

MACHIAVELLI'S *PRINCE*

Machiavelli's *Prince*

A New Reading

ERICA BENNER

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*Quanto piú mi è cresciuto la speranza, tanto mi è cresciuto el timore . . . Oimé,
che io non truovo requie in alcuno loco! Talvolta io cerco di vincere me stesso,
riprendomi di questo mio furore, e dico meco: Che fai tu? Se' tu impazzato?
Quando tu l'ottenga, che fia? . . . Non sai tu quanto poco bene si truova nella
cose che l'uomo desidera, rispetto a quello che l'uomo ha presupposto trovarvi?*

*The more my hope has grown, the more my fear has grown . . . Woe is me!
I can't find rest anywhere! Sometimes I try to conquer myself, reproaching
myself for this fury of mine, and say to myself: What are you doing? Are
you crazy? When you get her, what'll it amount to? . . . Don't you know how
little good a man finds in the things he has longed for, compared with what
he expected to find?*

(Mandragola, Act IV, scene 1)

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Abbreviations

Machiavelli's works

<i>Ai Paleschi</i>	Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 1.
<i>AW</i>	<i>Art of War</i> [Dell' arte della guerra]. Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 1.
<i>Cagione</i>	<i>Cagione della Ordinanza</i> . Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 1.
<i>CC</i>	<i>The Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca</i> [La vita di Castruccio Castracani da Lucca]. Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 3.
<i>D</i>	<i>Discourses on Livy</i> [Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio]. Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 1.
<i>Decennale</i>	Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 1.
<i>Dell' Ambizione</i>	<i>Tercets on Ambition</i> . Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 3.
<i>Di Fortuna</i>	<i>Tercets on Fortune</i> . Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 3.
<i>Discursus</i>	<i>Discourse on Remodelling the Government of Florence</i> [Discursus florentinarum rerum]. Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 1.
<i>FH</i>	<i>Florentine Histories</i> [Istorie fiorentine]. Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 3.
<i>GA</i>	'A Portrait of German Affairs' [Ritratto delle cose della Magna]. Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 1.
<i>Legations</i>	<i>Legazioni e Commissarie</i> . Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 2.
<i>MF</i>	<i>Machiavelli and his Friends: Their Personal Correspondence</i> . Trans. and ed. James B. Atkinson and David Sices. Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 2.
<i>Provisione</i>	<i>Provisione della Ordinanza</i> . Original in <i>Opere</i> vol. 1.3.

Other works

<i>AP</i>	Aristotle, <i>Politics</i>
<i>AR</i>	Aristotle, <i>Rhetoric</i>
<i>ANE</i>	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
<i>GD</i>	Guicciardini, <i>Dialogues</i>
<i>LH</i>	Livy, <i>Histories</i> [Ab urbe condita]
<i>ME</i>	Benner, <i>Machiavelli's Ethics</i>
<i>PolH</i>	Polybius, <i>Histories</i>
<i>PL</i>	Plutarch, <i>Parallel Lives of Greeks and Romans</i>
<i>PM</i>	Plutarch, <i>Moralia</i>
<i>SJW</i>	Sallust, <i>Jugurthine War</i>

SWC	Sallust, <i>War with Catiline</i>
TA	Tacitus, <i>Agricola</i>
TH	Tacitus, <i>Histories</i>
TPW	Thucydides, <i>Peloponnesian War</i>
VA	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>
XC	Xenophon, <i>Cyropaedia</i>
XH	Xenophon, <i>Hiero</i>

Introduction

De' principi si parla sempre con mille paure e mille rispetti.

Princes are always spoken of with a thousand fears and a thousand hesitations.

(*Discourses*, I.58)

Niccolò Machiavelli's *Prince* is one of the most famous books in the world—and perhaps the least understood. Its author announced the existence of a first draft 500 years ago, in a December 1513 letter to his friend Francesco Vettori. The letter begins with a vivid description of how Machiavelli spent his days at his small family estate outside Florence, where he had gone in March after suffering a series of political and personal disasters. The Florentine republic he had served for 14 years had been overthrown in September of the previous year. In the ensuing months Machiavelli was dismissed from his political posts, accused of taking part in a conspiracy against the new rulers, imprisoned, and tortured. Recovering his spirits *post res perditas*, 'after these wretched affairs',¹ he tells Vettori that his greatest solace comes in the evenings when, retreating to his study:

I step inside the antique courts of the ancients where, lovingly received by them . . . I nourish myself on that food that alone is mine and for which I was born. . . . And because Dante says that no one makes knowledge [*fa scienza*] without retaining what he has understood, I have jotted down what capital I have made from their conversation and composed a little work [*opusculo*], *De principatibus* ('Of principalities'), in which I delve as deeply as I can into the cogitations concerning this topic, disputing the definition of a principality, the categories of principalities, how they are acquired, how they are maintained, and why they are lost. And if ever any whimsy [*ghiribizo*] of mine has given you pleasure, this one should not displease you. It ought to be welcomed by a prince, and especially by a new prince; therefore I am dedicating it to His Magnificence Giuliano.²

In September 1512 the 33-year-old Giuliano de' Medici had led troops against Florence, backed by Pope Julius II and Spanish forces, and deposed the republican government that had employed Machiavelli. By late 1513 rumour had it that Giuliano's brother Giovanni, now Pope Leo X, might employ him

¹ As he inscribed on a copy of his 'Discourse on the reorganization of the Florentine state for arms'.

² Machiavelli to Vettori, 10 December 1513, *MF* 263–5.

to assert papal control over the Romagna,³ as a decade earlier Pope Alexander VI had used his son Cesare Borgia—a key figure in the *Prince*—to further his political aims in the same turbulent region. These plans never materialized, and Giuliano died early in 1516. In the end Machiavelli dedicated his book to Giuliano's and the Pope's nephew Lorenzo II, who had been made *de facto* ruler of Florence in 1515.

We do not know when the dedication was changed, or whether Machiavelli ever presented his *De principatibus* to any Medici prince. It remained unpublished during his lifetime, but circulated among his friends and further afield. In 1523 an extensively rewritten version appeared under the name of Agostino Nifo, a philosopher and theologian with close ties to the Medici. Nifo's changes preserved many of the *Prince*'s themes and examples, but recast its basic analytic categories to make it more amenable to prevailing monarchical and Church doctrines.⁴ Machiavelli's book was first published posthumously in 1532. But Church and other political authorities soon came to view it as a major troublemaker. Its author was denounced to the Inquisition in 1550. When the Church instituted its Index of Prohibited Books in 1559, all Machiavelli's works—not just the *Prince*—were put on the list. According to Lord Acton, 'he was more rigorously and implacably condemned than anybody else', and 'continued to be specially excepted when permission was given to read forbidden books'.⁵

What made this 'little work', the 'whimsy' of a disgraced Florentine civil servant, so threatening—and whom did it threaten most? The *Prince*'s early readers were sharply divided on these questions. Those loyal to the Papacy and Catholic monarchies were the first to denounce it as a godless handbook for tyrants. The English Cardinal Reginald Pole claimed that it attacked the foundations of civilization itself. 'I found this type of book', he declared, 'to be written by an enemy of the human race. It explains every means whereby religion, justice and any inclination toward virtue could be destroyed'.⁶

Readers with republican and anti-Papal sympathies thought the exact opposite. Behind its morality-subverting mask, they insisted, the *Prince*'s basic purposes were moral: it surreptitiously defended justice, virtue, and civility against the corrupt Popes and monarchs who were the real enemies of human decency. Henry Neville, an English republican who published translations of Machiavelli's works, agreed with critics like Pole that the *Prince* described the moral sickness of its author's times in terms that 'are almost able to nauseate

³ Their father was Lorenzo 'il Magnifico' (1449–1492). Their elder brother, Piero, had been Florence's last Medici head of state, having been expelled from the city with his family in 1494.

⁴ Nifo (2008/1523). See chap. 1.

⁵ Acton (2005/1907), 215.

⁶ Pole in Kraye, ed. (1997/1536), 274–85.

his Readers, and talk of such Ulcers, Boyls, Nodes, Botches, Cankers, etc. that are scarce fit to be repeated'. But rather than wanting to 'teach or exhort men to get this Disease', Machiavelli sets out the causes and symptoms of political disorder 'to the end that men may be bettered, and avoid being infected with it, and may discern and cure it, whenever their incontinence and folly shall procure it them'.⁷ The Dutch-Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza argued that when Machiavelli 'describes at great length' the means used by 'a prince whose sole motive is lust for despotic power', his intention was to warn free peoples not to hand over their fate to such men, however desperately they longed for a saviour.⁸ Alberico Gentili, an Italian Protestant who taught law at Oxford, claimed that the *Prince* sought to expose the corrupt maxims practised, but not openly admitted, by princes and popes. 'While appearing to instruct the prince', Machiavelli was actually 'stripping him bare' to reveal the tyrannical dispositions found in most new princes.⁹ One of the last readers to endorse this republican and moral reading of the *Prince* was the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who observed in 1762 that the Holy 'Court of Rome', as he called the Papacy, 'has severely prohibited [Machiavelli's] book, and I should think that it would: it is the Court he depicts most clearly'.¹⁰

Five centuries later, many readers might think that these early disputes over the *Prince*'s morality or immorality and its stance toward tyranny missed the book's profounder message: that traditional distinctions between moral and immoral, tyranny and freedom cannot help us to address all the complex issues that arise in political life. On this now widespread view, the *Prince* teaches us—perhaps quite reasonably—that those in power have no choice but to relax their moral standards if they want to stay safe and secure their parties' or countries' interests in the real world.¹¹ Even the book's most sympathetic readers find it hard to understand how Rousseau could hail the *Prince* wholeheartedly as 'the book of republicans'.¹² The political conflicts that inspired Machiavelli to write the *Prince* are remote from our own experiences; its examples and philosophical categories seem dated. When we don't engage too deeply with them, what we get from its pages is a bold defence of pragmatic amorality, which shocks few people today.

This book tries to bring some of those conflicts, examples, and categories back to life, so that we can better understand why some of the *Prince*'s most perceptive early readers—including many philosophers who, like Machiavelli, had great literary talents—saw it as a work aimed at restoring high moral standards in politics. Machiavelli's *Prince*, I suggest, is a masterwork of ironic writing with a

⁷ Neville (1691), 5. ⁸ Spinoza (1958/1677), VI.4–5, VII.1, X.1.

⁹ Gentili (1924/1594), III.9. ¹⁰ Rousseau (1964/1762), III.6.

¹¹ See Philp (2007), 37–54. ¹² Rousseau (1964/1762), III.6.

moral purpose. On the one hand, it warns aspiring princes about the dangers of trying to assert absolute control over people who care about freedom. On the other, it teaches ordinary citizens to recognize early warning signs of control-hungry behaviour in their leaders, and to impress on them the need to establish political and military ‘orders’ (*ordini*) that can keep tyranny at bay. Machiavelli uses a range of ironic techniques to underscore the problematic character of many princely actions he seems to praise.¹³ At the same time, he uses irony to exercise readers’ capacities to see through misleading political spin.

At the *Prince*’s core is a biting *critique* of both ruthless *realpolitik* and amoral pragmatism, not a revolutionary new defence of these positions. Far from eroding ancient contrasts between good and evil, just and unjust, or tyranny and freedom, Machiavelli’s book shows readers the dire consequences that ensue when our language and practices fail clearly to distinguish them.

If the *Prince*’s apparently amoral teachings were not meant in earnest, why has its irony eluded so many readers, especially in the past two centuries? Irony is by definition non-transparent. It seems to say one thing while hinting indirectly at another message, by means of signs, puzzles, or other provocations. The successful relaying of this message depends on an audience sufficiently attuned to the relevant clues to pick them up. Such clues may be created by a text itself, so that readers need no knowledge of referents outside the text to recognize or interpret its ironies. More often, ironic writings presuppose common understandings between writer and readers that the former play on to provoke recognition. If a writer lavishes praise on the achievements of a man whose projects famously collapsed before or shortly after his death, or describes a notorious villain as a model of virtue, readers familiar with the subject’s reputation will suspect that the author is being ironic. While such understandings are evocative for readers immersed in a particular culture, the ironies may be lost on readers remote from that culture.¹⁴ This book seeks to recover a small part of the background needed to understand the *Prince*, paying particular attention to ironic forms of writing that were well known to Machiavelli’s contemporaries, but seem obscure today.

MACHIAVELLI’S LIFE AND TIMES

The year Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) was born, the mantle of ‘first citizen’ in Florence was assumed by the 20-year-old Lorenzo de’ Medici,

¹³ I outline some of these in the section on ‘Ironic Techniques’ that follows this Introduction. There is a wide-ranging literature on irony, both in general and in specific writers or periods. For example, see Muecke (1982), Knox (1989), and others cited below.

¹⁴ See Hutcheon (1995), 97.

later called *il Magnifico*. In theory, Florence was a republic, governed by a broadly based body of citizens through elected magistrates. In reality one family, the Medici, had dominated the city for 35 years as a *de facto* dynasty. They were immensely wealthy bankers who had risen to ‘princely’ rank—but without holding princely or noble titles—by funding popular wars and using their money and connections to secure loyal supporters.¹⁵ Most Florentines acquiesced in the fiction that their city still lived as a free republic where the rich and powerful were subject to the same laws as everyone else—even while the Medici manipulated ballot boxes to put their supporters in public offices, intimidated opponents with questionably legal taxes, and whittled away at the popular council that gave less well-connected citizens a voice in government.

In 1494, 60 years of Medici rule ended, and broad-based republican institutions were restored.¹⁶ In 1498, the 29-year-old Machiavelli was appointed to his first public posts as Second Chancellor of the republic and Secretary to the Ten of War. Both posts made him responsible for highly sensitive matters of diplomacy, intelligence gathering, and military security. For reasons that remain unclear, but probably due to his father’s status as a tax debtor, Machiavelli was not eligible for elected magistracies or to sit on public councils, though he could work as a civil servant.

Nevertheless, within a few years the young Secretary developed a burning desire to overhaul Florence’s sorry defences, an ambition that went well beyond his official brief. Florence was a merchant city run by tradesmen and bankers who relied for their military needs on foreign troops or hired mercenaries. The first of these dangerously increased the city’s dependence on much stronger foreign powers, while the second—as Machiavelli would stress in the *Prince*—were even less trustworthy. This lesson was brought home to Florentines in 1499 when a prominent mercenary captain, Paolo Vitelli, was executed on suspicion of having been bought off by Florence’s enemies. Machiavelli saw clearly that the trouble could have been avoided if Florence had captains drawn from among its own citizens, and a military subject to strict civilian control. Between various diplomatic missions and starting a family, he launched an energetic campaign to form a citizen militia. Despite intense opposition, Machiavelli’s project was approved by 1506, and he was appointed as its head. Troops from his militia helped to win a celebrated victory over Pisa in May 1509.

Florence was not the only Italian state whose military defences needed reforming. Venice, Naples, Milan, and smaller city-states had long used foreign troops or mercenaries, a situation that forced them to depend heavily on external powers, chiefly the kingdoms of France and Spain and the German

¹⁵ As described in Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories*, FH VII.

¹⁶ See chaps 2 and 24. See Najemy (2006), 250–453 for an excellent account of Medici ascendancy and its opponents.

Empire. Italians paid a high price for such dependence. Both French and Spanish kings claimed dynastic rights over Naples, and brought vast armies in to the peninsula to fight over it. Milan was a veritable battleground for various foreign powers seeking a foothold in northern Italy. While recent popes in Rome claimed to exercise coherent leadership over Italy's several, mutually competitive states, in practice their policies tended to undermine prospects of forming any cooperative Italian defences, as Machiavelli argues in the *Prince*, chapter 11. Both his early and later writings show a strong interest in seeking to improve military collaboration among Italians to prevent the worst: the gradual 'acquisition' of all of Italy by large foreign monarchies with their formidable military forces. In the decades after Machiavelli's death, this did indeed come to pass.

Machiavelli's first lengthy work was a poem, *Decennale* (1504), that chronicled the depressing realities of recent Italian history and described the self-destructive power struggles among states, princes, and pontiffs. Machiavelli presents one ambitious new power after another seizing triumphant supremacy over the others—only to tumble ignominiously from its heights, bringing bloodshed and chaos in its train. Each new player throws himself into the game of power politics with more zeal and ingenuity than the last. Over and over, cities or princes adopt supposedly 'Machiavellian' measures: they break laws and promises, deceive friends, and show no scruples about taking what belongs to others. And over and over, after fleeting successes, their ambitions collapse. If lasting success eludes individual players, the collective results are far worse. Each new attempt further destroys chances of any stable order in Italy. By the poem's end,

By no means is Fortune yet satisfied; she has not put an end to Italian wars, nor is
the cause of so many ills wiped out;
And the kingdoms and the powers are not united . . .¹⁷

Machiavelli does not treat this hyperactivity as natural or uncontrollable. It arose, he suggests, from an unhealthy craving to dominate others. Both Italians and foreign powers were to blame. Florentines too had their share of responsibility. Their bitter wars to control neighbouring Pisa made them rely far too heavily on French support, earning the Secretary-poet's reproach: 'and you [Florentines] for Pisa have too strong desire'.¹⁸ In a later poem Machiavelli marvels that men don't check their political and military appetites, since their devastating results have been seen many times before:

That which more than anything else throws kingdoms down from the highest
hills is this: that the powerful with their power are never sated.

