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NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI  
THE PRINCE

A new translation by Peter Bondanella



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THE PRINCE

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI was born in Florence in 1469. Very little is known of his life until his entrance into the Florentine Chancery in 1498, where he served his mentor, the Florentine Standard-bearer Piero Soderini, until the return of the Medici in 1512 overthrew Soderini's republic and caused Machiavelli both the loss of his position and even brief imprisonment for his republican sympathies. *The Prince* was written in 1513 but not published until after Machiavelli's death, in 1532. It has since become a classic of political theory and social thought. In addition to a longer and more complicated work on republics, *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli wrote *The Art of War*, *The History of Florence*, lyric poetry, a novella, a number of brief essays and diplomatic narratives, and several plays, including the masterpiece of Italian Renaissance comedy, *The Mandrake Root*. He died in 1527.

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NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

*The Prince*



*Translated and Edited by*  
PETER BONDANELLA

*With an Introduction by*  
MAURIZIO VIROLI

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## INTRODUCTION

*The Prince* has generated polemical discussion ever since its appearance in the early sixteenth century. This slim volume has become a classic of modern social thought and a mainstay of courses on the great books, political theory, and Renaissance culture—and in all of these areas it continues to stimulate heated debate and controversy. While Machiavelli no doubt expected the critical tone of his treatise to provoke a sharp response among his readers, he might well have been surprised by the wide variety of different interpretations which have been suggested in the course of the last five centuries. The immediate practical purpose of *The Prince* was superseded within a decade of its composition, but its radically original treatment of crucial philosophical and political issues continues to attract new readers, many of whom are often unaware of any practical political goal Machiavelli might have intended in his argument.

The publication of *The Prince* generated a complex debate over its theoretical and moral implications that passed far beyond a discussion of its immediate practical purpose and its connection to the political fortunes and aspirations of the Medici family. Moralists, particularly in England and France, assailed the book as a compendium of cynical maxims fit only for evil tyrants. Elizabethan writers were scandalized and intrigued by what they saw as a typically Machiavellian character—although the character was most often a Senecan villain in doublet and hose. Their moral indignation was sometimes feigned, but the Elizabethans' nearly four hundred references to the Florentine Secretary introduced the derogatory terms 'Machiavellian' and 'Machiavellianism' into the English language. Some churchmen branded the book the work of the devil and its author an atheist, and Machiavelli's first name came to be associated with an already popular term for the devil: Old Nick. The book enjoyed the dubious distinction of being attacked from all sides. It was placed on the Index by the Catholic Church in 1559. Among Protestant



reformers, it symbolized all that was despised in the Italianate culture of High Renaissance Europe: popery, the Roman Curia, 'Reason of State', the Society of Jesus (in anti-Catholic propaganda Machiavelli was linked to Ignatius Loyola), and the moral corruption that Europeans liked to localize within the Italian peninsula but usually experienced closer to home.

As a result of this *succès de scandale*, *The Prince* became known at least indirectly to every sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reader. The traditional view of the 'Machiavellian' Machiavelli finds its best expression in the dramatic literature of the period: Machiavelli appears as a character in the prologue of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1589), the embodiment of Machiavellian amorality, who remarks: 'I count religion but a childish toy, | And hold there is no sin but ignorance.' More subtle Machiavellian figures include Shakespeare's Richard III and Iago.

In the seventeenth century Machiavelli's original views on republican government began to be studied as assiduously as his interpretation of princely rule. James Harrington, Francis Bacon, and a host of thinkers began to acknowledge Machiavelli's contributions to republican theory and to political realism in the *Discourses on Livy*, *The Art of War*, and *The Florentine Histories*, and they questioned the traditional view of Machiavelli as a teacher of evil. During the Enlightenment, Frederick II of Prussia, at Voltaire's instigation, assailed Machiavelli's immorality, but other thinkers, including Hume, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Alfieri, hailed the Florentine as the first modern thinker to have exposed the nature of political tyranny. Still later, during the Italian Risorgimento, the period that led to the nineteenth-century unification of Italy, Italians saw the final chapter of *The Prince* as a harbinger of their new nation.

