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CLAREMONT
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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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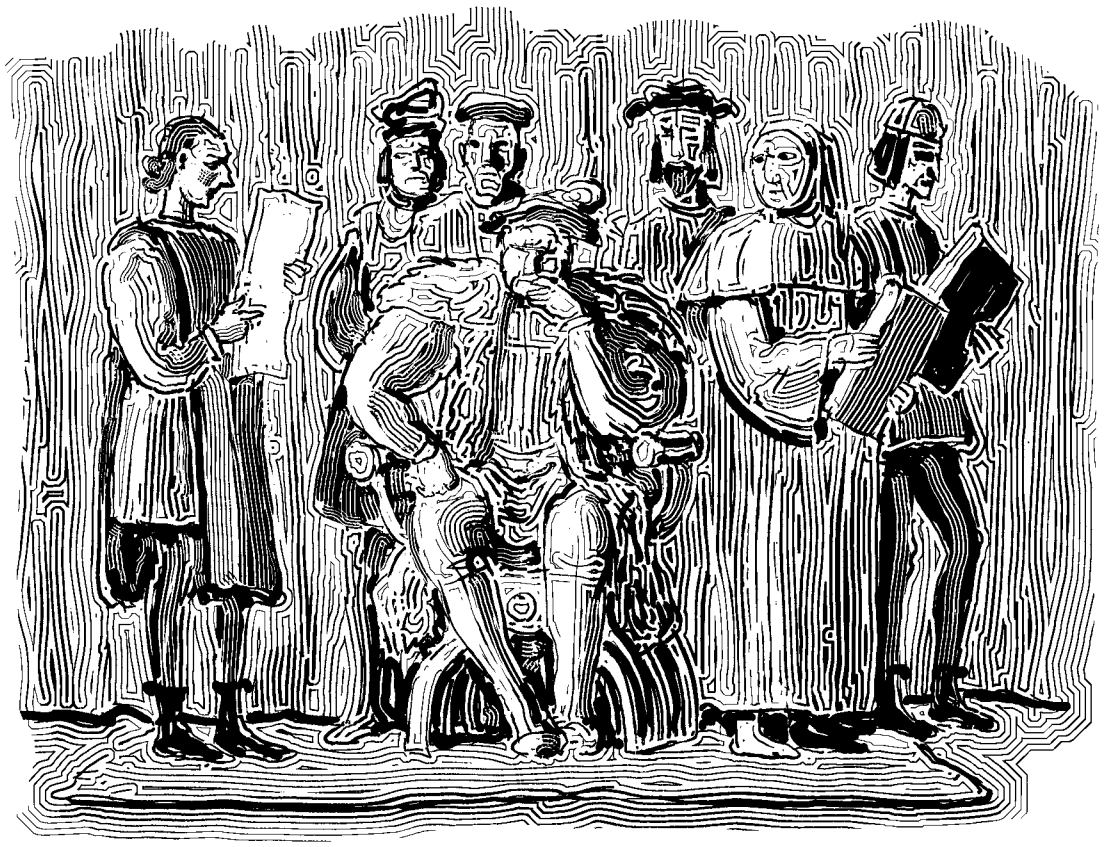
A Publication of the Claremont Institute
PRICE: $6.95
IN CANADA: $9.50

Book Review by Paul A. Rahe

The Petrarchan Moment

Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy, by James Hankins.
Belknap Press, 768 pages, $45



Within the larger scholarly world, James Hankins is best known for two achievements: his pioneering scholarly work on Renaissance Platonism, on Marsilio Ficino, and on Leonardo Bruni; and his accomplishments as the founder and general editor of the I Tatti Renaissance Library. Modelled on the Loeb Classical Library, this series, which now encompasses 90 volumes, aims to make accessible to non-specialists—in reliable editions with facing-page English translations, many available for the first time—the principal Renaissance Latin texts penned on historical, literary, philosophical, and scientific subjects.

Scholars operating within the narrower world of Renaissance studies or on its margins tend also to be aware that for more than a quarter of a century Hankins, a professor of history at Harvard University, has been re-examining Renaissance humanism as a whole, in scores of micro-studies focused on particular authors, with an eye to correcting the misapprehension of its character foisted on the larger world by Hans Baron in *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (1955) and in the two-volume *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism* (1988). In the process, Hankins has been undermining step by step the two quite different arguments concerning the roots of modern republicanism advanced by J.G.A. Pocock in *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975) and by Quentin Skinner in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978). In his magisterial new *Virtue Politics*, Hankins presents his findings to the larger scholarly world and to the general public.

