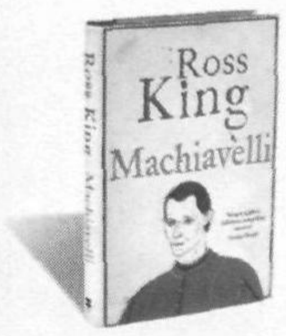
BOOKS

Machiavelli's Misery. A new biography reveals that the patron saint of political scheming was a charming, vulnerable man haunted by his own loss of influence

BY WILLIAM LEE ADAMS



NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI OFfered a famously dim view of human nature in *The Prince*. People are so "ungrateful, fickle, [and] false," he wrote, that a ruler should comfortably abandon conventional morality in dealing with them. He should slay deposed rulers and their families, recognize that friendship "yields nothing," and, beneath a veneer of compassion and honesty, master treachery and deceit. In short, because man is evil, leaders must know "how to do evil."

Such cold-hearted prescriptions have shaped Machiavelli's reputation as the grand master of brutal pragmatism. But they reveal surprisingly little about the man himself— a statesman, poet, playwright and Florentine patriot who lived from 1469 to 1527. In his highly readable new biography, *Machiavelli*, Ross King paints a more complete picture of Florence's most misunderstood thinker and his tumultuous times. King's breezy narrative doesn't spare Machiavelli, depicting him as an intellectual who loved prostitutes as much as philosophy. But it does present the fresh and sympathetic hypothesis that Machiavelli may not, in fact, have been so Machiavellian.

King, an art historian and the author of *Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling*, portrays a Machiavelli who lived by more than cunning and reason. He consulted astrologers and believed that the heavens influenced political events. Although he championed dissimulation, he was incapable of it: he refused to flatter fools and regularly mouthed off to superiors. He understood suffering, once urging his son to release a mule from its halter so that it might "regain its own way of life." And he inspired not fear, but affection. During his long trips abroad, friends wrote him letters professing that they were "seized by a marvelous desire" to see him, and reporting that his highly strung wife couldn't bear their separation: "Good Lord, there is no way to get her to calm down and take comfort."

Other women missed him, too: one friend wrote to inform him that a particular prostitute was also yearning for his return. Yet the amoral tone of Machiavelli's work seems to reflect his age more than his temperament. In the 16th century, gore and tragedy dominated the Italian peninsula, a hodgepodge of warring city-states, kingdoms and republics. Machiavelli roamed this minefield of intrigue on horseback as Florence's diplomatic envoy from the age of 29. In an early mission, he failed to resolve a long-standing feud between two families,

Power struggle *Machiavelli was imprisoned, tortured and exiled*

and King describes the result: "The heads of a dozen members of the Panciatichi family were stuck on lances and paraded through the city, while other disembodied heads were used for games of *palla*, a primitive version of tennis." Machiavelli later encountered a henchman trained in strangulation, a mother who kept a recipe book of beauty treatments and slow-acting poisons, and a ruler who ate his brother-in-law's heart.

Italy's ongoing wars provide King's book with its narrative structure, but Machiavelli's personal struggles give it drive. After 15 years of service—representing Florence abroad, raising and training its first citizen militia, and collaborating with Leonardo da Vinci on engineering projects—Machiavelli watched his beloved city-state fall to the Spanish in 1512. Under the subsequently installed Medici family, he was imprisoned, tortured by having his shoulders dislocated, and banned from his former offices. He retreated to the countryside with his wife, then pregnant with their seventh child. King doesn't miss the irony: "He understood better than anyone else how to seize power, and yet deprived of power himself, he spent many long years in the political wilderness."

They were the darkest years of Machiavelli's life, and King poignantly captures his anguish as he became a broken man, haunted by a sense of defeat and inadequacy. "Physically I feel well, but ill in every other respect," he wrote to a friend in 1513. Subsequent missives grew increasingly plaintive as he worried about "rotting away ... unable to find any man who recalls my service or believes I might be good for anything." The man who had once graced the courts of Louis XII and Ferdinand II now trapped birds for dinner and passed his afternoons in a tavern, playing backgammon with the local butcher. In August 1513, Machiavelli began writing *The Prince* "to overcome feelings of worthlessness and depression." He hoped the work would secure him a job in the government, but officials refused to show it to the Medicis; no more than three dozen people read it in his lifetime.

Political philosophers will find little new in King's sound, if predictable, analysis of Machiavelli's later writings, which show an evolution in his thinking. In *Discourses*, Machiavelli demonstrated a more idealistic outlook, embracing personal liberty, republicanism and good government. King's real achievement comes in his careful appraisal of Machiavelli's lesser-known works—the poems and bawdy plays that provided an outlet for his lascivious imagination and wit. In the play *Clizia* he mocked the folly of an older man pursuing a younger woman. In the novella *The Fable of Belfagor*, he speared matrimony by having the protagonist choose the torments of Hell over the anxiety of the "marriage yoke." By examining these lesser-known works and invoking Machiavelli's personal quirks and imperfections, King draws out what the revered philosophical writings mask: Machiavelli's own human nature. ■

MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY