

## *Introduction*

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### *Love of Politics and Love of Country*

If we are to begin to understand and appreciate an author as controversial and misunderstood as Niccolò Machiavelli, a few preliminary warnings based on facts are in order. The first is that Machiavelli's main and lasting passion and vocation was politics. "Fortune has seen to it," he wrote Francesco Vettori on April 9, 1513, "that since I do not know how to talk about either the silk or the wool trade, or profits or losses, I have to talk about politics. I need either to take a vow of silence or to discuss this." Politics meant for him service for the common good in the hope of attaining lasting glory. When from 1498 to 1512 he served as Secretary of the Second Chancery and the Committee of Ten of the Republic of Florence (both committees were concerned primarily with the government of the Florentine Dominion and with foreign affairs), Machiavelli discharged his duties with impeccable honesty. "My poverty," he proudly proclaimed, "is a witness to my loyalty and honesty."<sup>1</sup> No one, not even his political enemies or his most severe critics, has been able to refute this assertion.

<sup>1</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, December 10, 1513, in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere*, vol. 2, ed. Corrado Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi, 1999), p. 297; Eng. trans., *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence*, ed. and trans. James B. Atkinson and David Sices (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), p. 265.

As he wrote in the letter that opens *The Prince*, he attained his mastery of political matters at the cost of hardships and risks. On March 1509, for instance, while the Florentine army was busy trying to conquer Pisa, the governors of Florence had considered sending him to Cascina, a much safer place behind the lines. He answered: “I am aware that that post would expose me to less danger and fatigue, but if I wanted to avoid danger and fatigue I should not have left Florence; and therefore I entreat your Lordships to allow me to remain in the camps to cooperate with the commissaries in all the measures that have to be taken. For here I can make myself useful, but at Cascina I should not be good for anything, and should die of sheer desperation.”<sup>2</sup>

Machiavelli’s political adversaries accused him of being the puppet (*mannerino*) of Piero Soderini who, as Gonfalonier of Justice, held the highest office of the Republic of Florence. Historical evidence points in a different direction. He was, to be sure, a rather unconventional Segretario: opinionated, keen to express his own judgments on political matters instead of simply reporting facts, irreverent, unable to flatter government officials, and ever ready to criticize the faults of Florentine institutions and to show his contempt for the incompetence, corruption, and meanness of many members of the political elite. He

<sup>2</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli to the Signori of Florence, April 16, 1509, in *Opere, op. cit.*; Engl. trans., *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 4, ed. and trans. Christian E. Detmold (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1891), p. 173.

steered clear, however, of factional involvements.<sup>3</sup> It was precisely on account of his unwillingness to play the game of factional politics and serve powerful citizens that he found himself isolated when the popular government led by Piero Soderini was overthrown by the Medici and their partisans. When he asserted, “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,” he was being truthful.

He might have added that his loyalty to the Republic was the main cause of his political downfall. Soon after the Medici returned to Florence in September 1512, the new government under their control fired Machiavelli from office, tried him, and sentenced him to one year’s confinement within the Florentine Dominion. Then, in February 1513, he was imprisoned and tortured under the charge of conspiracy against the new government. He was freed in March, after Giovanni de’ Medici was elected pope with the name Leo X. Thereafter he tried hard to persuade the Medici, in Florence and in Rome, to put him back in the service of the Republic.

Yet he did not compose his most famous (or infamous) work, *The Prince*, to please them or to gain their favor. Had that been the case, he would have written a quite dif-

<sup>3</sup>See Robert Black, “Machiavelli, Servant of the Florentine Republic,” and John M. Najemy, “The Controversy Surrounding Machiavelli’s Service to the Republic,” in Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli, eds., *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 71–100 and 101–118.

ferent text, one full of praise for the Medici and for their glorious history, replete with the kind of counsel that men like Giuliano, Giulio, Lorenzo, and Leo X best liked to hear. Machiavelli knew that the most important rule of successful flattery is to say what pleases the person from whom one expects to obtain favors. In *The Prince* he did exactly the opposite. Instead of reinforcing the well-established principles that had allowed the Medici to gain control over Florence, Machiavelli gave them advice that they were not in the least able to appreciate and that would surely have irritated them, had they read the work. He was not a servant of the Medici; he wanted the Medici to follow him. But the Medici had no wish to avail themselves of a counselor like Machiavelli. They gave him some minor offices and the assignment of writing a history of Florence, and this only after 1523, when another member of the Medici family became pope (Giulio de' Medici, with the name Clement VII).

