

Renaissance Lawgivers

*Savonarola, Machiavelli,
Castiglione, and Aretino*



RALPH ROEDER

With a new introduction by
Michael Ledeen

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Transaction Publishers
New Brunswick (U.S.A.) and London (U.K.)

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This book is printed on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials.

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2011000424

ISBN: 978-1-4128-1824-7

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Roeder, Ralph, 1890-1969.

[Man of the Renaissance.]

Renaissance lawgivers : Savonarola, Machiavelli, Castiglione, and Aretino / Ralph Roeder.

p. cm.

Originally published under title: The man of the Renaissance. New York : Viking, 1933. With new introd.

ISBN 978-1-4128-1824-7 (alk. paper)

1. Renaissance--Italy. 2. Savonarola, Girolamo, 1452-1498. 3. Machiavelli, Niccolò, 1469-1527. 4. Castiglione, Baldassarre, conte, 1478-1529. 5. Aretino, Pietro, 1492-1556. I. Title.

DG533.R6 2011

945'.050922--dc22

2011000424

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To My Wife

Foreword

THE four figures that follow illustrate four phases of the moral life of their age and, taken together, they compose the man of the Renaissance. The usual picture of that period is one of exuberant energy and positive achievement, and we are apt to forget that it was also one of mortal travail and misery. Its triumphs are preserved in art, its reverses in its spiritual story, and both were the result of the same cause—its supreme vitality. In the broadest sense the Renaissance might be described as one of those recurring crises in the annals of the race when a ferment of new life, like a rising sap, bursts the accepted codes of morality and men revert to Nature and the free play of instinct and experience in its conduct. But such revolutions are not accomplished without resistance or completed without reaction. In Italy the struggle was peculiarly acute because of the high civilization of the race, on the one hand, and its intense individualism, on the other. The Italian was a born individualist and the ferment of new life quickened his craving for unfettered self-expression; but he was also a civilized man who cherished humanity, and he was torn between the claims of Nature and human nature. Thus it was that in art his self-expression found full and free play, for there it was independent of consequences; but in life he could not emancipate himself from them and the result was spiritual turmoil and confusion. The force that created was the force that destroyed, and it was no coincidence perhaps that the artistic glories and the moral miseries of the age came to a climax together.

The Italian Renaissance culminated between the years 1494 and 1530; that span marked the apogee of its artistic development and the crisis of its religious, political, and social disintegration. No thinking man who lived through those four brief momentous decades was the same when they were over. In the lives of the four protagonists of the period it is possible to trace this development; they focus and foreshorten it, and they complement one another with a logical continuity. Together they loom like so many lawgivers, raised by the age to answer its perplexities. In the lawlessness of Nature the Renaissance

man found the retribution of its freedom; he was at the mercy of chance; and the word which resounds down the age, the obscure power which dominated and haunted his life, was Fortune. The futility of destiny made faith a necessity; and the search for it produced the prophets who proposed and passed on the torch in turn from one to another. Seeking successively to master life by spirit, by intelligence, by refinement, and by instinct, they found, each according to the truth of his temperament, their vital principles in religion, in patriotism, in society, and in self-satisfaction; and between them they exhausted the alternatives. Their lives embodied the adventures of the basic ideas that men live by; and they developed them with such transparent simplicity and extreme consistency that they live on for posterity as types. The ascetic virtue of Savonarola, the expedient virtue of Machiavelli, the convivial virtue of Castiglione, the animal virtue of Aretino—what are these but the final solutions of those who fear life, those who accept it, those who compromise with it, and those who succumb to it? With the passage of time the ideas which they stated and lived with such force have become so familiar as to be commonplace; but they are commonplaces which the centuries cannot stale; if they are elementary, they are also fundamental. The lawgivers lie with their laws, but it was a man of the Renaissance who wrote: "Only the countenances of men change and the extrinsic colours, the same things always return, and nothing that we suffer but has happened to others before us." The obsolete is always reborn.

