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“The deeds of great men”: Thoughts on
the Literary Motives and Imaginary
Actions of Machiavelli’s New Prince

Machiavelli’s *Prince* (1513) has long been understood as the prototypical work in modern political theory. Usually this has meant either that Machiavelli helped to bury classical political theory and usher in an amoral modern politics or that he merely documented the radical historical and political changes taking place around him. Thus, some have confused Machiavelli with the historical forces he was recording, while others have taken his claim merely to report *la verità effettuale della cosa* (the actual truth of things) at face value.

Neither position takes the *Prince* seriously enough as a literary work, by which I mean, borrowing from Kenneth Burke’s shorthand for poetry, “any work of a critical or imaginative cast . . . adopting . . . various strategies for the encompassing of situations.”¹ I stress the imaginative here, and direct attention to the essentially make-believe character of the political people, institutions, and events that Machiavelli brings to life in the *Prince*, and to the way in which the real situation (if you will) that these imaginings represent is not the historical-political reality of Florence and Italy in 1513, but the dramatic landscape in which Machiavelli’s psyche struggled with the demons of his own tragic fate. His *Prince* is the symbolic and dramatic action

1. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1941, 1973), 1.

staged therein; it molds, interprets, and plots a history of its own making and provides the theory with which to know and master it.² "No one should be surprised," Machiavelli wrote, "if, in discussing states where both the prince and the constitution are new, I shall give the loftiest examples."³

My intention is to explore in a speculative way the interpretive assumption that the new prince was imagined by Machiavelli and made logically to generate its own new political world just so that his own equally new political science would be necessary to bring it to life and explain it. Machiavelli had found part of that political science in his own failed practices, part in his regretful and resentful grasp of the political realities surrounding him, and part in his hopeful and extravagant political wishes; and he fashioned the rest from his own creativity as the story unfolded. (Left to their own devices, my undergraduates in political theory classes invariably refer to the *Prince* as a "novel.") The scene and the actions thus achieved required a protagonist, and he fashioned the idea of a new prince to give them expression, and brought both into existence poetically in beautifully rendered acts of destructive creativity—the archetypal conquest of the hereditary or traditional principality (in two instances, a republic) (see chapters 5 and 9), replayed in repeated scenes by a variety of political actors through the discourse of the *Prince*.

Machiavelli is not much concerned to advise princes how exactly to become princes; there is very little account of how any prince might come to be so poised and ready to strike. Machiavelli becomes truly interested only at that moment when the hereditary prince is overthrown, the new prince is born, and the new political world, full of danger, comes to life. The *Prince* is a book about this fictive and dramatic world and about how the complex hero, the new prince, must act in it. The central topic here will be this new prince and

2. I long ago argued this general point in relation to the text of the *Prince*, especially in respect to the symbolic action among the emotional image-clusters organizing so much of the text. My concerns in the present essay are narrower. See Charles D. Tarlton, "The Symbolism of Redemption and the Exorcism of Fortune in Machiavelli's *Prince*," *The Review of Politics* 30 (1968): 332-45.

3. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. and ed. George Bull (London: Penguin, 1961, 1995), 17. All further references are to this edition and made parenthetically.

the actions by which he is politically realized in the text of the *Prince*.

Princely action, as Machiavelli has depicted it, can be divided into three major phases. First, the action of conquest, the politically aggressive action *par excellence*, serves not only to destroy the imaginary premodern political form represented by the model hereditary principality, but at the same instant creates the new prince from the coarse and easily recognized image of the *condottiere* (mercenaries), as if from nothing. Second, that initiating action sets in motion immediate and threatening counteractions that force the new prince into an immediate, unavoidable, dangerous, and reactive posture, from which inaction is forever proscribed. In Machiavelli's political theater, to lose is almost certainly to die, and so each of these actions, of course, has always to be the exactly right one. Third, because of all this, the new prince is catapulted into an uncomfortable prominence, exposed to public view and scrutiny, and required to create and project a false and manipulative image.

Before examining these three stages of princely action in greater detail, however, we need to look at what is always the first object for consideration: the political setting, which is, from the outset, represented by an imagined quasi-historical period of political stability and security that Machiavelli calls the hereditary principality:

I say, then, that in hereditary states, accustomed to their Prince's family, there are fewer difficulties in maintaining one's rule than in new principalities; because it is enough merely not to neglect the institutions founded by one's ancestors and then to adapt policy to events. In this way, if the Prince is reasonably assiduous, he will always maintain his rule . . . and if he does not provoke hatred by extraordinary vices, it stands to reason that his subjects should naturally be well disposed toward him. (5-6)

The stable, calm, and peaceful hereditary principality of chapter 2 of the *Prince* is definitely not the representation of any historical political form at the time widespread in Italy. Even a cursory look at the history of Italian despots of the fifteenth century reveals their cupidity, violence, illegitimacy, and insecurity.⁴ Machiavelli ignored the historical

4. See Orville Prescott, *Princes of the Renaissance* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970) and John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: The Age of the Despots* (London: J. Murray, 1954).

reality of the dynastic states of his day and romanticized the popularity, legitimacy, and traditional security of his model hereditary principality.

Even when Machiavelli later explicitly attacks and belittles the "Princes" of his day "who have lost their states," he carefully avoids naming any Italian rulers and speaks only of the "king of Naples" and the "duke of Milan" (76). It is impossible to decipher exactly what he means here; the political history of Naples and Milan in this period makes it impossible to determine with any confidence who Machiavelli might have had in mind. Nevertheless, he writes that

these Princes of ours, whose power had been established many years, may not blame fortune for their losses. Their own indolence was to blame, because, having never imagined when times were quiet that they could change (and this is a common failing of mankind, never to anticipate a storm when the sea is calm), when adversity came their first thoughts were of flight and not of resistance. They hoped that the people, revolted by the outrages of the conqueror, would recall them. (77)

Rather than Naples or Milan, however, it seems more likely that Machiavelli was here reaching back to the general ideas of chapter 2. The most telling portions of this later chapter are the opening lines, and they strongly suggest exactly that what Machiavelli certainly had in mind was the new and the hereditary princes of his imaginary politics:

If he carefully observes the rules I have given above, a new prince will appear to have been long established and will quickly become more safe and secure in his government than if he had been ruling his state for a long time. The actions of a new prince attract much more attention than those of a hereditary ruler; and when these actions are marked by prowess they, far more than royal blood, win men over and capture their allegiance. This is because men are won over by the present more than by the past. (76)

The presentation of the hereditary principality in chapter 2 takes up only seven sentences at the very beginning of the book, but the role it plays in providing the scene of the book's typical and repeated action is crucial. The hereditary principality prepares the way textually for the appearance of the new prince in several ways. First, it represents, in part, the idealized political world of fifteenth- and sixteenth-

century Humanist ideology and theory,⁵ but, we should stress, only with a certain contempt, as Machiavelli no sooner sketches the moralized state of the hereditary prince, than politically, militarily, and conceptually he causes it to be overtaken, consumed, and replaced by the wilder image of the new conqueror-prince.

Second, because the hereditary principality's destruction serves as the occasion or scene of the new prince's birth, it anticipates the new prince's main characteristics in reverse. The hereditary state's legitimacy was prescriptive and based in historical and felt loyalties. Machiavelli's language in describing the hereditary prince's situation depends on such terms and phrases as "accustomed," "ancestors," "natural Prince," "should be more loved," and "the antiquity and persistence of his rule" (5-6). We are told that the hereditary principality virtually ran itself, that "it is enough merely not to neglect the institutions founded by one's ancestors. . ." (5). The authority of the state was rooted, too, in affection, which had the wonderful effect of allowing the ruler even to make mistakes without deadly consequences. Neither the loved prince nor the loved subjects were easily enticed to provoke the other. Politics remained peaceful, and that, together with the greater significance of ritual, tradition, and reputation, meant that there was little need to maintain large armies or worry much about war. In addition, as we have already seen, the ideal of the hereditary state will later serve as the measure by which any new prince could judge whether he was successful or secure; the goal was to seem as if he, and his family before him, had always held this position.

Everything that distinguishes the hereditary principality here is passive, static, and unreflective; the thorny questions of concern to the new political science simply do not arise unless the natural tranquility is disturbed by particularly stupid and clumsy mistakes in the ruling part. At the opening of the *Prince*, the idea of the hereditary state waits, like some picturesque but indistinct castle with its village at

5. Felix Gilbert's representation of the political history in which the ideas of the *Prince* are best located stresses the collapse of morality-based medieval political regimes and the emergence of a *de-facto* politics based in the reality of the *condottiere*, "The Humanist Concept of the Prince and *The Prince* of Machiavelli," *Journal of Modern History* 11 (1939): 449-83.

the beginning of a fairy tale—"Once upon a time, all politics was peaceful, safe, and snug."

The very idea of a new prince, of course, presupposes just some situation like this in which the politics had once been "old." All of the main concerns of the *Prince* will come into view, defining itself in opposition to the hereditary state, but always presuming it as a condition and as a site. The hereditary principality is the battleground of old and new, in which past meets present, and from which we are propelled into an uncertain future.⁶

The hereditary prince has no need of the tactical advice or clever designs and ploys we commonly associate with Machiavelli. There is no mention here of armies or military strategy, perhaps just because each beloved hereditary prince is busily going about his own business and seeking his personal glory by modest and customary actions that insure the ruling family's good name. None of the dangers facing the new prince—threats of subversion from within and of conquest from without—even need to be discussed, because even if the hereditary prince is "so deprived, whenever the usurper suffers a setback he will reconquer" (5).

Traditionally prescriptive, based in old affections, lawful, and rooted in an idealistic kind of political ethics, the hereditary principality will prove, however, to be unsuspecting as well. The hereditary prince is born to power, titled, loved, and expected. Machiavelli's direct interest in the hereditary principality does not last long, however, and in the world soon to be created by the new prince, it will not be the recognized and legitimate heirs to thrones who will ascend them, but private men who, by their unanticipated and violent actions, will define not only a new kind of politics but also a new kind of political actor.

We come, then, upon the first stage or phase of princely action, where the new prince stirs, enters, and takes up arms to disrupt the calm:

But he thought it was servile to take orders from others, and so he determined that, with the help of some citizens of Fermo to whom the enslavement of their native city was more attractive

6. See J. G. A. Pocock, "Custom and Grace, Form and Matter: An Approach to Machiavelli's Concept of Innovation," in *Machiavelli and the Nature of Political Thought*, ed. Martin Fleisher (New York: Atheneum, 1972), 153-74.

than its liberty, and with the favour and help of Vitellozzo, he would seize Fermo for himself. (28)

He determined to make himself Prince and to possess by force and without obligation to others what had been voluntarily conceded to him. (27)

The new prince, the spectral "extraordinary and inordinate force" of chapter 2, arises to deprive the settled and unsuspecting hereditary Prince of his possessions. In that single action, two things happen: the long apocryphal era of peace, tranquility, and stability is rudely and violently interrupted and the new prince creates himself, emerging from the initiating action of conquest as something whole and entirely new on the political scene. This summary narrative abstracts from the *Prince* many of Machiavelli's stories of the efforts of ambitious men to become new princes. Dozens of narrative fragments, some direct and in the open, and others indirect and mentioned only in passing and left in the background, are hung up all around the text: "the duke of Ferrara" has been assaulted, overcome, and thrown from power; Louis XII of France has ousted Ludovico il Moro from Milan (twice). Discontented subjects invite outsiders to come in and take their side, only to discover that the outsider then becomes prince in his own right and is taking steps to secure himself, including suppressing the very friends and supporters who had brought him in. Some kingdoms are hard to conquer, but give way completely once they are occupied; others are easily taken, but held, if at all, only by the greatest exertions. Republics may fall easily or with difficulty, but they can be securely held only by destroying them. In one place, "a Prince who has a well-fortified city and does not make himself hated cannot be attacked," while in another "the enemy will as a matter of course burn and pillage the countryside when he arrives . . . so the subjects will identify themselves even more with their Prince, since now . . . their houses have already been burned and their lands pillaged. . ." (34-35). Turks, Macedonians, Romans, Carthaginians, Sicilians, Emperors, Popes, mythical and quasimythical heroes, petty dukes, Swiss pike-men, Spanish kings, criminals, and "stateless men soldiering for money" (42) all attacked the traditional hereditary principality, helpless now to defend itself from such an onslaught.

The new princes who inhabit the *Prince* are fictionalized versions of those "real" soldiers and politicians whose names Machiavelli uses and who we might find in any history of the Italian Renaissance.⁷ The point, to which we shall return, is that Machiavelli toys with the boundary between actual and make believe, drawing his cases and examples from the lives and adventures of easily recognized figures, but lifting those stories from their factual setting and sculpting them to fit the purposes of his text. The line between such historical characters and obviously mythical figures, such as Romulus, Theseus, Achilles, and Chiron the centaur, is calmly effaced. Machiavelli's highly charged depiction of Cesare Borgia's destruction of Remirro d'Orca in the *Prince*, where he has it that Borgia's unexpected action "awed" the people, provides a good example. That account differs significantly from his report of the same episode in his diplomatic dispatches, where Machiavelli says that the people were demanding it.⁸

Machiavelli's interest is keenest in those cases where "both the Prince and the constitution are new" (17). Cesare Borgia, Francesco Sforza, Oliverotto da Fermo, Giovanni Bentivogli, Ludovico il Moro, Pandolfo Petrucci, and the Vitelli of Città di Castello (among Italians) and Hiero and Agathocles, both of Syracuse (among the ancients), were all new princes who, in Machiavelli's versions of them, transformed themselves by acts of conquest from ordinary men into rulers. The *Prince* everywhere narrates the efforts of ambitious men to become new princes, men "who have seized countries and [are] determined to hold on to them" (13). For Machiavelli, these were, indeed, the men of their times, and he so structures their encounter with the seductively awaiting hereditary kingdoms that, without this categorical opportunity, their "talents" would never have found an outlet, but would have been wasted, useless, and ignored.

"But, in the new principality," Machiavelli says in the first sentence of the third chapter, "difficulties do arise" (6).

7. Hayden White, of course, reminds us that this distinction between historical and fictional can easily be overstated, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973) and *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978).

8. Christian E. Detmold, ed., *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Cambridge: Houghton and Mifflin, 1891), vol. 4: 257.

Thus, the new prince steps forward. He is ambitious, greedy, vain, and probably megalomaniacal (Cesare Borgia had Julius Caesar's words, "*Jacta est Alea* [The die is cast]," engraved on his parade sword).⁹ He is someone who probably smarts under the authority of others. "Why should I take orders," Oliverotto might have asked, and then murdered his foster father by way of an answer. The question, of course, could not be borne. "The wish to acquire more," Machiavelli writes, "is admittedly a very natural and common thing; and when men succeed in this they are always praised rather than condemned" (12).

Several times in the text, Machiavelli suggests, briefly and almost nostalgically, that political regimes might also be evaluated by the quality of the institutions that have been created in them, by the wisdom of the laws, or by the personal virtues of their rulers. He always sardonically returns, however, to the colder realization that the situation of the new prince, as he has conceived it, has little room for gratuitous generosity or goodness. When all is said and done, there is only one key "characteristic of these principalities; and that is whether a Prince's power is such that, in case of necessity, he can stand alone, or whether he must always have recourse to the protection of others. . . ." This question, in turn, comes down to whether he can "assemble an army equal to an encounter with any aggressor" (33-34).

The actions by which such men as Agathocles, Oliverotto da Fermo, and Cesare Borgia announced themselves as new princes are narrated in detail. We learn of their ambition, of their insignificant political beginnings, and of their wild maneuverings to gain power. Oliverotto and Agathocles exploited what were essentially military opportunities and, mixing these with military skill and cunning, led their enemies into fatal traps. Borgia was only slightly different. The bastard son of a Pope, ambitious in the highest degree, and clever, he was handed an army with which he then assaulted and defeated more powerful and more established opponents on all fronts. He was bloodthirsty (no handicap at all in the world of new princes), and the road to his brief success was littered with the dead; he destroyed all who had

9. Sarah Bradford, *Cesare Borgia* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1976), 80.

injured or might later injure him. Borgia was the new prince with a vengeance, overthrowing a long list of principalities—Pesaro, Rimini, Cesena, Forlì, Imola, and Urbino.

However, whether we look at these three or at the many others whose stories are not taken up in the same detail, the general pattern is clear. The new princes, from Francesco Sforza, King Louis XII of France, or Pope Julius II, who are mentioned in the book's opening pages, to Ferdinand of Aragon, Machiavelli's "Romans," or the "Lorenzo de' Medici" of the dedication and exhortation, create (or are invited to create) themselves by actions that burst upon an unsuspecting political landscape and forge their new political position from its destruction.

This conquest and the destruction simultaneously demonstrate that all previous political principles, theories of obligation, popular affection, or even God, are no real defense against raw force and violence. The new prince is, at bottom, an abstracted, depersonalized force, the logical underpinning of all political discussions. Machiavelli dresses this abstraction up in the costumes of his character-princes, but, underneath these, it is the general idea of the new prince that the *Prince* most relentlessly pursues. Only the incurably naïve (and those, anyhow, soon to be destroyed) believed any longer in things "as they are imagined" or in "republics and principalities which have never in truth been known to exist" (48). Faced with the political choice of "fighting: by law or by force," the new princes had discovered and were subsequently teaching, by their example, that "the first way often proves inadequate [and] one must needs have recourse to the second" (54). Such cold, natural animals of power had neither the time nor the inclination to pause and consider the decency (or lack of it) in the actions by which they satisfied their needs.

In the second phase of princely action, the new prince finds himself cornered by the very actions that have propelled him upward into power. In the same passages that celebrate and dissect the new prince's conquests, there is always the further suggestion that there is more to conquest than just triumph and glory. The new prince wins, certainly, but in the process he also destroys the very values on which an earlier and more innocent political stability depended. He has introduced unheard-of changes in

political methods, tactics, and outlook, but, alas, the world has witnessed everything, and all men can learn. In the very midst of the new prince's active debunking of the old ways, he has, simultaneously, exposed himself to the same dangers and threats he had only just before exclusively posed for others. As the new prince could take whatever he wanted, when he wanted it (and *if* he could), so whatever he acquired could now similarly be taken away by whoever else wanted it (if *he* could).

That was just the beginning; the new prince's inaugural actions created the very rivals and enemies who would later attempt to destroy him. The new prince had discovered a new politics in which no limit need be recognized, in which the only moral question was the prudential query whether an action would actually work, and in which failure is tantamount to violent death. Such a politics, of course, drives everyone into a corner, and the new prince (and, after a while, it must be that everyone has become a "new" prince), at bay, must remain constantly on guard and always be ready to act, violently, if necessary. "A new prince, of all rulers," Machiavelli cautions soberly, "finds it impossible to avoid a reputation for cruelty, because of the abundant dangers inherent in a newly won state" (52).

Further, intense political pressures build up in the ruins of the old order. In conquered republics, for example, "the memory of their ancient liberty does not and cannot let them rest" (17), and even when a hereditary Prince has been conquered, he cannot be kept out forever because, the new conqueror making the slightest blunder, the old one will be restored. Machiavelli recalls that "all that had to happen was that a Duke Ludovico should rampage on the borders" to regain control of Milan from the usurper, Louis XII (6).

Having conquered, then, the new prince is automatically and inescapably compelled to further and defensive actions, equally violent and provocative. Before becoming conqueror, he always, of course, had the choice to act politically or not. Once entered upon the conqueror's path, however, there was no alternative to further violence. The new prince must then devote himself wholly to maintaining his position. He must learn, Machiavelli writes, in a most typically Machiavellian precept, to discern trouble from far off and be prepared to act violently on little notice (10). He all but says, too, that the new prince needs to run scared and never

"imagine that [he] can always adopt a safe course; rather [he] should regard all possible courses as risky. This is the way things are: whenever one tries to escape one danger one runs into another" (72).

The actions of every new prince are, by definition, disruptive of whatever order had previously existed. They destroy longstanding institutions and "make enemies of all those who prospered under the old order . . . and whenever those who oppose the changes can do so, they attack vigorously. . ." (19). New princes antagonize everyone "partly because of the new institutions and laws they are forced to introduce in founding the state and making themselves secure" (18-19). To fit himself in, so to speak, the new prince must first dislocate the existing pattern of forces. "It should be borne in mind," Machiavelli bluntly warns his new princes, "that there is nothing more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, and more dangerous to carry through than initiating changes in a state's constitution" (19).

Cesare Borgia provides the readiest illustration of this dilemma. His father, Pope Alexander VI, set out to disrupt and, thereby, breach the obstacles consolidated against his planned conquest of the Romagna. "What he had to do, therefore," Machiavelli wrote, "was to create disorder, throwing their states into a turmoil, so that he could win secure control over part of them" (22). The ensuing chaos, as useful as it initially was, ultimately proved as dangerous to Borgia as to the others. The political and military actions by which he established and secured himself generated a feverish shifting back and forth among those already on the scene politically. Finally, after all the intense jockeying for position, the destructive warfare, murder, and treachery, he lost everything.

Each new prince, having come out on the stage and cruelly taken his position, is then constantly pursued and eventually put on the defensive, from where he has not only always to act, but to act successfully. He faces, from the outset, a frightening inventory of problems that threaten to destroy him. "There is no doubt," Machiavelli reminded his reader, "that a Prince's greatness depends on his triumphing over difficulties and opposition" (67). The new principality is by its very nature beset with "difficulties," anyway, and the new prince who "does not attend carefully to these points

will quickly lose what he has acquired; even while he still holds on he will experience countless difficulties and annoyances" (9).

Having been forced onto the hereditary principality's preexisting structures of power, right, loyalty, and habit, the new principality has to be held in place there, held down like a hatch against the floods of *fortuna*. The new prince who comes to power based on ability and his own forces faces most of his trouble early on, as he is forging his "foundations." "Luckier" princes, those whose *fortuna* tosses them into power, "who make the journey as if they had wings," encounter their troubles "when they have landed," and find themselves in power without adequate foundations (20). But, whether the coming to power was quick and easy or protracted and difficult, things must still be held in place.

The most sustained discussion of the cornered new prince (and our last offering under this category) is contained in chapter 3, "Composite Principalities," where Machiavelli introduces the very idea of a "new prince," and which was in large part focused topically on the invasion of Lombardy and the conquest of Milan by Louis XII of France. Machiavelli draws out the consequences of Louis's initial act of invasion and concentrates on the ways his faulty responses to countermoves brought about his eventual defeat. Without doubt, the lesson of chapter 3 is that the new prince is never in greater danger than at the outset of such an enterprise. Louis came into Italy, attacked Milan, conquered it, and then found himself face-to-face with the many-barbed situation his own actions had produced. Allies and enemies alike rose up before him, forcing choices and decisions upon him (to support someone here, resist another there).

In Machiavelli's vignette, Louis lacks the ability demanded by his ambitions, and his enterprise failed ultimately because, once he had invaded Italy and was then required to act further, he made a series of six fatal mistakes. The worst of these contributed to the power of the Church, seriously weakened the Venetians, and brought in the Spanish king, Ferdinand, a future enemy, and one who would eventually drive him from Italy altogether. "From this we can deduce a general rule," Machiavelli concludes, "which never or rarely fails to apply: that whoever is responsible for another's becoming powerful ruins himself . . ." (13). The key, Machiavelli notes, is the

inexorability of one action calling forth the next. "Having made one mistake," Machiavelli said, "he was forced to make others" (11).

The third phase of princely action requires the prince to feint; a moving or invisible target is hardest to hit. The idea at the bottom here, according to Machiavelli, is that "Men in general judge by their eyes rather than by their hands; because everyone is in a position to watch, few are in a position to come in close touch with you. Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are" (56).

From his exposed pinnacle, the new prince finds himself uncomfortably naked and vulnerable. He is subject to attack from anyone catching any sight of weakness, lack of preparation, or irresolution within his government. Needing, far more than others, to keep his circumstances, plans, and actions secret or to wrap them in illusions and distractions when that is required, the new prince must nevertheless remain constantly in public view. His absence itself would be a public act to be scrutinized. His actions have thrown him up onto the political stage and such glory is bought, we have seen, by the loss of security; we see now that it also costs him his privacy.

The new prince has come greedily front and center, climbing right up into full public view to accept the cheers, out there, by himself, open on all sides and fully visible even to the lowliest of the low. He escapes this public exposure only in subterfuge. He slips away and leaves his false face smiling in his absence; he "must know how to colour [his] actions and to be a great liar and deceiver," Machiavelli wrote, and "men are so simple, and so much creatures of circumstance, that the deceiver will always find someone ready to be deceived" (55).

The actions of friends and enemies alike will be based on what they take the prince to be. They will act differently, Machiavelli explains (in a series of discussions about appearances, deception, and lying that remind one of nothing so much as Renaissance comedy), depending on whether they believe the prince to be generous or stingy, religious or impious, honest or a liar, kind and compassionate, or cold and indifferent. They will trust and depend on him, or not, undertake tasks for him and expect just rewards, or not, or bring their disputes and

disagreement before him, or not, depending entirely on what "qualities" they are convinced are his.

The implication is equally clear that the actions of the new prince's enemies are also governed only by what they take to be his reality. This means, of course, that he can mislead us regarding his character. That is the first part. The new prince must be a person of such "flexible disposition" that he can pretend to be religious or honest, misrepresent his intentions, delay for time, and leave his friends in the lurch, and then still turn back to us, smiling, and make us believe he knew nothing at all about it. The further question, of course, is that if he can effectively "create" his own character with smoke and mirrors, why could he not deceive his enemies into believing that he was braver than he really is, richer, more powerful, or even better armed?

We can wonder, then, whether the manipulative advice of chapters 15 to 19 is not really meant to make up for the absence of cruder real power in the form of soldiers. Perhaps he felt too keenly the ironies and emptiness of all his talk about soldiers and soldiering in chapters 12, 13, and 14. How would any prince-adventurer of the sort Machiavelli is imagining actually have armies of his "own," loyal and willing to die? This prince could have dream soldiers, but perhaps deceit, cunning, masks, lies, bravado, in a word, *theater*, might really be the best available alternative to real power.

These are two alternative categories in Machiavelli's thought about the situations of princes—"innovators who stand alone and those who depend on others . . . those who to achieve their purposes can force the issue and those who must use persuasion" (19). In the first case, where acts of conquest are taken in situations containing the elements and potential of resistance and counterplot, Machiavelli's politics fill the scene with soldiers. Where those same actions have only thrust him into prominence and subjected him to the scathing scrutiny of a curious, worried, and suspicious, but unarmed public (as well as bringing him to the attention of distant and as yet only potential enemies), then the prince's best weapon is misdirection.

The whole discussion of princes and soldiers and extravagant schemes of public seduction is a matter of appearances, anyway. The successful conquerors in

Machiavelli's day (and these include most of those in his book) depended heavily on mercenaries. The only completely nonmercenary army with which Machiavelli had any actual experience was his own Florentine militia, whose cowardice and failure cost Machiavelli his job, his reputation, and perhaps more. The "realities" of power in the *Prince*, if that is what we can call them, are really only these imaginary "armies" of Machiavelli's dreams.¹⁰ The Roman Legions, the Swiss pikes, the Greek and French and Spanish soldiery that populate the *Prince* are of the same substance, in the final analysis, as those phantom and invincible Italian armies he raves about to Lorenzo in the dedication. The "idea" of the army is itself so much more important than any outside reality that Machiavelli can say of his "[w]ise princes," that "[t]hey have preferred to lose battles with their own forces than win them with others. . ." (43). Having stepped forward and into public view, entirely exposed and actually without the strong foundation of an actual army of his own (except for those operatic spearholders that define his "role"), the new prince needs to project and depend upon his image as a brave, experienced, and cruel general whose reputation makes everyone else tremble.

Looking at the same point in more concrete terms, Cesare Borgia "was held in real respect," Machiavelli says, "only when everyone saw that he was absolute master of his armies" (40). Borgia, however, was a new prince of the sort who had come to power by means of "*fortuna* and the arms of others" and, as such, his position was paradoxical from the start. "As I said before," Machiavelli writes, "a man of exceptional prowess can build the foundations of his state after he has acquired it, even if by doing so he runs a risk himself as well as endangering the whole subsequent edifice" (21).

During that time in which such Princes are trying to "lay foundations such as other Princes would have already been building on" (21), they would have had few resources except

10. This can be seen most clearly, I believe, in Machiavelli's *Art of War*, in which a stage battle is fought at the very center of the book and won decisively (if improbably) by an army organized around the principles Machiavelli had developed in his management of the ill-fated Florentine militia. See Neal Wood, ed., *Machiavelli's Art of War* (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1965).

reputation. The reality of one's power is tested only in genuine conflict: "There is simply no comparison," he says, "between a man who is armed and one who is not" (46). But this great hero, Cesare Borgia, mounting assaults, changing his troops, killing or abandoning allies, and finally, when his father died and he fell ill, turning out to have no political or military reality behind him, seems to suggest a further possibility. Despite this hollowness, and that "what he instituted was of no avail," Machiavelli can still insist that he knows "no better precepts to give a new prince than ones derived from Cesare's actions" (21). Borgia's skill and his ability to build his foundations as he went along more likely indicate that perhaps there was more of the showman to Machiavelli's Borgia than at first appears, and that that was why Machiavelli used him to represent those who come to power, not by *virtù* and with military forces of their own, but by *fortuna*.

Machiavelli's new prince, then, never encounters physical force in the form of opposing armies, except that they, too, are made of the same literary material. When he does encounter these, however, then the theoretical symmetry of his idealized armies is more than enough to guarantee that he can (at least) imagine fighting his way out. When, on the other hand, the danger is spelled out in terms of the new prince's exaggerated display, then it is not a matter of countering even opponents offering only stage-resistance. What counts now is his magical ability to control how he is viewed.¹¹ Exposure transforms the prince into an actor in a play, and molds his subjects (and some enemies) into his audience. He then needs to remember his "through-action" and his lines, and never to make eye contact lest the illusion be broken. The double danger, and the real pressure, that is on Machiavelli's text throughout, would then be that the new prince was suddenly and simultaneously portrayed as both *cornered* (required to fight his way out) and *exposed* (having no option but to persuade someone to fight along with him).

11. Much of this material finds a different reading in Michael McCanles, *The Discourse of Il Principe* (Malibu: Undena, 1983), especially "Machiavelli and the Discourse of Cesare Borgia," 70-85. See also Victoria Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), chap. 1, "The Prince," 14-43.

We have arrived, then, at a turning point. With the hereditary principality, the scene had been set, the new prince has been introduced, and, in the sequence of conquest, counteraction, and the exposure of the prince, pieces of a plot and some preliminary exposition have been sketched roughly in. Following out our metaphor, we now need only some stage directions and the dialogue. These Machiavelli provides in the form of a strategic political science, which, in its naïve certainty, oversimplifications, and labored cynicism, promises to be as imaginary as the rest of the story and to keep itself far this side of any real, detailed, confusing, and unpredictable world beyond the text.

"If he carefully observes the rules I have given above," Machiavelli says toward the end of the *Prince*, "a new prince will appear to have been long established and will quickly become more safe and secure in his government than if he had been ruling his state for a long time" (76). By now, however, I hope that we can take that "new prince" he is talking to and about to be, not any actual (or authentically potential) king, viceroy, pope, soldier-of-fortune, or petty potentate in Italy at the time, but only a general, expectant, and perhaps unfulfilled audience-reader that the text, as text, logically presumes. The rules of this politics, Machiavelli's political science, then, are the choreographed moves, countermoves, and tricks that bring to life the actions of the successful new prince and others in the finished *mise-en-scène*.

These laws represent, Machiavelli says, the understanding and interpretation of politics that, partly from his observations from the sidelines and partly from his reading of formal classical texts, especially the story-like Greek and Roman historians, he had accumulated over the years and that he believed (or pretended to believe) had come to him in fantasies at night on the farm at Sant' Andrea. In the now famous letter to Vettori of 10 December 1513, Machiavelli wrote intimately that he had recently been studying ancient political authors and that he had "jotted down what I have profited from in their conversation and composed a short study, *De principatibus*. . . (*Of or On the Principality*)." He calmly reports that he spent these evenings dressed in his curial robes and asking the ancient writers questions about politics, about success and failure,

and he relates that they answered him, and that "for four hours at a time I feel no boredom, I forget all my troubles, I do not dread poverty, and I am not terrified of death. I absorb myself into them completely."¹² One could, of course, say that this is mere metaphor on Machiavelli's part, but no matter how many times one reads this letter, I would argue, it is impossible to escape the sense of his extreme distress. Was he hearing things?

What is crucial here, of course, is that the constitutive phases of Machiavelli's political fiction, that is, the scenic hereditary principality, the new prince, his initiating act of conquest, his being cornered by the responses and counteractions he generated, and the rising need for the arts of deception and flexibility, transmute quite naturally and without interruption into the rules, maxims, and advices that emerge as Machiavelli's political science. They are logically coextensive and conceptually isomorphic, the political science's prescriptions for action being, in the main, merely larger and fuller depictions of the situation, the actions within it, and its agents.

The politics and the political science contained in the *Prince* are, of course, political pathologies when compared to the norms and principles that had dominated theoretical writing about politics for two millennia. Perhaps because he was searching for something sufficiently novel to give his creations real distinctiveness, or perhaps because certain of his experiences, either his close observations, say, of the menacing Cesare Borgia (or of the many other murderous episodes in the sad story of Florentine foreign relations in the early sixteenth century), or his personal suffering in prison and under torture at the hands of the Medici, Machiavelli found solace in the violent, amoral, and wholly instrumental prescriptions we find in the *Prince*. It seems unlikely, in either case, that these ideas were the result of a careful, systematic, and inductive study of politics and history.

Whether the maxims and rules are said to be inspired by historical events or stamped as things actually witnessed, we are not in the midst of any inductive historical or

12. James B. Atkinson and David Sices, trans. and ed., *Machiavelli and his Friends: Their Personal Correspondence* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1996), 264.

material reality merely and duly noted, we must remember, but in the thick middle of a complicated, imaginative, passionate, sly, and dramatic text that Machiavelli has offered up instead of and as if it were the data of real political events. He has invented this new prince, of course, his situation, his antagonists, and his possible future just so that he might then provide the science necessary to understand it all and make it work. Machiavelli depicts his new princes for us, gives them their typical motives, capacities, and urges, and sets up appropriate obstacles in their way. He then throws them into arenas of mad and ceaseless action, where fast-footed trickery and impenetrable illusions are all around. The resulting relationships among the actions, resources, and circumstances of these new princes turns out to be nothing other than the substance of his new science of politics.

The *Prince* also shows signs of having been shaped to answer Machiavelli's personal needs, that is, to encompass the situation in which he found himself (and to which, of course, he metaphorically compared the circumstances of both Florence and Italy). Machiavelli writes his political theory in such a way that the more the reader is familiar with Renaissance Florentine history and the details of Machiavelli's own life, the more everything takes on an autobiographical tinge, and becomes a kind of political and theoretical *roman à clef*.¹³ He portrays himself there as a wise, knowledgeable, experienced, and worldly adviser, but the realities of his having been disgracefully dismissed from office, singled out for persecution and humiliation, arrested, tortured, and then banished from his precious Florence are never far from view. No longer even a minor political actor in that world beyond the text, he came to see himself (both inside and outside his text) as enduring "the great and unremitting malice of fortune" (2). He uses virtually the same expression in Italian to describe Borgia's "undeserved" fate (21).¹⁴ Dreams, then, and musings, his memories, and

13. See Charles D. Tarlton, "Symbolism of Redemption" and *Fortune's Circle: A Biographical Interpretation of Machiavelli* (New York: Quadrangle, 1969). I have recently completed but not yet published an essay dealing with the autobiographical character of the historical narratives used in the *Prince*.