In Machiavelli's mind, love of politics and love of country were one and the same. He interpreted and practiced politics as service to his country because he loved it, and his country was Florence, and Italy. In 1521, when he was in Carpi to discharge a quite inglorious mission on behalf of the Wool Guild of Florence, he did not hesitate to explain flatly to Francesco Guicciardini, at the time governor of the papal states of Modena and Reggio, that he took his duty seriously, even if it was quite a lowly one for such a man as he, "because never did I disappoint that republic whenever I was able to help her out—if not with deeds, then with words; if not with words, then with signs—I

have no intention of disappointing her now.”<sup>4</sup> In a letter written on April 16, 1527, two months before he died, he confessed to his friend Francesco Vettori: “I love my country, more than my soul.” He was not boasting. Florence had been ungrateful and unjust to him, yet he decided to remain there even when, in 1521, he was offered an excellent opportunity to move to Ragusa to be again at the service of the former Gonfalonier of the Republic, Piero Soderini.<sup>5</sup>

His contemporaries regarded Machiavelli as a fine observer of political life. On August, 23, 1500, his assistant in the Chancery, Biagio Buonaccorsi, wrote him: “I do not want to fail to let you know how much satisfaction your letters give everyone; and you may believe me, Niccolò, since you know that adulation is not my forte, that when I found myself reading those earlier letters of yours to certain citizens, and some of the foremost, you were most

<sup>4</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli to Francesco Guicciardini, May 17, 1521, in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere*, vol. 2, p. 372; Eng. trans., *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 336. Machiavelli stresses his love of the fatherland also in the opening of his *A Dialogue on Language (Discorso o dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua)*, in *Opere*, vol. 3, p. 261: “Whenever I have had an opportunity of honoring my country, even if this involved me in trouble and danger, I have done it willingly, for a man is under no greater obligation than to his country; he owes his very existence, and later, all the benefits that nature and fortune offer him, to her. And the nobler one’s country, the greater one’s obligation. In fact he who shows himself by thought and deed an enemy of his country deserves the name of parricide, even if he has a legitimate grievance.” Eng. trans., *The Literary Works of Machiavelli: With Selections from the Private Correspondence*, ed. and trans. J. R. Hale (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 175.

<sup>5</sup>Piero Soderini to Niccolò Machiavelli, April 13, 1521, in *Opere*, vol. 2, pp. 369–70; Eng. trans. *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 334.

highly commended by them, and I took extreme pleasure from it and strove adroitly to confirm that opinion with a few words, showing with what ease you did it.” After he lost his office, on November 7, 1512, eminent friends continued to solicit his opinion on important matters of international relations. Francesco Vettori wrote to him: “Examine everything, and I know you have such intelligence that although two years have gone by since you left the shop I do not think you have forgotten the art.”<sup>6</sup>

Francesco Guicciardini, unquestionably one of the finest political minds of Renaissance Italy, criticized Machiavelli for his inclination to interpret political events through abstract models and examples taken from antiquity. He maintained that political decisions should be made using *discrezione* (discretion)—that is, a highly refined form of political prudence that is not based on general rules, cannot be learned in books, and that very few men have by nature or are able to attain through long practice.<sup>7</sup> Yet Guicciardini too admired Machiavelli’s judgment and wanted him as his main counselor when he had to face the tremendous task of saving the last glimmerings of Italian independence in 1525–1527.

Machiavelli’s main areas of expertise and interest were international relations and military matters. What really fascinated him, however, were the founders of republics or

<sup>6</sup>Francesco Vettori to Niccolò Machiavelli, December 3, 1514, in *Opere*, vol. 2, p. 330; Eng. trans. *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 294.

<sup>7</sup>Francesco Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, C 110, in *Opere di Francesco Guicciardini*, vol. 1, ed. Emanuella Lugnani Scarano (Torino: Utet, 1983).

principalities and the redeemers of peoples from foreign domination, tyranny, and corruption. He wrote *The Prince* to give life, with his words, to a redeemer capable of arousing “obstinate faith,” and “piety,” and to revive the “ancient valor” in the hearts of the Italians. With the *Discourses on Livy* he hoped to shape the “spirits” of youths so that they would denounce their own times, times filled with “every extreme misery, infamy, and reproach,” and emulate instead the times of antiquity, “so filled with virtue and religion.”<sup>8</sup> In *The Art of War*, he aimed to encourage his contemporaries and posterity to “bring back” the militia into its ancient orders, restoring its age-old virtue. He lamented the fact that he himself was unable to undertake the work of redemption, but held out the hope that others, in a new age, might be able to implement his teaching.<sup>9</sup> All his great works were designed to shape souls, teach, revive forgotten ways of life, and resurrect ancient ideas and principles for the purpose of attaining good political constitutions and mores. He was a theorist of grand politics.