¹⁷ *Decennale* I, lines 523–6.

¹⁸ *Decennale* I, line 536. See chap. 5.

Introduction

xxv

From this it results that they are discontented who have lost, and hatred is stirred up to ruin the conquerors;

Whence it comes about that one rises and the other dies; and the one who has risen is ever tortured with new ambition and with fear.

This appetite destroys our states; and the greater wonder is that all recognize this transgression, but not one flees from it.¹⁹

Instead of wanting to teach princes and republics to play this power-political game, Machiavelli depicts it as wantonly destructive of the most cherished human values: safety, stable order, and freedom. ‘From Ambition’, he wrote in another poem usually dated around 1509,

come those wounds that have killed the Italian provinces . . .

If from others a man will deign to learn the ways of Ambition, the sad example of these wretches can teach him.²⁰

These recurring critical judgements of excessive ambition and competitive power-politics should not be forgotten when we read the *Prince*.

Another notable feature of Machiavelli’s early writings is their irreverence toward the arrogant powerful. His literary executor (and grandson) Giuliano de’ Ricci reported that Machiavelli’s youthful works included a blisteringly satirical play based on Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, composed around 1504. Like its Greek model, Machiavelli’s play mocked high-profile contemporaries; sadly, it has long been lost.²¹ Machiavelli’s correspondence shows that he and his friends revelled in puncturing the pretensions of the ‘great’, and in mocking those who mistook titles for quality. Unembarrassed by his relatively modest background, in one of the first letters attributed to him the 28-year-old Machiavelli stoutly defended his family’s claims in a property dispute with the powerful Pazzi clan. Here we get a taste of Machiavelli’s lifelong fondness for deflating anyone’s claims to be superior because of mere birth and connections—and of his sense of drama. ‘If we, mere pygmies, are attacking giants’, the letter declares, we show our far greater ‘*virtú* of spirit’ by taking on ‘a competitor at whose nod everything is done immediately.’ Rather than see the Pazzi ‘bedecked with our spoils’, the Machiavelli would ‘strive by every means available’ to recover it, even if their hopes of winning were slim: for ‘whatever outcome Fortune may reserve for us, we shall not regret having failed in such endeavours’.²² In the event, Machiavelli’s family won the case, proving on a small scale a point Niccolò would often make in his writings: that comparatively weak families, individuals, cities, and peoples should always resist those who try to take what is theirs. Even if they lose

¹⁹ Machiavelli, ‘The Ass’ (*Asino*), V.34–46.

²⁰ *Dell’ Ambizione*, lines 122–3, 160–1.

²¹ Radif (2010) has tried to reconstruct its main themes.

²² Machiavelli to Cardinal Giovanni Lopez, 2 December 1497, *MF* 7–8.

some battles, their efforts make life harder for their oppressors; and their value is seen in the free-spirited quality of their actions, not in victory or defeat.²³

When reading the *Prince*, it is essential to remember that Machiavelli was never only a practical political man or a political ‘scientist’. From an early stage in his life he was also a poet, a writer of imaginative letters, and a brilliant satirical dramatist. Indeed, this last talent won him more fame among contemporaries than his political works. His comedies *Mandragola* and *Clizia*, both written after the *Prince*, were hugely popular in Machiavelli’s lifetime, and even now the *Mandragola*—an excoriating send-up of moral and political corruption in Florence—is widely considered one of the greatest Italian plays.²⁴ It should not seem improbable that his more ‘serious’ political works include a large satirical or ironic element.²⁵ And many of the *Prince*’s chapters have a distinctly dramatic structure, imitating the rising ambitions and difficulties of ‘new’ princes.

MACHIAVELLI, THE MEDICI, AND THE *PRINCE*

In 1510 the hot-headed Pope Julius II launched a crusade to expel the French and other foreign ‘barbarians’, as he called them, from Italy—not long after he himself invited them in.²⁶ When Florentines refused to break ties with the republic’s long-time ally France, Julius threatened to overthrow the government and restore the Medici by force. At the end of August 1512, with Julius’ blessing, Spanish troops attacked Prato, a neighbouring city under Florentine control, and ‘massacred the city’s population in a pitiable spectre of calamity’, as Machiavelli wrote a few weeks later.²⁷ Distraught Florentines agreed to Spanish and papal demands, and the Medici reclaimed their former standing as ‘first citizens’ in a republic ostensibly still based on widely shared power and the rule of law.

In fact, the newly installed leadership promptly dismantled many institutions that had protected public freedoms. Freedom of expression was sharply curtailed. Open or suspected critics of the new government were silenced in various ways—in a few cases through exile, in others through fear of being slapped with punitive taxes. Machiavelli’s citizen militia was one of the first casualties of the new quasi-principality. In November 1512 he was stripped of both his posts and banished from the chancellery offices. His

²³ See *ME* chap. 5. ²⁴ See Martinez (2010), Fachard (2013).

²⁵ While both satire and irony often say what is not meant, irony is subtler: it is less transparent than satire, and thus more easily overlooked, and usually aims to provoke thought where satire aims more simply to ridicule or shame its subjects.

²⁶ See chap. 26.

²⁷ Machiavelli to a Noblewoman, circa 16 September 1512, *MF* 215–16.

case was exceptional: according to Ridolfi, no other chancellery officials except Machiavelli's loyal assistant Biagio Buonaccorsi were sacked.²⁸ Worse was to come in February 1513, when a conspiracy against the Medici was revealed and Machiavelli was suspected of involvement. Though no evidence was found against him, he was imprisoned for three weeks and subjected to several bouts of interrogation under torture. Even then he would not stay silent vis-à-vis the Medici, but wrote two sonnets to Giuliano, mocking his own pathetic situation and humorously protesting his innocence.²⁹ He was released in a general amnesty after Giovanni de' Medici was elected Pope Leo X.

Machiavelli's ensuing correspondence with Vettori, now Florence's ambassador in Rome—and deeply unhappy about the recent *coup d'état*, though his brother's friendship with the Medici shielded him from suspicions of disloyalty—gives us a vivid picture of Machiavelli's attempts to cope with his own harsher fate. Refusing to give up hope of returning to political life and his far-reaching projects for reforming Florentine defences, he implored Vettori to take up his case with the new Medici Pope and his cousin, Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, later Pope Clement VII. Then in December he announced the existence in draft of his work on principalities, which he had already shown to other close friends and was constantly revising: 'I am', he told Vettori, 'continually fattening and currying it.' He explained his reasons for wanting to present the book to Giuliano, though not his reasons for writing it: to escape poverty, and in 'the 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 'through this study of mine, were it to be read, it would be evident that during the fifteen years I have been studying the art of the state I have neither slept nor fooled around'.

To modern readers used to a more ideological style of politics, it might seem odd that Machiavelli longed to work for a government that had brought him to such a 'great and continuous malignity of fortune'.³⁰ This desire does not, however, necessarily indicate a pragmatic willingness to adapt his political loyalties or principles. Medici-led governments were seldom so autocratic as to force critics to choose between active opposition and wholehearted allegiance. This one allowed many men who were known supporters of the deposed republic, including a number of Machiavelli's friends, to continue working as diplomats and civil servants. It was not naïve for Machiavelli to hope that he might earn a living as they did, perhaps working in his old field of external defence, without getting entangled in partisan conflicts. It was even possible to imagine working from within some middle-level government post to gently prod the new leaders toward reform.³¹

²⁸ Ridolfi (1963).

²⁹ Machiavelli, 'Two Sonnets to Giuliano'.

³⁰ *Prince*, Dedication.

³¹ See Conclusion.