In our own century the book has inspired a number of divergent and sometimes original interpretations. It has been variously read as the first work to analyse the role of the political elite; as the book which established the independence of politics from theology; as an early formulation of the political 'myth' required to galvanize apolitical masses into revolutionary action; as a practical handbook containing timeless rules for the

diplomat; as a useful guide to management and business practices; and, of course, as the handbook of evil. These changing interpretations in our own era, as well as in the more distant past, probably reveal as much about the book's readers as they do about the author's intentions and ideas.

### *Who Was Niccolò Machiavelli?*

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in Florence on 3 May 1469, the son of Bernardo and Bartolomea de' Nerli, from the neighbourhood of Santa Trinita. The Machiavelli had been a prominent Florentine family. Niccolò's father, however, was neither wealthy nor powerful. His law degree, and his properties on the outskirts of Florence, were barely sufficient to guarantee his family a modest lifestyle. In a letter to Francesco Vettori of 18 March 1513, Niccolò gives us a vivid summary of his youth: 'I was born in poverty, and at an early age learned how to script rather than to thrive.'<sup>1</sup>

Poverty did not prevent Bernardo from providing Niccolò with a good education that enabled him to learn grammar, rhetoric, and Latin. He never learned Greek, even if Florence was at the time one of the centres of Greek scholarship in Europe. He also never learned banking and trade, the two arts in which Florentines excelled. Unlike the most prominent humanists of his time, Niccolò was unable to read the great works of Greek philosophy and historiography in the original. The Latin world was, on the contrary, perfectly accessible to him. One of the few facts we know of Machiavelli's youth is that he copied out Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), the great poem describing the origins of nature—the sea, plants, and animals—and the condition of man.

From Lucretius, Machiavelli derived his disconsolate and realistic view of man's condition. Far from being the master of

<sup>1</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence*, ed. and trans. by James B. Atkinson and David Sices (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 222. All citations from Machiavelli's private letters are taken from this translation unless otherwise indicated.

the universe, man is in fact the victim of nature and of fortune. Man is born naked and bawling. Alone among the animals, he is capable of astonishing cruelty against his fellow human beings. Yet no other creature has such an enormous desire to live and such a thirst for—and need of—the eternal and the infinite.

With this conception of human nature and life, Niccolò Machiavelli appeared on the scene of Florentine politics in 1497. At the time, the major political and moral figure was the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola. Through his powerful oratory and his prophetic style, Savonarola had for years been denouncing the corruption of the papacy and the moral decline of Florence. As a remedy against moral corruption that was threatening to produce the irreparable fall of the city in the hands of a tyrannical regime, Savonarola urged the people of Florence to set up a republican government based upon a *Consiglio Maggiore* that was, by sixteenth-century standards, a very large legislative body. The Republic of Florence was actually instituted in December 1494, after the expulsion of the Medici, the family that, with its money and policy of patronage, had been the de facto ruler of Florence since the fifteenth century.

On 15 June 1498, a few weeks after Savonarola had been executed on a charge of heresy, Machiavelli was appointed by the new republican regime *Segretario* (Secretary) of the Second Chancery of the Republic and Secretary of the Ten of Liberty and Peace, a committee in charge of governing military matters and foreign affairs. Machiavelli's main task was to give the governors of Florence the information they needed to enable them to make appropriate and timely decisions. Whereas the political leaders of the Republic held their office for just a few months, Machiavelli's position was in principle a permanent job, with the obvious consequence that a capable and dedicated expert, such as he was, played an important role in the political life of the Republic.

In his position Machiavelli could count on the help of a number of subordinate assistants, such as Agostino Vespucci, Andrea di Romolo, and Biagio Buonaccorsi, who was to become a

loyal friend. Unlike his assistants, however, Machiavelli was often called to accompany Florentine ambassadors on delicate diplomatic missions. Even though the missions themselves were neither easy nor rewarding, he loved the opportunity they offered for travelling abroad, gaining direct experience of the mores of different peoples, and of studying their political institutions.