### *A Man of the Renaissance*

Machiavelli’s intellectual style exhibits a number of characteristics typical of the modern scientific mind. For example, he consistently shows remarkable intellectual courage and a penchant to challenge the most revered opinions of his time: “Contrary to the general opinion,

<sup>8</sup>*Discourses on Livy*, preface to Book II.

<sup>9</sup>*The Art of War*, VII.

then, I conclude and affirm . . .” is a phrase we find often in his writings.<sup>10</sup> He regularly rejects the principle of authority, including even the authority of Aristotle, still the most respected of political writers in Machiavelli’s day. When Francesco Vettori cites Aristotle’s *Politics* to argue that the Swiss cannot entertain expansionist ambitions, he replies: “I do not know what Aristotle says about confederated republics, but I certainly can say what might reasonably exist, what exists, and what has existed.”<sup>11</sup>

To validate political theories and political assessments, he credits only rational considerations based on facts. “On these matters,” he writes to Francesco Vettori, “I do not want to be prompted by any authority but reason.”<sup>12</sup> He is not only aware, but quite proud of his critical and free style of thinking: “I think, and ever shall think, that it cannot be wrong to defend one’s opinions with arguments founded upon reason, without employing force.”<sup>13</sup> In *The Prince* he has penned words that might well count as the fundamental tenet of political scientists: “It seems to me proper to pursue the effective truth of the matter, rather than to indulge in mere speculation.”<sup>14</sup>

Many passages of Machiavelli’s political works exhibit a style attentive to the nuances of concepts and language,

<sup>10</sup>See for instance *Discourses on Livy*, I. 58 and II.10.

<sup>11</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, August 26, 1513; Eng. trans., *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 258.

<sup>12</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, April 29, 1523; Eng. trans., *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 233.

<sup>13</sup>*Discourses on Livy*, I. 58.

<sup>14</sup>*The Prince*, XV; Eng. trans., *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2.



framing political issues in the clearest possible way: “All states and governments that have had, and have at present, dominion over men, have been and are either republics or principalities. The principalities are either hereditary or they are new. Hereditary principalities are those where the government has been for a long time in the family of the prince. New principalities are either entirely new, as was Milan to Francesco Sforza, or they are like appurtenances annexed to the hereditary state of the prince who acquires them, as the kingdom of Naples is to that of Spain. States thus acquired have been accustomed either to live under a prince, or to exist as free states; and they are acquired either by the arms of others, or by the conqueror’s own, or by fortune or virtue.” I am citing from the opening of *The Prince*.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, it would be misleading to read Machiavelli’s books as the works of a modern political scientist. He was a man of the Renaissance, and he shared the period’s belief in astrology and magic. He held, for instance, that “the occurrence of important events in any city or country is generally preceded by signs and portents and by men who predict them.”<sup>16</sup> His attempt to explain this process falls well short of the scientific: “The air is peopled with spirits, who by their superior intelligence foresee future events, and out of pity for mankind warn them by such signs, so that they may prepare against the coming evils.” And sure enough, he concludes, “The truth of the fact exists, that

<sup>15</sup>*The Prince*, I.

<sup>16</sup>*Discourses on Livy*, I. 56.

these portents are invariably followed by the most remarkable events.”<sup>17</sup>

Machiavelli believed that the movements of planets and stars affect the deliberations and actions of individuals and of peoples, and on the basis of this belief he explained political facts. In the *Discourses on Livy*, for instance, in the context of his discussion of Roman religion, he remarks: “The heavens did not judge the laws of this prince [Romulus] sufficient for so great an empire, and therefore inspired the Roman Senate to elect Numa Pompilius as his successor, so that he might regulate all those things that had been omitted by Romulus.”<sup>18</sup> Remarkable words indeed, if we consider that his source, Livy, makes no mention whatsoever of divine or celestial influence on the wise deliberations of Roman senators. The heavenly inspiration is entirely Machiavelli’s idea.

