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Journal

California Italian Studies, 2(2)

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Publication Date

2011

DOI

10.5070/C322008931

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Reading Machiavelli Rhetorically: *The Prince* as Covert Criticism of the Renaissance Prince

James O. Ward

Flattery is ugly, but censure is dangerous; that manner is best which lies between the two, namely innuendo.

--Demetrius of Phaleron

Criticare i principi è pericoloso, lodarli è bugia.

--Italian proverb

Since its first appearance there have been readers who have read Machiavelli's *Prince* not as advice for the Renaissance prince, nor as an objective presentation of political affairs in the Italy of Machiavelli's day, but rather as precisely the opposite, as a veiled but nevertheless trenchant critique of the Renaissance prince, presented in a form that seems to offer him advice. Perhaps the best-known of these interpretations of Machiavelli's treatise as a crypto-republican work, in which advice is actually given to the people on the ways of tyrants and the means of resisting them under the guise of seeming to instruct the prince, is that of Rousseau. In his *Du contrat social*, he comments: "[Machiavelli], pretending to give lessons to kings, gave great lessons to the people. *The Prince* of Machiavelli is the book of republicans." In the 1782 edition Rousseau himself inserted the following note:

The choice alone of his execrable hero [Cesare Borgia] makes clear his secret intention; and the contrasting of the maxims of *The Prince* with those of his *Discourses on Titus Livy* and his *History of Florence*, makes clear that this deep political thinker has up until now had only superficial or corrupt readers. The court of Rome severely prohibited his book; I well believe it; it is that court which it depicts most clearly. (1972, 3, 6. 169)¹

¹ Diderot is of the same opinion: "Machiavelli was a man of profound genius and wide erudition.... Some claim that he taught Cesare Borgia how to rule. What is certain, is that the despotic power of the house of Medici was hateful to him, and that this hatred, which was well within his power to hide, exposed him to long and cruel persecution.... How can one explain that one of the most ardent defenders of monarchy suddenly became an infamous apologist for tyranny? In the following manner.... When Machiavelli wrote his treatise on the Prince, it is as if he said to his fellow citizens: 'Read this work well. If you ever accept a master, he will be such as I paint him for you: here is the fierce animal to whom you will abandon yourselves.' And so it was the fault of his contemporaries if they misunderstood his purpose: they took a satire as a eulogy. Chancellor Bacon made no mistake, when he said: 'This man teaches nothing to tyrants; they know only too well what they must do; but he instructs the people on what they should fear. That is the reason why we should give thanks to Machiavelli and this type of writer, who openly and frankly show

Enlightenment readings that see the *Prince* as containing a concealed republican message are most familiar to modern scholars, but there is evidence that even well before its first publication in 1532, there were readers who discerned a hidden anti-princely agenda present in the text. An anecdote recounted by the English Cardinal Reginald Pole (one of the first writers to promote the myth of Machiavelli as a messenger of Satan), provides clear evidence of just such an early reading of the text *in chiave antimedicca*. Upon asking certain Florentines he encountered in the street during the winter of 1538-39 how they could justify Machiavelli's writing such an "infamous" work, Pole claimed to have heard in response of Machiavelli's secret intention in writing the *Prince*, that

since he [Machiavelli] knew him [Lorenzo] to be of a tyrannical nature, he inserted things that could not but most greatly please such a nature. Nevertheless, [Machiavelli] judged, as have all of the other writers who have written concerning how to make a man into a king or a prince, and as experience teaches, that if the prince did put these things into effect, his rule would be brief. This he greatly hoped for, since inwardly he burned with hatred toward that prince for whom he wrote. Nor did he expect from that book anything other than, by writing for the tyrant the things that please a tyrant, to give him, if he could, a ruinous downfall by his own action. (2002, 35, 1, 136)

Gennaro Sasso, the great scholar of Machiavelli's works, notes that the text aroused early hostility as it circulated in manuscript well before its first publication in 1532.² The text's first Florentine editor Bernardo di Giunta's dedicatory letter also notes strong aversion to the text, and asserts that the work contains strong medicine that will allow its readers to defend themselves against tyranny (cited in Machiavelli 1891, 35-36).³ Giunta

what men are accustomed to doing, not what they ought to do" (1999). I would like to thank Professor Déborah Blocerk of the University of California, Berkeley for help with this translation.

² For example, Sasso cites Biagio Buonaccorsi's dedicatory letter of his transcription of the *Prince*, addressed to his friend and protector Pandolfo Bellacci: "Ricevilo [the *Prince*] adunque con quella promptezza che si ricerca, e preparati acerrimo difensore contro a tutti quelli che per malignità o invidia lo volessino, secondo l'uso di questi tempi, mordere e lacerare" (Accept it [the *Prince*], then, with that readiness it requires, and prepare yourself to be its fierce defender against all those who, through ill will or envy, wish, in the spirit of these times, to tear and lacerate it). Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Italian and the Latin in this article are mine. Sasso notes that manuscripts of the *Prince* were in circulation as early as 1515 or 1516, and cites as evidence of this early manuscript tradition, among other examples, Guicciardini's borrowing of Machiavelli's passage on the difficulty of holding a new state in his *Del modo di assicurare lo stato ai Medici* of 1515 or 1516 (1988, 202).

³ Giunta requests of Gaddi that "V.S.R. la quale...lo piglierà non dimeno volentieri; et con quello animo, ch'io glielo porgo; et lo difenderà da quegli, che per il soggetto suo lo vanno tutto il giorno lacerando sì aspramente: non sapendo, che quegli, che l'herbe et le medicine insegnano; insegnano parimente anchora i veleni; solo accioché da quegli ci possiamo conoscendogli guardare: ne s'accorgono anco, che egli non è arte, ne scientia alcuna; la quale non si possa da quegli, che cattivi sono, usare malamente; et chi dirà mai, che il ferro fusse trovato più tosto per ammazzare gli huomini, che per difendersi da gli animali? Certo, che io creda, niuno" (take it, nevertheless, willingly, and in the spirit with which I give it to you; and defend it from those who, because of its subject, go about every day lacerating it so harshly, not knowing that those

adds that the text will need strong defenders to protect it from those who have taken offense at its message (ibid.). Taken together with his reference to the text as medicine against tyranny, this suggests the possibility that certain of its early readers may have been offended not only by the provocative material regarding the necessity for the successful prince to imitate the fox as well as the lion, to cultivate fear as well as the love of his subjects, but also by what they may have discerned as a veiled anti-Medicean message present in the text, analogous to that described by Cardinal Pole in the anecdote cited above. The dedicatee of Giunta's prefatory letter was none other than Giovanni Gaddi, the brother of the powerful anti-Medicean Cardinal Niccolò Gaddi.⁴

The Neapolitan humanist Agostino Nifo produced a Latin version of the *Prince* entitled *De Regnandi Peritia*, issued in Naples in 1523, that describes Machiavelli's work in terms similar to those later used by Giunta:⁵ "For you will find in these pages both the deeds of kings and of tyrants briefly described, as in the books of doctors both poisons and antidotes: that you might avoid the former, and seek out the latter" (Nifo 2008, Dedication to Charles V).⁶ While usually dismissed as mere plagiarism or an inept rewriting of Machiavelli's text, Nifo's additions to and reordering of Machiavelli's text are intended to censure the rule of tyrants and describe the nature of just kingly rule. In this respect, his work anticipates Innocent Gentillet's better-known and more systematic "refutation" of the *Prince*, the *Commentariorum*, published more than fifty years later.⁷

Specifically, Nifo seems to read Machiavelli's chapter "De Principatu Civili" as a description of Florence's political situation under Medici rule. After a close translation of Machiavelli's discussion of the way a civil prince comes to power he adds

In this way the Florentines made Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici civil rulers...the Sienese Pandolfo Petrucci, the Bolognese first Annibale, then

who teach us about herbs and medicines, also teach us about poisons, for the sole reason that, knowing them, we may defend ourselves from them; nor do they realize, that there is no art, nor science which cannot be ill used by those who are evil; and who would ever say that iron was discovered for the purpose of killing men, rather than to defend ourselves against animals? Surely, as far as I know, no one"). The mention of the use of iron to defend oneself against animals may also be a reference to tyrants, since it was a commonplace in classical and Renaissance political thought to refer to tyrants as beasts, and not men. For example, Cicero remarks in Book II of the *De Re Publica*: "who, although he [the tyrant] has the shape of a man, nevertheless in the savagery of his conduct surpasses the fiercest animals." Donato Giannotti uses the same metaphor in his *Dialogi* where the discussion of tyrants is a veiled critique of the Cosimo de' Medici of his day (Giannotti 1939). Compare Machiavelli on the only remedy for tyrants: "nè vi è altro rimedio che il ferro" (*Discorsi* I.58).

⁴ For a discussion of the literary/political *ambiente* which saw the first publication of the *Prince*, see n. 20.

⁵ Giunta's prefatory letter obliquely refers to Nifo's version, suggesting that he was thinking of Nifo in the later passage.

⁶ For Nifo's connections with Neapolitan humanist circles, see Valeri (2007). For Nifo and Machiavelli, see Anglo (2005), ch. 2, and Procacci (1965), pt. 1, ch. 1.

⁷ In light of the hidden anti-tyrannical message present in Machiavelli's text, it is ironic that Gentillet's *Commentariorum* (1576), the first systematic refutation of Machiavelli's supposed "perfidies," was intended by the author to inspire Francis, Duke of Alençon, to liberate France from the "barbarous tyranny" of the "peregrinos homines," that is, Catherine de' Medici and her Italian advisors ("ad eam [Francia] vindicandam à perigrinorum cruenta et barbara tyrannide"), the latter phrase clearly an echo of Machiavelli's "Exhortatio ad Capessandam Italiam in Libertatemque a Barbaris Vindicandam" (*Il principe*, ch. 26).

