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REappraisals

Machiavelli's *Prince*: Political Science or Political Satire?

GARRETT MATTINGLY

The reputation of Niccolò Machiavelli rests on a curious paradox, a paradox so conspicuous and so familiar that we have almost entirely forgotten it. After the collapse of the Florentine republic, which he had served faithfully for fourteen years, Machiavelli relieved the tedium of exile and idleness by taking up his pen. He wrote poems—verse, at least—and tales and plays, including one comedy which is a classic. But mostly he wrote about politics. He was mad about politics. He says in one of his letters that he had to talk about it; he could talk of nothing else. So, in short discourses and political fables, in a history of Florence, in a treatise on the art of war and, notably, in a series of discourses, nominally on the first ten books of Livy, he strove to pass on to his fellow countrymen the fruits of his experience, his reading and his meditation. These are solid works, earnest and thoughtful, often original and provocative. Scholars who have read them usually speak of them with great respect. But not many people ever look at them, and most of those who do have had their curiosity aroused by the one little book which everyone knows: *The Prince*.

The Prince is scarcely more than a pamphlet, a very minor fraction of its author's work, but it overshadows all the rest. Probably no book about politics was ever read more widely. Certainly none has been

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better known to people who have never read it. Everyone knows that Machiavelli recommended hypocrisy and ingratitude, meanness, cruelty and treachery as the traits proper to princes. Everyone recognizes "Machiavellian" as an adjective for political conduct that combines diabolical cunning with a ruthless disregard for moral standards. But *The Prince* obsesses historians and political philosophers who know a good deal more about it than that. Its burning prose still casts a lurid glow over the whole landscape of Renaissance Italy: historians who ought to know better call the whole period "the age of Machiavelli" and describe it as if it were chiefly characterized by the kind of behavior on which *The Prince* dwells; and philosophers, undertaking to describe Machiavelli's political thought, after carefully apprising their readers of the greater weight and complexity of the *Discorsi* and his other writings, end up by choosing half or more of their quotations from one slender volume. But *The Prince* is a short book, and most people remember short books better than long ones. Moreover, *The Prince* is easily Machiavelli's best prose. Its sentences are crisp and pointed, free from the parenthetical explanations and qualifying clauses that punctuate and clog his other political writings. Its prose combines verve and bite with a glittering, deadly polish, like the sword-play of a champion fencer. It uses apt, suggestive images, symbols packed with overtones. For instance: A prince should behave sometimes like a man, sometimes like a beast, and among beasts he should combine the traits of the lion and the fox. It is studded with epigrams like "A man will forget the death of his father sooner than

the loss of his patrimony," epigrams which all seem to come out of some sort of philosophical Grand Guignol and, like the savage ironies of Swift's *Modest Proposal*, are rendered the more spine chilling by the matter-of-fact tone in which they are uttered. And this is where the paradox comes in. Although the method and most of the assumptions of *The Prince* are so much of a piece with Machiavelli's thought that the book could not have been written by anyone else, yet in certain important respects, including some of the most shocking of the epigrams, *The Prince* contradicts everything else Machiavelli ever wrote and everything we know about his life. And everyone who has studied the subject at all has always known this.

The history of Machiavelli's literary reputation underlines the paradox. His other political works were received on publication much as they have been received ever since, respectfully but without undue excitement. However, when *The Prince* was published in 1532, five years after its author's death, it achieved an enormous *succès de scandale*. As word of its appalling doctrines spread, all Europe hummed with a chorus of disapproval. For two centuries, to call one's political opponent a disciple of Machiavelli was about the worst thing one could say of him. The cynical immorality of the maxims in *The Prince* horrified even so unscrupulous a young rascal as Frederick the Great of Prussia—or at least he said they did.

Then, as the modern spirit of nationalism dawned, the image of Old Nick began to change. Appropriately enough, it was Herder who first declared that *The Prince* was neither a satire nor an iniquitous guide for political criminals, but an objective study of sixteenth-century Italian politics, offered by a patriot as a service to his country. People began to point out that if Machiavelli recommended behavior of which one could not really approve, he did it for the sake of a united Italy. Some of his councils were shocking, truly, but only bitter, dangerous medicines would suffice for his corrupt age. So, from being a sort of Byronic diabolist, Machiavelli gradually

became a hero, and then a saint of the Italian Risorgimento. Villari's solid volumes proving that Machiavelli was a Florentine patriot, and perhaps even an Italian one, are the chief monument to this nineteenth-century hero-image.