Machiavelli also affirms that God intervenes in the life of peoples. In the final chapter of *The Prince* he alludes to men who seemed “*ordinati da Dio*” (ordered by God) to redeem Italy. In the *Florentine Histories* he interprets extraordinary natural events as signs of God’s wrath. Of the fire that burned the church of Santo Spirito during the visit of the Duke of Milan in 1471, he relates, without questioning it, the popular belief that it was God’s punishment for the corrupt customs of the Duke’s court: “At that time was seen a thing never before seen in our city: this being the season of Lent, in which the Church commands

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>*Discourses on Livy*, I. 11.

that one fasts by not eating meat, his court, without respect to Church or God, all fed on meat. And because many spectacles were held to honor him, among which was represented the giving of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles in the church of Santo Spirito, and because that church burned down as a result of the many fires that are made in such solemnities, it was believed by many that God, angered against us, had wished to show that sign of his wrath.”<sup>19</sup>

Like his Florentine contemporaries, Machiavelli believed in the power of prophecy and wrote prophecies of his own.<sup>20</sup> The outstanding example is the “exhortation to liberate Italy from the barbarians,” with which he ends *The Prince*. In this text Machiavelli prophesies Italy’s emancipation on the basis of signs he believes he has been able to decode: “Having now considered all the things we have spoken of, and thought within myself whether at present

<sup>19</sup>Similar considerations come into play when he describes an extraordinary storm that ravaged Tuscany: “Thereupon, when arms had been put away by men, it appeared that God wished to take them up Himself: so great was a wind storm that then occurred, which in Tuscany had effects unheard of in the past and for whoever learns of it in the future will have marvelous and memorable effects. . . . Without doubt, God wanted to warn rather than punish Tuscany; for, if such a storm had entered into a city among many and crowded houses and inhabitants, as it did enter among few and scattered oaks and trees and houses, without doubt it would have made ruin and torment greater than that which the mind can conjecture. But God meant . . . that this small example should be enough to refresh among men the memory of His power”; *History of Florence*, VI. 34, in *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Christian E. Detmold (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1882), p. 314.

<sup>20</sup>See for instance his remarks in *History of Florence*, VI. 29.

the time was not propitious in Italy for a new prince, and if there was not a state of things which offered an opportunity to a prudent and capable man to introduce a new system that would do honor to himself and good to the mass of the people, it seems to me that so many things concur to favor a new ruler that I do not know of any time more fitting for such an enterprise.” Like a prophetic poet, he unveils God’s plan for Italy: “And although before now a spirit has been shown by some which gave hope that he might be appointed by God for her redemption, yet at the highest summit of his career he was thrown aside by fortune.” Then, to eloquently introduce his prophecy, he cites the words of Petrarch: “Virtue will seize arms / Against furor, and the battle will be brief: / For ancient valor / Is not yet dead in Italian hearts.”<sup>21</sup>

His examples are often more rhetorical than scientific. They do not serve the purpose of demonstrating the empirical validity of a scientific law, but are designed rather to render a piece of political advice more persuasive, and to stimulate the desire to emulate a specific way of acting: “Let no one wonder if, in what I am about to say of entirely new principalities and of the prince and his government, I cite the very highest examples. For as men almost always follow the beaten track of others, and proceed in their actions by imitation, and yet cannot altogether follow the ways of others, nor attain the high qualities of those whom they imitate, so a wise man should ever follow the ways of great men and endeavor to imitate only such as have been

<sup>21</sup> *The Prince*, XXVI.

most eminent; so that even if his merits do not quite equal theirs, yet that they may in some measure reflect their greatness. He should do as the skillful archer, who, seeing that the object he desires to hit is too distant, and knowing the extent to which his bow will carry, aims higher than the destined mark, not for the purpose of sending his arrow to that height, but so that by this elevation it may reach the desired aim.<sup>22</sup>

Only very rarely, and always as a pure intellectual exercise, does Machiavelli try to explain princes' actions by assuming that they are rational and pursue their best interest accordingly. To suppose that they made their decisions based on reason would be of little avail as he is convinced that human beings in general are not wise: "And truly, anyone wise enough to adapt to and understand the times and the pattern of events would always have good fortune or would always keep himself from bad fortune; and it would come to be true that the wise man could control the stars and the Fates. But such wise men do not exist: in the first place, men are shortsighted; in the second place, they are unable to master their own natures; thus it follows that Fortune is fickle, controlling men and keeping them under her yoke."<sup>23</sup> What would be the point of explaining or predicting princes' actions on the assumption that they are wise and act rationally, when in fact they are not and they do not?