Giovanni Bentivoglio.... In truth, it should not be overlooked that this type of princely rule is tyrannical, or tends toward tyranny, since it comes about neither through legitimate election, nor hereditary right. (III.10)

In Chapter 10 of Book I he had already described the Medici as exercising a kind of “iucundam tyrannidem” over Florence, words which echo Guicciardini’s famous evaluation in the *Storia d’Italia* (bk. 11) of Lorenzo’s rule over Florence years later, just as Nifo’s words classing the Medici as tyrants together with the Bentivogli of Bologna or Pandolfo Petrucci of Siena anticipate Soderini’s speech warning of Medici tyranny to the Grand Council. While it is impossible to know to what extent Nifo’s reading of Machiavelli’s text as a condemnation of the rule of tyrants is based simply upon his own ideas, it seems at least plausible that Nifo should be included in the group of early readers of the *Prince* who saw an anti-tyrannical message present in the text.⁸

A few modern scholars have argued that Machiavelli’s text needs to be read as political satire at the expense of Italy’s Renaissance princes. Garrett Mattingly famously questioned the common characterization of the *Prince* as “political science” with a satirical touch of his own:

I suppose it is possible to imagine that a man who has seen his country enslaved, his life’s work wrecked and his own career with it, and has, for good measure, been tortured within an inch of his life should thereupon go home and write a book intended to teach his enemies the proper way to maintain themselves, writing all the time, remember, with the passionless objectivity of a scientist in a laboratory. It must be possible to imagine such behavior, because Machiavelli scholars do imagine it and accept it without a visible tremor. But it is a little difficult for the ordinary mind to compass. (1958, 482-491)⁹

⁸ In this regard, it is worth noting that Machiavelli’s discussion of civil principalities parallels Cicero’s discussion in the *De Re Publica* of the way class conflict between nobles and people eventually leads to the creation of a dictator, and that the dedicatory letter is based on Tacitus’ observations on the usefulness of writing the history of the events of one’s own times, since mixed constitutions are rare and short-lived, and states alternate between rule by the nobles and the rule of the people, and it is thus useful for nobles to know the ways of the people in order to control them, and for the people to understand the nobles that they might be wise. Hence Machiavelli, with typical wit and cleverness, while appearing to engage in the traditional self-abasement of the *captatio benevolentiae* before a powerful patron, in his reference to his low station, by implicitly comparing himself to Tacitus, is actually hinting here that his treatise will be useful for an understanding of, and perhaps even an elimination of, Medici tyranny (Tacitus, *Annals*, 4.33 [1975]). For early readers of the *Prince*, besides Sasso (1988), see Raab (1965), Richardson (1995), Donaldson (1988) and Anglo (2005). For a concise discussion of early interpretations of the *Prince*, with a generous sampling of primary texts, see Burd’s edition of the text. Burd is one of those critics who reject out of hand any interpretation of Machiavelli’s work as containing a secret, anti-tyrannical or anti-Medicean message, although he gives no cogent reasons for this rejection.

⁹ Hans Baron is of a similar opinion: “Garrett Mattingly has recently said, not without good reasons, that instead of closing our eyes to the profound differences between such [republican] convictions [in the *Discorsi*] and the counsels for a despotic ruler in the *Prince*, it would be better to return to the eighteenth-century suspicion that some of the prescriptions in the *Prince* were not meant seriously, but were intended to satirize the life of princes” (1961, 223-224).

This view has its more recent adherents but it has not prevailed.¹⁰

Some early readings of the *Prince* see the text as containing a veiled censure of tyrannical rule and take the work to be a vindication of republican principles written by a man embittered by his own political marginalization at the hands of a prince in a time when the open expression of such sentiments could be dangerous. The reasons the Enlightenment readers later give for interpreting the text in this same light are suggestive; Why would Machiavelli choose as his example of ideal princely behavior one of the most hated men of his time? Why would a man descended from a family with a long tradition of service to the republic betray this family history? Why, when in all his other writings Machiavelli is clearly an advocate for the republican cause, would he compromise his principles in this one case for the sake of personal gain? Nonetheless, these thinkers rely for the most part on evidence external to the text.

In this paper I suggest a way of reading the *Prince* that draws on classical rhetorical theory and evidence *internal* to the text, and shows the work to be neither political science nor advice for a prince, but rather a very clever and forceful condemnation of the Renaissance prince, and by extension the miserable state of affairs in Italy in the early 1500s. I shall argue that Machiavelli's use of the rhetorical technique of *innuendo* allowed him to write a treatise that criticizes the prince while ostensibly offering him advice.¹¹

Such a strategy was suited to the political climate in Florence in the second decade of the sixteenth century, when the Medici return to power and the regime's suspicion of intellectuals, especially those associated with the Orti Oricellari made it dangerous to speak too freely of one's republican beliefs.¹² Using such a strategy, Machiavelli could avoid Medici reprisals while at the same time reaching those of his fellow republicans who were sufficiently sophisticated to apprehend the real meaning hidden beneath the

¹⁰ Dietz (1986) contends that Machiavelli's *Prince* was intended as a kind of elaborate trap for the Medici, to lure them into action (such as taking up residence in the city) which would be disastrous to them, thus ensuring their demise. This interpretation recalls the anecdote of Cardinal Pole cited above. Dietz' 1987 article is especially recommended for its very incisive and convincing refutation of John Langton's critique of her 1986 article, its clear presentation of the current status of the debate over the interpretation of the *Prince*, and its insistence on the importance of historical context in determining the meaning of the text. See also Fallon (1992), as well as Scott and Sullivan (1994).

¹¹ I list the many synonyms for these so-called "figured problems," in which a meaning different from the apparent one is hinted at, in n. 15.

¹² Francesco Guicciardini eloquently describes this political climate and the means necessary to deal with it: "Fa el tiranno ogni possibile diligenza per scoprire el segreto del cuore tuo, con farti carezze, con ragionare teco lungamente, col farti osservare da altri che per ordine suo si intrinicano teco, dalle quali rete tutte è difficile guardarsi: e però, se tu vuoi che non ti intenda pènsavi diligentemente e guardati con somma industria da tutte le cose che ti possono scoprire, usando tanta diligenza a non ti lasciare intendere quanta usa lui a intenderti" (1983, 103; A tyrant will do everything possible to discover your secret thoughts. He will be affectionate, and talk to you at great length, will have you observed by men he has ordered to become intimate with you. It is difficult to guard yourself against all these snares. If you do not want him to know, think carefully, and guard yourself with consummate industry against anything that might give you away, using as much diligence to hide your secret thoughts as he uses to discover them [1965, 78 translated]). Compare Aristotle: "It is part [of the nature of tyranny] to strive to see that all the affairs of the tyrant are secret, but that nothing is kept hidden of what any subject says or does, rather everywhere he will be spied upon" (*Politics* bk. 5, ch. 11 [1984, 2085]).

surface of his text.¹³ The use of this sophisticated rhetorical technique kept him from being totally silenced, while maintaining a margin of safety; it also gave him the “last laugh” on the family that had exiled and tortured him and had dashed any hopes of a leading role for him in a republican Florence.¹⁴ If the power of the Medici lion could not be broken or confronted directly, at least the fox-like intelligence of its opponents could maintain some measure of covert resistance and personal dignity.

Classical Theory of Innuendo

Quintilian describes a form of covert critique, which he calls *sermo figuratus*, in his *Institutiones Oratoriae*:

But in the figurative form of irony the speaker disguises his entire meaning, the disguise being apparent rather than confessed.... This class of figure may be employed under three conditions: first, if it is unsafe to speak openly; secondly, if it is unseemly to speak openly; and thirdly, when it is employed solely with a view to the elegance of what we say, and gives greater pleasure by reason of the novelty and variety thus introduced than if our meaning had been expressed in straightforward language.... *For we may speak against the tyrants in question as openly as we please without loss of effect, provided always that what we say is susceptible of a different interpretation*, since it is only danger to ourselves, and not offence to them, that we have to avoid. And if the danger can be avoided by any ambiguity of expression, the speaker’s cunning will meet with universal approbation. (1986, 9. 2. 66-68; emphasis added)

¹³ In his discussion of Machiavelli’s debt to classical rhetoric, Viroli comments: “The interpretation of Machiavelli as a founder of the science of politics is wrong, no matter what meaning we attribute to the word ‘scientific’.... He [Machiavelli] wrote to persuade, to delight, to move, to impel to act—hardly the goals of the scientist, but surely the goals that an orator intends to achieve. He pursues truth, but this truth is always a partisan truth; always a truth colored, amplified, ornate, and interested; and at times not truth at all—a liberty which a scientist can never allow himself, but which an orator is surely permitted to take” (1998, 1, 3). Viroli is usually associated with the so-called “Cambridge School” of political historians. The work of Quentin Skinner, the leading exponent of this school, is especially important in its insistence—in opposition to the banishment of the concept of intentionality in several schools of twentieth century critical thought—on the importance of a consideration of the author’s intent, as far as this can be determined, in establishing the meaning of a given text. But this is simply to insist upon a rhetorical reading of early-modern texts, since rhetorical theory presupposes a speaker, a speech, and an intended audience, the expectations and mental predispositions of which play a large role in determining the content, style, structure and tone of a work of oral or written discourse.

¹⁴ For the important and insufficiently studied topic of opposition to the Medici, see Brown (1994). Important also for an understanding of the unpopularity of Medici rule in Florence during the pontificates of Leo and Clement, due in large part to the arrogance of Lorenzo di Piero and the appointing of outsiders such as Goro Gheri and Silvio Passerini to run the city in their absence, is Stephens (1983, especially 81-123). See also the sources cited in Dietz (1987, 1284).

Here Quintilian is describing the so-called “figured problems” of classical rhetoric, and notes that, besides providing a margin of safety for the speaker, this mode of discourse also provides pleasure to the audience. He also makes the rather surprising statement that it is indeed possible to criticize a tyrant, provided one is cautious regarding the means by which this is done.

In his discussion of equivocal discourse or innuendo, Demetrius of Phaleron also mentions the usefulness of this kind of discourse when addressing a tyrant:

Frequently, however, when we are speaking to a dictator or some other violent individual and we want to censure him, we are of necessity driven to do so by innuendo.... Men often speak equivocally. If one wishes to speak like that, and also one’s censure not to sound like censure, then what Aeschines said about Telauges is a model to follow. *Almost his whole account of the man leaves one puzzled as to whether he is expressing admiration for him or satirizing him....* I mention these things to draw attention to the proper way to speak to princes, and that it very much requires the circumspect manner of speech which is called innuendo.... Flattery is ugly, but censure is dangerous; that manner is best which lies between the two, namely innuendo. (1961, 125-127, par. 289-294; emphasis added)¹⁵

Here again we see that an indirect manner of speech is called for when criticizing princes, and—this is significant for our interpretation of the *Prince* as a form of covert critique—that this type of argument may be very difficult to detect. The reader or listener may experience a nagging sense that there is something “not quite right” with the argument being presented, that something else may be at work in the text than what the author appears to be saying. By its very subtlety, this form of argumentation may create an audience of those “in the know,” aware of the hidden message or suspecting its presence, and another audience which blithely continues its reading or listening, unaware of the latent argument at work beneath the surface.¹⁶

There were many names for this type of discourse in classical rhetorical theory—irony and innuendo being the most familiar to modern readers. In his study of covert criticism in classical rhetorical theory and practice, Frederick Ahl notes that an

¹⁵ Unfortunately, the speech of Aeschines on Telauges is no longer extant. Wright cites Julian’s *Second Oration to Constantius* as an example of the technique of covert critique, and close analysis of the text bears out this observation.

¹⁶ In his Loeb edition of Philostratus’ *Lives of the Sophists*, Wilmer C. Wright defines *hypothesis eschematismena* or veiled argument (whose synonyms include *schema*, *emphasis*, *sermo coloratus*, *innuendo*, *suspicio*, *ductus contrarius*, *ductus obliquus*, *ambiguitas* and *silentium*) in the following terms: “In such a speech the true intent should show or ‘shimmer’ through. The device may be used throughout a speech or only in certain passages: for safety, when one aims at tyrants; for piquancy, or as a test, e.g. Agamemnon’s exhortation to flight in the *Iliad*.... It is skating on thin ice...and is distinct from *eironia* and offers more of a riddle to the audience. A great orator like Demosthenes employed it as a matter of course” (1952, 570). For more on this type of argument, with citations of classical examples, see “Emphasis,” in Lausberg (1988, paragraph 906), as well as “figura causae” in Shipley (1966, 239) and Montefusco (2003). For a listing of these and other rhetorical devices, with examples, see Burton (n.d.).

understanding of *innuendo* (the term I shall use in this essay to identify this rhetorical technique) is fundamental to a proper understanding and interpretation of much of the Latin poetry written in imperial Rome, and indeed to appreciating the elaborate techniques for expressing criticism of authority, which were part of the stock in trade of writers in Eastern Europe living under Communism.¹⁷ The Roman rhetorical theorists do not go into great detail about how the technique of covert critique worked in actual practice, but Quintilian does make it clear that rhetorical ambiguity does not depend on “words of doubtful or double meaning.” He then declares that to achieve this difficult effect

the facts themselves must be allowed to excite the suspicions of the judge, and we must clear away all other points, leaving nothing save what will suggest the truth so that the judge will be led to seek out the secret which he would not perhaps believe if he heard it openly stated, and to believe in that which he thinks he has found out for himself. (1986, 9.2.71; emphasis added)

As we shall see, it is precisely this method of judicious arrangement of pertinent facts that Machiavelli employs in the *Prince* to allow a hidden critical meaning to “shimmer through” (to use the phrase of the Greek rhetoricians [Philostratus and Eunapius 1952, 570]) the seemingly straightforward surface of the text. Quintilian also notes that the technique is psychologically powerful, since by discerning the hidden meaning himself the listener will tend to feel that this message is “his.” In other words, the individual who has invested the effort in finding it out will have a proprietary sense of this knowledge as opposed to the one who is told it explicitly. Referring specifically to speech critical of tyrants, Quintilian writes:

For we may speak against the tyrants in question as openly as we please without loss of effect, provided always that what we say is susceptible of a different interpretation, since it is only danger to ourselves, and not offence to them, that we have to avoid. And if the danger can be avoided by any ambiguity of expression, the speaker’s cunning will meet with universal approbation. (1986, 9.2.67-68)¹⁸

¹⁷ Ahl also cites Leo Strauss on the use of covert means of expression by writers living under totalitarian regimes: “Persecution, then, gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing, and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines.... It has all the advantages of private communication without having its greatest disadvantage: that it reaches only the writer’s acquaintances. It has all the advantages of public communication without having its greatest disadvantage: capital punishment for the author.... Therefore an author who wishes to address only thoughtful men has but to write in such a way that only a very careful reader can detect the meaning of his book” (Strauss 1973, 25-26).

¹⁸ The translation is Ahl’s (193). Discussing the prevalence of this technique in classical times, Ahl remarks “Ancient rhetoricians...devoted much time and energy to what they called ‘figured problems’: how to express oneself safely, tactfully, and effectively in almost every imaginable situation.... It is my contention

Machiavelli's Knowledge of Innuendo

If one compares the instances where Machiavelli or his friends discuss the use of literary technique in his political writings with the passages in the classical rhetorical texts quoted above, it seems clear that Machiavelli had explicit knowledge of the classical rhetorical techniques of textual obfuscation. To cite only one example, Donato Giannotti notes Machiavelli's comment that, in his *Istorie fiorentine*

io non posso scrivere questa historia da che Cosimo prese lo Stato per insino alla morte di Lorenzo come io la scriverei se io fossi libero da tutti i rispetti; le azioni saranno vere, et non pretermetterò cosa alcuna, solamente lascerò indrieto il discorrere le cause universali delle cose; verbi gratia, io dirò gli eventi et gli casi che successero quando Cosimo prese lo stato; lascerò stare indrieto il discorrere in che modo, et con che mezzi et astutie uno pervenga a tanta altezza, et chi vorrà ancor intendere questo, noti molto bene quello ch'io farò dire ai suoi adversarii, perché quello che non vorrò dire io come da me, lo farò dire ai suo adversarii. (Giannotti 1974, II, 35)

(I cannot write this history from the time when Cosimo took over the government up to the death of Lorenzo just as I would write it if I were free from all reasons for caution. The actions will be true, and I shall not omit anything; merely I shall leave out discussing the universal causes of the events. For instance, I shall relate the events and the circumstances that came about when Cosimo took over the government; I shall leave untouched any discussion of the way and of the means and tricks with which one attains such power; and if anyone nevertheless wants to understand Cosimo, let him observe well what I shall have his opponents say, because what I am not willing to say as coming from myself, I shall have his opponents say.) (Machiavelli 1965, III, 1028)

Gilbert remarks on Machiavelli's "frequent orations in the Thucydidean manner," in which criticism of a powerful individual is achieved by placing the critique in the mouth of a character other than the author, adding that such a technique "allowed Machiavelli to deal with the problem of the Medici."¹⁹ Consider the passages in which Demetrius

that there is a long tradition of 'figuring' language in the interests of both tact and safety, and that this tradition reaches back beyond the documented beginnings of Greek and Roman rhetoric and forward into the Roman Empire and beyond" (1984, 174).

¹⁹ One observes Machiavelli's use of this technique in Niccolò da Uzzano's speech in bk. 4, ch. 27 of the *Istorie fiorentine* (Gilbert 1965, III, 1027; Machiavelli 1967, 610-12). Sasso points out that this form of disguised expression of personal sentiments was also common in the diplomatic correspondence of Machiavelli's time (1988, 196).

Phalereus describes one technique of covert criticism and Machiavelli's remarks on Caesar in the *Discorsi*. Demetrius writes:

Frequently, however, when we are speaking to a dictator or some other violent individual and we want to censure him, we are of necessity driven to do so by innuendo...men and women in positions of power dislike any reference to their faults...therefore, we shall not speak frankly. We should either blame others who have acted in a similar way, we may, for example, condemn the despotic severity of Phalaris when talking to Dionysius; or again we shall praise others, be it Gelon or Hiero, who have acted in the opposite way and say they were like fathers or teachers to their Sicilian subjects. As he hears these things, Dionysius is being admonished, but he is not being censured; moreover he will envy the praise bestowed on Gelon, and he will want to deserve such praise himself. (1961, 125-127, par. 289-295)

In similar fashion Machiavelli pointedly observes of writers who praise Caesar:

Né sia alcuno che s'inganni per la gloria di Cesare, sentendolo massime celebrare dagli scrittori; perché quegli che lo laudano sono corrotti dalla fortuna sua e spauriti dalla lunghezza dello imperio, il quale, reggendosi sotto quel nome, non permetteva che gli scrittori parlassono liberamente di lui. Ma chi vuole conoscere quello che gli scrittori liberi ne direbbono, vegga quello che dicono di Catilina. E tanto è più biasimevole Cesare, quanto è più da biasimare quello che ha fatto, che quello che ha voluto fare un male. Vegga ancora con quanta laude ei celebrano Bruto, talché, non potendo biasimare quello per la sua potenza, ei celebravano il nimico suo (*Discorsi*, I.10)²⁰

(Let no one be fooled by the glory of Caesar, hearing him highly praised by the writers; because those who praise him were corrupted by his success and intimidated by the duration of the empire, which, legitimizing itself under his name, did not allow writers to speak freely of him. But whoever wants to know what those writers would have said about him, observe what they say about Catiline. And Caesar is just as more to be blamed as he is blameworthy who actually does, rather than wants to do, evil. And again, observe with how much praise they celebrate Brutus, seeing that, not being able to blame him because of his power, they celebrate his enemy).

²⁰ Here and throughout citations from the *Discorsi* are to Machiavelli (2001); translations are my own.

The similarities between these two passages suggest Machiavelli's familiarity with the classical rhetorical art of covert critique.²¹ Both passages describe a rhetorical strategy in which covert criticism is achieved by censuring the actions of one similar to the one we wish to covertly criticize, a method deployed in Machiavelli's vivid evocation of the crimes of Agathocles and Oliverotto da Fermo as an oblique means of condemning the character and actions of Cesare Borgia.²² Both passages also note that one can achieve the same effect by bestowing praise on someone other than the person one wishes to covertly censure. We shall see that Machiavelli uses precisely this technique in Chapter VI of the *Prince* to blacken by implication the character of Cesare Borgia by bestowing lavish praise on those state founder heroes such as Theseus, Moses, and Romulus who differ from him in every respect. Machiavelli's remark about the corruption and intimidation of those who praised Caesar could be applied to the risks he later faced in writing the *Istorie fiorentine* for Pope Clement, and may be a veiled gibe at his contemporaries who outdid themselves in flattery of the Medici princes. At the end of the dedication of his *Istorie*, Machiavelli writes: "perché io giudico che sia impossibile, senza offendere molti, descrivere le cose de' tempi suoi" (1967, 462; I judge that it is impossible, without offending many, to describe the events of one's own times). These would be the times from the death of Lorenzo up to and including the present times under Pope Clement—a strategic omission on Machiavelli's part. The implication is that to speak openly of Florence and her loss of liberty under the Medici would risk incurring the Pope's displeasure. When speaking to princes, some things are better left unsaid, or, if they are to be expressed, then they should be expressed through the indirect mode of discourse called *innuendo*.²³

²¹ Machiavelli might have known Demetrius' text in the Greek edition published by Aldus in Venice in 1508 as part of his series of Greek *Rhetores*, where the section describing the figured problems is called *De Interpretatione*. While the question of Machiavelli's knowledge of ancient Greek is still undecided, he might have had the help of one his friends or acquaintances in deciphering the Greek text. That Demetrius' text was known in the circle of republican exiles in Rome is demonstrated by the fact that Piero Vettori prepared a Latin translation of the work under the title *De Elocutione*, on the basis of a manuscript (Parisinus graecus 1741) borrowed from the personal library of Cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi, a staunch opponent of the Medici, and saw to its publication in 1542. A recent paper elucidates the close connections among exiled republican Florentine scholars in Rome, among them Vettori himself (who returned to Florence in 1537), the Gaddi brothers, Donato Giannotti, the Cardinals Niccolò Ridolfi and Giovanni Salviati, Benedetto Varchi, Bartolomeo (Baccio) Cavalcanti and Niccolò Ardinghelli. The group also included the writers Pietro Aretino and Francesco Maria Molza, both known for their anti-authoritarian attitudes (Molza composed an epigram on the assassination of Alessandro de' Medici in 1537, as did Varchi), as well as Annibal Caro (the personal secretary of Giovanni Gaddi). (This information is from Mouren, 2008). Machiavelli could not have known Vettori's translation at the time of the composition of the *Prince*, since Vettori was born in 1499.

²² Kahn (1994, 25-39) also discusses relationship between Chapters 7 and 8, although to different ends than these. Tacitus also mentions this technique in describing the offense taken at his work by the descendants of Tiberius: "You will still find those who, from a likeness of character, read the ill deeds of others as an innuendo against themselves. Even glory and virtue create their enemies: they arraign their opposites by too close a contrast" (1975: 4.33).

²³ Hörnqvist notes Machiavelli's use of Ciceronian *insinuatio* in his exordium, remarking that the classical rhetoricians recommended two modes of discourse for insinuating oneself and one's speech into the minds of the listeners: *principium*, which was open and direct, and *insinuatio*, to be employed only under special circumstances, when the speaker suspects that he is dealing with an audience hostile to his case. Hörnqvist notes that, while most evident in the dedicatory letter, use of this figure continues throughout the work. He adds that Machiavelli's use of the figure "suggests that the feelings Machiavelli addresses towards the

Innuendo in The Prince: The Borgia

Here I recall several points that are relevant to this interpretation of the *Prince* as covert critique of Medici rule. First, covert critique is used when addressing a tyrant, who may, because of his inherently violent nature, react negatively to any form of criticism.²⁴ Second, this covert critique may be accomplished in three ways: either by blaming the faults of someone similar to the tyrant whom we wish to criticize, by praising the qualities of someone who is different from the tyrant in question, and lastly, by praising the tyrant himself for qualities he does not possess. This censure of a prince not directly, but through attributing his faults to someone else, or by praising those unlike him, is central to an understanding of Machiavelli's description of Cesare Borgia. As we shall see, Machiavelli censures Cesare Borgia by describing the crimes of individuals similar to him, and by praising individuals unlike him, and thus uses the first two techniques described by Demetrius. Machiavelli also uses the third of these devices, covert censure of a powerful individual by means of bestowing praise on that individual for precisely the virtues they lack.

Building on but going beyond classical precedents, Machiavelli, in the famous seventh chapter on Cesare Borgia, also uses a technique which might be called "exemplum inaptum," a technique which one scholar discerns at work in Erasmus' *Panegyricus* to Philip of Burgundy, the father of Charles V, celebrating his return from Spain to the Low Countries in 1504.²⁵ This technique, while not specifically mentioned

intended readers of the treatise, the Medici, should not be taken at face value, but instead be seen as belonging to a rhetorical strategy firmly rooted in classical rhetorical theory" (2004, 30). For Machiavelli's debt to the classical rhetorical tradition, besides Viroli (1988) see Colish (1978), Cox (1997), Garver 1980, Kahn (1994), McCanles (1983), Siegel (1968), Tinkler (1988) and Hörnqvist (2004). The latter (4-13) discusses many of these recent rhetorical interpretations of the *Prince*.

²⁴ On the homicidal touchiness of tyrants when confronted with criticism, Demetrius notes: "Philip, for example, had only one good eye, and any reference to a Cyclops angered him, indeed any reference to eyes. Hermias, ruler of Atarneus, though in other ways gentle, found it difficult to endure any reference to knives or surgical operations, because he was a eunuch" (1961, par. 293).

²⁵ In this essay, Rundle argues that Erasmus' *Panegyricus* is not so much praise as "subtle criticism" (1998, 167). Coluccio Salutati provides a Renaissance formulation of this rhetorical device: "If praise has been devised untruthfully [*de falsis*], as is the case whenever it is dressed up in panegyrics, it warns its subject that he has not been praised as much as told what he should do; it spurs on those who are praised into trying to become like the people they see themselves being praised as, even in error" (Salutati 1951, 68, cited in Rundle 1998, 155). Important to note here is the Renaissance assumption that panegyric could easily imply its opposite. Compare Susenbrotus: "Hyperbole is used when the words or ideas exceed what is believable, for the sake of amplifying or diminishing...in particular, Hyperbole lies, not however because it wishes to deceive through falsehood, but that in this way we may arrive at the truth.... In short, Hyperbole asserts more than is true, and yet what is true is understood from what it false" (1621, 17). Two examples of ironic hyperbole in the *Prince* which might be cited here are Machiavelli's addresses to Leo which conclude Chapters XI and XXVI, in which the exaggeratedly elevated tone (which is in pointed contrast to the usual concise, pointed and rapid style of the author) serves as a signal to the reader not to take the praise at face value, but to understand it ironically. A delightful example of Machiavelli's use of ironic hyperbole to mock Lorenzo il Magnifico is his *Capitolo pastorale* (2005, v. 3, 4-7), in which the ironically-inflated tone is even more obvious than in the *Prince*. Although, as inevitably with Machiavelli, this work has been interpreted in an entirely opposite manner, that is, as flattery of Lorenzo di Piero (not il Magnifico), in an

by the ancient rhetoricians, allows the writer to hint at another meaning through a choice of examples which, instead of supporting his thesis, tend to subtly undermine it.²⁶

In his discussion of Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli also uses another means well suited to a latent critical meaning, namely the juxtaposition of morally questionable behavior (attributed to his “hero”) with the examples of true heroes, whose moral integrity is beyond reproach. Machiavelli’s points of comparison with the present are the heroic paragons of the distant past. The contrast between Chapters VI and VII is central to Machiavelli’s characterization of Borgia.²⁷ Even before looking closely at these chapters, we should note that the chapter titles themselves suggest that Machiavelli intends his reader to question Borgia’s morality and his fitness to rule. The title of Chapter VI (“De Principatibus Novis Qui Armis Propriis et Virtute Acquiruntur”) is in counterpoint to the title of Chapter VII (“De Principatibus Novis Qui Alienis Armis et Fortuna Acquiruntur”). “Propriis” is an inversion of “alienis;” “Virtute” contrasts with “Fortuna.” In these formulations Cesare Borgia’s status already seems problematic as the new prince who acquires his influence in the Romagna through the arms of another (his father) and morally repugnant means. The title of Chapter VIII (“De His Qui Per Scelera ad Principatum Pervenere”), in turn, continues the negative theme of the title of Chapter VII, and the title of Chapter IX (“De Principatu Civili”) then returns to the positive tone of the title of Chapter VI. As we shall see in some detail below, these chapters form a unit in which the meaning of one chapter is created in part by “strategic juxtaposition” with the chapters which come before and which follow it.

Machiavelli’s creation of a kind of “cognitive dissonance” between Chapters VI and VII hinges on “great examples” of “great men” that he adduces in Chapter VI. First, the heroes of Chapter VI, who include Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus are provided with opportunities by fortune, but it is their own abilities that allow them to achieve great things; fortune as a force in human affairs clearly takes second place. Second, these men belong to a very select group of founders of new kingdoms; in the rhetorical tradition such men were second only to men of God as worthy subjects of praise.²⁸ Third, while they may use force to maintain their innovations, the text makes it clear that such force is used for the good of the people as a whole—these leaders come to be venerated by their people. In Machiavelli’s words the heroic founders of states are “truly great examples” (*grandissimi esempi*) who exhibit great ability (“*virtù*”); they are “*eccellentissimi*” (most excellent) and serve as models for state-building. They are “*mirabili*” (truly wondrous), “*felici*” (blessed by fortune), and have “*eccellente virtù*” (great ability) that ennobles and supremely blesses the states they found. It seems clear that these founders of states are to

attempt on the part of Machiavelli to ingratiate himself with the newly-restored Medici regime following the restoration of 1512 (Bausi 1987).

²⁶ Besides Erasmus, Rundle also argues that Sir Thomas More, in his *Carmen gratulatorium* on Henry the VIII’s accession in 1509, engaged in this same clever rhetorical ploy, and that this work “by its phrasing and its use of classical anecdotes, subverts its praise” (Rundle 1998, 167, citing his article of 1995). See also the recent studies of Robin 1995 and D’Elia 2006, which describe the deliberate misuse of classical examples to convey censure of a contemporary ruler, Filippo Maria Visconti and Sigismondo Malatesta, respectively.

²⁷ Citations are to Machiavelli (1981). Translations are my own.

²⁸ For a study of the rhetorical tradition of praise in the Italian Renaissance, see Hardison (1962), Murphy (1983) and O’Malley (1979).

be considered “virtuous” in both the moral and the effective senses of the word. They have seized the opportunity (*occasione*) that fortune provides to men of ability.

Machiavelli’s men of great ability and authority are almost godlike heroes who are all liberators of their peoples: the “el popolo d’Israele...stiavo e oppresso. dagli Egizii” (the people of Israel, enslaved and oppressed by the Egyptians), the “e’ Persi malcontenti dello imperio de’ Medi” (the Persians discontented with the rule of the Medes), the “Ateniensi disperse” (Athenians dispersed). Clearly for Machiavelli only states founded by great men, who derive their power either from God or the desire for freedom from oppression, can be called truly fortunate. This view squares with what we know of Machiavelli’s political convictions expressed in his other works, and it is in accord with the long tradition of classical and Renaissance republican thought, which makes a clear contrast between tyrannies founded by violence for the satisfaction of the personal ambitions of the ruler over the wishes of their subjects, and free republics founded by law with the consent of the governed. The classic expression of this distinction can be found in Aristotle:

The best of these [forms of government] is monarchy, the worst timocracy. The deviation from monarchy is tyranny; for both are forms of one-man rule, but there is the greatest difference between them; *the tyrant looks to his own advantage, the king to that of his subjects....* Now tyranny is the very contrary of this; the tyrant pursues his own good (*Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 8, ch. 10 [Aristotle 1984, 1834; emphasis added])

For the same reason, their [foreign kings’] guards are such as a king and not such as a tyrant would employ, that is to say, they are composed of citizens, whereas the guards of tyrants are mercenaries. *For kings rule according to law over voluntary subjects, but tyrants over involuntary; and the one are guarded by their fellow-citizens, the others are guarded against them.* (*Politics*, bk. 3, ch. 13 [ibid., 2039; emphasis added])

The actions of Cesare Borgia as described in Chapter 7 are clearly those of a tyrant in the classical, medieval and Renaissance tradition of thought on the just ruler.²⁹ Moreover, it was commonplace among Florentine republican writers to refer to the Medici as tyrants who had usurped the ancient freedom of the Florentine citizens.³⁰

²⁹ For a concise discussion of classical, medieval and Renaissance thought on the tyrant, see Hörnqvist (2004, 198-204).

³⁰ For example, Donato Giannotti (1974; cited in text above); Alamanno Rinuccini in his *De libertate*; and Girolamo Savonarola, *Trattato sul governo di Firenze* (the former translated in its entirety in Watkins 1978, the latter in part). Benedetto Varchi’s account in his *Storia fiorentina* of Alessandro de’ Medici’s 1535 “trial” before Charles V in Naples (1963, v.2, 444-455), in which Varchi has Jacopo Nardi compare Alessandro to the worst of the classical tyrants, could also be read as an oblique critique of the Medici ruler

The title of Chapter VII “De Principatibus Novis Qui Alienis Armis et Fortuna Acquiruntur” points up the contrast with the founder-heroes of Chapter VI. The men described at the beginning of Chapter VII “solamente per fortuna diventano di private principi” (become princes from private citizens solely through fortune) and “con poca fatica diventano, ma con assai si mantengano” (become [princes] with ease but maintain themselves with difficulty). The reference to the two routes of ascent, one easy and one difficult, recalls classical and Christian conventions regarding the easy road to vice, from which one is eventually cast down, and the hard road to virtue, which leads to lasting happiness. Even on the level of language, Machiavelli makes this contrast clear: the lofty eulogistic tone of Chapter VI gives way in Chapter VII to “coloro”—not “great men,” but merely “those” (a deliberate echo of the pejorative Latin *isti/tales*) who fall into an anonymous group of those to whom “è concesso uno stato...o per danari o per grazia di chi lo concede” (a state is conceded either for money or out of the generosity of the one who concedes it). The specific names of great men are replaced by those anonymous individuals who do not earn their states through individual effort and talent, but rather purchase them or passively rely on the generosity of others: “come intervenne a molti in Grecia, nelle città di Ionio e di Ellesponto, dove furono fatti principi da Dario” (as happened to many in Greece, in the cities of Ionia and the Hellespont, where they were made princes by Darius). Once again, the words “as happened to many” serve to underline the commonplace anonymity of these petty princelings. It seems likely that Machiavelli meant to draw a parallel with the warring princes of 16th century Italy. And to ensure that his readers do not miss the point, he adds one more detail to the detriment of this class of rulers, referring to: “quelli imperatori che, di privati, per corruzione de’ soldati, pervenivano allo imperio” (those emperors who from private station, through the corruption of the soldiers, came to supreme power).³¹

In the short space of less than a paragraph Machiavelli has impugned the subjects of this chapter for corruption, and for a reliance on the favor of others rather than on their own merit. All this would seem perfectly appropriate if Machiavelli were making the argument that those who gain their kingdoms through fortune or the arms of others are inferior to those who win power through merit and divine favor, but this is the chapter that introduces Cesare Borgia as the supposed paragon of the new prince. It is hard to escape the conclusion, even at this early point in the chapter, that Machiavelli must have something else in mind than praise, or even approval, of Cesare Borgia and his father Alexander VI.

Moving on to his discussion of Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli makes it clear that of the two ways of becoming a prince, through ability or fortune, Francesco Sforza represents the former and Cesare Borgia the latter:

Francesco, per li debiti mezzi e con una gran virtù, di privato diventò duca di Milano.... Dall'altra parte Cesare Borgia, chiamato dal vulgo duca Valentino, acquistò lo stato con la fortuna del padre, e con quella lo perdé

of his day, Cosimo, which might explain in part why his history was not published until 1740, and then in Germany under a fictitious imprint.

³¹ This latter is surely an oblique reference to Cesare Borgia.

(Francesco, by the appropriate means and with great ability, from private station became Duke of Milan.... On the other hand, Cesare Borgia, called by the common people Valentino, acquired the state through the fortune of his father, and through that he lost it).

Sforza's great virtue, the difficulty with which he acquires his state and the ease with which he holds it recall the state-founder heroes of the preceding chapter. Borgia acquires his state by fortune, not ability, and it is not even his own fortune, but that of his father, and then he loses it. Second, Machiavelli remarks that this is what "the crowd" calls him. That the common people refer to him without a title seems a subtly diminishing touch. Even when Machiavelli goes on to commend Borgia's ability in "laying foundations for future power" (aveva il duca gittati assai buoni fondamenti alla potenza sua) it is clear that the founding of the state itself did not come through his own ability, but rather through the efforts of his father.

Having thus begun this chapter with an accumulation of small but significantly negative details concerning new princes who acquire their states through the arms of others, Machiavelli expands on this depreciating opening. In the next paragraph he writes: "Alessandro sesto, nel voler fare grande el duca suo figliuolo..." (Alexander VI, wanting to make his son the duke great), words which suggest that we should see Cesare Borgia, not as a talented leader, but as one who does not owe the favor he enjoys to his own abilities, but rather relies on the favor of others. The following paragraphs make clear that unlike the rulers of the previous chapter who found and hold states for the benefit of the citizens, Cesare Borgia uses ruthless means to advance his own interests.

Keeping in mind Machiavelli's use of "strategic juxtaposition" and curiously inappropriate examples to signal to the reader the presence of a hidden message in the text, let us now consider how he uses suggestive language to achieve a similar effect.³² In the section of Chapter VII where the deeds of Alexander VI are introduced, this technique does not immediately strike the reader. Instead Machiavelli relies on a gradual accumulation of words whose tone or coloring begins to seem strangely at odds with the surface meaning of the text. According to Machiavelli, the Pope arranges it so that "si turbassino quelli ordini" (the status quo was disrupted) and makes it possible to "disordinare" (throw into chaos) their states so that he may make himself ruler ("insignorire") of their possessions. Continuing to catalogue the Pope's actions, Machiavelli notes that he was responsible for facilitating the invasion of Italy by the French ("passò adunque il re in Italia con lo aiuto de' Viniziani e consenso di Alessandro"). It is in this way that Valentino acquires the Romagna: not only with the arms of another, but with an occupying army of foreigners. Once again, Machiavelli relies on a careful choice of words to make his point: the Duke oversees the "expugnazione di Faenza" (the conquest of Faenza) and "assaltò" (assaulted) Tuscany. The following section describes Cesare Borgia's "snuffing out" (spense) of the Orsini

³² While I have not been able to find these two techniques, "exemplum inaptum" and "strategic juxtaposition" explicitly mentioned in the classical rhetorical treatises, their use is evident in Julian's *Second Oration to Constantius*, a masterful demonstration of the incredible subtlety and complexity of this technique when extended to the discourse as a whole and raised to the level of an art form in itself.

before passing from military aggression to Borgia's use of fraud and a passing reference to the slaughter of his opponents at Sinigallia, an event famous in Machiavelli's own time for its cruelty and treacherousness.³³

And then we arrive at the famous passage on the slaughter of Borgia's minister, Ramiro de Lorqua. Machiavelli introduces it with the marvelously bland phrase, "e, perché questa parte è degna di notizia, e da essere imitata da altri, non la voglio lasciare indietro" (and, because this part is worthy of notice, and to be imitated by others, I do not wish to leave it out). The matter-of-factness of this phrase recalls similar passages in Tacitus in which a passage describing a horrific deed is introduced by a seemingly innocuous statement of fact. Readers familiar with Tacitus would have anticipated, with a degree of dread, the conclusion of the passage with the graphic description of some murderous deed. Machiavelli delivers on the Tacitean effect. The tone of ironic understatement and objectivity continues:

Costui [de Lorqua] in poco tempo la ridusse pacifica et unita, con grandissima reputazione. Di poi iudicò el duca non essere necessario sí eccessiva autorità, perché dubitava non divenissi odiosa.... E, perché conosceva le rigorosità passate averli generato qualche odio

(in a short time he made it peaceful and unified, to great acclaim. And then the duke judged such excessive authority not to be necessary, because he feared it might become hateful...and, because he knew that the past rigors had generated a certain amount of hatred towards him).

Then, suddenly, the bloody conclusion: "E, presa sopra questo occasione, lo fece mettere una mattina, a Cesena, in dua pezzi in sulla piazza, con uno pezzo di legno et uno coltello sanguinoso a canto" (and, seizing his chance, he had him placed one morning in Cesena in two pieces in the piazza, with a piece of wood and a bloody knife alongside him). Machiavelli's description of the "purgation" of the souls of the people through this horrific deed is a brilliantly deployed euphemism.

