

**Machiavelli: The Enduring Enigma**

Niccolò Machiavelli is one of the most controversial figures in political history. For nearly five hundred years historians and political scientists have examined countless documents and interpretations of Machiavelli; however, the debate over his true beliefs continues. His abstruseness has increased because of a drastic shift in the analysis of his works through the years. History has often bastardized Machiavelli but recent scholars have dug deeper into the study of his works to present him more favorably. This essay intends to pry open the mystery of Machiavelli by looking into his life, analyzing the various explanations of his works from generation to generation, and finally offering a new interpretation. His writings imply that he finds pleasure in presenting himself as an enigma and leave many asking if Machiavelli was truly “Machiavellian.” Was he a republican or a supporter of tyranny? His *Discourses on Livy* suggests the former, while his most infamous work *The Prince* suggests the latter. There is also the proposition that *The Prince* was merely a satirical work that Machiavelli did not truly believe. In short, the work of Machiavelli will perhaps always engender debate because he is simply an inscrutable figure whose mystery may never be fully solved.

The traditional and superficial interpretation of the term “Machiavellian” suggests that one who uses the tactics found in *The Prince* is deceitful and ruthless. *The Prince* defies the ethos of government that Machiavelli advocates in the *Discourses* and is the principal source of his unsavory reputation. In fact, Nobel Prize winning philosopher Bertrand Russell referred to *The Prince* as a manual for gangsters.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, 1920s New

York mobster Salvatore Maranzano often recited Machiavelli's maxims to his subordinates regarding the handling of punishments and benefits.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Maranzano's face value interpretation of *The Prince* is the most common assessment because history has simply attached an evil stigma to Machiavelli's name. In fact, the majority of people who recognize Machiavellianism have never read *The Prince* or even heard of the *Discourses*.

The divergence of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* invites the question of which political theory is more in line with Machiavelli's beliefs. He is chiefly known for *The Prince*, but there are also those like J. H. Whitfield who believe the *Discourses* "represent the capital book of Machiavelli."<sup>3</sup> His name conveys a great deal of negativity and epitomizes the evilness that certain leaders represent. For example, rulers such as Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Saddam Hussein, and even George W. Bush have been labeled as Machiavellian. Mussolini actually endeavored to write a dissertation on Machiavelli although it was never completed.<sup>4</sup> Machiavelli's ill-fated reputation has caused him to be the source of much criticism, but scholars like the nineteenth-century German Robert von Mohl question if he really deserves all the denigration: "Machiavelli has sinned, but he has been even more sinned against."<sup>5</sup> In many respects, the sins against him took place after his death because his life merely served as the fuel for his legacy.

Over the last five centuries many prominent figures, such as Jean Bodin, Frederick II, Pasquale Villari, Garrett Mattingly, and Harvey Mansfield, have given their individual views on Machiavelli. These scholars have built on prior interpretations and have also heavily influenced each other. In celebration of Machiavelli's five-hundredth birthday in 1969, Oxford scholar Sir Isaiah Berlin published a lengthy article in 1972

titled “The Originality of Machiavelli” that examines dozens of interpretations. He notes that the bibliography on Machiavelli is immense and ever growing, as it contained over 3,000 items at the time,<sup>6</sup> which was an immense leap from the 2,113 that were listed in a 1936 study.<sup>7</sup> In addition, over 500 more pieces have emerged since 1969.<sup>8</sup> After a thorough study of Machiavelli’s works and the various studies of his writings, it can be concluded that he was infatuated with politics and a republican at heart.

Interpretations have referred to Machiavelli variously as an immoral cynic, a man of satire, a staunch nationalist, a humanist, and a man of wisdom. There have been those who thought of him as an evil man and those who considered him to be a champion of liberty. For example, English scholar Thomas Macaulay wrote that history vilified Machiavelli: “Out of his surname they have coined an epithet for a knave, and out of his Christian name a [synonym] for the devil.”<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Francis Bacon believed, “We are much beholden to Machiavelli and other writers of that class.”<sup>10</sup> The confusion also goes beyond politics in that Machiavelli was debased on the religious front in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Protestants thought of him as a teacher of Jesuits, but Jesuits saw him as a heretic fit for effigy burning.<sup>11</sup>

Machiavelli’s name has evidently garnered much attention, but he was simply a man driven by an obsession with politics. He was fascinated with history, in particular with Florentine politics, and he was determined to let others know of his mastery of these subjects. Machiavelli wrote the *Discourses* and *The Prince* to show that he understood politics from multiple approaches. Moreover, he was motivated to gain the favor of whoever was in power in order to have the greatest opportunity to convey his knowledge. Thus, Machiavelli dedicated *The Prince* to Lorenzo de' Medici to increase his chances of

reentering the political scene and receiving a commission to write his *History of Florence*, which he completed two years before he died.

Shortly after his death, Machiavelli was quickly portrayed as a devilish man who advocated unethical means to achieve desired ends. However, the nineteenth century marked a change in the perception of Machiavelli. Much of Europe was experiencing a nationalist fervor and Machiavelli began to be considered in a positive light. More and more people focused on the last chapter of *The Prince*, which seemed to be a break from the rest of the treatise. The last chapter deviated from the previous twenty-five chapters in advocating Italian unity and liberation from foreigners. Many now justified the harsh schemes of *The Prince* by arguing that Machiavelli was simply proposing those methods out of his great love for Italy.<sup>12</sup> The meaning of the last chapter has continued to boggle the minds of scholars; however, it is the dating of Machiavelli's works, which will later be examined, that has created the most discomfort. Along with studying Machiavelli's works, it is also necessary to look into his life in order to fully understand his motivations.

Machiavelli was born in Florence on May 3, 1469. Not much is known about his youth, but it is acknowledged that he came from a noble family whose members had often held Florentine governmental positions. However, he descended from a poor branch of the family. His father Bernardo held a law degree but only earned a modest sum. Machiavelli had a close relationship with his father and inherited his love of books from him. On the other hand, not much has been documented about his mother Madonna Bartolomea except that she was well-read and enjoyed writing poetry.<sup>13</sup>

Although Machiavelli's parents were not wealthy, he received a broad education enabling him to study philosophy, law, history, grammar, and Latin. He challenged himself by reading the ancients, including Thucydides, Plutarch, Tacitus, and most importantly, Livy.<sup>14</sup> While Machiavelli received a sound education, his mind was also shaped by the turmoil that characterized Florence during his early years. For example, such events, as the Pazzi conspiracy in 1478, which was the failed attempt to overthrow the Medici, and the arrival of the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola in 1489, who spoke against tyranny in front of mass audiences, had a substantial impact on his thinking.<sup>15</sup>

The critical point in his life came on May 28, 1498, just four days after Savonarola's execution, when he was appointed secretary of the Second Chancery to the Florentine Republic. Machiavelli was aware of how callous the political world could be because of the chaos he had already witnessed in his life, but he was now going to experience politics first hand. The next fourteen years of Machiavelli's life were absolutely vital in the formation of his thinking. He became a public figure and traveled extensively while completely absorbing himself in the political affairs of his day.<sup>16</sup> During this time Machiavelli met with top officials, such as Louis XII, Cesare Borgia, Pope Julius II, and Emperor Maximilian. These meetings proved to be crucial to Machiavelli's post-secretary life when he began to relate his experiences in his works.

The year 1512 marked a cataclysmic moment for Machiavelli because the Republic was overthrown and the Medici was restored to power. Along with the demise of the Republic went Machiavelli's career as a public figure; however, it also marked his beginning as a writer. The Signoria, which was the elected body, informed Machiavelli

of his dismissal on November 7, 1512.<sup>17</sup> Machiavelli was then forced to live a lonely life away from the public eye. He no longer could travel and was barred from his natural home, the Palazzo Vecchio, the center of the Florentine government.<sup>18</sup>

After his dismissal Machiavelli endured the most physically traumatic experience of his life. He was accused of conspiring against the Medici and found himself in their custody on February 12, 1513.<sup>19</sup> Machiavelli was subjected to the *strappado*, a dreadful form of torture aimed at dislodging one's joints. The procedure consisted of tying a person's hands behind his back and then lifting him to the ceiling. He would then be dropped from the ceiling and land just short of the floor, yanking his arms upward and causing immense pain. Machiavelli endured the *strappado* six times and never uttered a word of self-incrimination.<sup>20</sup> He later reflected on his experience in a letter, saying "it is a miracle that I am [still] alive, . . . God and my innocence have preserved [my life] for me."<sup>21</sup> It was an extremely terrifying period for Machiavelli because he was on the verge of death and surrounded by lice, rats, and human excrement, while listening to the screams of others being tortured.<sup>22</sup> In the second week of March, Machiavelli was finally released and exiled to his estate at San Casciano, just seven miles outside of Florence.<sup>23</sup>

Machiavelli entered the period of his life from which his legacy has been derived, with the writing of the *Discourses* and *The Prince*. Additionally, Machiavelli also produced the *Art of War* and his *History of Florence* along with several plays and poems. His life was never quite the same after the fall of the Republic. He persistently endeavored to serve the Florentine government. In fact, Machiavelli claimed that he loved his country more than his soul.<sup>24</sup> However, he was never able to obtain a post from the Medici. The last days of Machiavelli's life were spent in the company of his friends.

He entertained them as he always did, but ill health eventually overtook him and he passed away on June 21, 1527. He may have been buried a day later in the church of Santa Croce, but in many ways this was his beginning because his legacy was just coming to life.<sup>25</sup>

In 1532 the *Discourses* and *The Prince* were first published and they circulated widely throughout Italy over the next decade. The widespread reading of Machiavelli's works came when the *Discourses* (1544) and *The Prince* (1546) were translated into French and then published in 1548 and 1553. In addition, the *Art of War* was translated in 1546 and years later his *History of Florence* in 1577. It cannot be overemphasized how critical French political thought was in spreading Machiavelli's name throughout Europe.<sup>26</sup>

Machiavelli received endorsement from the first French translator of the *Discourses*, Jacques Gohory.<sup>27</sup> Gohory translated the *Discourses* into French in 1544, and esteemed Machiavelli as a genuine man with a good heart: "I assure you that once you have come to know him you would not have missed him for anything in the world; for he is an honest and reliable man. . . . His merchandise is neither disguised nor embellished."<sup>28</sup> Readers apparently heeded Gohory's claim, as it is believed that Machiavelli's name was welcomed with approval because of the suggestion that he was more accepted in France than in Italy.<sup>29</sup> Gohory still admired Machiavelli twenty-seven years after his first translation, as he referred to him in a 1571 edition of *The Prince* as "the noblest mind to have appeared on earth in the past few centuries." In addition, he claimed *The Prince* presented an "excellent doctrine" that should be embedded in

people's minds.<sup>30</sup> In the meantime, Gaspard d'Auvergne's 1553 translation of *The Prince* commended Machiavelli for revealing the cruelty and treachery of men.<sup>31</sup>

While Machiavelli was receiving praise in France, *The Prince* had been on the papal Index as a banned book since 1557.<sup>32</sup> Cardinal Reginald Pole, for example, was adamant in portraying Machiavelli as a malevolent advisor to autocrats as early as 1536 in his *Apologia ad Carolum V.*<sup>33</sup> Machiavelli's contemporary, Giovanni Battista Busini, summed up the general interpretation of *The Prince* at the time in an infamous letter he wrote in 1549: "everyone hated [Machiavelli] on account of *The Prince*; to the rich, it seemed that his *Prince* was a document for teaching the duke how to steal their possessions, to the poor their liberty. To the piagnoni [followers of Savonarola] he seemed a heretic, to the good dishonorable, to the wicked more wicked or more clever than they: so that everyone hated him."<sup>34</sup> Machiavelli's hated prose was beginning to establish a diabolic reputation and his name was soon to be forever connected to the maliciousness of tyranny.

*The Prince* was quickly becoming more common in France and it was not long before the outspoken student of Machiavelli Jean Bodin, offered his opinions on the treatise. Bodin's struggle with forming a solid conclusion truly represents the dispute over the interpretation of Machiavelli. In his *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitum* in 1566, Bodin applauded Machiavelli for being the first to make a significant impact on political theory since "1,200 years [of] barbarism had overwhelmed everything."<sup>35</sup> He espoused Machiavelli as a republican and overlooked the views of men like Cardinal Pole.



However, just ten years after writing the *Methodus*, Bodin came to a new conclusion in his *Les six livres de la République* where he followed the negative sentiment toward Machiavelli that was resonating throughout France. In the introduction Bodin completely changed his opinion from a decade earlier: “[Machiavelli is an] atheist [whose] political science consists of nothing but tyrannical ruses that he has searched out in all corners of Italy.”<sup>36</sup> Bodin also makes sure to dismiss any prior admiration he had shown for Machiavelli.<sup>37</sup> The utter fact that Bodin went from one extreme to the other in his analysis of Machiavelli is astonishing, but appropriately defines the essence of Machiavelli interpretation.

The reason for the reversal of Bodin’s interpretation is likely to have been the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, which occurred on August 24, 1572. The massacre was the result of a heated battle between Protestants and Catholics that had been brewing since the Protestant Reformation in 1517. It resulted in blood-filled streets and in the perishing of thousands of Huguenots, perpetuating a tumultuous period of religious wars. Machiavelli was almost immediately pinned with the blame, as exiled Huguenots in Switzerland pointed to his teachings as a prime motivation for the bloodbath.<sup>38</sup> The Protestant interpretation of Machiavelli was clearly negative at this point, as writer T. S. Elliot reflected: “the growth of Protestantism . . . created a disposition against [Machiavelli].”<sup>39</sup> Machiavelli’s sinister reputation was close to indelible at this point because of his supposed connection to the massacre. Moreover, two of the massacre’s main insinulators, Charles IX and Henry III, were being labeled as Machiavellians. In fact, Henry was believed to have always carried a copy of *The Prince* in his pocket.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to attaching the responsibility for the massacre to Machiavelli, Protestants branded the subsequent actions of Henry as Machiavellian. Henry carried out the murders of rival Catholics, the Duke of Guise and his brother the Cardinal of Guise in 1588. This was precisely a page taken from *The Prince* because Machiavelli clearly advocated the butchering of those who posed a threat to one's power.<sup>41</sup> The assassinations were promptly connected to Machiavelli, as one attack stated that Henry was "the arch-atheist of our times . . . [and the] son of a Florentine . . . imbued with the religion of Machiavelli."<sup>42</sup>

By the mid 1570s Machiavelli's name had endured a great deal of criticism and his reputation was permanently tarnished. The taint on his name was irremovable and many fervently ventured to solidify his evil status. The French Huguenot lawyer Innocent Gentillet was the first to publish a widely read condemnation of Machiavelli's *Prince*, as he anonymously published the French translation of his pamphlet, the *Contre-Machiavel* in 1576.<sup>43</sup> As a lawyer, he lashed out at Machiavelli for dismissing civil law and natural law and adamantly denounced Machiavelli for his doctrines supporting a strong monarchy.<sup>44</sup> Gentillet also attacked Machiavelli on the religious front. He blamed the French religious civil wars of the sixteenth century on Machiavelli's ideas and eagerly attacked his maxims.<sup>45</sup> The *Contre-Machiavel* also deprecates Machiavelli for his advocacy of religion as a political tool and for the subjugation of the citizenry.<sup>46</sup> Gentillet was unwavering in his disapproval of Machiavelli. However, an argument that has been levied against Gentillet is that he had only read *The Prince* and the *Discourses* and did not know or care to know much about Machiavelli's life. Nevertheless, his *Contre-Machiavel* still had an effect on several French citizens. For instance, Huguenot

general Francois de la Noue, shifted from his past approval and depicted Machiavelli in a negative light.<sup>47</sup>

Machiavelli's name was also becoming known in other parts of Europe, such as Scotland where he was already being related to immorality by 1570.<sup>48</sup> The first published English translation of *The Prince* only appeared in 1640, but copies in Italian floated around London long before then. English authorities had prohibited the book because of its unethical recommendations. In actuality, copies were clandestinely translated in manuscript, giving people the opportunity to read *The Prince* in English. The condemnation of *The Prince* only gave people more impetus to obtain a copy. In 1584 the Elizabethan printer John Wolfe eluded the ban when he translated *The Prince* and the *Discourses* in manuscript.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, Wolfe's depiction of Machiavelli had changed, because at first he had a negative interpretation but he ultimately came to admire his works: "The more I read, the more they pleased me, . . . and, in brief, I realized that I had learned more from these works in one day about the government of the world, than I had in all my past life . . . ."<sup>50</sup> Wolfe's outlook on Machiavelli did not particularly resonate with Elizabethans, but his translations were widespread. Machiavelli is referred to on several occasions in Elizabethan literature, as in Shakespeare's infamous line in *Henry VI* about the "Murderous Machiavel."<sup>51</sup> In short, *The Prince* had more influence on Tudor England than any other work and no writer was more commonly cited than Machiavelli.<sup>52</sup> Eduard Meyer's study pointed out at least 395 references to Machiavelli in Elizabethan literature.<sup>53</sup>

*The Prince* eventually found its way into Spain as well. Writers continued to negatively portray Machiavelli and these portrayals had a considerable influence over the

Spanish people. The Jesuits were the most offended by Machiavelli's works and viciously assailed *The Prince*. The censure of Machiavelli in Spain officially began in 1595 when diplomat Pedro de Rivadeneira wrote the *Treatise of Religion, and Virtues which the Christian Prince Must Have to Govern and Conserve his States, against what Machiavelli and Politicos of this Time Teach*. The elaborate title is a clear indication of Rivadeneira's eagerness to attack Machiavelli on more than one front. He tore apart *The Prince* because he felt it was a terrible example for leaders and a heretical assault on religion. In fact, Rivadeneira dedicated his refutation of *The Prince* to Philip III shortly before he became the ruler of Spain.<sup>54</sup> The rough treatment of Machiavelli continued for several years as another distinguished Jesuit, Claudio Clemente, wrote *Machiavellianism Decapitated by Christian Wisdom of Spain and Austria* in 1637. Like Rivadeneira, Clemente's attack was also chiefly based on religion, which served as the general argument against Machiavelli in Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>55</sup>

There were obviously more ways than one to interpret Machiavelli. Interpretation relied on the political situation in the countries where Machiavelli's works were being read. Catholics naturally despised Machiavelli because *The Prince* had received papal condemnation, as did Protestants, but Machiavelli was being praised in some parts of Europe. There was sizeable attention given to him in Holland in the early seventeenth century where a democratic interpretation was being popularized. Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza thought highly of him and cited him regularly in his works.<sup>56</sup> In fact, Spinoza construed *The Prince* as a clandestinely republican work and referred to Machiavelli as a "wise man [who] gave some very sound advice for preserving [freedom]."<sup>57</sup> However, this approval did not sway the thinking of most Europeans.

Over the next century there were many more vigorous denunciations of Machiavelli, but one of the most popular and fiercest came from the well-known King of Prussia, Frederick II. Frederick wrote *Antimachiavel* in 1739 and had it published in 1740 before he became king. He described Machiavelli as a hindrance to the betterment of society.<sup>58</sup> It has been suggested that his refutation of *The Prince* was ironically a classic Machiavellian plot in order to eliminate any thought amongst Prussians that he would be a despotic ruler, a tactic that Machiavelli would have applauded.<sup>59</sup> In fact, Voltaire advised Frederick to write *Antimachiavel* reasoning that Machiavelli would have looked favorably upon a leader for denouncing *The Prince*.<sup>60</sup> Voltaire's recommendation to admonish the "poisonous"<sup>61</sup> instruction of Machiavelli led to a systematic attack on every chapter of *The Prince*. In a sense, Frederick was even mimicking Machiavelli because his treatise contains twenty-six chapters, the same as Machiavelli's *Prince*.

Frederick was explicit in his disapproval of Machiavelli. He believed Machiavelli had a terrible impact on politics and that his ideas would have grave effects on civilization. He goes on to refer to Machiavelli as a "monster" who wants to destroy humanity and states, "I have always regarded *The Prince* of Machiavelli as one of the most dangerous works that have ever been poured out on the world." Frederick had a fear that *The Prince* would influence the young and ultimately lead to corruption and evil leadership.<sup>62</sup> He lamented the thought of people living under the type of prince that Machiavelli endorsed because they would ultimately be at the disposal of their leader in every respect. Frederick even claimed that Machiavelli endorsed the value that princes "ought to abuse the world with their dissimulation." Furthermore, he disagreed with Machiavelli's suggestion that humans are inherently selfish and iniquitous.<sup>63</sup>

*Antimachiavel* proved to be popular in the eighteenth century because of its noted author. It went through more than an edition a month over its first fifteen months; however, it did not end up having a lasting impact on the interpretation of Machiavelli.<sup>64</sup>

Heading into the nineteenth century, alternate interpretations of *The Prince* were being suggested. Many were beginning to argue that Machiavelli was merely writing to solve the problems of Italy during his day. This interpretation thrust nationalism into the picture as Machiavelli's prime motivation. It began to take the forefront in the early part of the nineteenth century and continued to grow as it went hand in hand with many contemporary political situations in Europe.<sup>65</sup> The infamous chapter twenty-six of *The Prince* fell right in line with this theory.

Pasquale Villari, the nineteenth-century Italian historian who wrote a classic biography on Machiavelli, believed that *The Prince* was written to support nationalism. Villari himself had played a lively role in the unification of Italy, which likely had an impact on his interpretation.<sup>66</sup> He referred to the fall of the Florentine Republic as “a blessing in disguise” because it allowed Machiavelli to write and express his ideas advocating a unified Italian state.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, Villari asserts that all of Machiavelli's works, including the *Discourses*, *Art of War*, and *History of Florence*, offered sentiments for unification. He focuses on Machiavelli's belief that Italy's problems stemmed from foreign intervention and a lack of unity, which he believed were the principal motivations for writing *The Prince*.<sup>68</sup> Villari considered *The Prince* to have been written with these thoughts in mind and held Machiavelli in high regard because of his intense love for Italy: “It is impossible not to grant him our admiration when we find him preaching the

necessity of arming the people [and] training [them] to self-sacrifice for [their] country's cause . . . .”<sup>69</sup>

Many others also believed Machiavelli was motivated by nationalism. The nineteenth-century Italian literary critic Francesco De Sanctis and early twentieth-century English scholar Sir Richard Lodge both offered nationalist interpretations of Machiavelli. They too believed that Machiavelli was writing with thoughts of Italian unification in mind. De Sanctis insists that Machiavelli believed that patriotism was at the heart of human existence,<sup>70</sup> as he paid tribute to him on the eve of Italian unification: “Let us be proud of our Machiavelli! . . . [Let] there be glory to Machiavelli! At the moment in which I am writing, . . . the people are shouting *Viva* for the independence of Italy! Glory to Machiavelli!”<sup>71</sup> In De Sanctis's eyes, Machiavelli thought humans were indebted to their nation and their duties in life were to be first and foremost in correspondence with their country's needs.<sup>72</sup> Lodge's interpretation coincides with De Sanctis's because he too believes *The Prince* was written in regard to the existing status of Italy. According to Machiavelli, Italy was too subservient and oppressed by outsiders: “. . . more enslaved than the Jews . . . She has no leader, no organization. She is beaten, robbed, wounded . . . [and] she has experienced every sort of injury.”<sup>73</sup> Machiavelli expressed these sentiments about a subjugated Italy in the last chapter of *The Prince*, which served as a central piece to the nationalist perspective.

The nationalist interpretation continued in the twentieth century with Felix Gilbert, who pays close attention to the controversial last chapter of *The Prince*. However, he disagrees with Villari, De Sanctis, and Lodge in terms of what nationalism meant to Machiavelli. Simply put, he believes Machiavelli's nationalism differs from

nineteenth-century nationalism.<sup>74</sup> Gilbert argues that the last chapter characterizes the fundamental nature of *The Prince* written from a nationalistic point of view in the sixteenth century. He was deeply engrossed by the last chapter and was devoted to solving its mystery. He believes that the reasoning behind the last chapter is the answer to a significant problem of Machiavelli and essentially concluded that it is crucial to determine exactly when the last chapter of *The Prince* was written. Gilbert's theory is in line with German historian Leopold von Ranke who was also alarmed by the last chapter because of its discrepancy from the rest of the work. Ranke described Machiavelli as seeking "the salvation of Italy, but [the] situation seemed to him so desperate that he was bold enough to prescribe poison."<sup>75</sup> In a fashion similar to Ranke, Gilbert believes that Machiavelli's harsh doctrine was meant for the Italy of his day.

Although the nationalist perspective allowed for a more benevolent interpretation of Machiavelli, the classic explanations given by Gentillet and Frederick II reverberated in the twentieth century. Professor Emeritus Leo Strauss of the University of Chicago is one of the most renowned scholars of Machiavelli the world has ever known. Harvard professor Harvey C. Mansfield states every time he touches upon a new aspect of Machiavelli he is greeted with the message that Strauss has already been there.<sup>76</sup> Strauss wrote extensively on Machiavelli in the 1950s and maintained a philosophy similar to Gentillet and Frederick II, establishing a reputation as a stern anti-Machiavellian.

Professor Strauss is adamant in portraying a ruthless Machiavelli by stressing that his teachings are "immoral and irreligious."<sup>77</sup> He cannot comprehend how Machiavelli's recommendations could be classified as anything other than evil and validates his claim by citing Machiavelli's support of murder to achieve desired ends. Indeed, Strauss states



the mere fact Machiavelli associates his name with such tactics is more than enough to characterize him as an evil man. He also rejects the argument that Machiavelli was a patriot or a scientist, as he defines Machiavelli's patriotism to be "collective selfishness," and emphasizes that anyone who misinterprets him has fallen prey to his principles.<sup>78</sup>

Strauss's explanation of Machiavelli is obviously guided by his severe contempt.

However, there were many others in his era who offered contrasting interpretations. For example, twentieth-century professor and columnist, Max Lerner believed Machiavelli exposed the actual traits of leaders. Lerner maintains Machiavelli was truly a republican in accordance with the *Discourses* and interprets *The Prince* as a book of realism. Lerner was very much in line with the sentiments of T. S. Eliot who in 1929 declared, "[Machiavelli] merely told the truth about humanity. . . . His reputation is the history of the attempt of humanity to protect itself, by secreting a coating of falsehood, against any statement of the truth."<sup>79</sup> Lerner goes on to define *The Prince* as a magnificent pamphlet because it not only held significance in Machiavelli's day, but also continues to have an important meaning. It is a treatise that will always be applicable because many present-day leaders have characteristics that are common with those advocated in Machiavelli's *Prince*.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, Lerner views *The Prince* as an asset to everyday life because it is a "hard-bitten inquiry into how things actually get accomplished in a real world."<sup>81</sup>

Lerner also admires the *Discourses* and portrays the work as being more indicative of the true Machiavelli because of the effort that went into its completion. However, he is persistent in commending *The Prince* because it reveals the ruthless tendencies of human beings in a manner not previously seen. Lerner believes these

revelations are the reason why people “shudder” at the thought of Machiavelli’s name: “It is our recognition that the realities he described *are* realities; that men, whether in politics, in business or in private life, do *not* act according to their professions of virtue; [and] that leaders in every field seek power ruthlessly and hold on to it tenaciously. . . .”<sup>82</sup> He ventures further into the fray by arguing that Machiavelli’s name breeds such a negative connotation simply because he has uncovered so many of the world’s problems.<sup>83</sup> In some cases leaders are eager to increase their power in every way possible and see no limitations. Machiavelli had a thorough understanding that this was the typical behavior of leaders and that they were compelled to act in this fashion during his time and also in future generations.

There is also the controversial interpretation that Machiavelli did not mean a word he wrote in *The Prince*. The Italian international law scholar Alberico Gentili first raised the proposal of *The Prince* as a satire in 1585 when he wrote *De legationibus libri tres*.<sup>84</sup> Gentili states Machiavelli was “a strong supporter and enthusiast for democracy. . . . Therefore he did not help the tyrant; . . . [because] while appearing to instruct the prince he was actually educating the people.”<sup>85</sup> His interpretation received vigorous support from Spinoza and Rousseau<sup>86</sup> and from two articles in the *Journal étranger*, written in 1760 and 1761.<sup>87</sup> Rousseau gives Machiavelli adoring praise in his *Social Contract*: “While appearing to instruct kings he has done much to educate people. Machiavelli’s *Prince* is the book of republicans.”<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the Italian poet Vittorio Alfieri picked up where Spinoza and Rousseau left off, as he wrote of “the divine genius of our Machiavelli” in his 1796 work, *Del principe e delle lettere*.<sup>89</sup> Although the interpretation of *The Prince* as a satire sprouted many new thoughts, it has often been shunned as being

too cynical. Nonetheless, it was once again brought to the forefront in the twentieth century in a well-recognized article written by historian Garrett Mattingly in 1958, “Machiavelli’s *Prince*: Political Science or Political Satire?”

Mattingly famously portrayed *The Prince* as a “savage satire” and defended his argument by providing several examples of Machiavelli’s life, along with his controversial portrayal of the unsuccessful Cesare Borgia as the model prince.<sup>90</sup> He cynically looks upon the suggestion that Machiavelli seriously wrote a how-to book for tyrants. Instead, Mattingly reiterates Machiavelli’s struggles for liberty and citizen participation. He asks why Machiavelli portrays the failed Borgia as the ideal leader. In addition, Mattingly uses the well-worn example of the *Discourses* as the true embodiment of Machiavelli’s ethos. Mattingly then states that *The Prince* would have been a negation of everything Machiavelli ever wrote and stood for in his life. He believes it made “excellent sense” to view *The Prince* as a satire because it is the only way to understand why Borgia was selected as the model prince. Moreover, a satire would explain why Machiavelli’s friends did not chastise him for authoring *The Prince*. Lastly, this interpretation clears up many ambiguities that arise in the case of a known republican advocating authoritarianism.<sup>91</sup>

While Mattingly initially set forth the idea of political satire, he had a change of heart before his death. In 1961 Mattingly reversed his opinion of *The Prince* when he noted: “. . . of course, the proposal that *The Prince* was conceived as a satire is the kind of anachronism which only the eighteenth century could have perpetrated. . . . [Machiavelli] would have failed completely to understand the proposition that *The Prince* was a satire.”<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, Hans Baron claims Mattingly told him before his death

“that the theory of a satirical meaning of *The Prince* cannot be maintained.”<sup>93</sup> Although Mattingly originally interpreted *The Prince* as a satire, his change of opinion truly epitomizes the essence of the continuous debate over the understanding of Machiavelli’s *Prince*. Mattingly explicitly exposes the controversy because he displays the difficulty in coming to a solid conclusion of what Machiavelli’s actual motives were in writing *The Prince*.

In addition to the several interpretations that have been offered, it is necessary to present a contemporary evaluation in attempting to overcome the difficulty of Machiavelli. Harvey Mansfield has written extensively on Machiavelli and is considered a top modern Machiavelli scholar. In his introduction to the *Discourses* he and co-author Nathan Tarcov pay close attention to the connection that has been made between the *Discourses* and *The Prince*. Most historians have referred to the *Discourses* as the book for republicans and *The Prince* as a guide for tyrants, but Mansfield chooses to bind the two together in order to define Machiavelli as a republican. He emphasizes Machiavelli’s admiration of the Romans and points out that the Roman republic is presented as a model for princes in *The Prince*. Mansfield believes Machiavelli was a proponent of a democratic form of government who justifies *The Prince* by stressing that authoritarianism may be necessary to uphold a powerful state. He goes on to argue that Machiavelli meant for *The Prince* and *Discourses* to go hand in hand because sometimes republics require dictators to keep order and dictators need republics to sustain their power. In short, Mansfield concludes that Machiavelli believed that in order to build a strong republic it was necessary to implement the methods he sets forth in *The Prince* and

alternatively in order to prevent tyrannical rule it was necessary to follow the *Discourses*.<sup>94</sup>

The controversy over Machiavelli's works is the reason he has lived on for nearly five hundred years. Scholars have attacked the problem of Machiavelli from a multitude of angles but still remain perplexed by his enigma. The study of Machiavelli's works has almost become an intellectual game where historians offer their own interpretation and then pick apart the analysis of their colleagues. There are many facets of Machiavelli's life and works that can be debated, but his mystique culminates into whether he was an adherent of liberty or a supporter of despotism. Hence, the question of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* comes to the forefront.

When attempting to determine the principal work of Machiavelli, one must first look at the dating of *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. The dating of the two works is extremely controversial and a large piece of the Machiavelli puzzle. Many have asked why Machiavelli wrote two divergent books. The dilemma is especially problematic because the two books were apparently written at the same time. In fact, *The Prince* refers to the *Discourses* and likewise the *Discourses* refers to *The Prince*. One interpretation that has been suggested is that Machiavelli began writing the *Discourses* early in 1513, finishing the first eighteen chapters of book one. He then stopped to begin work on *The Prince* in July 1513 and impulsively completed it by December. According to this interpretation Machiavelli then recommenced work on the *Discourses* in 1515.<sup>95</sup> However, there are many more interpretations that have been considered, particularly in regard to the infamous last chapter, which some students of Machiavelli have argued was added well after *The Prince* was written.

The last chapter has served as the most impenetrable piece of Machiavelli's *Prince*. Whitfield asks if Machiavelli "really [meant] the last chapter of *The Prince*, or did he gum it on afterwards, to bamboozle the Medici and mystify the public for four centuries?"<sup>96</sup> Whether or not Machiavelli intended to mystify the public over the next four centuries, he has indeed done so because of the many ambiguities surrounding the last chapter. The first twenty-five chapters of the book deal with the cruel matter-of-factness of leadership, while the last chapter is a direct plea to the Medici to rid Italy of its oppressors.<sup>97</sup> Hans Baron claims that chapter twenty-six must have been written approximately thirteen to twenty months after *The Prince* was originally completed.<sup>98</sup> In 1514 Machiavelli had removed himself from political affairs. Additionally, as of September 1515 the situation in Italy would have been untimely to write chapter twenty-six because of the declining possibility of freeing Italy from foreigners.<sup>99</sup> Baron straightforwardly expresses the incongruity of the events: "Surely, the twenty-sixth chapter must have been written in advance of the changes in the peninsula that began in September 1515."<sup>100</sup> In fact, the Italian scholar Mario Martelli believes it was written as late as 1518.<sup>101</sup> Nonetheless, chapter twenty-six was almost certainly added to *The Prince* after the initial completion of the treatise, which leads to the transfixing question of the dating of the *Discourses*.

It has generally been assumed that the *Discourses* was composed from 1513 to 1517, with some arguing it was completed in 1519. The starting year is believed to have been 1513 because in chapter two of *The Prince* Machiavelli alludes to having already discussed republics somewhere else. It has been concluded that this reference was to the *Discourses*. The ending date of the *Discourses* could not have been any later than 1519

because Emperor Maximilian and the Florentine republican Cosimo Rucellai were mentioned as being alive and both died in 1519. Also, there are many important references in the *Discourses* to events that occurred in 1517, indicating that its composition definitely stretched over a lengthy period of time.<sup>102</sup>

In 1515 Machiavelli began conversing with friends about republics in the famed Rucellai Gardens meetings, which were led by Cosimo Rucellai. Filippo de' Nerli, a historian and friend of Machiavelli's, stated that the meetings were critical in motivating Machiavelli to write the *Discourses*: "There they trained themselves, through the reading of classical works, and the lessons of history, and on the basis of these conversations, and upon the demand of his friends, Machiavelli composed his famous book the *Discorsi on Livy*."<sup>103</sup> Machiavelli did not participate in these meetings prior to 1515; therefore, a great deal of the *Discourses* was written after that year. Hence, the allusion to another work on republics in *The Prince* could not have been referring to what he wrote following the Rucellai Gardens meetings.<sup>104</sup> One historian has suggested Machiavelli had been writing a treatise on republics while he was working on *The Prince*. He then began writing the *Discourses* after attending the Rucellai Gardens meetings and used the manuscript on republics for the final version to provide a "fuller introduction."<sup>105</sup>

However, there is a more plausible theory that has been suggested by Baron. Baron insists that *The Prince* was written in 1513 and that Machiavelli began writing the *Discourses* no earlier than 1515. He argues that the reference to republics in *The Prince* was added after 1515, which is a clear deviation from the aforementioned dating of the works.<sup>106</sup> Baron's theory is more in line with a republican Machiavelli because it argues that he never interrupted the *Discourses* to work on *The Prince*. In essence, Machiavelli

capriciously wrote *The Prince* on a five-month writing spree when he was undergoing immense psychological duress due to the overthrow of the Republic, his dismissal as secretary, and painful experience of torture. The *Discourses*, on the other hand, was a work in progress that probably stretched over four years, which is evidence of how fervent Machiavelli was in promoting a republican form of government. In the end, the dating of the *Discourses* is merely speculation because early chapters refer to later chapters and the later chapters refer to earlier ones.

Machiavelli's works covered both authoritarianism and popular rule because he delighted in letting everyone know that he was a connoisseur of politics. He was obsessed with politics and could not help but write or talk with his friends on the subject, as he wrote to his friend Francesco Vettori: "I have to talk about politics."<sup>107</sup> It did not matter to Machiavelli if he was talking to republicans or dictators because he felt compelled to offer his opinion. Politics was a game to him and he was intent on mastering it from all angles.<sup>108</sup> His fixation even went beyond reality as he described a typical day on his estate in his most famous letter to Vettori on December 10, 1513:

When evening comes, I return home and enter my study; on the threshold I take off my workday clothes, covered with mud and dirt, and put on the garments of court and palace. Fitted out appropriately, I step inside the venerable courts of the ancients, where, solicitously received by them, I nourish myself on that food that *alone* is mine and for which I was born; where I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about the motives for their actions, and they, out of their human kindness, answer me. And for four hours at a time I feel no boredom, I forget all my troubles, I do not dread poverty, and I am not terrified by death. I absorb myself into them completely. And because Dante says that no one understands anything unless he retains what he has understood, I have jotted down what I have profited from in their conversation and composed a short study, *De principatibus*, in which I delve as deeply as I can into the ideas concerning this topic, discussing the definition of a principedom, the categories of principedoms, how they are acquired, how they are retained, and why they are lost.<sup>109</sup>



Machiavelli's fascination with politics was so extreme that he preferred being in hell with the great thinkers as to being in heaven with ordinary people. He had a dream that he could spend eternity with the renowned historians and philosophers of antiquity, such as Plato, Plutarch, and Tacitus. Machiavelli envisioned discussing politics with these brilliant men rather than suffering the tedium of heaven.<sup>110</sup>

The ancients had influenced Machiavelli ever since he was a young child and greatly contributed to his republican beliefs. Machiavelli's father went to great lengths to make sure he had access to the great authors. Bernardo rented, borrowed, and bartered for books written by these men. In one case Bernardo agreed to the monotonous nine-month task of collecting an index of place-names for the Florentine publisher Niccolò della Magna in order to get Livy's *History of Rome*. As a result, Machiavelli was able to read and meticulously study the formation of Rome's potent republic, as well as its political and military prowess.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, he was taught by the great Florentine humanists of the late fifteenth century, Paolo da Ronciglione and Mercello Adriani.<sup>112</sup> Machiavelli's education coalesced with the strong republican beliefs of his family and helped embed the characteristics of liberty. His genius was budding and his advocacy of a republican form of government was beginning to materialize.

Machiavelli was so enveloped in history and politics that he believed it was possible to solve any problem by simply referring to the ancients.<sup>113</sup> He relied heavily on antiquity, especially in the composition of the *Discourses*. In fact, Machiavelli was almost apologetic whenever he used a contemporary example because he was determined to draw on the lessons of antiquity in order to create a masterful political treatise.<sup>114</sup> Even in *The Prince* there is mention of the importance of emulating the ancients: "I point to

the greatest of men as examples to follow. For men almost always walk along the beaten path, and what they do is almost always an imitation of what others have done before.”<sup>115</sup>

However, the method of applying the ancients was much more evident in the *Discourses*:<sup>116</sup> “Prudent men often say, neither casually nor groundlessly, that anyone wishing to see what is to come should examine what has been, for all the affairs of the world in every age have had their counterparts in ancient times.”<sup>117</sup>

Machiavelli is adamant in stressing that history will repeat itself and that rulers must heed to the best examples of the past.<sup>118</sup> He understood that in writing the *Discourses* he was “[entering] a path which [had] not yet been taken by anyone,” and that it was going to be a difficult task, but he remained dedicated because he hoped leaders would consider his advice.<sup>119</sup> Also, he acknowledged that if he failed, he hoped someone else could learn from his failure and write a treatise that would sufficiently establish his objectives: “. . . although this undertaking is difficult, nevertheless, aided by those who have encouraged me to shoulder this burden, I believe I can carry it in such a manner that only a short distance will remain for another to bring it to the destined goal.”<sup>120</sup> His heart was clearly vested in the spirit of liberty. He was intent on contributing to a republican work through the use of antiquity and yearned for the *Discourses* to have an inspiring influence on the conduct of leaders.