<sup>22</sup> *The Prince*, VI.

<sup>23</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli to Giovan Battista Soderini, September 13–21, 1506.

### *Investigating Political Life*

Machiavelli studied the actions of princes and the deliberations of councils in order to grasp the reasons (*ragioni*) of those actions and those deliberations. By “reasons” he means the goals that political actors intend to achieve. The first step to accomplish this task, he tells us, is to understand the passions, the humors, and the beliefs that orient the conduct of a particular prince or ruler.<sup>24</sup> A prince who is afraid to lose his power does not act in the same way as a prince who is confident of his ability to expand his dominions; a prince possessed by love of glory does not act like a prince whose soul is dominated by avarice; a prince who hates other princes and is consumed by envy or by the desire to avenge himself does not act like a prince who trusts his subjects and other princes and entertains no plans for revenge.

Examples abound of Machiavelli’s method for deciphering the intentions of a prince by probing the geography of his passions. On December 10, 1514, for instance, he writes: “I believe that the reason why the king of England has clung to France was to avenge the insults Spain inflicted upon him during the war with France. This in-

<sup>24</sup> As Felix Gilbert has stressed in a masterful essay of 1957, in Machiavelli’s time no such a thing as a scientific method to investigate political events existed. To explain and predict political events, Florentine rulers and citizens relied on the observation of the character of political leaders and on very general ideas about human nature, often couched in popular proverbs and sayings. “Florentine Political Assumptions in the Period of Savonarola and Soderini,” *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 20 (1957), pp. 187–214. Machiavelli follows the same path.

dignation was justified, and I see no issue that might so readily eliminate this indignation and destroy the loving relationship that has formed between these two monarchs; unlike many who are influenced by the inveterate hostility between the English and French, I am not, because the people want what their kings want, not the reverse. As for the English being offended by France's power in Italy, this would inevitably have to result from either envy or fear. Envy might exist if England too were unable to find a spot for acquiring honor and were obliged to remain idle; but if he too can achieve glory for himself in Spain, the cause of the envy is removed. As for fear, you must understand that frequently one acquires territory and not armed forces; and if you think it through carefully you will realize that as far as the king of England is concerned, the king of France's acquisition of cities in Italy is one of territory, not armed forces, because with so great an army France could attack that island whether or not he had Italian territory."<sup>25</sup>

He interprets a republic's intentions in a similar vein. Concerning the possibility of Imperial and Swiss domination over Northern Italy, Machiavelli notes that "at first men are satisfied with being able to defend themselves and with not being dominated by others; from this point they move on to attacking others physically and seeking to dominate them. At first the Swiss were satisfied with defending themselves against the dukes of Austria; this defense began to make them appreciated at home. Then they

<sup>25</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, December 10, 1514.

were satisfied to defend themselves against Duke Charles, which gave them a renown beyond their homeland. Finally, then, they were satisfied with taking their pay from other people so that they could keep their youth ready for warfare and do them honor. This process has given them more renown and, for having observed and become familiar with more and more regions and people, made them more audacious; it has also instilled in their minds an aspiring spirit and a will for soldiering on their own.”<sup>26</sup>

To decipher princes’ passions, and on those grounds predict and interpret their behavior, Machiavelli very often turns to history. He is confident of his ability to understand the behavior of princes or peoples of his time by identifying pertinent analogies with past events that historians reported as having happened in comparable circumstances, and with similar protagonists. It was for this reason that he wanted to consult Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* when he was assigned the mission to uncover Duke Cesare Borgia’s intentions.<sup>27</sup> Niccolò’s skill at divining the meaning of princes’ actions, words, gestures, and beliefs gained him his reputation as a true master of the art of the state.

Because he was a true master of the *arte dello stato*, and not an amateur, Machiavelli was well aware that political life does not lend itself to the sort of scientific examination that aspires to find demonstrable truths. In fact, he often presented his views as conjectures and tentative assess-

<sup>26</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, August 10, 1513.