If we admit that Borgia's deed may be a sterling example of the exercise of a certain kind of power, is it really necessary or even possible to suspend our moral qualms in the wake of Machiavelli's Tacitean operation? Or is the very brutality of Borgia's actions precisely the point? Machiavelli ostensibly presents the murder of Borgia's minister as an exemplum of his efficacy in "laying excellent foundations for his power," knowing as well as his readers that the foundations failed. He describes Borgia's acquisitions in central Italy as "winnings": the words "acquisto" or "acquistare" recur very frequently in

³³ See for example Paolo Giovio: "[Cesare Borgia] mise le mani sanguinose a Baroni della fattione, et famiglia Orsina. Et prima fece crudelmente morire Vitellozzo, da lui odiato per il suo grande animo et valore" ([Cesare Borgia] laid bloody hands on the barons of the Orsini faction and family. And first he had Vitellozzo cruelly put to death, whom he hated for his great spirit and valor" (cited in Machiavelli 1981, 35). For a full description of the crime, see Machiavelli's *Descrizione del modo tenuto dal Duca Valentino nello ammazzare Vitellozzo Vitelli, Oliverotto da Fermo, il Signore Pagolo, e il Duca di Gravina Orsini*, (Machiavelli 1967, 785-91).

this chapter, as does the word “spegnere.” Violent words are used to describe the means by which Borgia acquires his power: “spegnere” (to snuff out), “disperse” (scattered), “spogliare” (to despoil), “ammazzare” (slaughter), words better used to describe a mercenary adventurer than the founder of a state. For his part, the Borgia pope “disrupts the status quo” and “throws into chaos” the states of Italy; based on cunning and personal ambition, his actions resemble those of Dante’s “seminatori di discordia” who dishonored the Christian faithful (*Inferno* 27).

Besides this careful use of language, in the section which follows Machiavelli’s strategic juxtaposition contrasts the founders of states of the preceding chapter, who seize the opportunities offered them by a benevolent fortune, with Cesare Borgia who finds himself on the defensive against fortune’s blows:

Ma Alessandro morí dopo cinque anni che elli [Cesare] aveva cominciato a trarre fuori la spade...E lui mi disse, ne’ dí che fu creato Iulio secondo, che aveva pensato a ciò che potessi nascere morendo el padre, et a tutto aveva trovato rimedio, eccetto che non pensò mai, in su la sua morte, di stare ancora lui per morire

(But Alexander died five years after he had begun to draw the sword...and he said to me, on the day Julius II was made Pope, that he had thought of everything which might happen upon the death of his father, and had found a remedy for everything, except that he never thought that at his death, he himself might be on the point of death).

The means by which Cesare Borgia achieves power are morally repugnant, and for all his efforts, he still fails in the end. In a kind of negative symmetry with the preceding chapter, Borgia receives power from a mortal man, instead of benign fortune, and must worry about it being taken from him, rather than trusting in the favor of his people. But the fact that tyrannies, in contrast to states founded upon just principles, ultimately perish is simply a corollary of the old classical idea that the best defense of a ruler is the love of his subjects, *iustitia fundamentum regni*.

The contrast with the preceding chapter is also made clear in the means by which Borgia must hold onto his power: instead of through the favor of God, his own ability and the esteem of his people, he must “slaughter the lords he had despoiled” (de’ signori spogliati ne ammazzò quanti ne possa aggiungere), win over the Roman nobles” (e’ gentili uomini romani si aveva guadagnati) and “secure for himself the College as much as he could” (e nel Collegio aveva grandissima parte), presumably through bribery.³⁴ This last observation reinforces the theme of corruption with which the chapter began. This final note of corruption and nepotism would have registered quite forcefully with those Italians who had been subject both to the brutalities of the occupying Spaniards and to the

³⁴ This was also similar to Pope Leo’s method of packing the College of Cardinals with men favorable to Medici interests, and demanding cash contributions from some of those he favored in this way (Hibbert 1980, 235).

political ambitions of Pope Alexander; the fact that Alexander was Spanish would only have increased this effect. Instead of just rule based on the esteem of the citizens of Chapter VI, we have in this chapter a desperate grabbing of power by violent or corrupt means for selfish ends, which in any case ends in failure.³⁵

The Medici Connection

We see this use of meaningful juxtaposition in Chapter VIII as well. Here Machiavelli further darkens his portrait of Cesare Borgia through an implied comparison of his behavior with the unequivocally evil actions of not one, but two tyrants, one ancient and one contemporary: Agathocles, tyrant of Syracuse and Oliverotto da Fermo, tyrant of Fermo. The association of the crimes of Oliverotto with the actions of Cesare Borgia comes with a reference to the liberty and servitude of a city: “ma, parendoli cosa servile lo stare con altri, pensò, *con lo aiuto di alcuni cittadini di Fermo, a’ quali era più cara la servitù che la libertà della loro patria, e con il favore vitellesco, di occupare Fermo*” (emphasis added; but, seeming to him to be a servile thing to live with others, he thought, *with the help of some citizens of Fermo, to whom the slavery of their city was more dear than its liberty, and with the help of Vitelli, to occupy Fermo*). It is not implausible to suppose that Machiavelli may have intended an oblique reference to Florence under the Medici.³⁶

The description of a powerful pope promoting the territorial ambitions of a relative with the assistance of foreign troops would be an appropriate analogue of the Medici. Pope Leo X and Lorenzo di Piero de’ Medici’s triumph over the Florentine republic in 1512 came on the heels of the brutal sack of Prato, an event that made a profound impression on the minds of Machiavelli’s contemporaries.³⁷ The Medici had the clandestine help of *palleschi* supporters within the city in staging the *coup d’etat* that

³⁵ Cf. Mattingly on contemporary reactions to the character and actions of Cesare Borgia: “A Medici [Giuliano] was being advised to emulate a foreigner, a Spaniard, a bastard, convicted, in the court of public opinion anyway, of fratricide, incest and a long role of abominable crimes, a man specially hated in Tuscany for treachery and extortion and for the gross misconduct of his troops on neutral Florentine soil, and a man, to boot, who as a prince had been a notorious and spectacular failure” (1958, 487). One of the great virtues of Mattingly’s article is his taking into account contemporary reactions to the actions of the personages described by Machiavelli.

³⁶ Machiavelli’s mention of Oliverotto’s besieging of the magistracy in the palace, and the fear it caused (“montò Oliverotto a cavallo, e corse la terra, et assediò nel palazzo el supremo magistrato; tanto che per paura furono costretti obbedirlo e fermare uno governo, del quale si fece principe”), might also be a reference to the besieging of Piero Soderini in the Palazzo della Signoria, his surrender and flight during the Medici coup d’etat following the sack of Prato in 1512. The shortness of Oliverotto’s rule (“in spazio d’uno anno che tenne el principato”) also recalls the shortness of Borgia’s (“la Romagna l’aspettò più d’uno mese” [ch. VII]), a very short period of time, especially considering the tremendous effort which went into constructing his state. For Aristotle on the brief duration of tyrannies, see n, 43.

³⁷ For the sack of Prato, see Guicciardini (1969, Book 11, 262-3). Michelangelo in a letter to his father of October or November 1512 comments: “Del chaso de’ Medici, io non ó mai parlato contra di loro chosa nessuna, se non in quel modo che s’è parlato generalmente per ogn’uomo, come fu del caso di Prato; che se le pietre avessin saputo parlare, n’arebbono parlato” (1965, vol. 1, 139; Regarding the Medici, I have never spoken anything against them, except generally as everyone has spoken, as in the case of Prato; which, if the stones had heard about it, they would have spoken).

returned the Medici to power. These would be the citizens of Florence to whom, like those of Fermo, the “slavery of their city was more dear than its liberty” (a’ quali era più cara la servitù che la libertà della loro patria).

We may go farther to suppose that Machiavelli’s discussion of Cesare Borgia’s taking of the Romagna with the aid of Pope Alexander may also be an allusion to the Medici, in this case Leo’s determination to acquire territory for his family in northern Italy. As Najemy notes: “Leo’s real objective was the acquisition of a territorial state, and Florence and its finances and institutions were merely a base from which to pursue more grandiose ends” (2008, 429). According to Hibbert, Leo intended to “form central Italy into a single strong state by uniting the duchies of Ferrara and Urbino, and by joining to them the cities of Parma, Modena and Piacenza” (1980, 219). In early 1515, Najemy continues, “it was rumored that Leo planned to give these territories [Modena, Reggio, Parma, and Piacenza] to Lorenzo and, if the French expelled Spain from southern Italy, to install Giuliano on the Neapolitan throne” (ibid., 430). Such ambitions led to Leo’s eventual acquisition of Reggio and Modena from the Emperor and to a short but arduous war against Urbino, culminating with the expulsion of the city’s lord, Duke Francesco Maria della Rovere, and Lorenzo’s triumphal entry into the city in May of 1515.³⁸ It may be that Machiavelli’s reference to the “slight hatred” (qualche odio) that the people of the Romagna felt for the Borgia codes the ill will provoked by Lorenzo’s conquest of Urbino. Similarly, Cesare Borgia’s acquisition of Valence came about through the marriage dispensation of the Pope, so Leo was rumored to be maneuvering to acquire cities for his nephew. In short, Borgia’s aggressive militarism in central Italy may thus allude to similar conduct on the part of his implied analogue, Lorenzo, a man also relying on the power of his father, and also consumed with military domination and conquest at the service of personal ambition.

In point of fact, the period during which Machiavelli wrote the *Prince*—1513-1514 with some additions perhaps completed in early 1515—corresponds exactly to the time of the machinations of Pope Leo and Lorenzo di Piero. If one accepts that Machiavelli intended the reader to draw these parallels, then much of what he says about Borgia may apply as well to Lorenzo. While Francesco Sforza acquires Milan through great ability and with great difficulty (“per li debiti mezzi e con una gran virtù...con mille affanni”) and holds his state with ease, Valentino/Lorenzo acquire their states with the assistance of their fathers and soon lose them. These men gain their states with the assistance of their fathers (rather than through the exercise of their own *virtù*), but also through their fathers’ *fortuna*: a doubly weak foundation for power, as noted above.