In the twentieth century the image changed again, partly, perhaps, because of difficulties in the nationalist explanation, but mostly, I suspect, because of a change in the prevailing climate of opinion. Kosuth and Garibaldi were being shouldered aside by Darwin and Pasteur, and from being a patriot whose exaggerations were forgivable because of his devotion to torn and trampled Italy, Machiavelli became the passionless, objective scientist, the perfect mirror and analyst of his time. Machiavelli's "objectivity" and "realism" had been praised in the nineteenth century and even earlier by a few people, mostly by philosophers like Herder and Fichte and Hegel, who did not bother to check up on him; but it was Sir Frederick Pollock who, about 1910, first conferred on Machiavelli the proud title of "scientist." As far as I know he has held it to this day, the dissenters being mainly belated exponents of the nationalist-patriot school. In his *Myth of the State* Ernst Cassirer enshrined the current image in an eloquent passage describing Machiavelli watching political behavior and drawing conclusions from it with the passionless detachment of a chemist in a laboratory.

There is a certain superficial plausibility about this view. Since so much of *The Prince* does harmonize with the rest of Machiavelli's thought, and since it is so quotable, the temptation to explain away the discords is hard to resist. And often Machiavelli did say that he wanted to show things as they really are instead of as they ought to be, and often he did try to do so, not only in his state papers, where dispassionate, objective reporting was expected of him, but also in the *Discorsi* and other works in which the literary tradition was different. He tried; he did not always succeed. To insist that republics are always juster, wiser and more trustworthy than princes, as Machiavelli frequently does in the *Discorsi*, seems a judgment as much

charged with subjective emotion as its reverse would be. And, in the year 1520, to dismiss firearms as unimportant in war seems slightly unrealistic even for a cloistered scholar, and rather more so for a man who had been more than a decade the secretary of war of an embattled republic. Yet usually he did try to be objective, and that is why *The Prince* is so serious a stumbling block. The notion that this little book was meant as a serious, scientific treatise on government contradicts everything we know about Machiavelli's life, about his writings, and about the history of his time.

In the first place, this proposition asks us to believe that Niccolò Machiavelli deliberately wrote a handbook meant to help a tyrant rule the once free people of Florence. The Machiavelli were an old Florentine family, noted for their devotion to the republic. In the two centuries before Niccolò was born they had given Florence twelve *gonfalonieri* and fifty-four priors. In the fifteenth century, Niccolò's great-grand-uncle Girolamo won himself a place in the hearts of the people by suffering imprisonment, torture, exile and death in defense of their liberty. Another Machiavelli, Francesco, was remembered for a public speech in which he said, "It is freedom that makes cities and their citizens great. This is well known. Tyranny makes only desolation. For tyrants must always fear good citizens and try to exterminate them." Nearly a century later, Niccolò made this assertion one of the central theses of his *Discorsi*, thus prolonging the family tradition in which he was brought up. We know more about his youth now than we did until a few years ago when the diary of Niccolò's father, Bernardo, was found and published. It is not unlike the diaries of many other of the pious, thrifty, hard-working, rather puritanical Florentine petty bourgeoisie who were the backbone of the city's greatness. Bernardo was almost poor and, in those days of Medici domination, without public honors. But he was proud of his family, a firm but affectionate father, anxious to bring up his son to good Latin letters and a devotion to republican princi-

ples. Poor as he was, Bernardo had a small library of classics, including, the diary shows, a Livy, which by the time Niccolò was seventeen had to be rebound. To his wife, Bartolomea de'Nelli, the authoress of a number of hymns, *laudi sacre*, Bernardo probably left their son's religious education, but he himself would have seen to it that Niccolò learned the history of his *patria*, how Florence was the citadel of freedom and the guardian of Italian liberty, and the share his own family once had in this glorious heritage.

In the 1470's it was still possible to believe that this heritage was not lost. The constitution of the city was still republican, and though the Medici enjoyed an influence that republicans like Bernardo might regard as sinister, and though the young Medici did not mask their power with the same care their grandfather had used, they were still in form and law just scions of the leading family of a free commonwealth. In fact, as the popular wrath against the Pazzi conspirators proved, most Florentines, particularly the *popolo minuto*, the "little people," still thought of the Medici as the guardians of their liberties both against foreign domination and against the selfish designs of the oligarchs. It was only slowly, in the 1480's, that most Florentines began to realize the attrition of their freedom. When Niccolò was twenty-five they rebelled, and Piero de Medici rode out of the city gates, never to return. Four years later Niccolò Machiavelli was appointed chancellor of the second chancery, and shortly thereafter secretary to the Ten of War. For the next fourteen years he served the Florentine republic with furious, dedicated zeal. He has left the proof of his devotion in the record of his activities and in the state papers in which he spun endless schemes for the defense and aggrandizement of the republic, and constantly preached the same to his superiors. One characteristic quotation is irresistible. The subject is an increase in the defense budget that Machiavelli's masters were reluctant to vote. He reminds them with mounting impatience that only strong states are respected by their