Between 1499 and 1512 Machiavelli had the opportunity to meet the most important political leaders of his time: the King of France, Louis XII; the Emperor Maximilian I; Pope Julius II; and Duke Valentino (Cesare Borgia). He visited several Italian courts, as well as France and the Tyrol. From his missions he was able to gain new insights into real political life and to know directly the minds, the ambitions, the vices, and the (few) virtues of the political leaders who were shaping the destiny of Italy and Europe.

In his diplomatic negotiations, Machiavelli very soon became aware of the political and military weakness of Italy vis-à-vis European nation-states like Spain and France. Divided into five major states (the Duchy of Milan, the Republic of Venice, the Papal State, the Republic of Florence, and the Kingdom of Naples) and a number of independent or semi-independent cities such as Genoa, Lucca, Bologna, Ferrara, and Siena, Italy lacked both political power and military might sufficient to protect the integrity of its territory. All Italian states, including the Republic of Florence, moreover, were relying for their safety on mercenary troops or on the protection of France or Spain.

To rectify this weakness, Machiavelli tried to persuade the political leaders of the Florentine Republic, and above all its highest authority, the Gonfaloniere (Standard-bearer) Pier Soderini, to institute an army, composed first of subjects of the dominion, and later also of Florentine citizens. One of his most important political writings of the period in which he served as Secretary, the *Parole da dirle sopra la provisione del danaio, facto un poco di proemio et di scusa* (*Words to be Spoken on the Law for Appropriating Money, After Giving a Little Introduction and Excuse*), is a powerful oration designed to convince the Florentine leadership that without a good army the Republic's liberty

was utterly insecure.<sup>2</sup> Machiavelli succeeded in his project: on 15 February 1506 four hundred soldiers of the newly instituted militia paraded in good order through the streets of Florence. It was his greatest political success.

Neither the new militia nor mercenary troops, and even less the king of France, Florence's alleged protector, were capable of defending the Republic from the assault of Spanish and papal troops in late August 1512. The assault had been carefully prepared by Pope Julius II and the Medici in exile. On 30 August the Spanish troops conquered and sacked Prato, a small town a few miles north of Florence. It was the end of the republican government led by Pier Soderini, and a new government totally controlled by the Medici was promptly set up in its place.

The fall of the Republic was the end of Machiavelli's career as Secretary. On 7 November 1513 he received a letter that relieved him of all his positions. A few days later another letter enjoined him to remain within the dominions of Florence for a year and to pay a surety of one thousand florins. Yet another letter on 17 November forbade him to enter the Palazzo Vecchio, the palace of the government, for a year. Between the end of November and 10 December officers of the new regime subjected him to close investigation to uncover any evidence of malfeasance. They found no such evidence. Even if vast amounts of money had flowed through his hands, Niccolò had served the Republic with complete and impeccable honesty.

Nonetheless, his tribulations were not over. A very poorly planned conspiracy against the Medici was unveiled. Machiavelli was suspected of involvement in it. He was imprisoned and tortured to obtain a confession that would have meant capital punishment. He was able to resist torture, however, and was released from prison on 11 or 12 March 1514, as a result of an amnesty that the Medicean government proclaimed to celebrate the elevation of Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici to the seat of Saint Peter, under the name of Leo X.

<sup>2</sup> For an English translation, see *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, ed. and trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), iii. 1439–43.

*Why Machiavelli Wrote The Prince*

When Machiavelli sat down in his farmhouse in Sant'Andrea in Percussina, a few miles south of Florence, to write *The Prince*, he was for everyone, and for himself, the 'former Secretary' of the bygone Republic, as he sadly signed a letter of April 1513. However, he did not compose his little treatise in order to please the Medici in the hope of obtaining some kind of political employment within the new regime they had established in Florence in 1512, or in Rome under the protection of the Medici Pope Leo X.

The truth is that Machiavelli did try to obtain a position from the Medici, but he did not write *The Prince* in order to win their favour.<sup>3</sup> He was hoping to be offered a new post in recognition of his unquestionable competence in the 'art of the state' and as a reward for his abilities and impeccable honesty, not as a gift in reward for flattery. As he wrote in the famous letter to Francesco Vettori of 10 December 1513:

Besides, there is my desire that these Medici princes should begin to engage my services, even if they should start out by having me roll along a stone. For then, if I could not win them over, I should have only myself to blame. And through this study of mine [*The Prince*] were it to be read, it would be evident that for the fifteen years while I have been studying the art of the state [*arte dello stato*], I have neither slept nor fooled around, and anybody ought to be happy to utilize someone who has had so much experience at the expense of others. There should be no doubt about my word; for, since I have always kept it, I should not start learning how to break it now. Whoever has been honest and faithful for forty-three years, as I have, is unable to change his nature; my poverty is a witness to my loyalty and honesty.<sup>4</sup>

Had Machiavelli intended to write a work primarily to obtain a job, he would have written a completely different text, full of praise of the Medici and their glorious history, replete with the

<sup>3</sup> The reader of *The Prince* should bear in mind that the original title Machiavelli gave to his work was in Latin—*De Principatibus*—and its literal translation in English would read *Of Principalities*. Machiavelli mentions this title in a letter addressed to Francesco Vettori, 10 Dec. 1513. See *Machiavelli and His Friends*, 264.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

kind of advice that men like Lorenzo or Leo X liked to hear. Machiavelli knew better than anyone else that the most important rule of successful flattery is to say what pleases the person from whom one expects to obtain favours. In *The Prince* he does exactly the opposite. Instead of repeating the well-established principles that had allowed the Medici to gain control over the city, Machiavelli gave them advice that they were not in the least able to appreciate, and which must surely have irritated them if they had decided to read Machiavelli's work. *The Prince* is a critique of the prevailing Medicean understanding of the art of the state, a policy founded upon a system of favours and patronage designed to ensure substantial control over the republic's institutions.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli addresses all the key issues concerning the security of a regime like that of the Medici, beginning with the hotly debated theme of the difficulty posed by the large number of supporters of the bygone Republic. With typical briskness, he assures his readers that, unlike what other advisers believed, the truth of the matter is that 'men are much more taken by present concerns than by those of the past, and when they discover benefit in present things, they enjoy it and seek no more. In fact, they will seize every measure to defend the new prince so long as he is not lacking in his duties' (Ch. XXIV).<sup>5</sup>

Machiavelli also rejects the idea that the new regime has to worry about those who were content with the old Republic and sustained it, claiming instead that the true danger comes from the aristocrats who were dissatisfied with it. It will be very difficult for the new prince to turn them into loyal friends, even if they have helped him to attain power (Ch. XX). A new prince must always regard the aristocrats as a serious threat to the state, because they have the means and the audacity to attack him openly if they are dissatisfied. He must therefore distinguish among the nobles between those who are prepared to associate their fate with his and those who are not:

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from *The Prince* are taken from the present translation and will be indicated by chapter number in the text proper.

Those who do not commit themselves can be evaluated in two ways. If they act in this manner out of pusillanimity and a natural lack of courage, you should make use of them, especially those who are wise advisers, since in prosperous times they will gain you honour and in adverse times you need not fear them. But when, cunningly and influenced by ambition, they refrain from committing themselves to you, this is a sign that they think more of themselves than of you. The prince should be on his guard against them and fear them as if they were declared enemies, because they will always help to bring about his downfall in adverse times. (Ch. IX)

The Medici, who always presented their regime as a 'civil principality' based upon 'the favour of the common people or with that of the nobility', would hardly have failed to read these lines as strong advice not to seek to ground their power on the nobles' support, as their counsellors were urging them to do (Ch. IX).<sup>6</sup> Against the trite proverb that 'he who builds upon the people builds upon mud' ('chi fonda sul popolo fonda sul fango'), endorsed by influential Florentine experts on matters of state, Machiavelli remarks that to secure a civil principality a prince 'must have the friendship of the common people' (Ch. IX). As he explains:

A prince can never make himself secure when the people are his enemy, because there are so many of them; he can make himself secure against the nobles, because they are so few. The worst that a prince can expect from a hostile people is to be abandoned by them, but with a hostile nobility, not only does he have to fear being abandoned but also that they will oppose him. Since the nobles are more perceptive and cunning, they always have time to save themselves, seeking the favours of the side they believe will prevail. Furthermore, a prince must always live with the same common people, but he can easily do without the same nobles, having the power every day to make and unmake them or to take away and restore their power as he sees fit. (Ch. IX)

Subversive though it was, such advice was less scandalous than his comments on the time-honoured Medicean practice of ruling

<sup>6</sup> See Maurizio Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Ch. 2, for a discussion of this point.



behind the scenes through loyal friends suitably appointed to the important posts of the republic. Civil principalities, Machiavelli warns, collapse as soon as the prince needs to take absolute authority. Since such a need may well arise, it is utterly unwise to believe that a principality in which the prince rules indirectly could last for long. A prince who governs 'by means of public magistrates', Machiavelli explains, is in a highly unstable position because he

depend[s] entirely upon the will of those citizens who are appointed as magistrates. These men can very easily (especially in adverse times) seize the state either by abandoning him or by opposing him. And in such times of danger, the prince has no time for seizing absolute authority, since the citizens and subjects who are used to receiving their orders from the magistrates are not willing to obey his orders in these crises. And in doubtful times he will always find a scarcity of men in whom he can trust. (Ch. IX)

It is difficult to imagine a more eloquent way of saying that the old traditional practice of ruling behind the scenes had to be abandoned, and new ways of governing be put into effect, if a solid state were to be constructed.

Along with the tradition of 'civil government', Machiavelli also attacks the other foundation of the Medicean art of the state, namely the policy of patronage and favours: 'for friendships acquired by a price and not by greatness and nobility of spirit are bought but are not owned, and at the proper time cannot be spent' (Ch. XVII). Favours and honours, he explains, generate at best a loyalty based on gratitude. But since men easily break the bonds of gratitude when they see that it is in their interest to do so, friendships acquired through private favours cannot offer a solid basis for the state. Much more effective than gratitude is fear, sustained by the threat of punishment. If one really regards interest and fear as the most powerful motives for men's conduct, one must conclude that for a prince it is not at all safe to rely on the gratitude of the partisans he has benefited, and that he should rather look for ways of making himself constantly feared. The policy of patronage cannot tie the partisans to the prince as strongly as the security of the state requires.

Once he has dismantled the basic tenets of Florentine wisdom on matters of state, Machiavelli explains that the true art of securing a principality cannot be the skill of controlling public institutions through one's friends, nor does it consist of dissimulating power under the guise of civility. It must first of all be the ability to create and to discipline a militia:

A prince, therefore, must not have any other object nor any other thought, nor must he adopt anything as his art but war, its institutions, and its discipline; because that is the only art befitting one who commands. This discipline is of such efficacy that not only does it maintain those who were born princes, but it enables men of private station on many occasions to rise to that position. On the other hand, it is evident that when princes have given more thought to delicate refinements than to military concerns, they have lost their state. The most important reason why you lose it is by neglecting this art, while the way to acquire it is to be well versed in this art. (Ch. XIV)

By saying that the prince should apply himself to the art of war and work to institute an army composed of his own subjects, Machiavelli was rejecting the Medicean view that the best way to secure a state was to disarm the people:

Now, there has never been a time when a new prince disarmed his subjects. On the contrary, when he has found them unarmed, he has always armed them, because when armed those arms become yours: those whom you suspect become loyal, and those who were loyal remain so, and they become your partisans rather than your subjects. Since all of your subjects cannot be armed, when those you arm receive benefits, you can deal more securely with the others. The difference in treatment toward themselves that they recognize makes them obligated to you. The others excuse you, judging it necessary that those who are in more danger and who hold more responsibility should have a greater reward. (Ch. XX)

For Machiavelli, the old way of building and preserving a regime, theorized over and practised in Florence since the times of Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464), had to be abandoned in order to embrace a new conception of the art of the state based on the principle that no state is a true dominion unless it is sustained by

an army composed of citizens or subjects. For Machiavelli, a state based only on patronage is utterly inadequate to permit a new prince to accomplish great things.<sup>7</sup> He wanted to instruct and motivate a prince who would be capable of liberating Italy from the ‘barbarians’, as we shall see, not simply of ruling Florence by conferring benefits on this or that individual, giving marriage dowries to the daughters of his partisans, protecting his friends from the magistrates, or other similar acts of patronage.