The republican ethos of politics had been in Machiavelli’s bloodlines for over two centuries and was successfully passed down to him.<sup>121</sup> Busini, an anti-Medici republican, who wavered on his interpretation of Machiavelli, wrote in the middle of the sixteenth century that he “was a most extraordinary lover of liberty.”<sup>122</sup> The Machiavelli family had delivered twelve gonfalonieri and fifty-four priors to the Florentine government over

the years and they were devoted to preserving liberty. For example, Machiavelli's great-grandfather Girolamo was imprisoned, tortured, exiled, and eventually put to death in the defense of freedom.<sup>123</sup>

Machiavelli followed in the footsteps of his family members when he became a passionate Florentine diplomat for the Republic in 1498. He may not have exerted too much power, but his diplomatic responsibilities were very important. One of the most important phases of his career was in his dealings with Cesare Borgia, who turned out to be the hero of *The Prince*. Machiavelli closely observed Borgia and attributed many of the methods offered in *The Prince* to him.<sup>124</sup> Borgia is given enormous praise and admiration in chapter seven of *The Prince*. Machiavelli portrays him as the model for princes because of his ruthlessness that supposedly helps establish a powerful state. However, because of his failure Borgia was a controversial example, but Machiavelli makes sure to excuse him on the grounds of bad luck. His handling of Borgia serves as a mystery because it does not seem logical that a person with a republican background would glorify such a cruel autocrat. Earlier references to Borgia in Machiavelli's writings actually make more sense.

Machiavelli tore apart Borgia in his historical poem *Decennali* in 1504, thus, contradicting the heroic depiction of Borgia in chapter seven of *The Prince*. Also, Machiavelli had written disapprovingly of Borgia in his letters throughout his travels. He could not have possibly made such a drastic change in his thoughts when he wrote *The Prince* in 1513.<sup>125</sup> Hence, *The Prince* was possibly written as a result of the grief Machiavelli had recently endured with his dismissal and torture and because of an unyielding desire to regain a position in the Florentine government. Indeed, he spent the

last fourteen years of his life trying to salvage his political involvement. Machiavelli could not accept being out of office and felt like a fenced-in animal on his San Casciano estate.<sup>126</sup> Guglielmo Ferrero put it rather candidly when he wrote, “*The Prince* was the supreme humiliation of a chained Titan, a mendicant prophet. We feel throughout its tormented pages the anguish of a frightful mortification.”<sup>127</sup> Upon this suggestion, it is clear that *The Prince* should not be considered Machiavelli’s primary work.

If Machiavelli had to determine his most important works, he would not have included *The Prince*. Machiavelli was simply not what his sixteenth-century enemies made him out to be. He was a devoted republican and, as Mattingly states, he was the “least Machiavellian . . . among his contemporaries.”<sup>128</sup> In fact, Machiavelli probably only deviated from his strong republican beliefs for a “momentary aberration” in the months he wrote *The Prince*. These five months were most likely the only time Machiavelli could ever be referred to as Machiavellian.<sup>129</sup> He believed that republics were the most dependable forms of government and openly referred to the examples of Rome and Athens as being ideal models.<sup>130</sup> His meetings in the Rucellai Gardens are another clear indication that Machiavelli’s loyalties were with a republican type of government. His true sentiments are unmistakably portrayed in the *Discourses* when he proclaims that citizen participation is always better than dictatorial rule.<sup>131</sup> Moreover, he asserts that “. . . a republic is of longer duration and has a much better fortune than a principality, for a republic, by virtue of its diverse citizenry, can better accommodate itself to the changeability of conditions than can a prince.”<sup>132</sup>

Machiavelli’s preference for citizen participation over autocracy is plainly evidenced in the dedicatory letter of the *Discourses*. The book was dedicated to Zanobi

Buondelmonti and Rucellai, two of Machiavelli's good republican friends from the Rucellai Gardens meetings who were both key motivators in his undertaking of the *Discourses*. In his dedication Machiavelli wrote that the *Discourses* was the best gift he could possibly offer them and nothing more could be expected. Machiavelli had poured his heart into the *Discourses* and it was undoubtedly his most passionate work: “. . . I have expressed all I know and all that I have learned from long experience and continuous study of worldly affairs.”<sup>133</sup> Machiavelli was very proud of its completion and looked upon it as his main work. In many respects, the *Discourses* was his way of lessening the effect of *The Prince*.

Machiavelli takes great pride in dedicating the *Discourses* to Buondelmonti and Rucellai. In fact, he deviated from the ordinary process of dedicating works to princes. In so doing he clearly undermines *The Prince* because it is dedicated to Lorenzo, the soon-to-be ruler of Florence. Machiavelli accuses those who dedicate their works to rulers as being out of touch with reality: “. . . those who write and always address their works to some prince [are] blinded by ambition and by avarice, [and] praise him for all his virtuous qualities when they ought to be blaming him for all his bad qualities.”<sup>134</sup> Machiavelli was effectively discrediting his whole dedicatory letter to Lorenzo, which was of the utmost reverence. This is staggering evidence that he had a superior view of the *Discourses*. Moreover, it can be legitimately interpreted that the *Discourses* was a refutation of what he advised in *The Prince* because he repudiates the intentions of *The Prince* by denouncing his dedication to Lorenzo.

Machiavelli goes on to praise Buondelmonti and Rucellai by saying he chose to honor them due to their exceptional character and because they “deserve to be

princes.”<sup>135</sup> His criticism of those who dedicate works to princes is not only an attack on others, but also on himself, thus, destroying the integrity of *The Prince*. Buondelmonti and Rucellai were both known republicans and primary leaders of the Rucellai Gardens meetings. It is absolutely astonishing that the author of *The Prince* deemed that these two men were deserving of princedom. These thoughts are obvious indications that Machiavelli was a proponent of a republican government where leaders who promoted liberty would hold power. He believed that men like Buondelmonti and Rucellai would serve as the best leaders because they were innately “generous,” unlike dictators who are merely “potentially generous.”<sup>136</sup> In essence, Machiavelli could not have set forth a more republican outlook in his dedication.

Machiavelli’s *History of Florence* is another sign as to where his true beliefs lay. He championed Michele di Lando for his role in the Ciompi revolt of 1378, which was a stark contrast from Leonardo Bruni’s *History of the Florentine people* that was written in the 1420s. Michele came from the lowest class, but had served in the army and was a leader among the wool workers. He led an uprising of wool workers and small artisans and, according to scholar Mark Phillips, Michele serves as “the heart” of Machiavelli’s *History of Florence*. Machiavelli was a big proponent of Michele and frowned upon Bruni because of his emphasis on foreign affairs while overlooking social conflict.<sup>137</sup> When the Ciompi revolt took place, Machiavelli described Michele as: “[accepting] the lordship, and because he was a sagacious and prudent man who owed more to nature than to fortune, he resolved to quiet the city and stop the tumults.”<sup>138</sup> Machiavelli said Michele exclaimed to a gathered crowd that Florence was in the people’s hands and it was their decision to determine who their leader would be.<sup>139</sup>

Additional praise is given to Michele in Machiavelli's *History of Florence* because he placed such great emphasis on the interests of the populace. Michele is depicted as being unselfish and having great respect for his state. Machiavelli claims that Michele should be exalted because he had the opportunity to make himself a tyrant but chose to be the peacemaker of the Florentines:<sup>140</sup> "In spirit, prudence, and goodness [Michele] surpassed any citizen of his time, and he deserves to be numbered among the few who have benefited their fatherland."<sup>141</sup> Machiavelli's promotion of Michele is yet another example of his penchant for autonomy. However, it must be noted that Machiavelli adds fictional information in his description of Michele in order to portray him under a more favorable republican light. In essence, Machiavelli excessively venerates Michele because of his desire to promote citizen participation. Michele had been recognized with limitations in Bruni's *History*, but Machiavelli made him a focal point.<sup>142</sup> There is an explicit distinction between Bruni's recollection of events and Machiavelli's descriptions. For example, in the gruesome revolt-driven execution of the Florentine authority figure, Ser Nuto, Machiavelli accentuates the importance of the whole episode.<sup>143</sup> The making of Michele into a hero is a lucid example that Machiavelli was a proponent of republican government, rather than authoritarianism, but also indicates his persuasive use of language.