<sup>27</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli to Biagio Buonaccorsi, October 21, 1502.



ments, openly recognizing the limits of his own capacity to understand the significance of the events that were unfolding before his eyes. To interpret the intent of *political* actors was particularly difficult, he knew, because they always cover their real plans. In the fifteen years that he spent in the apprenticeship of the art of the state, Machiavelli had many opportunities to observe this distinctive quality of princes. “As I have many times written to you,” he reported to the government of Florence, “this Lord is very secretive, and I do not believe that what he is going to do is known to anybody but himself. And his chief secretaries have many times asserted to me that he does not tell them anything except when he orders it. . . . Hence I beg Your Lordships will excuse me and not impute it to my negligence if I do not satisfy Your Lordships with information, because most of the time I do not satisfy even myself” (from Cesena, December 22, 1502).

Evaluations about princes’ actions can never be final because there is no judge to whom one can appeal for a conclusive verdict (*non è iudizio da reclamare*).<sup>28</sup> Moreover, each student of political affairs judges the outcome from his or her own perspective, guided or misguided by his or her passions and beliefs.<sup>29</sup> Interpretive work is valuable, but hardly conclusive. The best one can hope for is to come up with convincing narratives and plausible advice, and that will nonetheless be questioned by others who come up with different narratives and different counsel.

<sup>28</sup> *The Prince*, XVIII.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance Niccolò Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, August 10, 1513.

Politics is largely irrational because of the pervasive power of passions. But there is a way, Machiavelli maintains, to shed some light on it. This way is his interpretive method.

### *A Teacher of Wisdom*

Machiavelli owes his fame to his political works. A large body of this book is accordingly taken from them. Yet he also wrote on human passions, on vices and virtues, on human beings' position and destiny within the larger cosmos, on history, on life, and on death. His reflections on these broader issues offer us, as I hope this selection will at least suggest, some quite remarkable wisdom on how we should conduct our lives so as to fully develop our best qualities and face with courage the misfortunes, the agonies, and the sorrows that afflict our world.

The guiding principle behind Machiavelli's wisdom is that the right way of living one's own life is to accommodate both gravity and lightness, the serious and the playful, reason and passions. His letter to Francesco Vettori of January 31, 1515 makes this point with considerable eloquence: "Anyone who might see our letters, honorable *compare*, and see their variety, would be greatly astonished, because at first it would seem that we were serious men completely directed toward weighty matters and that no thought could cascade through our heads that did not have within it probity and magnitude. But later, upon turning the page, it would seem to the reader that we—still the very same selves—were petty, fickle, lascivious, and were directed toward chimerical matters. If to some

this behavior seems contemptible, to me it seems laudable, because we are imitating nature, which is changeable; whoever imitates nature cannot be censured.”

Loyal to this philosophy of life, Machiavelli at times completely devotes himself to grand and important political matters; while at other times he lets himself be carried off by the passion of love: “I have met a creature,” he writes Vettori on August 3, 1514, “so gracious, so refined, so noble—both in nature and in circumstance—that never could either my praise or my love for her be as much as she deserves. I ought to tell you, as you did me, how this love began, how Love ensnared me in his nets, where he spread them, and what they were like; you would realize that, spread among the flowers, these were nets of gold woven by Venus, so soft and gentle that even though an insensitive heart could have severed them, nevertheless I declined to do so. . . . And even though I may now seem to have entered into great travail, I nevertheless feel so great a sweetness in it, both because of the delight that rare and gentle countenance brings me and because I have laid aside all memory of my sorrows, that not for anything in the world would I desire my freedom, even if I could have it. I have renounced, then, thoughts about matters great and grave. No longer do I delight in reading about the deeds of the ancients or in discussing those of the moderns: everything has been transformed into tender thoughts, for which I thank Venus and all of Cyprus.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, August 3, 1514.

