

# Niccolò Machiavelli. A Paradoxical Success

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Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) is history's most startling and influential political commentator. *The Prince* is the world's most famous (and infamous) work of political theory.<sup>1</sup> The *Discourses on Livy* are the cornerstone of modern republican thought.<sup>2</sup> *Mandragola* is the greatest play written in the Italian language.<sup>3</sup> The *Florentine Histories* constituted the first successful neo-classical humanist history in Italian rather than Latin.<sup>4</sup> In Machiavelli's day, Aristotle was the most famous political thinker; in our time, it is Machiavelli.<sup>5</sup>

In the sixteenth century, more than two hundred printed editions of his writings were published, a further hundred in the next century, and in the eighteenth more than a hundred and seventy.<sup>6</sup> Just as today Freud and Marx are universal common currency, so was Machiavelli during the Renaissance.<sup>7</sup> In the first century after his death he had his advocates (for example Jean Bodin, who 'praised him as an exemplary reader of history',<sup>8</sup> and Francis Bacon, who argued 'that Machiavelli proposed a new intellectual instrument or weapon well adapted to (...) politics'<sup>9</sup>) but for the most part he was known as the wicked 'Machiavel', the godless champion of evil.<sup>10</sup> Machiavelli's champions praised his realistic vision of politics, whereas his critics condemned his amoral separation of politics from ethics.

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<sup>1</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il principe*, G. Inglese ed. (Turin 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, F. Bausi ed. (Rome 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *La Mandragola. Storia e filologia*, P. Stoppelli ed. (Rome 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere storiche*, A. Montevocchi and C. Varotti ed. (Rome 2010).

<sup>5</sup> V. Kahn, 'Machiavelli's Afterlife and Reputation to the Eighteenth Century' in: J. M. Najemy ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli* (Cambridge 2010) 239-255: 239.

<sup>6</sup> Kahn, 'Machiavelli's afterlife', 242.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, 245.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Bodin, *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History*, B. Reynolds trans. (New York, NY 1943) 54, 57. Quotation from Kahn, 'Machiavelli's Afterlife', 244.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, G.W. Kitchin ed. (London 1973) 186. Quotation from J. Barthas, 'Machiavelli in Political Thought from the Age of Revolutions to the Present' in: J.M. Najemy ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli* (Cambridge 2010) 256-273: 271.

<sup>10</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part III*, 3. 2. 193.

In the seventeenth century, he was taken up by English and Dutch republicans (James Harrington, John Milton, Algernon Sidney, Henry Neville, Spinoza),<sup>11</sup> while in the eighteenth century his influence was felt on Montesquieu,<sup>12</sup> Rousseau,<sup>13</sup> Robespierre,<sup>14</sup> John Adams<sup>15</sup> and James Madison.<sup>16</sup> In the nineteenth century he was a favourite of luminaries including Hegel,<sup>17</sup> Marx,<sup>18</sup> Mill,<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche<sup>20</sup> and Tocqueville.<sup>21</sup> In the last century, Machiavelli was fundamental for Italian intellectuals such as Croce<sup>22</sup> and Gramsci,<sup>23</sup> while he preoccupied philosophers, political analysts and historical critics including Hannah Arendt,<sup>24</sup> Leo Strauss,<sup>25</sup> Ernst Cassirer,<sup>26</sup> Isaiah Berlin,<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Meinecke,<sup>28</sup> Raymond Aron,<sup>29</sup> J.G.A. Pocock<sup>30</sup> and Quentin Skinner.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kahn, 'Machiavelli's Afterlife', 250.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, 251.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, J. Cranston trans. (Harmondsworth 1968) 118, 131.

<sup>14</sup> Cited by H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, NY 1963) 30.

<sup>15</sup> John Adams, *Works*, C.F. Adams ed. (Boston, MA 1856) vol. 5: 11, 183; vol. 6: 396. C.B. Thompson, 'John Adams's Machiavellian Moment', *The Review of Politics* 57 (1995) 389-417.

<sup>16</sup> James Madison, *The Federalist Papers* 10, C. Rossiter ed. (New York, NY 1961) 83.

<sup>17</sup> Barthes, 'Machiavelli in Political Thought', 256-273, 257-258, 261-264, 267, 269.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, 266.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, 258.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, 259-260.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, 263-264.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, 259, 262, 266.

<sup>23</sup> R. Rubini, *The Other Renaissance. Italian Humanism between Hegel and Heidegger*, (Chicago, IL 2015) 286-287; Barthes, 'Machiavelli in Political Thought', 263-266.

<sup>24</sup> H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, NY 1963).

<sup>25</sup> L. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago, IL 1958).

<sup>26</sup> E. Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, CT 1946).

<sup>27</sup> I. Berlin, 'The Originality of Machiavelli' in: M. Gilmore ed., *Studies on Machiavelli* (Florence 1972) 149-206.

<sup>28</sup> F. Meinecke, *The Doctrine of Reason d'État and Its Place in Modern History* (1924), D. Scott trans. (New Haven, CT 1962); F. Meinecke, *The German Catastrophe. Reflections and Recollections* (London 1946), S. Fay trans. (Cambridge, MA 1950).

<sup>29</sup> R. Aron, *Machiavel et les tyrannies modernes* (Paris 1993).

<sup>30</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ 1975).

Machiavelli's immeasurable influence and prominence began with the posthumous publication of his *Discourses on Livy* (1531) and *The Prince* (1532). In his lifetime he achieved a national reputation as a playwright, on the basis of successful performances of his comedies *Mandragola* and *Clizia* in the 1520s,<sup>32</sup> but as an author of printed publications his standing was minimal. Only three of his works were issued by the press, and only one with his cooperation: *The Art of War* in a single edition of 1521;<sup>33</sup> *The First Decade*, the poem recounting events in Italian history from 1494 to 1504, was printed at the instigation of his friend and colleague, Agostino Vespucci (Nettucci), in 1506,<sup>34</sup> while *Mandragola* came out in a pirated version of 1520. *The Prince* enjoyed a limited circulation in manuscript during Machiavelli's life, mostly among his Florentine friends and associates, while *The Discourses on Livy* were known mainly in pre-printed form to fellow members of the discussion group which met in the famous Florentine Rucellai gardens from 1515 to 1519. After their completion in 1519, they were read only by Machiavelli's intimate friend Francesco Guicciardini and have survived in a single complete contemporaneous manuscript (British Library Harley 3533). The *Florentine Histories* were dedicated and presented to Pope Clement VII (Giulio de' Medici) two years before Machiavelli's death in 1527; the work was not printed until 1532, although it enjoyed a limited circulation among prominent Florentines during Machiavelli's lifetime.

Machiavelli's nugatory impact as a political writer and thinker before his death was his own choice. He saw himself as a man of action; for him writing was a sideline or a substitute for involvement in diplomacy and politics. He paid little attention to how his compositions were received in the wider world. He was an author for the occasion: at various times he was intensely involved with particular individuals and specific projects, but, once circumstances changed, he moved on; he was no inveterate reviser. This is apparent, for example, in the one case in which at least three different versions of the same text have survived: the *First Decade* (1504-1506). During the production of the autograph manuscript, the dedication version and the printed text, the historical context changed significantly, resulting in

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<sup>31</sup> Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge 1978); Q. Skinner, *Machiavelli* (Oxford 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, M. Martelli ed. (Florence 1971) 891-913.

<sup>33</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *L'arte della guerra. Scritti politici minori*, G. Masi ed. (Rome 2001).

<sup>34</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Scritti in poesia e in prosa*, A. Corsaro ed. (Rome 2012) 16-51.

three different slants. But such changes were effected by the smallest possible alterations to a few lines of text: there was no extended rewriting, no change in Machiavelli's basic line of argument or purpose. Despite his future influence, Machiavelli wrote for the present, not for posterity. It is no accident that his preferred method of publication was the ephemeral manuscript, not the printed page. 'Although printing was beginning to spread through Italy when Machiavelli was born in 1469, the culture of manuscript publication was still strong, and in his case predominant'.<sup>35</sup> In the age of the press, manuscript publication implied products of occasion rather than timeless pronouncements.

Machiavelli's early years might have prepared for a life of contemplation, not action. He belonged to an old, upper-class Florentine family. His father Bernardo (d. 1500) had prepared for a legal career, following the example of several prominent Machiavelli lawyer cousins. Most recently Girolamo Machiavelli had been not only a leading advocate in Florence but also a first-rank political figure. He fell foul, however, of Florence's Medici rulers, suffered exile and died a captive in 1460. This family disaster spelled the end of career hopes in law for Bernardo, who shunned public life, avoided involvement in Florentine business or industry, and eked out a living as a rentier from the income of small agricultural holdings near Florence. Bernardo's principal activity was as an *érudit*, not only in law but also in Latin humanism: he was a notable book collector and legal pundit.<sup>36</sup>

Niccolò, his eldest son, was given a good classical education in Florence, entrusted to a series of leading humanist pedagogues at school and even attended the lectures of Florence's leading humanist scholar of the later 1490s, Marcello Virgilio Adriani (1465-1521). Niccolò's humanist background led to several early scholarly projects, which included copying and annotating the Roman poet Lucretius's *De natura deorum* and translating the Roman dramatist Terence's comedy, *Andria*, into Italian.<sup>37</sup> Machiavelli also began writing Tuscan vernacular poetry, mainly in the popular vein

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<sup>35</sup> B. Richardson, 'The Scribal Publication of Machiavelli's Works: "copisti per passion", "copisti a prezzo"' in: J. Krave and L. Lepschy ed., *Caro Vitto. Essays in Memory of Vittore Branca*, in collaboration with N. Jones, *The Italianist* 27 (2007), special supplement 2, 174-187: 175.

<sup>36</sup> R. Black, *Machiavelli* (London 2013) chapter 1.

<sup>37</sup> P. Stoppelli, 'La datazione dell'*Andria*' in: G. Barbarisi and A.M. Cabrini ed., *Il teatro di Machiavelli* (Milan 2005) 147-199.

following the example of Burchiello, Luigi Pulci and Lorenzo de' Medici, although the courtly influence of Poliziano is not absent. Well into his late twenties, there was no sign of preparation for a profession or for business: Niccolò was loyal to the paternal example, living off his father's meagre income and passing his time in amateur humanist studies and as a vernacular poet of modest talent and production.<sup>38</sup>

Machiavelli's life was revolutionized by a completely unexpected turn of events, when in 1498 he was elected to a high bureaucratic office in Florence. The Florentine chancery was a type of civil service, staffed by quasi-permanent functionaries. Its principal role was to assist in foreign affairs, preparing diplomatic correspondence for the government and administering the network of ambassadors and envoys sent to foreign powers, both in Italy and beyond the Alps. Occasionally chancery officials were sent abroad on diplomatic missions as well. Machiavelli was appointed to head the second chancery (technically in charge of diplomacy and correspondence with Florence's subject territories but in practice chancery business was shared between the first and second chancellors and their assistants) and to serve as secretary to the Ten of War, a magistracy responsible for administering Florentine military and diplomatic affairs: as such he was the second highest ranking figure in the entire chancery. It is still not fully understood why someone entirely without secretarial or diplomatic experience such as Machiavelli succeeded in this election. Perhaps it had to do with his antipathy to the firebrand preacher Girolamo Savonarola, who had dominated the Florentine political scene between 1494 and 1498, but had just fallen from power and suffered execution just a month before Machiavelli's success. Perhaps it was connected to the political detachment of his branch of the Machiavelli family: chancellors and secretaries had been heavily involved in behind-the-scenes politics in the Savonarolan period and now it may have been felt opportune to return these civil servants to their previously non-political role.<sup>39</sup>

Machiavelli put enormous pent-up energy into his new job. He went on more than forty diplomatic missions – an unprecedented level of involvement for a Florentine chancery secretary. He met and negotiated with the leading players in Italian and European politics: Pope Alexander VI and his son Cesare Borgia; Pope Julius II; Pandolfo Petrucci, the unofficial ruler of neighbouring Siena; Louis XII, King of France as well as Duke of

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<sup>38</sup> Black, *Machiavelli*, chapter 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, chapter 3.