Indeed, ancient and humanist precepts considered it the duty of good men to help their cities by getting close to rulers—especially unjust or tyrannical ones—and doing whatever they could to influence their conduct for the better.³² In more oppressive times, they may only be able to restrain a ruler's excesses. But in the best case, they might persuade him to give up the tyranny or principality altogether, and voluntarily establish a republic. Machiavelli took a stab at the second, more radical kind of persuasion in 1520 when, after the death of the *Prince's* eventual dedicatee Lorenzo II, he was among several known critics of the Medici who were asked to suggest improvements to the government. His response advises the Medici to give up their princely 'state' voluntarily, and suggests reforms that would take the city nearer to the form of a 'true republic'. The arguments are not idealistic. Machiavelli insists that it is in the Medici's own interests to step down and give power back to 'the whole body of citizens' and their ancient laws. Otherwise their government would never be stable, and must soon turn toward full-blown tyranny or savage partisan warfare. Either way, Machiavelli implores his addressees to 'imagine how many deaths, how many exiles, how many acts of extortion will result' if matters remain as they are.³³

In 1513 Machiavelli was in no position to offer similar advice—at least not directly. Despite Vettori's efforts, the Medici cold-shouldered Machiavelli's appeals to give him a chance to prove his good faith and usefulness to his fatherland. But if he was barred from serving it through active politics and unable freely to discuss his ideas for reform, he found indirect ways to express his political views when it was risky to state them outright. In his years of diplomacy and intelligence gathering, Machiavelli had become adept as a writer of coded and semi-cryptic dispatches. In private letters too, he often speaks of being constrained to convey messages by dropping hints or 'signs' (*cenni*) between the lines of innocently chatty text, due to the sensitive content of some exchanges.³⁴ When in 1520 he was commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de' Medici to write a new history of Florence—paid work under government auspices at last, though still not in active politics³⁵—he told his friends that he had deep reservations about how and how far to express his true opinions. 'Here in the country I have been applying myself . . . to writing the history', he writes to Francesco Guicciardini:

and I would pay ten *soldi*—but no more—to have you by my side so that I might show you where I am, because, since I am about to come to certain details,

³² See Plutarch's 'That a Philosopher ought to Converse Especially with Men in Power', and 'To an Uneducated Ruler', *PM* X.28–71.

³³ *Discursus*, 115.

³⁴ See *MF* 51–3, 365, 393–5, 398; also *AW* VII.123–33.

³⁵ A few years later after completing the *Histories*, Machiavelli's well-connected friends finally persuaded Giulio—now Pope Clement II—to entrust him with minor diplomatic missions, and then to establish a new version of his civilian militia. In 1527 the Medici were expelled from Florence and a republic was restored. Machiavelli died soon afterward.

I would need to learn from you whether or not I am being too offensive in my exaggerating or understating of the facts [*le cose*]. Nevertheless, I shall continue to seek advice from myself, and I shall try to do my best to arrange it so that—still telling the truth—no one will have anything to complain about.³⁶

But even when he did not have to dissimulate for political reasons, Machiavelli seems to have enjoyed writing in paradoxes that force readers to puzzle out his message. And the *Prince*, as we'll see, is packed with paradoxes and an ancient form of 'coded' language.

A PECULIAR KIND OF HANDBOOK

What kind of book is the *Prince*? In outward appearance, it resembles other 'mirrors for princes' (*specula principum*), a type of work common in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, with roots in ancient times.³⁷ These books sought to teach rulers how to do their job in an effective and just manner. They were typically dedicated to younger, less experienced rulers by older men who offered the benefit of their practical or philosophical wisdom. The manner of their teaching could be more or less direct. More direct ones took the form of handbooks that present straightforward rules or maxims, interspersed with examples from ancient history. Isocrates' letter 'To Nicocles' and Seneca's *De clementia*, dedicated to the emperor Nero, were famous exemplars. Their purpose was not simply to exhort rulers to act wisely and justly, but also to warn them of the dire consequences they must suffer if they fail to do so. Thus Isocrates tells the tyrant Nicocles that although kings are placed in authority over vast wealth and mighty affairs, and therefore imagined to be 'the equals of gods', the unpleasant truth is that 'because of their misuse of these advantages' they have brought it about that many consider the life of a ruler as a terrible burden. When people reflect on the great 'fears and dangers' so many monarchs have faced, their unhappy ends and 'instances where they have been constrained to injure those nearest and dearest to them', they 'conclude that it is better to live in any fashion whatsoever than, at the price of such misfortunes, to rule over all Asia'.³⁸

Other 'mirrors for princes' were historical and literary works that taught similar lessons indirectly, by presenting images of rulers to be imitated—or avoided. In such works, the author keeps a lower profile than in openly didactic handbooks. Instead of making straightforward judgements about

³⁶ Machiavelli to Guicciardini, 30 August 1524, *MF* 351.

³⁷ For a comparison of the similarities and differences between the *Prince* and other 'mirrors for princes' that differs from my interpretation, see Skinner (1978), 113–38.

³⁸ Isocrates, 'To Nicocles', 4.

better and worse methods of rule, he offers a complex portrait of a ruler's life and deeds, and invites readers to evaluate them for themselves. Perhaps the greatest work of this type is Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, meaning 'The Education of Cyrus'. Along with Virgil, Xenophon is one of only two writers whom Machiavelli names in the *Prince*, and the *Cyropaedia* is the only book he names.³⁹ His manifest interest in that work when writing the *Prince* and later the *Discourses*, where he refers six times to the *Cyropaedia*—more than to any other work except Livy's histories—suggests an essential starting-point, though a challenging one, for readers who seek to understand Machiavelli's message and puzzling methods of writing.⁴⁰

There is one very notable difference between the *Prince* and more conventional 'mirrors for princes' composed nearer to Machiavelli's own times.⁴¹ These sought to teach rulers how to be good monarchs, which meant above all how to avoid doing whatever leads to tyranny. The opposition between good monarchy and bad tyranny lies at their core. Machiavelli's little book seems to dispense with this opposition. The words 'tyrant' and 'tyranny' are altogether absent, an extraordinary omission in a book that appears to have the same educative purposes as other handbooks. Moreover, the *Prince* seems to recommend the most notorious methods and aims that had been associated with tyranny since ancient times: deception, the violation of oaths, the assassination of suspect or inconvenient allies, taking advantage of weaker foreign states that ask for your aid, and even the quest for 'absolute' power.⁴²

Does Machiavelli's work thereby break with all traditional political morality, ancient as well as modern? This view gained a wide currency in the twentieth century. But the idea that the *Prince*'s teachings are uniquely 'modern' is a rather recent construction, which appears convincing only if we take the book's morality-subverting assertions at face value. There are very good reasons, however, not to do so.

IRONY AND POLITICAL CRITICISM

The word 'irony' comes from the Greek *eirōneia*, meaning dissimulation or feigned ignorance. An ironic statement or work appears to say one thing while conveying another meaning. The presence of irony is signalled by a tension between explicit statements or appearances and quite different, unstated implications of what the ironist presents. Since the impulse behind ironic writing is 'a pleasure in contrasting Appearance with Reality',⁴³ it has long

³⁹ Chap. 14. ⁴⁰ See chaps 6 and 14; Strauss (1958), 161–2, 291; ME 71–88.

⁴¹ As well as the fact that Machiavelli wrote in the vernacular.

⁴² The last in chap. 9. ⁴³ Sedgewick (1965), 5.

been used as a weapon of political criticism. When depicting political leaders who use decent words to cloak far less decent realities, the critical ironist mimics their skewed values as a mirror for all to see—excusing or praising what deserves to be condemned, omitting or belittling what should be commended. Irony is especially suited for political criticism in conditions where it is dangerous for writers to express their views openly. Ironic techniques play down or mask, but seldom completely hide, a writer's critical views of a subject: they use various clues or signals to alert readers to judgements that differ from those made explicitly.

Irony may have constructive as well as critical aims. Ancient writers such as Xenophon, Virgil, Tacitus, and Plutarch used ironic dissimulation as a tool of moral and political education.⁴⁴ Its aim was to train readers to distinguish mere appearances of virtue or wisdom from qualities that deserve those names. This philosophical exercise had important practical uses. By reading works that imitate the specious rhetoric and appearances encountered in public life, people learn how these phenomena are generated, and become better equipped to avoid harmful policies or traps set for them by ambitious leaders. Since in political reality both leaders and ordinary people are constantly bombarded with half-truths and debased moral standards, ironists present these standards—or behaviour that conforms to them—without openly critical comment, challenging readers to resist becoming infected by them.