When fortune or the malignity of men hits us hard, irony and laughter offer some consolation, if not a complete remedy. In the darkest years of his life, between 1514 and 1520, Machiavelli composed his finest comedy, *Mandragola*, for the purpose of making people, including himself, laugh. It is the laughter of a defeated and disconsolate man.<sup>31</sup> But it helps one to carry on in the hope that better times will come. They will not come, however, if one does nothing but wait. Malignant fortune can be defeated, perhaps, but only if human beings keep fighting and do not give up: “I repeat, then, as an incontrovertible truth, proved by all history, that men may second Fortune, but cannot oppose her; they may develop her designs, but cannot defeat them. But men should never despair on that account; for, not knowing the aims of Fortune, which she pursues by dark and devious ways, men should always be hopeful, and never yield to despair, whatever troubles or ill fortune may befall them.”<sup>32</sup>

When Machiavelli passed away, on June 21, 1527, Fortune had defeated him. He had failed to achieve the political goals he had been struggling for all his life long: Italy was under foreign domination; the new popular government instituted in 1527 did not give him back his post as Segretario; moral and political corruption was triumphant all over Italy. But his books, in which he had infused his political and moral wisdom, began to be read, and slowly they helped peoples to gain their independence

<sup>31</sup> See the prologue to *Mandragola*.

<sup>32</sup> *Discourses on Livy*, II. 29.

and establish good republican governments, endowed with good laws, good armies, and good examples of political leadership. Here, the people of the United States of America deserve a special mention. We know for a fact that almost all of the Founding Fathers knew, directly or indirectly, Machiavelli's works, and they had absorbed and reworked his ideas.<sup>33</sup> His posthumous glory is the reward for his determination not to surrender to the malignity of men and times. His philosophy of life is a lesson for all times, but above all for dark times.

#### *A Quotable Author*

Niccolò Machiavelli's works lend themselves well to publication in the form of excerpts. In 1578 the Italian writer Francesco Sansovino filled his *Concetti politici* with maxims taken from Machiavelli's main political and historical works: 108 from the *Discourses on Livy*, 29 from *The Prince*, 4 from the *Art of War*, and 25 from *The Florentine Histories*.<sup>34</sup> In 1590 Sansovino's selections were translated into English with the title *The Quintessence of Wit*; in 1619 another English edition was published in London, titled *Archaio-ploutos: Containing, ten following bookes to the*

<sup>33</sup>See for instance C. Bradley Thompson, "John Adams's Machiavelian Moment," *Review of Politics* 57 (1995), pp. 389–417. See also Karl Walling, "Was Alexander Hamilton a Machiavellian Statesman?" *Review of Politics* 57 (1995), pp. 419–447; and Brian Danoff, "Lincoln, Machiavelli, and American Political Thought," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 30 (2000), pp. 290–310.

<sup>34</sup>Francesco Sansovino, *Concetti politici*, published by Giovanni Antonio Bertano in Venice, 1578.

*former Treasure of auncient and moderne times. Being the learned collections, iudicious readings, and memorable observations: not onely divine, morall, and philosophical; but also poetically, martiall, politicall, historical, astrologicall.*<sup>35</sup>

Over a century later, in 1771, the Italian jurist Stefano Bartolini published in Rome a selection of political maxims taken from Machiavelli's works (though the author's name was never mentioned). Another edition appeared in the same year in Lausanne, with the addition of a phony letter alleged to be from Machiavelli to his son Bernardo.<sup>36</sup> Three editions of the same work came out in 1797, and in 1891 an English edition was published with the title *Thoughts of a Statesman*. The editors included the evidently forged letter of Niccolò Machiavelli to his firstborn

<sup>35</sup>*The quintesence of wit. Being a corrant comfort of conceites, maximies, and poleticke deuises, selected and gathered together by Francisco Sansouino. Wherein is set fourth sundrye excellent and wise sentences, worthie to be regarded and followed. Translated out of the Italian tung, and put into English for the benefit of all those that please to read and understand the works and worth of a worthy writer; London, Edward Allde, 1590; Archaio-ploutos: Containing, ten following bookes to the former Treasure of auncient and moderne times. Being the learned collections, iudicious readings, and memorable observations: not onely divine, morall, and philosophical; but also poetically, martiall, politicall, historical, astrologicall, &c. Translated out of that worthy Spanish gentleman, Pedro Mexia, and m. Francesco Sansovino, that famous Italian: As also, of those honourable Frenchman, Anthony du Verdier, lord of Vaupriuaz: Loys Guyon, sieur de la Nauche, counsellour vnto the King: Claudius Gruget, Parisian, &c; London: Printed by William Iaggard, 1619.*