Hankins's take is straightforward. As he demonstrates in detail, humanism was a movement with a political mission. Its founder was Petrarch. His inspiration was the ethical, political, and rhetorical works of Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca. His aim, and that of those who followed his example, was not just the recovery and dissemination of the lost works of classical antiquity. It was also their deployment in an attempt to provide a moral formation and a schooling in political prudence for the ruling orders in the various communes and principalities of Italy and of Europe more generally. In the thinking of Petrarch and those who came after, Hankins insists, regime questions did not loom large. These men were not "civic humanists" of the sort imagined by Baron. They were humanists, to be sure, and they cared passionately about the *civitas*—but they were not republican ideologues hostile to monarchy as such. For the most part, Hankins believes, they were content with monarchical rule. What they cared about was the character and discernment of those who ruled, and they regarded moral rearmament along classical lines as a panacea for the very considerable ills of the age in which they lived. Statecraft was from their perspective soulcraft, and they treated the inculcation of moral and intellectual virtue as the highest form of politics.

To this end, the Renaissance humanists of Italy broke with their medieval Scholastic predecessors by eschewing logic and metaphysics

and by emphasizing ethics, rhetoric, and the study of history. Although they all professed Christianity, and some were actually devout, they were less interested in the salvation of souls than in promoting good governance. They advocated education in what we now call the liberal arts. They aspired to be tutors to and the advisors of princes, and the impact their sense of purpose had on European—and eventually American—affairs was, and still is, immense. Although Hankins doesn't say so, those of us who teach history, philosophy, and literature in high schools, colleges, and universities are the heirs of these humanists. In attempting to civilize and teach prudence to those who aspire to join today's elite, we, too, practice what Hankins calls "virtue politics."

In the story he tells, the odd man out is Niccolò Machiavelli. Uniformity is not a word that can be used to describe the humanists. On various questions, they were at odds. And yet, for the most part, when it came to fundamentals, Giovanni Boccaccio, Bartolomeo Platina, Giovanni Pontano, Cristoforo Landino, Buonaccorso da Montemagno, Niccolò Perotti, Aldus Manutius, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Pier Paolo Vergerio, Coluccio Salutati, Guarino of Verona, Poggio Bracciolini, Pier Candido Decembrio, Leonardo Bruni, Flavio Biondo, Cyriac of Ancona, Leon Battista Alberti, George of Trebizond, Francesco Filelfo, Aurelio Lippo Brandolini, Francesco Patrizi, and the other figures inspired by Petrarch's summons to arms were on the same page. None of the men named, whom Hankins examines one by one in some detail, rejected as a waste of time Petrarch's program of moral rearmament or the ethical teachings of Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca. This, however, Machiavelli did—and in the most ostentatious way possible: by denying the very existence of moral virtue, asserting that a legislator must assume all men rogues, and suggesting that the channeling of self-regarding passions through institutional restraints is the only plausible road to good governance in a republican setting.

The tale that hankins tells is an Italian tale. He ignores the northern Renaissance and devotes his attention to Petrarch and to his 15th-century disciples. They were, he argues, responding to a civilizational crisis, and for a time it looked as if they had alleviated it. Then, out of the blue, catastrophe struck, which induced Machiavelli to go rogue, challenge the premises on which they had constructed their program, and suggest an alternative approach.

The crisis in question had to do with what Hankins calls "the collapse in the power and authority of the Holy Roman Empire and the Papacy"—which is to say, with the anarchy occasioned by the relative empowerment of kings, princes, and cities; by the Babylonian captivity of the papacy (1309–1378) and the Great Schism (1378–1417); and by the collapse of communal government and the emergence of petty tyrannies throughout much of Italy. It also had to do with the growing Ottoman threat. In the late 15th century, the humanists came to think that this crisis had been alleviated by the end of the Great Schism and the return of the pope to Rome, and by the fruit of their efforts when, under the influence of rulers whom they had educated and advised, an equilibrium was established within Italy between the peninsula's five principal powers—Venice, Milan, Florence, the kingdom of Naples, and the papacy—and a major Ottoman attack was fended off.

The catastrophe began in 1494 when Charles VIII of France marched into Italy and there was no one able, or at least willing, to stand up to his army. For the next 40 years, this wealthy, defenseless peninsula would be a battleground on which outside powers would compete for control, and more than three centuries would pass before Italians once again ruled their native land. If, Hankins argues, Machiavelli dismissed the humanist project, it was because it had proved to be a dismal failure.