Introduction to the Transaction Edition

The *Man of the Renaissance*, first published in 1933, was a Book of the Month Club selection, and therefore judged appropriate for a large general audience. It's impossible to imagine that a large general audience would find this wonderful book equally attractive today, nor, for that matter, would I expect a more specialized academic readership for it. As William Anthony Hay wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* on July 16, 2011, "the connection between academics and the wider public...has been almost severed."

It's a pity, because history, well told, has a great capacity to enrich our understanding of the world, to give us a greater and more accurate perspective on issues of contemporary urgency, and to foresee the consequences of actions, whether our own or our leaders'. You are to be congratulated and envied for reading this volume, because few studies of the Italian Renaissance are so rich in detail, so ambitious in scope, so challenging in interpretation, and so dramatic in presentation. Ralph Roeder tells his story in four chapters, each revolving around one of the major figures of the high Renaissance: Savonarola, Machiavelli, Castiglione, and "the divine Aretino." Mix them together, and you've got Renaissance Man.

Why these four? First, because they were contemporaries in the period Roeder calls the "culmination" of the Italian Renaissance: 1494-1530, so they truly define the spirit of the age. Second, because they are the embodiment of "the basic ideas that men live by."

"The ascetic virtue of Savonarola, the expedient virtue of Machiavelli, the convivial virtue of Castiglione, the animal virtue of Aretino—what are these but the final solutions of those who fear life, those who accept it, those who compromise it, and those who succumb to it?"

Roeder tells the story, which is far more than a series of biographical portraits and analyses. Roeder takes us on a detailed visit to the courts, cities, and battlefields of Italy at a melodramatic moment when some of the greatest men and women (for there were many virile

women in key positions of command and influence in those years) were struggling to establish some sort of durable identity for Italy. At the same moment others, equally great and energetic, worked to undermine any hope of the creation of an Italian nation state. All of this occurred against the background of the revival of ancient learning, thanks to the arrival of Greek and Roman texts from the Middle East.

In this titanic struggle, the best and the worst of human nature came into play, from corruption to murder both singular and on a mass scale, from self-centered cynicism to blind religious zealotry, all erupting around two generations of seemingly tireless geniuses and rogues. Everyone alive at the time knew it, and Roeder revels in it. In the most famous history of the Renaissance, Jacob Burckhardt tells a story that contains, in a single stroke, the major virtues and vices of this extraordinary moment: a local officer freed a town from foreign aggression, and so the citizens debated amongst themselves what reward their civic hero should be given. They finally concluded that they could not possibly give him a sufficient sign of their gratitude, and concluded that they should elevate him to heavenly status by first killing him and then making him their patron saint. They took their cue from ancient Rome, as the Roman Senate had done the same thing with Romulus.

It is one of those stories whose veracity doesn't really matter at all. Burckhardt says it is "both true and not true, everywhere and nowhere," and it neatly presents many of the central themes of the Renaissance. It also points to the seamless integration of religious thought (and therefore religious leaders and institutions) into politics and warfare. Some of the most delightful, terrible, and insightful pages are devoted to the Vatican and its popes. The two that dominated the two generations in question were a Borgia and a Medici, and their very different temporal ambitions inspired both brilliant and tragic decisions on the ruler of the Papal States. Perhaps the most dramatic pages are devoted to the sack of Rome in 1527.

This is not to say that religion was invariably subjugated to politics, any more than the opposite. Driven by rage against the corruption of Florence and its Medici rulers, Savonarola called for the purification of the entire Christian world in terms that echo those of Martin Luther, barely a teenager when Savonarola was burnt at the stake in Piazza della Signoria. While their doctrines were very different, the two men

shared a common impulse—to purge the Church of corruption and restore Christianity to its original spiritual foundations—and their uncompromising fundamentalism inspired great masses of people to conflict, and to even go to war.