If his main aim was not to obtain the favour of the Medici, why then did Machiavelli compose *The Prince* in the way he did? Machiavelli composed his treatise in order to prove to everyone, and to himself as well, that although he had been dismissed as Secretary, he knew the art of the state better than anybody else in his time, and better even than the most revered political thinkers of antiquity, in particular Cicero and his modern followers. For this to happen, he had to compose a great work on the art of the state, that is, a work capable of teaching the goals and the means of political action in its greatest sense: the political action of founders and redeemers who have the ability to create new political and legal orders, to unite and emancipate Italy, and, for this reason, to attain perennial glory. Machiavelli’s new prince ought to be a new Cyrus, a new Theseus, a new Moses—certainly not a new Cosimo de’ Medici. Neither ancient nor modern political thinkers had composed a book designed to teach a founder and a redeemer. Machiavelli composed *The Prince* to provide this missing book, hoping in the process to contribute to the foundation of a new political order and to the emancipation of Italy.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Ch. XVIII and Ch. XXVI (‘An exhortation to seize Italy and to free her from the barbarians’) for examples of such ‘great things’ the new prince might accomplish.

<sup>8</sup> In the *Discursus florentinarum rerum post mortem iunioris Laurentii Medices* (*A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence*), composed between November 1520 and February 1521, Machiavelli writes a revealing eulogy of great philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato who were unable to found a republic in reality and had therefore to do so only in writing. For an English translation, see Gilbert (ed.), *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, i. 101–25.

The Prince *and the* Discourses on Livy

At this juncture the reader might well ask why a republican like Machiavelli should have composed a book to instruct a new prince. Over the centuries scholars have offered two answers. The first is the well-known argument that Rousseau made popular in his *Social Contract*: ‘While appearing to instruct kings he has done much to educate the people. Machiavelli’s *Prince* is the book of Republicans.’<sup>9</sup> The restoration of Machiavelli’s reputation as a republican thinker first began, however, in the late sixteenth century with Alberico Gentili, a jurist educated at Perugia who fled to England and was appointed in 1587 Regius Professor of Civil Law at Oxford. In his *De Legationibus (On Embassies)*, issued in 1585, he wrote an eloquent eulogy of Machiavelli, whom he praises as the author of the golden (*aureas*) observations on Livy, and as a man of unique prudence and learning. Those who have written against him, Gentili claims, have not understood Machiavelli’s ideas at all, and have indeed slandered him. The truth is, Gentili argued, that Machiavelli was

a strong supporter and enthusiast for democracy. [He] was born, educated, and received public honours in a republic. He was extremely hostile to tyranny. Therefore he did not help the tyrant; his intention was not to instruct the tyrant, but by making all his secrets clear and openly displaying the degree of wretchedness to the people . . . while appearing to instruct the prince he was actually educating the people. (*De Legationibus*, 3.9; author’s trans.)

Almost a century later, Spinoza resumed the interpretation of Machiavelli as a champion of liberty in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, published anonymously in 1670. The opinions of that

<sup>9</sup> *Le Contrat social* (3. 6). In the 1782 edition the following note was inserted: ‘Machiavelli was a decent man and a good citizen. But, being attached to the court of the Medicis, he could not help veiling his love of liberty in the midst of his country’s oppression. The choice of his detestable hero, Cesare Borgia, clearly enough shows his hidden aim; and the contradiction between the teaching of *The Prince* and that of the *Discourses on Livy* and the *Florentine Histories* shows that this profound political thinker has so far been studied only by superficial or corrupt readers. The Court of Rome sternly prohibited his book. I can believe it; for it is that court it most clearly portrays’ (author’s translation).