Hankins is not the first to suggest that Machiavelli initiated a revolution in political thought. Many others have in a similar fashion juxtaposed the Florentine with Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. What Hankins has done in this regard that is new and valuable is to show us the immediate context within which

Machiavelli penned his principal works. This, in turn, enables us to understand just how thorough was the breach with Renaissance humanism opened up by the author of *The Prince*, the *Discourses on Livy*, the *Art of War*, and the *Florentine Histories*. This is a considerable service. For we will never come to a tolerably accurate understanding of the relationship between ancient and modern republicanism until we have abandoned the illusion of continuity fostered in various ways by Pocock—who asserts that Aristotle, Cicero, Machiavelli, James Harrington, and the American Founders belong to a common tradition—and by Skinner, who draws a sharp line between the Greeks and the Romans and reads the thinking of Machiavelli and his English Whig admirers back into the latter.

There can be little doubt that Hankins's thesis is sound. Petrarch did initiate the Renaissance. He outlined an educational program that his successors embraced, and they all took it for granted that the Greeks and the Romans were fundamentally in accord. By examining one figure after another, Hankins has piled up evidence more than sufficient to make his case. He has, moreover, opened up a new field of study. His mentor Paul Oskar Kristeller pioneered the careful study of the humanists. Hankins has now introduced us to them, and in his endeavors as an editor he is making more and more of their writings accessible to those unable to search out the pertinent manuscripts and previous editions of their works.

One can quibble with Hankins's claim that Machiavelli's Latin was not up to snuff or that his knowledge of the classics was superficial. One can question the contention that, in the *Discourses on Livy*, he treats faction in one fashion and, in his *Florentine Histories*, he treats it in another. And one can argue against the contention that Machiavelli underestimated the importance of firepower in his *Art of War*. After all, he does acknowledge the importance of heavy artillery, and his treatment of the arquebus is sound. In Machiavelli's day and for some time after, there was no substitute for burly men with pikes.

There is also one regard in which, I suspect, future scholarship will modify Hankins's overall claims. Hankins surveys what Petrarch and his successors wrote, but he doesn't fully explore what they intended. He knows that flattery was required, but doesn't, in my opinion, adequately reflect on the manner in which the humanists' situation imposed constraints on what they could profitably say. Some of them were, no doubt, genuine admirers of monarchy. Others, however, may well have kept their regime preferences under wraps. There were very few communal governments still in operation in 15th-century Italy. There were petty despots galore. To secure employment and to do any good along the lines of moral rearmament, one had to accommodate oneself to the service of these despots, as Baldassare Castiglione lets us see in his early 16th-century *Book of the Courtier*, and this ruled out speaking one's mind forthrightly on regime questions. Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero were prepared to celebrate virtuous monarchy as an ideal, but none of them ever identified a particular king as a virtuous monarch. Thomas Aquinas recognized that most of the Roman emperors were tyrants, and Hankins's humanists, who were more fully informed than the Scholastics of Thomas's day, aren't apt to have been blind. The princes they served were, for the most part, tyrants, and they knew it.

One fact stands out. With rare exceptions, as Hankins notes, Petrarch and his successors excoriated hereditary monarchy. What Hankins does not add is that, in the European context, one could hardly reject the hereditary principle without attacking the institution of monarchy at its root and intimating that the executive should be an elective—which is to say, a republican—magistrate. In *The Education of a Christian Prince*, which is modeled on the mirrors of princes penned by Hankins's Italian humanists, Erasmus goes one step further. After fiercely attacking the hereditary principle, he suggests that education is not the only antidote to its ills. There is another expedient: mixed government—an admixture of monarchy with aristocracy and democracy. Castiglione in the fourth book of his magnum opus has Ottaviano Fregoso, the future doge of Genoa, sound the same theme. There should be, he argues, a council of nobles and a council of commoners, and the prince should consult them about everything so that the polity "would thus have the form of the three good kinds of government, which are monarchy, optimates, and people." This is an echo of what we find in Plato's *Laws*, in Polybius' depiction of republican Rome, and in Cicero. My guess is that these early 16th-century themes originated in the 15th century if not earlier. Erasmus and Castiglione were genuine classical republicans—hostile to absolute monarchy, admirers of public deliberation, friendly to mixed regimes on the Roman model. Was the same true of many of Hankins's humanists? My suspicion is that further investigation would turn up example after example. The humanist rejection of the hereditary principle suggests that Petrarch's heirs exhibited a great deal more interest in regime questions than Hankins acknowledges.

Even, however, if I am right in attributing this species of regime politics to the humanists of the 15th century, it does not detract from Hankins' achievement. Whatever the course of future scholarship, it will have been *Virtue Politics* that opened up the field and set the agenda for those who came after. James Hankins has presented us with a new continent to explore; and, thanks to the I Tatti Renaissance Library, he is making it much easier for us to visit and tour.

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