<sup>36</sup>*La mente d' un uomo di stato. Forma mentis aeterna Tacit. Vit. Agricol., in Roma MDCCCLXXI, a spese di Gaetano Quojani mercante libraro al Corso vicino S. Marcello. Con licenza de' Supariori; La mente d'un uomo di stato, Forma mentis aeterna. Tacit. Vit. Agrico. Losanna, 1771.*

son Bernardo, with a note explaining the history of the text: “This collection of maxims, extracted from the works of Machiavelli, was made by an eminent Italian jurist and man of letters, who selected and arranged them to show the injustice of the charges against the writings of Machiavelli, resulting from an unfair prejudice and imperfect understanding of his sentiments. The little book was printed in Rome, with the entire approval of the Papal censors, in the year 1771. Subsequently a corrected edition was printed at Lausanne in Switzerland, enriched with a polished dedicatory letter, pretending to have been written by Machiavelli himself to his son. This letter was so exactly in the style of Machiavelli that it deceived the public, and even those best acquainted with his writings. To give it still more a varnish of authenticity, a little note was added to the letter intended to make it appear that it had been found amongst the papers of Francesco Del Nero [an eminent Florentine statesman of the fifteenth century].”<sup>37</sup>

The purpose of the forged letter was to dispel the many and strong negative feelings that were still common in the eighteenth-century learned community. Under the heading “Religion,” for instance, we read: “All enterprises to be undertaken should be for the honor of God and the general good of the country; the fear of God facilitates every enterprise undertaken by governments . . . ; the non-observance of religion and of laws are vices that are the more detestable as they are caused by those who govern; it

<sup>37</sup> *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Christian E. Detmold (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1891).

is impossible that he who governs should himself be respected by those who disregard the Deity; in well-constituted governments the citizens fear more to break their oaths than the laws, because they esteem the power of God more than that of men; governments that wish to maintain themselves incorrupt must above all else maintain religious ceremonies uncorrupted, and hold them always in the highest veneration; if in all the governments of the Christian republic religion were maintained as it was instituted by its Divine Founder, the state and the Christian republics would be much more united and happy than what they are now; to show little reverence to God, and still less to the Church, is not the act of a free man, but of one that is dissolute, and more inclined to evil than to good; the disregard of all devotion and of all religion brings with it many troubles and infinite disorders; . . . it is not proper that men should pass their holidays in idleness and in places of pleasure; among all the qualities that distinguish a citizen in his country is his being above all other men liberal and munificent, especially in the construction of public edifices, such as churches, monasteries, and retreats for the poor, for the infirm, and for pilgrims; the good citizen, although constantly spending money in the building of churches and in charities, yet complains that he has never been able to spend so much in honor of God but what he finds himself His debtor on his books; it is proper to thank God, when in his infinite goodness he deigns to accord to a state or to a citizen some mark of approval, which the one has



merited by its greatness, and the other by his rare virtues and wisdom.”<sup>38</sup>

Also well adapted to American ideas of republican government were Machiavelli’s maxims on the rule of law: “We ought to attach little value to living in a city where the laws are less powerful than men; that country only is desirable where you can enjoy your substance and your friends in security, and not that where your property can be easily taken away from you, and where your friends, for fear of their own property, abandon you in your greatest need; a state cannot exist securely unless it has bound itself by many laws, in which the security of all its population is comprised; whoever is not restrained by the laws commits the same error as an unrestrained mob; the power of the law is capable of overcoming every obstacle, even that of the nature of the territory; as the preservation of good morals needs good laws, so the laws, to maintain themselves, require good morals; to prevent good morals from being corrupted and changed into bad morals, the legislator must restrain the human passions and deprive men of all hope of being able to trespass with impunity; it is the laws that make men good; good laws give rise to good education; good education produces good examples; in a well-constituted government the laws are made for the public good, and not to satisfy the ambition of a few; to despoil any one of his goods by new laws, at a time

<sup>38</sup>“Thoughts of a Statesman,” in *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 2, pp. 437–38.

when he claims them with justice before the tribunals, is a wrong that will bring with it the greatest dangers to the legislator.”<sup>39</sup>

Attractive and familiar as they might be, these “Machiavellian” sentences correspond only vaguely to Machiavelli’s texts. In this volume I have instead tried to faithfully present Machiavelli’s ideas, however provocative or distant or obsolete they may appear to contemporary readers. I have also endeavored to preserve the flavor of his unique prose, checking and, when necessary, amending existing translations, or translating the original Italian text when that seemed appropriate. I wish to thank Professor Pasquale Stoppelli for his precious comments.

<sup>39</sup>“Thoughts of a Statesman,” in *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolo Machiavelli*, pp. 444–445.