Milan since 1500; and Emperor Maximilian I. He also became well acquainted with the activities of the King of Spain, Ferdinand the Catholic. Because of his energy and high level of competence, Machiavelli became the favoured assistant of Piero Soderini, elected as Florence's chief magistrate (*gonfalonier* of justice for life) in 1502. With Soderini's backing, Machiavelli launched a key project of his own: a native Florentine militia to supplement Florence's mercenary army. Contemporaries thought Machiavelli's greatest achievement was to manage the recapture in 1509 of Florence's subject city Pisa, which had been in rebellion since 1509.

However, Machiavelli's close association with Soderini proved to be his own downfall. Soderini had numerous enemies among the Florentine elite, whom he was thought to have betrayed by not restoring aristocratic government to Florence after his election. Soderini also tenaciously pursued an alliance with France rather than its rival Spain, thus incurring the enmity of Pope Julius II, who, allied to the Spanish, was determined to expel the French from Italy. The result was that, when France retreated from Italy after the Battle of Ravenna in 1512, Florence was besieged by a papal and Spanish army and Soderini had to flee the city. The Spanish and the Pope insisted on the return of the exiled Medici family (who from 1434 to 1494 had first dominated and then as good as ruled Florence); they seized power in mid-September 1512, and, seven weeks later, Machiavelli was sacked from the chancery.<sup>40</sup>

Worse quickly followed. He was suspected of involvement in a conspiracy to oust the newly restored Medici regime, arrested in February 1513, tortured, and imprisoned. When the head of the Medici family, Cardinal Giovanni, was elected Pope Leo X in March 1513, a general amnesty was declared and Machiavelli was released from prison. But he was now *persona non grata* as far as the Medici regime was concerned – a fact that he himself failed to appreciate. He regarded himself as a loyal Florentine citizen, who had given his all to his native city during his fourteen years in the chancery. Moreover, he had had close relations with the Medici family and in particular with Giuliano, Leo X's younger brother. He had dedicated poetry to him in the 1490s and had sent him two famous sonnets from his prison cell in 1513; there is even some indication that he had had an adolescent homosexual liaison with Giuliano in the 1490s.<sup>41</sup> So Machiavelli became obsessed with trying to gain a place in Medici service after his

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<sup>40</sup> Black, *Machiavelli*, chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, 27-29, 76-78.

release from prison. In these efforts he enlisted the assistance of two important Florentine brothers – the aristocrats Paolo and Francesco Vettori, both intimate associates of the Medici.<sup>42</sup> With Francesco in particular Machiavelli now initiated a famous correspondence, not only filled with agonized complaints about his personal misfortunes, but also containing penetrating analyses of Italian and European contemporary diplomacy as well as profound reflections on politics in general. The intellectual exchange was far from one-sided, Vettori (later himself a significant historian) arguing the imponderability and unpredictability of politics, while Machiavelli insisted that politics was subject to rational analysis.<sup>43</sup>

In these circumstances, Machiavelli turned to writing. His earlier compositions had been almost entirely in verse: he had in fact continued to compose poetry in his extremely limited spare time as chancellor – most importantly the long narrative poem the *First Decade* (see above) and three long moral *capitoli* on the themes of fortune, ingratitude and ambition (1506-1509). Now he decided to write a prose treatise on politics, following the model of the so-called *speculum principis*, an ancient, medieval and humanist literary form in which a prince was given advice on how to become a glorious ruler. Machiavelli's aim was to win the favour of the Medici family by showing two of its leading scions – as yet to be provided with principalities by Pope Leo X – how to succeed as new princes. This work was *The Prince* (originally called *On Principalities* by Machiavelli), first dedicated to Giuliano, and then rededicated to the pope's nephew, Lorenzo. It was first mentioned by Machiavelli in a letter to Vettori on 10 December 1513. It then went through two revisions, the first early in 1514, when it may have been sent to Giuliano, with an allegorical sonnet as its preface; then it was slightly revised in late 1515 or possibly as late as the beginning of 1516, and given to Lorenzo. The text now survives only in the final version with the dedication to Lorenzo. *The Prince* was a revolutionary political text: if a new prince wanted to achieve glory, he had to put aside traditional morality and learn to practise deception and other underhanded methods. The only role for morality and religion was as a cloak to conceal the prince's *Realpolitik*. However, the work made no impression at all on the Medici, who shunned Machiavelli and ignored his advice book.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Black, *Machiavelli*, chapter 5.