Machiavelli solidly grasped how to effectively string words together. His rhetorical gift was the reason Francesco Guicciardini believed Machiavelli's advocacy of tyranny in *The Prince* was simply part of his plan to write an engaging book.<sup>144</sup> In many ways, Machiavelli revolutionized the art of writing through his witty approach. He is also known to have shunned prior historians for lacking the ability to entertain a reader.

The main goal of his works often seemed to be in beguiling readers and making sure not to bore them, even if he compromised historical accuracy.<sup>145</sup>

Machiavelli's letters to friends are a prime example of his objective to entertain his readers. He had an innate gift where he could magnificently use words to captivate his audience. Spinoza, in fact, viewed Machiavelli as one of the shrewdest writers he had ever read.<sup>146</sup> Machiavelli's letters were simply another indication of his wit. During his time it was likely that letters would not remain private so he conceivably expected others to read his correspondence.<sup>147</sup> Machiavelli, never too modest, perhaps thrived on having an audience because it was an opportunity to enchant more people. The letter to his friend Luigi Guicciardini in 1509 is a perfect illustration of embellishing a story to engulf the reader. He describes an encounter during one of his travels where he was "hopelessly horny," and could not help himself from having sex with an atrocious woman:

[She] was so ugly. . . . the crown of her head was bald . . . she had a fiery scar that made her seem as if she had been branded at the marketplace; at the end of each eyebrow toward her eyes there was a nosegay of nits; one eye looked up, the other down – and one was larger than the other; her tear ducts were full of rheum and she had no eyelashes. She had a turned-up nose stuck low down on her head and one of her nostrils was sliced open and full of snot. Her mouth . . . was twisted to one side, and from that side drool was oozing, because, since she was toothless, she could not hold back her saliva. Her upper lip sported a longish but skimpy moustache. . . . [and] she stuttered. As soon as she opened her mouth, she exuded such a stench on her breath that . . . [I] felt assaulted . . . and my stomach became so indignant that it was unable to tolerate this outrage; it started to rebel, . . . so that I threw up all over her. Having thus repaid her in kind, I departed. . . . I'll be damned if I think I shall get horny again.<sup>148</sup>

This narrative is so much exaggerated that it is not believable, but it undoubtedly earned laughter from Guicciardini. The story is enriched with hyperbole to an extent that is clearly out of a desire to engross the reader. Machiavelli was exceptionally gifted with his pen and enjoyed sprucing up stories like this encounter in a way that would leave his friends in hysterics because he relished in being known as a comedian. He was known



throughout Florence as a prankster and his friends nicknamed him “il Machia,” which signified his clever and audacious personality.<sup>149</sup>

It is narrative such as the aforementioned letter that leaves students of Machiavelli in constant contemplation when attempting to determine the type of man he was. He was a man of innumerable facets and capabilities, but most of all the father of politics. His works have been commented on by the most distinguished thinkers the world has known since the sixteenth century and his thought has been scrutinized globally.<sup>150</sup> It is his persona, however, that will continue to be a spellbinding study. He is a bundle of confusion that will most likely never be untangled. Machiavelli left behind letters that portrayed him as a comedian, trickster, caring father, political fanatic, and also as an insecure man. He perfectly summed up the magnitude of his correspondences in a letter to Vettori:

Anyone who might see our letters, honorable *compare*, and see their variety, would be greatly astonished, because at first it would seem that we were serious men completely directed toward weighty matters and that no thought could cascade through our heads that did not have within it probity and magnitude. But later, upon turning the page, it would seem to the reader that we – still the very same selves – were petty, fickle, lascivious, and were directed toward chimerical matters. If to some this behavior seems contemptible, to me it seems laudable because we are imitating nature, which is changeable; whoever imitates nature cannot be censured.<sup>151</sup>

This letter offers some insight as to why Machiavelli’s opinions on politics ranged from one end of the spectrum to the other. Perhaps he was acting on a whim when he wrote *The Prince*. After all, it was a stark deviation from the premise of his life. On the other hand, some may say the *Discourses* were purely a Machiavellian move in order to avoid a cruel reputation. Indeed, Machiavelli did warn that he may have deceived himself in parts of the *Discourses*.<sup>152</sup> Fundamentally, much that Machiavelli wrote can be challenged somewhere else in his writings.

Machiavelli noticeably left a vast scope for debate. His interpretation will always be a work in progress, but some have questioned if historians should even bother with the undertaking. Jeffrey Pulver, for example, believes that it is a pointless endeavor. Pulver asks why *The Prince* has aroused so much reaction and why it has become so notorious. He states that *The Prince* does not qualify for either detestation or applause: “There is nothing in the work that calls for interpretation; the plain text contains all that is necessary for a perfect understanding of its meaning; Machiavelli said exactly what he meant to say, and meant just what he said.”<sup>153</sup> Pulver audaciously utters that there is “nothing” in *The Prince* that rationalizes the vast observation it has received. In essence, he insists that the last five centuries of interpretation have been meaningless, which directly attacks scholars and historians who have spent careers trying to tackle the problem of Machiavelli.<sup>154</sup>

It has become quite obvious that studying Machiavelli is an extremely challenging and engaging task. There has been an enormous amount of scholarly and not so scholarly work done over nearly five hundred years, but historians are still at odds in determining the essence of Machiavelli. Who was he and what were his true beliefs? The answers to these questions will forever present problems and may never be definitively answered. Scholars remain transfixed by the incongruity of *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. It is almost assured that he was a republican because of the indisputable facts of his life, but this leaves immense contestability over why he wrote *The Prince*. Scholars must ask themselves if the question of Machiavelli can ever be answered. He made sure to create this problem by never truly revealing himself and seemingly making an effort to remain a mystery, as he wrote to Francesco Guicciardini only six years before he died: “As for the

lies of these citizens of Carpi, I can beat all of them out, because it has been a while since I have become a doctor of this art . . . ; so, for some time now I have never said what I believe or never believed what I said; and if indeed I do sometimes tell the truth, I hide it behind so many lies that it is hard to find.”<sup>155</sup> These words perpetually etched in stone the complex predicament of Machiavelli and truly epitomize the enduring enigma that he presents. Machiavelli may pose an eternal quandary but he has been as gripping a study as any individual in history, and therefore, his epitaph which states, “No praise can equal so great a name,” is more than fitting.<sup>156</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Renzo Sereno, "A Falsification by Machiavelli," *Renaissance News* 12 (1959): 166.
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3. J. H. Whitfield, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1947), 106.
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