Inspired by ancient ironists, many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers treated irony as 'a game with a deceptive surface which the reader is challenged to penetrate'. They used what Douglas Duncan calls the 'art of teasing' as a 'process of educative testing . . . whereby the moral intelligence of the public was to be trained by being subjected to attempts to undermine or confuse it'.⁴⁵ If readers, or viewers of an ironic play, are inclined to accept what is falsely presented as wisdom as truly wise, they fail the test. They either allow deceptive arguments and appearances to entrap them—as happens daily in political life, often with disastrous consequences—or their judgement was already corrupted.

Before Machiavelli, several Italian writers discussed these critical and educative uses of irony, in some cases admitting that they practised it themselves. Annabel Patterson has traced an important strand of critical dissimulation centred on Virgil's pastoral poem the *Eclogues*, where many readers detected a muffled yet distinct 'republican voice' behind louder declarations that praised or acquiesced in tyranny. The great poet Petrarch (1303–1374), whose *Italia mia* is quoted at the end of Machiavelli's *Prince*, wrote that he had been inspired by Virgil's example to write 'the *Bucolicum Carmen*, a kind of cryptic poem (*poematis genus ambigui*) which, though understood only by a few,

⁴⁴ On Xenophon and Plutarch, see ME 64–84; on Virgil, below; on Tacitus, O'Gorman (2000).

⁴⁵ Duncan (1978), 37, 2.

might possibly please many; for', he explains, 'some people have a taste for letters so corrupt that the well-known savour, no matter how sweet, offends them, while everything mysterious pleases them, no matter how harsh'. Petrarch adds mischievously that his cryptic poem had once fallen into the hands of 'some high-ranking personages' who were represented in them, but were unable to decipher those dangerous allusions. At the more obvious level, his poem aimed to 'please' the corrupt, particularly certain men of power; at a deeper level that remained opaque to them, it told the far less pleasing truth. For 'though truth has always been hated, it is now', the poet declares, 'a capital crime'.⁴⁶

Virgil and Petrarch's critical ironic tradition was rekindled in Florence under the first Medici 'princes'. Writers here faced a glaring contradiction between the city's old republican ideals of shared power, free expression, and transparent justice, and the realities of Medici control. Patterson identifies subtly critical strategies in a number of apparently deferential writings, including a pastoral poem dedicated by Cristoforo Landino to the 'Magnificent' Lorenzo. By placing its dedicatee in a now lapsed 'phase of decency and innocence', the poem hinted at the gap between that golden age and present, deficient realities 'while permitting Landino to remain laudatory without'. In 1487, when Machiavelli was 18, Landino published a commentary on Virgil's *Eclogues* suggesting that the Roman poet adopted the mask or 'persona' of a character living happily under the empire. But he 'concealed beneath that vulgar surface another sense more excellent by far, so that the work was adorned with a double argument': the obvious one seeming to celebrate his times and the emperors, the 'hidden' one discussing 'greater matters'. Landino refrained from saying what these were, but managed to slip into his own scholarly commentary 'an extraordinary republican moment' discussing liberty, and other passages that 'counter, or at least complicate . . . expressions of unequivocal support for Medician politics that Landino inserted into his prefatory address'.⁴⁷ Given his contemporaries' familiarity with such strategies, it is hardly far-fetched to suspect that Machiavelli may have used them for similar purposes.

SIGNS OF IRONY IN THE *PRINCE*

Why suspect that the *Prince* is a thoroughly ironic work? Discrepancies between the overtly prince-friendly *Prince* and the *Discourses*' clear preference for republics are one ground for this suspicion. The discrepancies are still

⁴⁶ Patterson (1987), 12–13, 43–4.

⁴⁷ Patterson (1987), 67–8, 75–8. Also see O'Hara (2007) on ironic and other truth-seeking uses of inconsistency by Roman authors.

greater on a careful reading of the *Florentine Histories*.⁴⁸ Before and after he wrote the *Prince*, Machiavelli was critical of the methods used by ‘new’ princes, including the Medici, to make themselves rulers over their own or others’ cities. The main theme of his early poems—the *Decennale*, *Di Fortuna* and *Dell’ Ambizione*—is how the unscrupulous methods and ambitions of power-hungry popes, new princes, and *stati* were ruining Italy; while his 1520 *Discursus* directly urges the Medici to restore a *vera repubblica* in Florence or face inevitable disaster.⁴⁹ It is hard to believe that the same author whose early and late writings treat the phenomenon of self-aggrandizing, unprincipled new princes as a lethal civil disease would—in a bout of opportunistic job-seeking—purport to teach the same princes how to succeed in their business.

Secondly, the *Prince*’s often shocking content raises the question of whether Machiavelli could reasonably have expected political and Church authorities in his time to welcome his little work. How did he expect the Medici and other ecclesiastical ‘princes’—so eager to cast themselves as legitimate champions of order, justice, and religion—to respond to his audacious suggestions that they should assassinate their rivals, break their oaths, and launch offensive wars without any pressing necessity? As Rousseau pointed out in 1762 and Garrett Mattingly in 1958, Machiavelli’s choice of modern examples would have been seen as scandalously provocative in his times, and recognized as a sign of ironic purposes.⁵⁰ If Machiavelli’s end was to please his city’s new authorities so that they would let him return to public life, his means—laying bare and seeming to approve of the serpentine ways used by all new princes, especially recent popes—seem oddly chosen.

The *Prince*’s use of ancient examples raises further suspicions. Most modern readers see nothing problematic in Machiavelli’s advice to imitate the Roman Empire’s ceaseless struggles for ever-greater ‘greatness’; or to pursue grandiose ambitions on the pattern of Theseus, Romulus, or Cyrus; or to use hunting as practice for war. But anyone who consults the *Prince*’s main ancient sources—Xenophon, Sallust, Polybius, Livy, and Plutarch—must be deeply puzzled, since they treat these themes in far more critical ways than Machiavelli appears to do. In some cases, his overt judgements of ancient figures clash so violently with those of his favourite authors that one cannot help but suspect irony. Perhaps not every reader in Machiavelli’s times would have read enough Polybius or Livy to realize that the *Prince*’s praise of the despicable and buffoonish Philip V, king of Macedon, was as improbable as its praise

⁴⁸ Rousseau (1964/1762), III.6 claimed that ‘the contradiction between the maxims of his book on the Prince and those of his discourses on Titus Livy and of his history of Florence proves that this profound politician has so far had only superficial or corrupt readers’.

⁴⁹ See *ME* 16–37.

⁵⁰ Mattingly (1958). In Rousseau’s view, ‘the choice of his execrable hero’, the notoriously violent Cesare Borgia, ‘suffices to exhibit [Machiavelli’s] secret intention’ to criticize corrupt political standards.

of Borgia. But a reader with even a little humanist education would surely have wondered whether, by urging modern princes to imitate the ‘criminal’ emperor Severus—as Machiavelli calls him in the *Discourses*—the author was being ironic. It is sometimes suggested that he sought to subvert all ancient judgements. A more likely purpose was to expose the corrupt thinking of princes in his ‘times’, when judgements were so perverted that the actions of devious and violent ancient rulers were widely imitated and admired.

But the best reasons to suspect that the *Prince* is ironic can be found in the style and content of the text itself. Leo Strauss has perceptively discussed its many stylistic peculiarities.⁵¹ Overtones of bold certainty are mingled with doubtful, nervous, or ominous undertones, followed by long discussions of the difficulties—or impossibilities—of ever attaining the goals set out with such confidence. When such problems appear in Machiavelli’s masterfully controlled writing, readers who appreciate his logical rigour and literary gifts may reasonably suspect the presence of irony.

As for content, there are serious problems of coherence among the *Prince*’s most general standards. If we try to identify a few basic criteria for evaluating the book’s numerous maxims and examples, a text that at first blush seems to present its author’s straightforward judgements soon starts to look slippery. Machiavelli, as everyone thinks they know, held that the ‘ends justify the means’. But what, in the *Prince*, are the appropriate ends of prudent action? At times the personal greatness, reputation, and survival of the prince himself are all that seem to matter for Machiavelli. At other times, he implies that a prince’s desires for power can only be satisfied if he gives priority to the stability, security, and well-being of the ‘generality of people’ (*universalità*) over his private ambitions. Nor do these two ends always converge in the *Prince*. In chapter 19, for example, one of the two ‘happiest’ Roman emperors, Severus, achieves great personal power and security by oppressing the people. On the other hand, chapter 12 suggests that princes are strongest who put military commands—including the prince’s own command—under strict civilian and legal controls.