Digging deeper into Medici family history, it is possible that in his vivid description of the slaughter of Oliverotto da Fermo, Machiavelli was alluding to the double homicide in 1488 of the lords of Forlì and Faenza, Girolamo Riario and Galeotto Manfredi. These events allowed Lorenzo il Magnifico to reassert Florentine influence over northern Italy.³⁹ Riario had been one of the instigators of the Pazzi Conspiracy. The cold-blooded

³⁸ The Pope’s plans to attack Urbino were opposed by Giuliano, who was grateful to the Duke for his hospitality to him during his exile in that city. The expulsion of the Duke from Urbino cost the Florentines a great deal of money, aroused lasting resentment, and may have even contributed to the death of Lorenzo himself, who had been wounded in battle during the campaign. Less than a year later, the city was recovered by della Rovere with the assistance of Spanish troops.

³⁹ For an account of the assassinations, see Pellegrini (1999) and Eisenbichler (2001). Machiavelli’s account of the incident is to be found in bk. 8, ch. 35 of his *Istorie fiorentine*.

and treacherous murder of Manfredi that occurred in the private space of his bedroom was instigated and carried out by one close to him (his wife). These details are very reminiscent of Machiavelli's presentation of Oliverotto da Fermo's murder of his enemies (among them his uncle), as well as his description of Cesare Borgia's slaughter of de Lorqua. If this is the case, it would be another example of Machiavelli's use of recent historical events as referents against which events within the text are to be understood, just as his vivid portrait of the classical tyrant Agathocles is intended, within the text, as a referent against which the character and actions of Borgia himself are to be understood.⁴⁰

If Machiavelli's political critique by innuendo, juxtaposition, and allusion is indirect and subtle, his representation of Hiero of Syracuse at the end of Chapter VI as a model leader is unambiguous. The acquisition of his state was extremely difficult, but once acquired it was easy to maintain. While Hiero receives his opportunity from Fortune, it is his own ability to make use of it that distinguishes him as a just and capable ruler. Hiero recalls the hero-founders presented earlier in the chapter. Just as Moses, Theseus, Cyrus and Romulus were liberators of their peoples and took appropriate means to maintain the forms of government they had introduced, the oppression of Hiero's people justifies any strong measures he may take. His rule came about from a free and unforced election by his people. This gives it durable authority, a very significant attribute in Renaissance political thought, which held that the only justification for absolute rule is that it come about either through inheritance, or through the free election of the people. Any other form of absolute rule is tyrannical or borders on tyranny. Equally important, Hiero relies on his own soldiers, rather than foreign mercenaries, a tenet central to Machiavelli's concept of a free and viable republican state. And finally, Hiero and leaders like him come to be held in veneration by their people, and they remain powerful, secure, honored, and blessed ("potenti, securi, onorati, felici"). If the views expressed here can be taken to reflect Machiavelli's political beliefs, they are an example of the numerous places in the text where he subtly and skillfully manages to incorporate republican sentiments made explicit in other of his writings, particularly the *Discorsi* into the pages of the *Prince*.

Reversing Machiavelli's observations about Hiero, one arrives at a description of the tyranny of Cesare Borgia and of the Medici as well: they obtain their states with ease (Borgia from his father, and Lorenzo from his uncle), but (or so Machiavelli might hope),

⁴⁰ As Mattingly eloquently puts it: "Machiavelli deliberately addressed himself primarily to princes who have newly acquired their principalities and do not owe them either to inheritance or to the free choice of their countrymen. The short and ugly word for this kind of prince is 'tyrant.' Machiavelli never quite uses the word except in illustrations from classical antiquity, but he seems to delight in dancing all around it until even the dullest of his readers could not mistake his meaning" (1958, 486). There is evidence that Renaissance readers were aware of Machiavelli's implied comparison of the Medici rulers to both Cesare Borgia and to the classical tyrants. Bausi notes that Machiavelli's *Capitolo pastorale* (mentioned above in n. 25) explicitly compares Lorenzo di Piero "not only to the Roman tyrant [Caesar]...but also to a 'Cesar duca' closer to his times—Cesare Borgia, to whom his contemporaries were already accustomed to compare the Duke of Urbino" (1987, 201-202). Ludovico Alamanni, in his *Discorso...sopra il fermare lo stato di Firenze nella devozione de' Medici* of 1516 feels it necessary to remark "potendo ...[Lorenzo]...rendersi pare ad qualunque delli antichi et de' moderni, vorrà più presto giostrare con Cesare et Camillo che con lo impio Agathocle, col crudelissimi Sylla et con lo scelerato Liverocto da Fermo," words which suggest that he may have been aware of Machiavelli's allusive denigration of Lorenzo in his implied comparison of the Duke to the classical and contemporary tyrants, and that this view of the Medici ruler was well-enough known to need refutation (cited in Cummings 90, 212 n. 14).

have great difficulty holding them; they find their people not oppressed, but free, and then proceed to try to oppress them; their rule is established not through an election, but by violence and deceit; they rely not on troops drawn from a broad section of the Florentine populace who would be highly motivated to defend her freedom courageously, but instead employ foreign mercenaries to intimidate the native population.⁴¹ In what may be a pointed jab against the Medici, Hiero—although powerful—does not actually have or require a kingdom. Machiavelli employs that famous paradox with which Justinian described Hiero’s rule: “ut nihil ei regium deesse, praeter regnum videretur” (so that he seemed to lack nothing of kingship but a kingdom), given an even more concise expression by Tacitus in his equally famous adage at the expense of Galba: “capax imperii, nisi imperasset” (capable of ruling, had he not ruled). Machiavelli’s ironic use of the adage here to make a very veiled allusion to Medici rule once again reflects Tacitus’ similar procedure in his critique of the absolute princes of his day, yet Machiavelli’s irony is much more deeply buried than that of his Roman model because it relies on the reader to catch allusions that are not apparent in the text.⁴²

In alluding to a powerful individual who could have had absolute power but chose to give it up for the good of the state, Machiavelli may well be referring to an honorable Florentine and his classical avatar. In his *The Natures of Florentine Men* (*Nature di uomini fiorentine*) Machiavelli writes of Antonio Giacomini:

Era Antonio...severo nel servare la maestà pubblica, e quello che è mirabile e raro, liberalissimo del suo ed astinentissimo da quel d'altri. Ne quando era al governo di un esercito o di una provincia, voleva dai suoi subbietti altro che la ubbidienza, nè de' disubbidienti aveva alcuna pietà. Privato, era senza parte e senza ambizione alcuna; quando pubblico, era solo desideroso della gloria della città e laude sua. (1843, 231)

(Antonio was...strict in keeping the dignity of the government and—something that is admirable and unusual—he was very liberal with his own property and altogether refrained from that of others. Not even when he was in control of an army or a province did he ask his subjects other than obedience, yet on the disobedient he had no mercy. He was, in private life, without partisan feeling and without any ambition; when in

⁴¹ For an eloquent (and darkly comic) discussion of the odiousness of Medici rule in Florence under Clement, and the disarming of the Florentine citizens, see Varchi (1963, vol. 2, bk. 12, ch. 49-50 and bk. 14, ch. 1). On the tyrant’s need to defend himself against his own citizens, Aristotle remarks: “Both [the oligarch and the tyrant] mistrust the people, and therefore deprive them of their arms” (*Politics*, bk. 5 [1984, 2081]). See also Najemy (2008, 429-30, 435) for Lorenzo’s unprecedented creation of his own private army in Florence in January 1515, and (ibid., 426-34) for a concise account of the consolidation of Medici power in Florence in the hands of Lorenzo.

⁴² Machiavelli makes a similar comment regarding Hiero in comparing his rule to that of Persius of Macedon in the dedication of the *Discorsi* to his friend Zanobi Buondelmonti, adding the following pointed allusion to Medici rule in Florence: “Perché gl’uomini, volendo giudicare dirittamente, hanno a stimare quelli che sono, non quelli che possono essere liberali; e così quelli che sanno, non quelli che senza sapere possono governare uno regno” (1967, 125-6). I thank Professor Albert Ascoli for this reference.

public life, he was eager only for the glory of the city and for his own reputation.) (trans. in Gilbert 1965, 3, 1436-8)

Machiavelli's description resembles a similar austere discipline of moral rectitude and self-sacrifice in service of the state that characterizes Cicero's portrait of the ideal republican leader, which finds its most vivid expression in the person of Cato the Elder. Once again, we observe the highly allusive nature of Machiavelli's text and its dependence for full effect on readers being familiar not just with the Roman model he is imitating, but also with the views expressed in his other writings as well as classical, medieval and Renaissance thought on the nature of the just ruler (embodied by Hiero) and the tyrant.⁴³ The implication of all this for the newly reestablished Medici rulers in Florence is left up to the readers to discern.

On the account offered here, the Medici like the Borgia before them, are covertly censured for their continuation of a policy of personal ambition, abetted by the use of bribery,⁴⁴ and when necessary, violence in the service of familial aggrandizement. Mobilizing the classical techniques of innuendo, the *Prince* is doubly allusive in its cunning association of the Borgia and the Medici with one another and with censuring exempla of the ancients.

The Virtuous Prince

A reading of Machiavelli's text as a veiled critique of Medici rule, achieved in part by an allusive use of classical sources, can be extended to *Il principe* as a whole. In closing I will consider two examples: one intertextual and one the famously controversial closing chapter of the treatise.

One of the ironies of Machiavelli's discussion of the ethical behavior of the new prince is that it derives in large part from Cicero's treatment in the *De Officiis* of allowable deviation from ethical norms on the part of the leader of a free state. As Colish has pointed out:

The principal dimension that is present in the *De Officiis* and which Machiavelli deliberately omits from the *Prince* is the dimension of civic virtue.... His omission of the *topos* of civic virtue from the *Prince* therefore can be seen as an ironic comment on princes in general and the Medici in particular. It is certainly an omission which contemporary

⁴³ Discussing the various forms of government, Aristotle notes "Yet no forms of government are so short-lived as oligarchy and tyranny" (*Politics*, bk. 6, ch. 12, [1984, 2088]).