<sup>43</sup> J. Najemy, *Between Friends. Discourses of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli-Vettori Letters of 1513-1515* (Princeton, NJ 1993).

<sup>44</sup> Black, *Machiavelli*, chapters 5 and 6.

By early 1515, Machiavelli finally realized that he was getting nowhere with the Medici. He now became involved with a circle of Florentine aristocrats who met to discuss literature, history and politics in the gardens belonging to Cosimo de' Rucellai, a young student of classics and humanism. The Rucellai circle included a number of close Medicean associates, but by the mid-1510s a significant contingent of Florentines were becoming disenchanted with the Medici regime. Florence was now well down on the list of Medici priorities, below Rome, the papacy, the church and international affairs: Florentine government was in the hands of absentee rulers and stopgap substitutes. In these circumstances, the republican alternative came to the forefront for more than a few important Florentines, and the Rucellai gardens hosted a number of such republicans – albeit often clandestine or disguised. At the Rucellai gardens Machiavelli began to lead discussions and even to lecture on politics and history: his perspective was republican, popular, anti-aristocratic and anti-Medicean.

The result was his *Discourses on Livy*, a text that brought together his remarks and thoughts on the widest possible range of political and historical questions, as developed from the Rucellai sessions. *The Prince* – composed in the context of Medici patronage and potential rulership – had focused on an individual who would become the saviour and redeemer of Florence and Italy, beset as they were by foreign invaders. The *Discourses* moved away from this perspective, concentrating instead on the role of classical antiquity – in line with the classicizing literary interests of the Rucellai group – and particularly of antiquity as a model of political inspiration and as a standard for social reform. The *Discourses* took on board the Machiavellian revolution in political morality as developed in *The Prince* but now widened the perspective to include all types of constitutional and social structures in antiquity and modern times – republics, principates, popular and democratic classes as well as aristocratic elites, with its scope extending to transalpine Europe as well as to Italy. An entirely original set of ideas articulated in the *Discourses* was Machiavelli's rejection of the time-honoured condemnation of political and social conflict. He strode forth as the founder of modern pluralist political ideology with the view that the success of the ancient Roman republic was due to the conflict between the plebs and the aristocrats – a situation that underpinned Roman liberty and was the recipe for the political energy which drove Rome's successful foreign conquests and imperialism.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Black, *Machiavelli*, chapters 7 and 8.

Another important literary work composed during the most desperate and depressed period of Machiavelli's life in the second half of the 1510s was a long, incomplete allegorical poem, *The Ass*, dating from 1517-1518.<sup>46</sup> In *The Prince* and the *Discourses* Machiavelli had put forward the extreme and unconventional view that there was not a spark of goodness in man, and now his misanthropy received its fullest expression in *The Ass* with the outrageous argument that animals were superior to men, excelling in prudence, strength and temperance: they were closer to nature and endowed with superior senses. In the *Discourses* Machiavelli had launched an unprecedented attack on Christianity, asserting that – with its exaltation of humility and its doctrine of turning the other cheek – it was responsible for political and military weakness and failure in modern times, but in *The Ass* he went even further, making the cosmic leap from anticlericalism and anti-Christianism to atheism, arguing that God was powerless to help man and suggesting implicitly that an impotent God was a contradiction in terms and so could hardly exist.<sup>47</sup>