In chapters 3 and 4, again, Machiavelli describes—and seems to commend—republican Rome’s ambition to dominate the ‘free’ province of Greece, although he also states that there was no pressing necessity for the conquest. Then in chapter 5 he sets out compelling reasons to respect people’s desires to live in freedom from foreign occupation, and warns princes that they must face recurrent violent resistance if they remove that freedom. It is hard to see how Machiavelli, or anyone else, can give equal weight to both these ends—non-necessary conquest for the sake of maximizing power on the one hand, desires for freedom on the other. And it seems inconsistent that the same book teaches princes and empires how to seize power, even ‘absolute’ power, over peoples who value self-government. Here and in other instances, the *Prince*’s morally

⁵¹ Strauss (1958).

flexible ‘Machiavellian’ precepts appear to contradict the book’s strongest, most consistently developed arguments. Many readers have perceived a contradiction between Machiavelli’s strong preference for freedom and his apparent reluctance to criticize the Romans for depriving other peoples of their independence.⁵² But there are, in fact, fiercely critical undertones in Machiavelli’s discussions of Rome’s imperial ambitions. In the *Discourses* he says that expansion became ‘pernicious’ to republican Rome during and after the wars with Carthage and Greece, shows the terrible costs of the city’s penchant for constant military expansion, and says point-blank that Rome’s imperial overreaching destroyed the republic’s cherished liberty and security. His criticisms of decreasingly virtuous Roman ‘modes’ in the later republic are less direct in the *Prince*, but nonetheless audible.⁵³

Machiavelli’s basic standards become still harder to define when we ask what he considers the most effective means for pursuing princely ends. There is a deep, recurring tension between two ‘modes’ of action discussed throughout the *Prince*. One is associated with steadiness and trust, the other with changeability and deceptive appearances. At times Machiavelli insists that a prince’s self-preservation depends on satisfying his subjects’ desires for non-arbitrary rule, transparency, firm mutual obligations, and regular order. At other times, the most effective princely ‘modes’ are said to be non-transparent, variable in accordance with ‘the times’, and indifferent to stable expectations on the part of subjects or allies. Chapter 18 tells princes to break faith when this gives them an edge over rivals, or helps them rise to greatness. Yet in chapter 21 and before, Machiavelli says that it is *always* best to make and keep firm commitments to subjects and allies—even if this sometimes puts the prince on the losing side, and seriously limits what he can do to increase his own power. More generally, chapter 25 begins by advancing a cautious approach to dealing with fortune’s caprices by patiently building ‘dykes and dams’ long before troubles strike. This approach is linked to the *Prince*’s most obvious practical aim: to teach readers how to construct a well-ordered, well-defended *stato* that has fair chances of lasting long after their deaths. But on the very next page, Machiavelli declares that it’s better to handle fortune with youthful impetuosity than with an older man’s caution, and to beat her into submission instead of patiently building firm orders to regulate her moods.

THE USES OF INCONSISTENCY

There are several easy solutions to the *Prince*’s apparent contradictions. The easiest is to say that they were inadvertent, products of a not very systematic

⁵² Plamenatz (2012), 48; Hörnqvist (2004).

⁵³ See chap. 3.

mind or the author's volatile 'passions'. Such accounts will seem implausible to anyone who detects the logical structure, powers of clear judgement, and artistic care that permeate the *Prince*. Another solution sees Machiavelli's inconsistencies as a deliberate expression of scepticism, intended to unsettle readers' received notions of truth and reflect a world where no stable judgements are possible.⁵⁴ Sceptical readings are superficially plausible given Machiavelli's highly ambiguous style of discussion. Nonetheless, I find them hard to accept. The *Prince* and all Machiavelli's main writings appeal constantly to stable standards of truth against falsehoods and misleading appearances, and to reasonable judgements against unreasonable opinions. He doesn't tell readers straight out what constitutes a 'true knowledge of histories', but the *Discourses* state clearly that lack of such knowledge causes moral confusion and political disorders.⁵⁵ To speak as Machiavelli often does of the false and dangerous appearances that lead men to ruin, he must have in mind some truer qualities behind the appearances that, when recognized, help avert destruction. Without defining these qualities for readers, he invites them to consider for themselves what they might be, and to recognize their profound importance for any sustainable—and recognizably human—orders.

Among contemporary scholars, perhaps the most favoured solution treats the *Prince's* inconsistencies as merely apparent: Machiavelli's different political standards are relative to circumstances. On this view, Machiavelli thought that some circumstances are friendly to freedom in republics, while in others principality or even tyranny 'has good effects and there is no alternative to it'.⁵⁶ At times one should work steadily and cautiously to forestall fortune's downturns, at other times strike and beat her; sometimes break faith, but also know how to glean the benefits of others' trust in your fidelity.

If one looks for a general statement of this circumstance-relative position in the *Prince*, the best candidate is the claim made near the end of chapter 18 that a prince 'needs to have a spirit disposed to change as the winds of fortune and variations [*variazione*] of things command him'. This claim is echoed in chapter 25, where we read that if one 'would change his nature with the times and with affairs, his fortune would not change'. If variability is Machiavelli's overarching criterion of political *virtú*, while careful ordering or stability or freedom are appropriate aims of *virtú* only in some conditions, then many of the *Prince's* apparent inconsistencies can be explained away.

But if we follow the order of the *Prince's* text and pay close attention to its language, we find many reasons to doubt that the ability to change one's 'spirit' or one's nature is part of *virtú* at all. Firstly, Machiavelli first commends this ability—or seems to commend it—very late in the book. Before chapter 18, the ability to order and command one's own forces regardless of fortune's

⁵⁴ For example, Kahn (1994). ⁵⁵ D I.Pref.

⁵⁶ For example, see Plamenatz (2012), 44, following Pasquale Villari; Berlin (1981/1958).

‘variations’ looked like the height of *virtú* in the *Prince*. The book’s main practical proposals call for a *virtú* that builds firm orders to ‘govern’ (*governare*) fortune. This steady, self-directed kind of *virtú* is especially needed to build civilian militias as the foundation of renewed Italian strength. Such orders have to be founded on a self-imposed logic that makes one as independent of fortune’s whims as possible—for although no one is immune to their effects, virtuous works can help one avoid being subject to fortune’s ‘commands’.

Secondly, even in chapter 18 and later, Machiavelli does not identify *virtú* with the ability to change at fortune’s command. On the contrary, he frequently underscores the deficiencies of those who allow fortune to blow them hither and thither. Throughout the *Prince*, the word *variazione* is a byword for fortune’s blind and destabilizing oscillations. In chapter 19, variability (*varia*) tops Machiavelli’s list of qualities that win contempt, associating it with pusillanimity, effeminacy, and irresolution, ‘from which a prince should guard himself as from a shoal’.⁵⁷

Thirdly, just after declaring that men should change their modes with the ‘times’ in chapter 25, Machiavelli turns around and says that this kind of versatility is well-nigh impossible. ‘No man’, he writes, ‘may be found so prudent as to know how to accommodate himself to this.’ According to Machiavelli’s strongly egalitarian anthropology, even the most prudent men are incapable of perfect foresight and self-control. The variation argument therefore rests on an unrealistic view of human capabilities. It reflects a longing for total control of circumstances that cannot be completely controlled—though they can be ‘managed’ or ‘governed’ by self-ordering *virtú*.

PRINCES OF *VIRTÚ* AND OF FORTUNE

A central argument of this book is that in the basic antithesis between *fortuna* and *virtú*, Machiavelli offers a solution to his own inconsistencies. Early on in the *Prince*, he sets out a general, reflective standard that serves as a touchstone for evaluating the book’s particular precepts and examples: namely, that it is better to acquire and hold power by means of one’s own *virtú* than by fortune and others’ arms.⁵⁸ I argue that he uses the antithesis to signal indirect judgements about the prudence and praiseworthiness of actions or maxims. When he stresses the role played by fortune in an agent’s actions, however successful, he implies some deficiency in the quality of those actions, even

⁵⁷ Chap. 19. For examples that show why this ‘mode’ weakens princes in the long run, see chap. 16 on varying one’s spending patterns to court popularity, and chap. 21 on changing alliances to avoid defeat.

⁵⁸ See chap. 1.

when they are mixed with *virtú*—and even when he lavishes words of praise on them.⁵⁹ For fortune and *virtú* are not equally efficacious ‘modes’ of action, depending on circumstances. Machiavelli maintains that it is *always* better to rely on *virtú* than on fortune, both in principalities or republics, and in corrupt or virtuous political conditions. Some ‘modes’ of ordering human relations always tend to bring stability and safety, while others always tend toward their opposites. This, I’ll suggest, should be our standard for judging the inconsistent policies discussed in the *Prince*, not particular conditions.