‘wise man’, wrote Spinoza, ‘seem to me particularly attractive in view of the well-known fact that he was an advocate of freedom [*pro libertate fuisse constat*], and also gave some very sound advice for preserving it’.<sup>10</sup> After Spinoza, the idea of Machiavelli as a misunderstood republican was authoritatively endorsed in Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire*,<sup>11</sup> and by Diderot in the *Encyclopédie* (‘it was the fault of his contemporaries if they misunderstood what he was getting at: they took a satire for a eulogy’).<sup>12</sup>

For this interpretation to be acceptable we would have to find in Machiavelli’s works or letters compelling evidence that his claims in *The Prince* are exaggerated in order to instil in the people feelings of hatred for princes. No such evidence exists, while abundant textual evidence confirms, on the contrary, that in *The Prince* Machiavelli was perfectly serious. In the *Discourses on Livy*, his republican masterpiece composed between 1513 and 1519, he was to instruct future republican leaders with the same kind of political advice found in *The Prince*.

The second possible answer to the question of why the republican citizen Machiavelli could also be the author of *The Prince* (to borrow the title of a seminal essay by Hans Baron), is that after the fall of the Republic Machiavelli came to the conclusion that the times called for the institution of a princely government and therefore set down to write the intellectual foundation of that new regime, his *Discourses on Livy*.<sup>13</sup> The most compelling textual evidence for this interpretation is a well-known passage from that work (*Discourses on Livy*, 1. 18) in which he sums up his discussion of whether it is possible to set up a republican government in a corrupt city: ‘Even if one had to be established or maintained there, it would be necessary to lead it more towards a monarchical

<sup>10</sup> Benedict De Spinoza, *The Political Works*, ed. A. G. Wernham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 313.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 2nd edn, 3 vols. (Rotterdam: Reiner Leers, 1702), article ‘Machiavelli’, note ‘o’.

<sup>12</sup> *Encyclopédie*, article ‘Machiavelisme’; I am quoting from the 1765 Neuchatel edition (ix. 793; author’s translation).

<sup>13</sup> See Hans Baron, ‘Machiavelli the Republican Citizen and the Author of *The Prince*’, in *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). The essay was first published in 1961.

than towards a popular government, so that those insolent men who cannot be improved [by the laws] would be held in check by an authority which is almost kingly (*podestà quasi regia*).<sup>14</sup> To understand this passage properly, we must take into consideration that, for Machiavelli, a good republican government must be a mixed government which encompasses the principles of the three classical forms of good political constitutions: monarchy, aristocracy, and popular government. Hence the passage quoted above means that in times of widespread political corruption and political and military crisis, a republican government must give a predominant role to its monarchical element, represented in Florence by the Gonfaloniere or Standard-bearer, the principal executive officer of the Republic.

Machiavelli was perfectly capable of putting in writing, as we shall see, the most subversive political claims. Had he intended to say that in a corrupt city the only form of government possible was a principality, he would have openly said it. He never made such a claim. In the *Discourses on Livy*, on the contrary, he wrote the most unequivocal defence of the superiority of republican governments over principalities. In 1520, when Cardinal Giulio de' Medici consulted him about a possible constitutional reform, Machiavelli recommended the restoration of a republican government.<sup>15</sup> The simple truth is that Machiavelli did not compose *The Prince* to sustain a political transition from a republic to a principality, but to instruct a founder of a new military and political order and a redeemer of Italy, as I have already indicated. Even if Machiavelli, in *The Prince* and elsewhere, indicates that the people can be the prince, he believes that the work of foundation and redemption can be carried out by one man alone.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Discourses on Livy*, eds. and trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 70 (the original Italian phrase at the end of the citation is inserted by the author). All additional English citations from this work come from this edition and will be noted in the text proper.

<sup>15</sup> For Machiavelli's recommendations, see the previously mentioned *Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence*, in Gilbert (ed.), *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, i, 101–25.