To be sure, the wars of the Renaissance were not “religious” in the same way as the wars of the Reformation, but Roeder’s sympathetic portrait of Savonarola shows how the Florentine monk meddled first in local politics (directly challenging Lorenzo the Magnificent to admit sin and make amends for his malefactions) and then in the armed conflicts that roiled Italy (supporting the French invasion). One of the wonders of this book is the demonstration that the theories of the “lawgivers” grew out of, and at the same time shaped, great political and military events. The four men were up to their necks in politics and war, and their successes and failures were often taken as evidence for the accuracy or wrongheadedness of their ideas and beliefs.

But not always, and not for all of them. Friar Girolamo Savonarola certainly believed his actions—all his actions—were divinely inspired, and if he failed it was due either to the wickedness of his enemies (he was particularly venomous toward the Jews, for example, albeit it was highly unlikely he knew the Medicis were originally Persian Jews), his own failure to perceive the divine will, or on occasion, even to deliberate deception from the heavenly hosts! “If I am deceived, Christ, you have deceived me! Holy Trinity, if I am deceived, you have deceived me! If I am deceived, Angels, you have deceived me! Saints in Paradise, Saints without number, if I am deceived you have deceived me!”

Machiavelli, on the other hand, was as pessimistic about men’s abilities to control events as he was about their capacity to master powerful rivers and other natural forces, along with their own basic nature. At best, he thought, one might master Fortune half the time, which was still better than the odds of producing virtue, since “man is more inclined to do evil than to do good.” Both failure and success, in Machiavelli’s view, can result from plain dumb luck. However, when it came to analyzing Savonarola’s downfall, luck was not part of the equation. The man of faith failed because he did not understand the requirements for victory. In one of his most famous and brutal phrases, Machiavelli put it bluntly: the Prophet unarmed always goes to ruin. Savonarola rose to power because of his oratorical skills and prophetic gifts. He predicted the deaths of three men: Lorenzo de Medici, the

King of Naples, and the Pope himself. They were gone in a very few years. This further enhanced his charisma, and gave him thousands of followers, even a political party. But his enemies had armies and militias, while the friar was unarmed, and was destroyed.

Roeder does not much like Machiavelli, whom he views in a very traditional way as a cynic, a manipulator, a hero worshiper (especially of Caesar Borgia), and a moral compromiser who was always ready to employ evil means to achieve a desired outcome. He greatly prefers Savonarola. Yet Machiavelli admired Savonarola (after all, he was no more an admirer of the Medici than the friar was); years after the execution, Niccolò would even leave open the question of whether Savonarola spoke directly with God. His criticism of the fiery preacher was not over ends, but the Prophet's insufficient means for his revolutionary enterprise.

Machiavelli and Savonarola were both involved in the creation of the modern nation state, the "state as a work of art" in Burckhardt's famous formulation. In no small part, the very idea of a modern state was the result of a fundamental change in military technology, namely the emergence of powerful cannons that could blow holes in the walls around the domains of the petty nobles. Before the new cannons, warfare did not always require armies at the ready. If a domain were besieged, its lord would gather his people within the walls, and engage mercenary forces to come and rescue them. But if the walls did not hold, there was no time for such maneuver, anyone hoping to survive a frontal assault would have to have his own soldiers on the spot and ready to fight, and the question of readiness was—and is—exceedingly important. It does not come naturally to a man to lay down his life for someone outside his immediate family. Willingness to sacrifice for something larger has to be learned, and thus when Machiavelli called for the creation of a permanent militia for Florence, he was insistent that the soldiers be trained, not only in the martial arts and virtues, but also in loyalty to the city and its leaders. Today we call it patriotism, and we take it for granted, seeing nothing extraordinary in citizens' armies. But in the early sixteenth century it was quite new. Soldiering was a profession, not a civic obligation, and armies were commodities for sale, or at least for rental.

