

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### 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>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

D'Elia, A. (2014). Compte rendu de [Jurdjevic, Mark. A Great and Wretched City: Promise and Failure in Machiavelli's Florentine Political Thought]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 37(3), 298–300.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v37i3.22478>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2015

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

éerudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

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.*

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. Pp. 295. ISBN 978-0-674-7546-1 (hardcover) \$49.95.

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 challenging 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 inevitability 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 supported 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 oligarchic regime was destined to fail. Once we acknowledge the context of political 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 Guelph 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.***

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. xv, 281 + 14 ill. ISBN 978-1-137-28161-4 (hardcover) \$85.

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"