Machiavelli's greatest literary creation, the side-splitting comedy *Mandragola*, also dates from these years of gloom in the second half of the 1510s. Here Machiavelli conceives of a universe in which there is no room for a Christian god, much less for a god with any discretion at all. Nature and fortune are counterpoised: benefit and disadvantage are automatically balanced; nature has its own volition conforming to neither a moral nor a religious order. The world of *Mandragola* is the rotten world of *The Prince* in microcosm. Amorality is rife; necessity justifies evil. *Mandragola* is the blackest of black comedies. It is a play without hero or heroine. The world of *Mandragola* is a caricature of Machiavelli's political world, lacking in values or ideas, dominated by primitive instincts: lust, avarice, pride, procreation. Here Machiavelli reached the nadir of his negativism: in the abominable world of *The Prince*, there had been the possibility of an Italian redemption through a great new leader; in the *Discourses*, hope from a republican renewal inspired by the example of antiquity; in *The Ass* a further development of the cyclical idea – inherent in *The Prince* and explicit in book one, chapter two of the *Discourses* – that politics was subject not only to inevitable decline but also to revival. In *Mandragola* there is nothing but evil.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Corsaro ed., *Scritti*, 139-193.

<sup>47</sup> Black, *Machiavelli*, 179-185.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, 186-194.

*Mandragola* marked the nadir of Machiavelli's depression but also constituted the turning point in his fortunes. The first known Florentine performance in the early spring of 1520 persuaded Leo X to have the play staged in Rome shortly afterwards: it was an immediate success, not least with the pope, who was renowned for his sense of humour. *Mandragola's* favourable reception coincided with a change in Florence's political climate. In the mid-1510s Florence had been under the charge of Leo X's nephew, Lorenzo, whom he made Duke of Urbino in 1516, but the latter incurred the dislike of Florentines of all classes through his signorial and princely bearing – inimical to Florence's deep-rooted republican ethos and traditions. When he died in 1519, Leo X – never happy with Lorenzo's autocratic style – immediately orchestrated a rapprochement with Florentine republican sentiments, sending his conciliatory cousin Cardinal Giulio de' Medici to oversee the city. One notable (or notorious) republican was Machiavelli. There now commenced a series of gestures and commissions reintegrating Machiavelli into Florentine political life and into Medici favour and patronage: he was given a semi-official diplomatic mission to Lucca in 1520; he prepared – evidently at Medici behest – a sample piece of historical writing, *The Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca*, also in 1520;<sup>49</sup> and he was requested to submit – together with several other Florentines – a proposal for a constitutional reform of Florence, delivered to the Medici in 1520–1521 as his *Discourse on Florentine Affairs after the Death of the Younger Lorenzo*.<sup>50</sup> All this culminated in a commission for an official history of Florence under the auspices of the University of Florence but in fact coming from Cardinal Giulio. As Florence's official historian – ultimately producing the *Florentine Histories*, dedicated and delivered personally to Giulio (now Pope Clement VII) in 1525 – Machiavelli's reconciliation with the Medici and the Florentine establishment was complete. Complementary to this Medici rapprochement was Machiavelli's dedication in 1521 of his military treatise, *The Art of War*, to the Medici courtier Lorenzo Strozzi, as well as his intimate friendship with the Medici's right-hand man, the Florentine aristocrat Francesco Guicciardini, who served as a papal lieutenant and military governor in the 1510s and 1520s.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> A. Montevocchi and C. Varotti ed., Machiavelli, *Opere storiche*.

<sup>50</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *L'arte della guerra. Scritti politici minori*, J. Marchand ed. (Rome 2001) 624–641.

<sup>51</sup> Black, *Machiavelli*, chapter 10.

Machiavelli now began a second career in Florentine public and Medici service with a series of increasingly significant diplomatic, military and political missions until the Medici regime's fall in May 1527, a month before his own death. These included legations to the Chapter General of the Franciscan Order in Carpi (1521); to the Romagna and Venice (1525); to the League of Cognac and Francesco Guicciardini, Cremona and Modena (1526); and to the League and Guicciardini again and then south towards Rome (1527). He was also appointed provisor and chancellor to the Five Procurators of the Walls, supervising Florentine fortifications in 1526 and 1527.<sup>52</sup>

Machiavelli's most famous biographer, Roberto Ridolfi, wrote of his well-known image as portrayed in a Florentine painted terracotta bust:

A man getting on for sixty, his head bent, his face marked with the labours of the mind and the spirit, the poor face of a tired and unhappy man (...) Beneath the weariness and the bitterness on that face the pathetic remains of a clever and subtle smile (...) If that portrait is his, no page of writing can better tell the story of Machiavelli's tragedy.<sup>53</sup>

'The change of 1512 had caught him still young in the full vigour of his powers and hopes. This change of 1527 found him old, tired and disillusioned'.<sup>54</sup> Round him on his deathbed 'were those few good friends that remained to him'.<sup>55</sup>

There is no doubt that Ridolfi's vision here was a product of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italian romantic culture in which he had himself been nurtured; other recent biographers who have accepted Ridolfi's interpretation include J.R. Hale, M. Viroli, F. Bausi, R. King, M. Marietti, N. Capponi and C. Vivanti.<sup>56</sup> The great individual and lonely

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<sup>52</sup> Black, *Machiavelli*, chapter 11.

<sup>53</sup> R. Ridolfi, *Vita di Niccolò Machiavelli* (Florence 1978 [seventh Italian edition]) 379; English translation: C. Grayson, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli* (London 1963) 242.

<sup>54</sup> Ridolfi, *Vita*, 388; trans. Grayson, 247.

<sup>55</sup> Ridolfi, *Vita*, 390; trans. Grayson, 249.

<sup>56</sup> J.R. Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy* (London 1960); M. Viroli, *Niccolò's Smile. A Biography of Machiavelli*, A. Shugar trans. (London 2001); F. Bausi, *Machiavelli* (Rome 2005); R. King, *Machiavelli* (London 2007); M. Marietti, *Machiavel: le penseur de la nécessité* (Paris 2009); N. Capponi, *An Unlikely Prince: The Life and Times of*

creator beaten down by historical forces beyond his powers are not what emerged from Machiavelli's own words or from those who knew him in his last days. He was regarded as a unique playwright, implored by the Florentine community in Venice on 28 February 1526 to send another theatrical creation.<sup>57</sup> He was esteemed for his poetry.<sup>58</sup> He was proud of his national reputation as a man of letters.<sup>59</sup> He was highly regarded by Pope Clement VII.<sup>60</sup> He was esteemed as a military planner.<sup>61</sup> Machiavelli was fully aware he had gained a circle of important friends.<sup>62</sup> His letters were regarded as the voice of 'oracles'.<sup>63</sup> His luck was perceived to have changed, as his close friend, the Florentine aristocrat and prominent political figure Filippo Nerli wrote in September 1525: 'your friends are all very happy, and believe that what people have not granted on the basis of your merits has been provided by chance'.<sup>64</sup> At the end of his life, Machiavelli did not regard himself – and was not regarded by others – as the isolated and victimized genius.

The most notable development of Machiavelli's late writings was an apparent return to more conventional morality: his later works tend to substitute a more conventional ethical perspective for the radical rejection of traditional morals found in *The Prince*, the *Discourses* and *Mandragola*. Machiavelli was not immune to the normal human tendency to set aside youthful radicalism with the onset of maturing years. Moreover, with his emergence as the favourite of the Florentine elite in the Rucellai gardens and even more significantly as a key adviser to and official historical spokesman for the Medici, Machiavelli began to speak with the voice of the establishment.

A particularly striking feature of *The Art of War* is its conventional morality. Machiavelli upholds the common good (Preface. 3, IV. 137), law

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*Machiavelli* (Cambridge, MA 2010); C. Vivanti, *Niccolò Machiavelli: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton, NJ 2013).

<sup>57</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Lettere*, F. Gaeta ed. (Turin 1984) 576.

<sup>58</sup> Machiavelli, *Lettere*, 577.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, 625.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, 582.

<sup>61</sup> Ridolfi 1978, 579-80 n. 26; Ridolfi 1963, 322 n. 26.

<sup>62</sup> Machiavelli, *Lettere*, 625.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, 608.

<sup>64</sup> Machiavelli, *Lettere*, 560. English translation by: J. Atkinson and D. Sices, *Machiavelli and his Friends. Their Personal Correspondence* (DeKalb, IL 1996) 366 (adapted).