Some kinds of *virtú*, moreover, are more conducive to stability and safety than others. What Machiavelli calls ‘*virtú* of spirit’ (*di animo*) is especially effective for acquiring power, winning battles, or making conquests. But his exemplars of exceedingly bold and spirited *virtú* tend to be less skilled at maintaining political power, or at founding a secure legacy for future generations. Since the *virtú* of great captains and conquerors is insufficient for great statesmanship, leaders who fail to develop the political and intellectual virtues needed to maintain what they acquire turn by default to fortune—hoping that something other than their own abilities might prop them up.

Machiavelli’s *fortuna-virtú* antithesis is not freestanding. It forms the basis for a patterned, normatively coded language that signals Machiavelli’s reflective judgements throughout the *Prince*, and is developed further in his later works. Some words, that is, always have a positive sense associated with *virtú*, while others are always associated with *fortuna* and its destabilizing, *virtú*-corroding effects. Some of these are listed in the section on ‘Coded words’ that follows this Introduction. Machiavelli’s remarkably consistent use of these words stands in striking contrast to his inconsistent statements. This language embodies basic standards for judging the diverse policies described in the *Prince*.

The entire *Prince*, I’ll suggest, can be read as a series of confrontations between two kinds of prince, or two ‘modes’ of princely action: one that depends on *virtú* and ‘one’s own arms’, the other on fortune and ‘the arms of others’. If we assume that these ‘modes’ can be fruitfully combined, or that in some circumstances princes need to rely on fortune more than on *virtú*, we may overlook Machiavelli’s subtle criticisms of *any* policy that depends on the advantages he identifies with fortune. Machiavelli was a literary man as well as a political one, and the *Prince* is a carefully structured work of art as well as a work full of razor-sharp, profound political analysis. His use of the *virtú-fortuna* antithesis and its corresponding ironic language reflects his fondness for wickedly provocative wordplay. But it also embodies a philosopher’s concern to analyse particular examples and actions in terms of more basic causes, general distinctions, and reflections on human capacities and limitations.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ See ‘Ironic Techniques’ (1).

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the senses in which Machiavelli may be considered a philosophical writer, see *ME* chap. 1.

Most of Machiavelli's antitheses and deceptively normative words are drawn from a long tradition of ancient writing passed down from early Greek writers to Romans and humanists.⁶¹ Readers familiar with the tradition—as Machiavelli's early humanist readers were—would have picked up on this method of ironic writing more quickly than readers less immersed in ancient texts. This helps to explain why it seemed clear to them that Machiavelli was dissimulating—or as Alberico Gentili put it in a nice paradox, 'making all his secrets clear' and 'revealing his secret counsels' by ironic indirection—while modern readers unversed in a wide range of ancient writings fail to see the pattern.⁶²

WHY WOULD MACHIAVELLI DISSIMULATE?

If the *Prince's* underlying judgements are decent and moral rather than subversive of traditional moral standards, some might ask, why would Machiavelli have thought he needed to dissimulate through irony? I see three main reasons.⁶³

One was defensive: to protect the author of a text that hints very strongly at the hypocrisy of the new Medici authorities—whose dynastic and princely behaviour contradicted their official status as mere 'first citizens' in a free republic, recalling similar hypocrisy in the early Roman *principes*—and at gross corruption in the Church, now headed by a Medici Pope. To suggest that Florence's rulers and Church leaders fell short of generally accepted moral standards—indeed that they were two-faced, faithless, or criminal—was obviously risky and best done obliquely.⁶⁴

A second reason was diplomatic circumspection when seeking to change readers' political judgements. Machiavelli's aim was not just to mock political and religious authorities. The *Prince* also seeks to induce rulers, and their supporters among the people, to recognize their errors and turn toward better forms of government. As ancient orators and philosophers knew well, when you want to show people uncomfortable truths it is better to sweeten the pill with ironic dissimulation than risk alienating them through uninvited lectures.

⁶¹ See 'Coded words' for some general examples; more are provided in particular chapters.

⁶² Gentili (1924/1594), III.9.

⁶³ Machiavelli perhaps also had private reasons for writing an ironic piece about princes at the time: to regain some sense of his own power—intellectual if not material—vis-à-vis the new regime, and to lighten the heaviness he and his friends felt after the Medici coup. As Worcester (1940), 142 notes, irony can offer 'an escape from mental pain, as morphine offers an escape from physical pain'.

⁶⁴ As Machiavelli observes in the *Discourses*, 'princes are spoken of with a thousand fears and a thousand hesitations.' *D* I.58.

If ‘those who are discontented with a prince’ are not strong enough to challenge him openly, they should, as we read in the *Discourses*,

seek with all their industry to make themselves friends to him . . . following his pleasures and taking delight in all those things they see him delighting in. This familiarity makes you live secure . . . and affords you every occasion for satisfying your intent. . . . Thus one must play the crazy man, like [Lucius Junius] Brutus, and make oneself very much mad, praising, speaking, seeing, doing things against your intent so as to please the prince.⁶⁵

Having gained the prince’s confidence by seeming to care only about his safety and glory, his critics might then try to persuade him to give up his tyrannical ways of his own accord.⁶⁶

A third reason is perhaps the most important, and least often recognized. Like the ancient works it refers to, the *Prince* has an educative and philosophical purpose: to train readers to discriminate between apparent and genuine political prudence. As the English philosopher and Machiavelli admirer Francis Bacon noted, dissimulation can be an excellent means of helping people to see through misleading appearances and deceptions. Prodded by subtle ‘signs and arguments’ to notice true qualities or judgements behind the open words, attentive readers can pick up the clues and try to decode the ironist’s concealed purposes.⁶⁷ It is essential that they do this decoding for themselves, since it exercises their powers of critical observation. By mimicking the sophistries that abound in political life, the *Prince* induces readers to reflect on what’s wrong with these persuasions, and thus arm themselves against their seductions.

Though formally addressed to a prince, the *Prince* speaks to ordinary citizens as well as men aspiring to political greatness. For Machiavelli as for his ancients, the ultimate source of political disorders—including tyranny of one man or empire—is not ambitious individuals *per se*, but the failure of peoples to recognize the signs of danger and causes of disorders before they grow virulent. In his own times, many Italians who had long lived in free republics eagerly embraced new self-styled princes who they hoped would help them win partisan battles or make great conquests for their cities. Having welcomed these men ‘in the belief that they will fare better’, they found that

⁶⁵ D III.2. Junius Brutus led a movement to expel Rome’s last kings and establish a fully-fledged republic; see Conclusion.

⁶⁶ In his *Seventh Letter* 332d–333a, Plato writes that he and his friend Dion tried to teach the young Syracusan tyrant Dionysius how to be more ‘in harmony with virtue’. But because he was so deficient in virtue to begin with, his resourceful philosopher-teachers did not express their ethical teaching ‘openly, for it would not have been safe; but we put it in veiled terms and maintained by reasoned argument that this is how every man will save both himself and all those under his leadership, whereas if he does not adopt this course he will bring about entirely opposite results’.

⁶⁷ Francis Bacon, *Essays* (1985/1597–1625), 76–8. Compare Bacon’s (2001/1605), 193–4 remark that dissimulation is a means to ‘tell a lie and find a truth’.

they were deceived; in fact ‘they have done worse’, and were now more servile, beaten, and despoiled than before.⁶⁸ Instead of showing these misguided people the way to their hoped-for paradise, Machiavelli wrote to his friend Guicciardini, he would like to teach them ‘the way to Hell in order to steer clear of it’.⁶⁹ The best way to teach human beings how to avoid evils is to show how they themselves produce them, often under self-deceptions about their own shrewdness or virtue. While seeming to advise princes to disregard moral principles, the *Prince* uses irony to show peoples how to defend themselves from their own bad judgements.⁷⁰

In stressing the *Prince*’s educative aims, my argument differs from those of several other scholars who have recognized the work’s *sotto voce* criticisms of Medici government. In an important 1986 article, for example, Mary Dietz argued that Machiavelli’s purposes in the *Prince* were covertly republican, and that he wanted the Medici to give up their pre-eminent power in Florence.⁷¹ I agree with Dietz on these points, and with her view that the *Prince*’s ironies not only mock the Medici but seek to reveal ‘certain truths about princely power’ that might help republicans to reconstitute a stronger government in future. But I disagree that the *Prince* is ‘an act of deception’ aimed at luring a gullible prince into following the book’s advice, ‘and thereby take actions that will jeopardize his power and bring about his demise’. My reading is closer to that of John Langton, who published a thoughtful response to Dietz’s article in the same journal, arguing that the *Prince* seeks to teach princes how to convert their quasi-monarchies into republics.⁷²

More than either of these arguments, however, I am interested in the *Prince*’s teachings for citizens as well as those for princes; and in its invitation to moral and philosophical reflectiveness, which goes far deeper than espousing a republican message versus princely politics. What are the qualities of a truly praiseworthy statesman? Can amoral means serve good ends? Does security depend on justice? Why bother to work hard at building and maintaining free political orders if fortune and fate control much in human affairs? What are the limits of any ruler’s, state’s, or empire’s control over subjects? The *Prince* invites readers to consider these questions from many, often unexpected angles.