⁴⁴ As an additional example of Leo's use of bribery to achieve personal ends, we might cite the suggestion of his secretary, Bernardo Dovizi, to Cardinal Francesco Soderini of the possibility of a marriage between Lorenzo and one of Soderini's relatives. This helped secure Soderini's support in the conclave of March 1513 which elected Leo Pope (Hibbert, 1980, 217). See also Leo's packing of the College of Cardinals with men sympathetic to the Medici cause, discussed above in n. 34.

readers, steeped as they were in Cicero's *De Officiis*, were bound to notice. (1978, 92)

According to Colish, while obsessed with the theme of civic virtue in his *Discorsi* and *Istorie fiorentine*, "Machiavelli [unlike Cicero] has difficulty envisioning such an organic moral relation between the ruler and the ruled in a principality. More precisely, he has difficulty envisioning it in the case of the Medici ruler for whom the *Prince* was intended" (ibid.). Cicero's (already pointed) subordination of the Stoic *honestum* to the *utile*, in which the good of the state as a whole is the only justification for a deviation from conventional moral norms, is reduced even further by Machiavelli to an elevation of the *utile* as an end unto itself, whose only purpose is the preservation of the personal power of the ruler. So Machiavelli's "counsel" in these chapters involves a wholesale abandonment of the ethical norms traditionally associated with the preservation of a free state. Machiavelli's discussion here is also derived, as indeed was Cicero's, from those chapters in Aristotle's *Politics* where the philosopher describes the means by which a tyrant can secure himself in power (bk. 5, chs. 10-12 [1984, 2080-2090]). A comparison of parallel passages from the two works makes this abundantly clear.⁴⁵

As my second and final example of Machiavelli's allusive encoding of a critique of Medici rule, I suggest that the final chapter of the treatise is also meant to be taken ironically.⁴⁶ Machiavelli hints at this by reintroducing at the beginning of this chapter the examples of truly just leaders from Chapter VI, whose behavior was described in order to form a contrast with the behavior of the classical and Renaissance tyrants in the following chapters.

The very means by which Machiavelli goes on to recommend that Leo adopt *nuovi ordini* and *arme proprie* are those that appear in his other writings as essential to the maintenance of a free republican Florence. Colish has argued that Machiavelli's discussion of an Italian army is an allusion to his project for a civilian militia (1998). Moreover, the very foreigners against whom Machiavelli urges Leo to take up arms are the same ones who form Leo's main source of support in maintaining Medici rule over Florence: the Spanish. While in the chapters on the ethics of the new prince Machiavelli is discreetly urging the Medici to behave as tyrants, here in a delicious twist he is urging them to adopt republican means to remove the basis for this tyranny, an action which can only lead to their demise.

⁴⁵ For Machiavelli's use of Aristotle's advice to the tyrant in the *Prince*, see Hörnqvist (2004, 205-08) and 204 n. 31 (where he cites Walker's list of citations from Aristotle in the *Discorsi* [Machiavelli 1950]) and, especially, Procacci 1965, pt. 1, ch. 3, who cites numerous readers of the 1500s who discerned the close affinities between Aristotle's discussion of the tyrant and the *Prince*. It is worth noting that Savonarola's veiled critique of Lorenzo il Magnifico in his *Trattato sul governo di Firenze* (II, 2 [1999: 53-61]) is derived almost entirely from the same chapters in Aristotle, in particular, the philosopher's discussion of the "wise tyrant," who eschews the more brutal tactics of his more familiar cousin to secure the people's favor. An example of Savonarola's borrowings from the *Politics* is his presentation of Lorenzo as keeping the citizens of Florence busy with the building of elaborate churches, an echo of Aristotle's discussion of the building of the pyramids of Egypt in the *Politics*, bk. 5, ch. 11 (1984, 2085). For an English translation of a selection from the treatise, see Watkins (1978, 231-260).

⁴⁶ For Ariosto's encoding of a covert critique of Leo in the structure of the *Orlando furioso*, see Ascoli (2001).

The tone of the final exhortation to Leo is also a signal to the reader not to take its meaning at face value. In its exaggeratedly elevated tone (standing in pointed contrast to the rapid and concise expository tone of the passage on the Italian army), it is an excellent example of the familiar Renaissance technique of ironic hyperbole.⁴⁷ On this reading the final citation of Petrarch's poem would indeed be a coded call for the Florentines to resume their ancient liberty. As Mattingly reminded us, "The antique valor Petrarch appealed to was, after all, that of republican Rome" (491).

Conclusion

Machiavelli found himself constrained to curry favor with the Medici rulers of Florence soon after their restoration to power in 1512. Unwilling to choose the safer, but perhaps less honorable route of silence and self-censorship (a phenomenon known among scholars of religious discourse of the period as "nicodemismo"), his displacement from the centers of power in Florence found its outlet and its most powerful expression in the coded message against the Medici lords who had displaced him in the pages of the work—ironically—often considered his most "objective" or unbiased, or as a celebration of Medici power. The fact that many readers over the ages have missed this message is testimony to his skill in practicing this difficult art.

I noted at the beginning of this essay the wide circulation of manuscripts of the *Prince* well before its first publication in 1532, a fact that tends to suggest that it was eagerly read by Florentines caught up in the turbulent internal politics of the city immediately following the Medici restoration of 1512. It seems possible that at least some of these early readers of the text with direct and recent experience of the return of the Medici to power and the extinction of the republican regime may have gleaned a hidden critique of Medici power in the text. The anecdote recounted by Cardinal Pole cited at the beginning of this essay would tend to suggest that this audience may have been larger than scholars have recognized up until now.⁴⁸

Certainly the political circumstances in Europe during this period created an environment in which modes of discourse that allowed for the expression of critical ideas while maintaining a margin of safety would have been very appealing.⁴⁹ There remains to

⁴⁷ Many critics have noted the elevated tone of the final "Exhortatio," although some might not agree that this tone is meant ironically. For a very perceptive discussion of the "Exhortatio" and Machiavelli as rhetorician, see Jaeckel (1996).

⁴⁸ For a study of early manuscripts of the *Prince*, see Richardson (2007, 164-7). Richardson notes the wide circulation of the work in manuscript among the elites in Florence, including the Guicciardini family, immediately after its completion, who were eager to read the work in the political context of the recent restoration of the Medici to power, a fact which suggests that these readers, in a way similar to those Florentines on the street mentioned by Cardinal Pole may have read the work as containing a veiled political commentary on contemporary events. Richardson also notes the wide circulation of the text in manuscript outside of Florence soon after its completion, including a manuscript now in Germany prepared by a team of Venetian scribes as a working copy for an early edition of the text which was never published, an edition, which, had it been published, would have predated the first edition of 1532 by almost fifteen years.

⁴⁹ Schellhase, in his book on Tacitus in Renaissance political thought, mentions the need participants in the discussions of the Orti Oricellari felt for careful discretion in discussing political matters in Medicean

be written a history of ambiguous expression in Renaissance Europe's secular writings to accompany the already excellent discussions of strategic obfuscation in the religious discourse of the period.⁵⁰ But before such a history can be written, modern readers will have to adjust their "horizon of expectations" to allow for the presence of such texts, which currently fall outside conventional reading habits insofar as they assume that what a writer says is generally what he means. Deliberate ambiguity in Renaissance Europe was not only a device to insure the writer's safety by guaranteeing what we would call today "plausible deniability," it was also considered a high art worthy of praise and imitation for its own sake due to the intrinsic difficulty of achieving the effect.⁵¹

A reading of the *Prince* that sees it as a covert criticism of Renaissance princes also meshes with the contemporaneous widespread use of various forms of encoded or equivocal expression across cultural practices. Indeed, one can see the enormous popularity of emblems in Renaissance Europe as a specific case of the fondness for covert expression in general. In addition, the widespread popularity in Renaissance Europe of the literary genre of the paradoxical encomium attests to the predisposition of Renaissance readers to discern covert meanings in works of literary art apparently offering praise.⁵² Such a predisposition would have formed part of their "cognitive style" (to use the apt phrase of the art historian Michael Baxandall [1984]). The fact that modern readers may have different cognitive skills may account for the relative paucity of modern readings of the *Prince* that allow for the possibility that it may have been intended as covert criticism of the Medici rulers of Florence.⁵³

I conclude with a reminder from a scholar of Tacitus about the difficulty of ever being sure that one has interpreted Machiavelli's classical forerunner correctly:

The *prudentia* of Tacitus lies as much in what he does not reveal as in what he does display in his narrative. The reader is challenged to reach his own conclusions, and when he has done this he still cannot know for certain if he has correctly understood the mind of Tacitus. Thus the

Florence: "A similar strict attention to the event itself and to the avoidance of politically relevant personal comment is characteristic of the whole *History of Florence*.... Perhaps, too, he [Machiavelli] did not proceed beyond this date [1492] because he would not have had free rein to speak his mind on contemporary and immediate politics. *Even his views on historical political situations had to be hidden*.... Machiavelli was considered [by the Medici regime] meddlesome if not actually dangerous...it was believed by the government that his republican writings had incited the plotters, many of them former members of the Rucellai circle" (1976, 81-82; emphasis added). Here I might cite also Felix Gilbert on Machiavelli in the Orti: "The political conclusions which the group around Machiavelli drew from Roman history and especially from Livy were exactly opposite to the views cherished by Bernardo Rucellai and his circle.... Machiavelli and his friends used classical history as a justification of broad democratic government and their enthusiasm for the republican virtues of Rome was sharply pointed against the Medici" (1949, 125).

⁵⁰ See for example Cantimori (1992), Firpo (1993), Ginzburg (1970), and Zagorin (1990).

⁵¹ On "plausible deniability" see Colie (1966, 38). Aristotle says that we fear "not those among our victims, enemies, or adversaries who say everything forthrightly, but those who are gentle, ironic, up to everything. Since you cannot see when they are close, you can never see when they are far away" (*Rhetoric* 1382b, cited in Ahl 1984, 175).

⁵² For the paradoxical encomium in classical times and in the Renaissance, see Miller (1956).

⁵³ An example of a covert message from the visual arts might be Holbein's famous portrait *The Ambassadors*, in which a mysterious meaning is clearly hinted at, but whose exact interpretation is harder to establish.

interpreter of Tacitus faces a dilemma. He must engage with the wise and subtle intellect of a genius who seldom stands at the center of his stage, yet, in interpreting to his audience the doctrines of the historian, he runs the risk of using the words of Tacitus in ways not intended by the author (Morford 1993, 150-51).

One should approach an interpretation of Machiavelli's *Prince* with the same caution. But we may at least entertain the possibility that Machiavelli's use of language was so subtle, so "fox-like," that the work's true meaning—a veiled, yet nevertheless (for those readers able to discern it) forceful condemnation of Renaissance princes in general and the Medici in particular—has eluded many of its best readers down to the present day.

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