<sup>16</sup> See *Discourses on Livy* (1. 9), where Machiavelli declares that 'in organizing a republic it is necessary to be alone'. Machiavelli also speaks of the people as a prince in *The Prince* (Ch. XII); and in line 63 of the poem entitled 'Dell'Ingratitudine'

To these observations we must add another remark, namely that Machiavelli was not a philosopher committed to producing a political system, but an orator engaged in the practice of deliberative rhetoric. For a philosopher, writing one text advocating the principality and another advocating a republican form of government represents a contradiction and a problem; for an orator, such apparent contradictions are less problematic. To state that Machiavelli composed *The Prince* in the manner of an orator means to put forth an interpretation that challenges the view of *The Prince* as a scientific text, indeed the founding work (or one of them) of the modern science of politics.<sup>17</sup>

### The Prince as a Political Oration

Machiavelli grew up in a city that considered eloquence as the highest ornament of a free political life and a necessary component of the education of a good citizen.<sup>18</sup> To enable young Florentines to learn and effectively practise the art of eloquence, the Republic of Florence and its leading citizens devoted considerable resources in attracting prominent scholars to teach rhetoric at the Studio Fiorentino, the urban institution that eventually became the University of Florence. The words with which Angelo Poliziano, one of the most distinguished humanists of his times, opened his course on rhetoric in 1480 give us a sense of the subject's prestige in Machiavelli's Florence. Nothing is more beautiful, Poliziano explains, than to distinguish oneself in the very art that makes men excel over other animals; nothing is more

(“Tercets on Ingratitude or Envy”)—an English translation is included in Gilbert (ed.), *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, ii, 740–4.

<sup>17</sup> The interpretation of Machiavelli as founder of the science of politics is best expressed in Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1946), 130; and in Luigi Russo, *Machiavelli* (Bari: Laterza, 1949), 71.

<sup>18</sup> For discussions of rhetoric, oratory, and eloquence in Renaissance Florence, see Emilio Santini, *Firenze e i suoi oratori nel Quattrocento* (Milan–Palermo–Naples: Sandron, 1922), 67; Jerrold E. Seigel, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968); and Nancy S. Struever, *The Language of History in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

marvellous than to be able to penetrate the mind and the soul of a multitude, to captivate the people's attention, to drive their will and dominate their passions. Eloquence permits us to embellish and celebrate virtuous men and their actions, and to darken the wicked; to persuade one's dearest fellow citizens to pursue what is useful for the common good and to avoid what is damaging and malignant. Eloquence is like the breastplate and sword with which we defend ourselves and the common good against our enemies and the enemies of the republic. Thanks to eloquent men, Poliziano remarks, states have obtained the greatest advantages, and for this reason oratory has in all times been rewarded and held in the highest honour.<sup>19</sup>

Had Machiavelli not learned the art of rhetoric perfectly well, he would have had no chance of becoming Secretary of the Second Chancery of the Republic of Florence under the supervision of the renowned scholar Marcello Virgilio Adriani.<sup>20</sup> An important, indeed essential, aspect of his assignments was to write letters to inform the leading committees of the Republic (the Signoria and the Ten of Liberty and Peace) on matters of foreign policy and on issues pertaining to the Florentine dominion. Another equally important duty was to compose orations to be delivered before the Great Council of the Republic, or in public ceremonies. Both the letters and the orations required an impeccable mastery of the art of rhetoric.

Machiavelli learned the rules of eloquence by studying the works of the Roman theorists. We know from his father Bernardo's diary (the *Libro di ricordi*) that Niccolò had available in his house the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (*To Herennius*), wrongly attributed to Cicero, along with Cicero's *De Oratore* (*On the Orator*). Under the rubric of the deliberative genre (the section of rhetoric that teaches how to compose persuasive speeches on political matters), these works offered instructions on how to compose an oration on state affairs. When Machiavelli, between

<sup>19</sup> Angelo Poliziano, *Oratio super Fabio Quintiliano et Statii Sylvis*, in Eugenio Garin (ed.), *Prosatori latini del Quattrocento* (Milan–Naples: Ricciardi, n.d.), 883–5.

<sup>20</sup> See Peter Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli: Florentine Humanism in the High Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).



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