled literature at the time. And by making it familiar it might thereby gain welcome among the noblemen, poets, philosophers, and theologians who since Petrarch were caught up in the revival of letters. This welcome might even facilitate Machiavelli's aim to undermine, in the rival figure of Castruccio, the humanist ideal of civilized leisure. If so, the little biography counters the pretty literature of the day, and as such is also an expression of contempt of the philosopher for men of letters.

Do the 34 sayings, taken together, throw light on the private, as against the public, man? Very little with one notable exception: Castruccio replies thus to a friend reproaching him for allegedly being taken in by a young woman with whom he lives: "You are wrong. I have taken her, not she me." His *eros* is directed only to ruling people. The beautiful in all forms simply has no hold on a man fearful only of losing his keen taste for action when the great days are come.

If we examine the sayings, we find nothing biblical or medieval in them. We find instead that 31 of the 34 come from *The Lives of Philosophers* of Diogenes Laertius.⁴ Machiavelli knows this writer, citing him not in the biography but in the *Art of War* (1). Laertius' book reports the opinions, explanations and reasonings of famous philosophers amidst much trivial banter on their lives, known or imagined. Machiavelli repeats the banter while leaving the rest in the contempt of silence.

4. Discussed in Strauss, *op. cit.* 223–25.

Most of the 31 sayings, a few lightly changed, come from the lives of the Cynics. Is Machiavelli enrolling Castruccio in this school? The family name of Castracani suggests a military-camp dog and a dog is the symbol of the Cynics; the sixth saying also equates dogs and philosophers, so Castruccio may indeed be of this tribe. He also shares their hostility to conventional prejudices, contemplation, and abstract reasoning. On the other hand, Castruccio is no eccentric tramp and he glories in fame, not pleasures, and above all he is not apolitical, a decisive difference with the school cited.

Is Machiavelli joining this school with his biography? He likes their shock tactics, derisive iconoclasm, and penchant for didactic exaggeration. Also like them he is no “astronomizing soul”; he probably sides with the Thracian girl laughing at Thales for falling into a well while looking up at the stars (*Theaetatus* 174a). Yet Machiavelli would not ally himself with philosophers, not even with the school cited, for such an alliance would direct youngsters to philosophy, while his aim rather was to turn them from philosophy to politics. Starting almost like a great figure of legend, what does Castruccio become? Not a philosopher, not a prophet, not a saint: he becomes rather a captain-statesman, a very great man who did very great things, to repeat Machiavelli's superlatives. Castruccio is the new type of human excellence.

As keen-witted as anyone, Machiavelli knew the splendid charm of philosophy and therefore its seductive power over bright youngsters, as well as its unchallenged authority, along with theology, in traditional education. So he appreciates the difficulty of persuading youngsters to give it up in favor of political ambition. Hence his tactic of placing young men before the exciting life of an energetic and wily leader cast in the mold of Achilles, Alexander, and Caesar.