(Preface. 3), justice (VI. 124), peace, good faith, the fear of God (Preface. 3. 5) and patriotism (Preface. 5, I. 2, IV. 151). Machiavelli appears to contradict not only the amorality of *The Prince*, where he had endorsed bad faith and marginalized the public good, but also the impiety of *The Ass*, where he had ridiculed prayers for divine intervention (V. 106-111). He now spotlights the soldier as ‘one who every day, submitting himself to infinite dangers, has ever more need of God’s help’ (Preface. 7). Similarly, an aspect of the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs* contradictory to the tone of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* is the text’s conventional moral and political language. Machiavelli consistently speaks of the ‘common good’, of a ‘pious and good’ political leader, of abstaining from ‘actions that are not good’.

As has been already observed, *The Prince* was a text in which the new prince’s selfish interests are paramount, with little room left for the greater political good. In contrast, the traditional values of the Italian city republics take centre stage in the *Florentine Histories*. The common good (‘ben comune’) had been marginalized in *The Prince* but now becomes central to Machiavelli’s discourse. Machiavelli now cast aside the political morality that had made *The Prince* such a controversial work. In *The Prince* Machiavelli had notoriously argued that it was better for a ruler to be feared than loved, but in the *Florentine Histories* he made precisely the opposite judgement (II. 37. 24). The admonition in *The Prince* (and *Discourses*) regarding the necessity of bad faith is now reversed (III.5.5).<sup>65</sup> The morality of *The Prince* is that of the criminal leader of the rebels in 1378, so that by condemning him, Machiavelli rejects *The Prince*’s ethics (III. 13. 22).<sup>66</sup> In chapter fifteen of *The Prince* Machiavelli had famously warned that ‘a man who wants entirely to profess the part of a good man will necessarily come to ruin among so many who are not good’, but in the *Florentine Histories* Benedetto Alberti comes to grief because he is too good among so many who are bad: the moral norm has now been reversed, Alberti being spotlighted as a paragon of virtue, not as an ingenuous political innocent (III.23.7).<sup>67</sup> In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli had made the revolutionary suggestion that civic divisions had been the foundations of Rome’s liberty and success, but in the *Florentine Histories* he returned to the more traditional theme of republican political thought, arguing that unity was beneficial and dissension detrimental to any political system (e.g. *Proemio* 4).

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<sup>65</sup> Machiavelli, *Opere storiche*, 303.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, 332.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, 358.

Machiavelli's final extended literary effort was another comedy, *Clizia*, staged in January 1525. Here a plausible domestic drama takes the place of *Mandragola*'s acerbic social and religious critique. The 'protagonists' are 'the sober, class-conscious mercantile bourgeoisie (...) conservative, responsible, materialistic, superstitious'; *Clizia* becomes 'a near-documentary Day in the Life of a Florentine Bourgeois'.<sup>68</sup> Unlike *Mandragola*, where vice is triumphant, in *Clizia* the comedy assumes a moral purpose: as Machiavelli declared in the Prologue, 'Comedies were invented in order to benefit (...) the spectators'.<sup>69</sup> The principal character's humiliation teaches the consequences of immorality: his vice is suitably punished, the plot being resolved in a return to the moral and social order.

Machiavelli's immortal greatness is founded on the works from his years in the wilderness. In his most subversive writings – *The Prince*, the *Discourses on Livy*, *The Ass* and *Mandragola* – he rejected the moral and political values inherited by the Renaissance from Antiquity and the Middle Ages. These outrageous and revolutionary compositions were all written in mid-life, when Machiavelli was a political outcast in his native Florence. Later he was reconciled with the Florentine establishment and with the ruling Medici family, and as a result his final compositions – including his renowned *Florentine Histories* as well as his final comedy *Clizia* – represent a return to more conventional norms. Machiavelli's posthumous success was a paradox – the product of the very failure he had suffered at the low point of his life.

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<sup>68</sup> J.R. Hale ed., *The Literary Works of Machiavelli* (London 1961) xxi-xxii.

<sup>69</sup> Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 892. English translation: D. Gallagher (Prospect Heights, IL 1996) 5.