⁶⁸ Chap. 3. ⁶⁹ Machiavelli to Guicciardini, 17 May 1521, *MF* 336.

⁷⁰ According to Henry Neville (1681), the *Prince* shows both tyrants and ‘the poor people who are forced to live under them’ the danger each faces: ‘by laying before the former, the hellish and precipitous courses they must use to maintain their power’, and by showing peoples ‘what they must suffer’ if they fail to restrain over-ambitious leaders.

⁷¹ Dietz (1986). In his 1536 polemic, Cardinal Reginald Pole (1997/1536) wrote that according to Florentines, Machiavelli’s cynical advice in the *Prince* did not reflect his own view of political prudence, but aimed to mislead the Medici toward self-destruction.

⁷² Langton (1987).

THE *PRINCE* AS A DISCOURSE

Machiavelli's 'little work', then, is not a treatise setting out the author's wisdom to be imbibed second-hand by uncritical readers. It is a series of highly provocative, mind-teasing conversations with the young, the impetuous, and men in power that seeks to improve their powers of political judgement. Machiavelli refers to the discussions in several of the *Prince's* chapters as 'discourses' (*discorsi*). The word suggests that they are structured as conversations with readers, not as lectures delivered from an authorial pedestal. A discourse differs from a univocal lecture or treatise in imitating several different voices, or expressing different points of view canvassed by a participant—here the princely reader—whose own judgements are still uncertain or poorly founded. Unlike a dialogue or drama, it does not name specific discussants or announce shifts from one view to another. In the *Prince*, the impression of shifting voices or *personae* is created by a range of devices: shifting pronouns (sometimes 'he', sometimes 'you' for princes), hesitations and doubts following sweepingly assured claims, contrasts between cynical and moderate tones, or between misanthropic and philanthropic assertions in the same chapter.⁷³

In content, lectures put forward carefully worked out reasons and conclusions in the voice of a single author who has thought them through. Like a dialogue, a discourse typically offers weakly reasoned but boldly asserted opinions, bringing their flaws to light as discussion progresses. The flawed opinions, however, are not necessarily renounced. The task of assessing them is left to readers, as part of the education in independent judgement that is a basic purpose of dialogical or multi-vocal writing.

What readers take from discourses depends on their own aims and dispositions. Aspiring princes in a hurry to gain power are likely to read quickly, scouring the text for nuggets of second-hand wisdom that they can apply directly to their enterprises. Since their aim is to achieve greatness and glory, they will seize on the most impressive-sounding phrases and examples, not pausing to notice subtle warnings or advice that they might be better off working through more modestly virtuous 'modes'.

As with princes, so with lay readers: those who read the *Prince* in hopes of finding a quick-fix, uncomplicated message may pick out the boldest

⁷³ As Patterson (1987), 6 says of Virgil's *Eclogues*, by throwing into question 'the location of his own voice . . . Virgil effectively demonstrated how a writer can protect himself by dismemberment' and a 'wickedly shifting authorial presence', effected through 'striking variations in tone and range' and 'oppositions such as serious/light, high/low, idyllic/ironic'. In view of this tradition of writing, Machiavelli's declarations in his own voice—'I say' (*dico*) or 'I judge' (*iudico*)—do not necessarily announce his own views more directly than other statements; like ancient ironists, his *dico* is often misleading, challenging readers to follow sound reasons in the text rather than the author's supposedly authoritative assertions. I thank Maurizio Viroli for alerting me to this problem.

statements and not trouble themselves too much with the caveats. If they find the amoral advice profound or intriguing, they will be disinclined to notice the subtle ways in which Machiavelli subverts it, and ignore the quietly prudent advice woven into other levels of the text. By contrast, readers who avoid falling into the snares laid by the *Prince*'s web-like writing will recognize puzzles that challenge them to think hard about what they read. If they recognize the superior logical power and practical prudence of the moderate arguments, they will be more inclined to resist the pull of the shocking ones, and work harder to decipher the underlying message. The *Prince* tests readers by moving constantly between the perspective of an impetuous, over-ambitious young man—one seeking the quickest and easiest ways to acquire power, with fortune's help—and judgements more likely to give a state firm foundations.

READING THE *PRINCE*

To understand a work that one suspects is full of ironies, of course, it is not enough to identify the 'signs' of irony—signs that the text contains meanings or messages other than those that appear on the surface. One also has to work out what those meanings or messages are, and set out reasons for interpreting them in a particular way. This is the hardest part: even if two readers may agree that a passage seems ironic, they may disagree on what deeper message it seeks to convey. The most that readers can do is to spell out the strongest reasons that led them to their interpretation. In presenting mine, I have given preference to the following kinds of evidence, in this order:

1. Other statements, terms, or examples in the *Prince* itself
2. Other texts by Machiavelli, where possible those known to have been composed before the *Prince*
3. 'External' contexts, including:
 - (a) Works by other writers, giving priority to those mentioned or alluded to in the *Prince*
 - (b) Historical background

A good reading clearly needs to be informed by an account of the text's origins and the particular problems its author sought to address. Nevertheless, I assume that if we want to understand a difficult text, evidence drawn from that text and others written or invoked by the same author is generally our most reliable source, and should be given primacy over purely extra-textual information—that is, information that the author did not discuss or allude to in his writings. Any reader of such a complex work as the *Prince* must overlook many nuances, and lack the background knowledge needed to

understand some parts. I am all too aware of my own limitations in this regard, and hope other readers will supplement, correct, or take issue with my interpretation.

The best English translation for any reader who wants to grasp the *Prince*'s ironies is Mansfield's, which usually preserves Machiavelli's own consistent use of idiosyncratic terms instead of trying to render them more colloquial. I have used this translation as the basis for my own. I leave out page references, since my discussion proceeds chapter by chapter; most of Machiavelli's chapters are short enough that readers can easily find references without a page, while in the case of longer chapters I closely follow their order.

Needless to say, scholarship on the *Prince* is vast and exceedingly rich, although most of it deals either with general themes or particular historical, philological, or interpretative issues. Surprisingly few book-length treatments examine the work as a whole.⁷⁴ My interpretation agrees with other scholars on many specific and some general points, and disagrees on many others. I discuss our most important agreements and disagreements in the Conclusion, while keeping secondary references in the main text to a minimum. Many comparisons between the *Prince* and Machiavelli's other works are made in my *Machiavelli's Ethics* (2009). I refer to some of them in the footnotes under the abbreviation *ME*.

Whether or not others agree with my reading, I hope this book will demonstrate the need to pay much closer attention to Machiavelli's subtle uses of language. We need to take seriously the possibility that like many of the ancient writers who, as he told Vettori, inspired him to compose *De principatibus*, he used a patterned, ironic language to communicate judgements that differ from his overt declarations.

Above all, I hope to persuade readers that the *Prince* needs to be approached as a profoundly *ambiguous* piece of writing, not as a straightforward 'treatise'. Most Machiavelli scholars, and other close readers, are well aware of some of the ambiguities I discuss in this book. But the majority tend to deal with them by barely acknowledging their problematic presence, preferring to build their own interpretations on often misleading assertions about what Machiavelli 'clearly' stated or held. Others recognize the *Prince*'s ambiguities as a serious challenge. Yet they seldom consider that they might be artfully *patterned* ambiguities, which invite readers to perceive the pattern if they want to understand the *Prince*'s message. I don't expect readers to agree with every detail of my interpretation; with a writer as brilliantly elusive as Machiavelli, that would be sheer folly. I do hope that more readers might notice his book's many ambiguities, frankly acknowledge them, and then grapple with—not just seek quick and easy answers to—the hard question: why did he put them there?

⁷⁴ A short but valuable exception is de Alvarez (1999).