14. ". . . una grande e continua malignità di fortuna" (Fortune's great and persistent malice) in his own case, and ". . . una straordinaria et estrema

the "lessons" he took from these were all he had left, all he had to offer.

I have not found among my belongings anything as dear to me or that I value as much as my understanding of the deeds of great men, won by me from a long acquaintance with contemporary affairs and a continuous study of the ancient world; these matters I have very diligently analysed and pondered for a long time, and now, having summarized them in a little book, I am sending them to Your Magnificence. (1)

It has, of course, become a commonplace of Machiavelli studies to see this proffered political wisdom and advice as essentially practical; Machiavelli was seeking employment, so the story goes, and he believed this practical handbook might help sell his skills. The letter to Vettori that we have already mentioned, the *Prince's* prefatory letter of dedication, and the rhapsodic exhortation at the end are generally read from this perspective. They are made to appear as supplemental to the main text, parts of a temporarily fitted container, a kind of messenger appointed to deliver it; they are not, in this view, part of the text. This has produced many strained interpretations of both fragments, always as if they were evidence separated from and supportive of this or that reading of the "text," being proof that Machiavelli was, in fact, a highly moral patriot or, in contrast, that he was the first objective political scientist.

When we read the dedication and the exhortation (each absurd and impossible, in its own way) as integral and poetic parts of the "text" of the *Prince*, however, they can be seen to serve the very different purpose of "completing" the symbolic action traced in its imaginative narratives by providing, in its bringing in of the "Medici," the missing "audience" for all the advisory and admonitory style in which those narratives have been presented.

In the last few sentences of the political part of his *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes lamented the futility of just this kind of merely verbalized politics and wished for a sovereign who would come along and make his book the basis of civic education, and thus "convert this Truth of Speculation, into

malignità di fortuna" (Fortune's extraordinary and enormous malice) in Borgia's. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe e Discorsi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1960), 14, 35.

the Utility of Practice."¹⁵ In the dedication to the *Prince*, Machiavelli hoped that Lorenzo would "discover in it my urgent wish that you reach the eminence that fortune and your other qualities promise you" (2). In the exhortation, Machiavelli's plea is for Lorenzo to "emulate those I have singled out for admiration," "introduce a new order," and "lead Italy to her salvation" (80, 81). Machiavelli's wish, like Hobbes's, is an open admission that, this side of miracles, political writing is not (and never can reach) the world. Both political writers wait helplessly for someone else to come, someone who, without their help, is already occupying a position of political power, to come and—what?—magically translate the merest signifiers into things.

We cannot confidently accept the notion that Machiavelli really meant the *Prince* to fire the ambition of the Medici and also arm them with the practical knowledge necessary to seize the whole of Italy (an ambition which, I submit, is impossible to attribute to Machiavelli without questioning his sanity). Neither, however, can we, at the same time, ignore the language of challenge, promise, temptation, and cajolery contained there. So perhaps there is another way to read the exhortation and the Medici's relation to Machiavelli's literary politics. I am suggesting, of course, that the "Italy" Machiavelli meant his textualized Medici to conquer was on the same literary plane as were his fictionalized hereditary and new princes, his models of action and reaction, and his puppet-theater of deception and staged battles. The text of the *Prince* opens to include this now completely poetic conquest; the Medici are addressed as characters in the story, taking their place and planning their future there. Logical room can be made now for all the "unheard of wonders . . . the sea is divided, a cloud has shown you the way, water has gushed from the rock, [and] it has rained manna" (81-82). Soldiers and armies as Machiavelli has all along only dreamed them, a rebirth of Italian military skill and courage, and a rising tide of unheard patriotism are heaped generously and with a god-like hand upon these cardboard Medici.

15. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 254. See, too, Charles D. Tarlton, "The Word for the Deed": Hobbes's Two Versions of *Leviathan*," *New Literary History* 27 (1996): 785-802.

These Medici of his, then, are not *the* Medici? No, and neither was his Francesco Sforza *the* Sforza nor his Julius II, "who was impetuous in everything" and never looked before he leaped, *the* Julius. Throughout the *Prince*, Machiavelli's political fictions have borne the names of real or mythically "familiar personages." Their literary reality in the text is not determined by their consubstantiality with individuals outside the text, any more than the validity and certain success of the archetypal political actions or general strategic statements portrayed there depend on the cooperation or recalcitrance of real objects, people, or the physical-psychological laws of nature. The imaginary reach of the *Prince* is all-inclusive. That the Medici of the dedication and exhortation are as fictional as Cesare Borgia, Hiero, and Romulus in the midst of the text is the simplest reading.

The dedication and exhortation provide the narrative of the *Prince* with a future. It is, however, a literary and textual future in which we are asked to imagine Machiavelli's principles and lessons tested, so to speak, in the field. Nothing actually happens, of course, in any world outside the text. Those princely actions, which have all along been both the subject and the motive energy of the text, are invited to come outside, beyond their restricted, morality-tale chapters. Machiavelli can predict now that his ideas will, of course, easily withstand the scrutiny-in-action of real conquest. However, the "outside" of the exhortation is an entirely inside outside. The conquest in which he dreams of testing them will be a poetic war, because then the scene of the conflict, the stylized and imaginary actors, and the outcomes all remain within the text and under control of his pen.

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