Machiavelli knew that religion must play a role if the new state were to succeed. His advice to leaders was to employ "good laws, good arms, and good religion." *Pace* Mr. Roeder, the sort of religion

Machiavelli had in mind was almost certainly Savonarola's, from whom Machiavelli also took his vision of a frugal leader commanding a rich state. Indeed, Savonarola himself was a model of frugality, as he was of most Christian virtues. As the Vatican prepared his doom, the Pope's men snooped into the Friar's private life but could find no sin on which to base its forthcoming excommunication.

As Roder tells us, "it was a day when personalities played a preponderant part in politics," as befits Italy's entry into modernity. In the creative Florentine cauldron, so many energies were unleashed, that only a brilliant leader could provide the firm yet prudent guidance the new state required. Machiavelli and his sometime associate, Leonardo da Vinci, both sought in vain for such a leader, but famously failed to find one. Both were employed for a while by Caesar Borgia, and for a while they had high hopes in him, but at the crucial moment he was outwitted by the Pope and was destroyed. Machiavelli sought vainly for a new "Prince" who could purge Florence (or better, all Italy) of unworthy rogues, and his famous book can be read as an early modern classified advertisement: "wanted, one virtuous man prepared to assume total power by all necessary means and to do the terrible things required to restore this country to glory."

It was not to be, as Roeder remarks with considerable satisfaction: "with reason baffled, effort defeated, and friendship itself uncomprehending, the prophet subsided and let thought languish into the sensual soliloquy of instinct. What else was left? For, after all... Men may philosophize as they please...and *The Prince* was forgotten."

Machiavelli's reputation as perhaps the greatest political thinker in Western history rests not on the accomplishments of his lifetime but on *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, both published a generation after his death.

If Machiavelli and Savonarola provide us with a view of the Renaissance from the corridors and sitting rooms of the mighty, Castiglione and Aretino take us to quite a different place. The first guides us into the palace, not to help us become more powerful and influential, but to make us loyal, elegant, and helpful servants of the ruler. The second takes us behind the curtains of the rich and powerful to expose their secret passions, their innumerable self-indulgences, their triumphs, and their humiliations. The first was a consummate practitioner of his own advice. The second was less inclined to advise than to throw himself into the delights of the high Renaissance. Taken together, as

Roeder does so well, they provide a marvelous picture of the great stage set and the endlessly entertaining cast of characters that make the Renaissance not only intellectually and artistically challenging and satisfying but also a treat for anyone with a properly functioning sense of humor.

Both Aretino and Castiglione were inevitably involved in much of the scheming and even some of the warfare that occurred, but they were not destined for leadership nor, for that matter, to sit at the right hand of the Prince and provide either courage or sagacity. Castiglione fully intended to be a brave warrior, but his horse fell en route to the battlefield, and his potential moment of glory was gone. Henceforth he concentrated on becoming the greatest courtier in history. The “divine” Aretino attached himself to a true hero, Giovanni de’ Medici, but the hero died on the battlefield fighting the Germans. “If God granted him his allotted span, everyone would have known his goodness as I knew it, and I praise him for his merits, not from flattery.” Thereafter, Aretino plunged headlong into the pleasures of the flesh, the better to be able to provide his readers—all over Europe—with elegant and politically detailed accounts of the amorous activities, social failures, intellectual shortcomings, and physical frailties of Italy’s ruling class.

It was a tour de force. Listen to Roeder: “he was the poet of human conceit and he realized a universal desire by flattering it. His own reputation rested on the common craving for fame. He capitalized and exploited it; he created and controlled public opinion; he dispensed censure honor and made and unmade reputations; and his clients in turn accepted and spread and created his own credit.”

In the end, Aretino fell from grace in a tragicomic affair with a much younger woman: “for the first time he knew love and it baffled him. In the mingled rapture and remorse of his passion, sensation flowed into sentiment and sentiment into sensation in troubled confusion... He could not explain what had happened to him. Why was love not as simple as desire?”

Great pleasures await you.

Michael Ledeen
July 2011

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PART ONE

Savonarola