neighbors and that their neglect of military strength in the recent past has cost them dear, and he ends with anything but detached calm: "Other people learn from the perils of their neighbors, you will not even learn from your own, nor trust yourselves, nor recognize the time you are losing and have lost. I tell you fortune will not alter the sentence it has pronounced unless you alter your behavior. Heaven will not and cannot preserve those bent on their own ruin. But I cannot believe it will come to this, seeing that you are free Florentines and have your liberty in your own hands. In the end I believe you will have the same regard for your freedom that men always have who are born free and desire to live free."

Only a man who cared deeply for the independence of his city would use language like this to his employers. But Machiavelli gave an even more impressive proof of his disinterested patriotism. After fourteen years in high office, in a place where the opportunities for dipping into the public purse and into the pockets of his compatriots and of those foreigners he did business with were practically unlimited (among other duties he acted as paymaster-general of the army), Machiavelli retired from public life as poor as when he had entered it. Later he was to refer to this record with pride, but also with a kind of rueful astonishment; and, indeed, if this was not a unique feat in his day, it was a very rare one.

For fourteen years Machiavelli served the republic. Then, in 1512, the militia he had counted on so much ran like rabbits at the first sight of the Spanish veterans. There was the bloody sack of Prato, and the republic collapsed before his eyes. The Medici, Cardinal Giovanni and his brother Giuliano, came back behind the Spanish pikes, and while the new government was still unsettled there was a plot to murder them. Two young men named Capponi and Boscoli were arrested. One of them tried to get rid of a paper on which was a short list of names. They were the names of prominent republicans, some of whom

had already fled. One was that of Niccolò Machiavelli.

Machiavelli had not fled. Dismissed from office, he still lingered in Florence. He was arrested, imprisoned and interrogated under torture. Four turns of the rack were usually enough to break a man, body and spirit. Niccolò endured six, and well enough to congratulate himself afterward not just on his survival but on his courage. He admitted nothing, and since nothing could be proved against him, he was released with no further punishment than the loss of his offices, a ruinous fine, and exile to his tiny estate seven miles from the gates of Florence, there to eat his heart out in loneliness and boredom.

Machiavelli emerged from prison in mid-March, 1513. Most people believe that *The Prince* was finished by December. I suppose it is possible to imagine that a man who has seen his country enslaved, his life's work wrecked and his own career with it, and has, for good measure, been tortured within an inch of his life should thereupon go home and write a book intended to teach his enemies the proper way to maintain themselves, writing all the time, remember, with the passionless objectivity of a scientist in a laboratory. It must be possible to imagine such behavior, because Machiavelli scholars do imagine it and accept it without a visible tremor. But it is a little difficult for the ordinary mind to compass.

The difficulty is increased by the fact that this acceptance of tyranny seems to have been a passing phase. Throughout the rest of his life Machiavelli wrote as a republican and moved mainly in republican circles. In 1524 two of his closest friends and patrons, Zanobi Buondelmonti and the poet Luigi Alamanni, were involved in another conspiracy against the Medici and fled. Much later Machiavelli's name was connected with this conspiracy too. The accusation came too late to do him any harm, and nothing was proved. Of course it does not prove anything either that when the Medici were finally driven out again in 1527, Buondelmonti and Alamanni began

working at once to bring their old friend back to the service of the restored republic. But the facts do seem to indicate a singularly consistent life, except for one aberration.

The notion that *The Prince* is what it pretends to be, a scientific manual for tyrants, has to contend not only against Machiavelli's life but against his writings, as, of course, everyone who wants to use *The Prince* as a centerpiece in an exposition of Machiavelli's political thought has recognized. Ever since Herder, the standard explanation has been that in the corrupt conditions of sixteenth-century Italy only a prince could create a strong state capable of expansion. The trouble with this is that it was chiefly because they widened their boundaries that Machiavelli preferred republics. In the *Discorsi* he wrote, "We know by experience that states have never significantly increased either in territory or in riches except under a free government. The cause is not far to seek, since it is the well-being not of individuals but of the community which makes the state great, and without question this universal well-being is nowhere secured save in a republic. . . . Popular rule is always better than the rule of princes." This is not just a casual remark. It is the main theme of the *Discorsi* and the basic assumption of all but one of Machiavelli's writings, as it was the basic assumption of his political career.

There is another way in which *The Prince* is a puzzling anomaly. In practically everything else Machiavelli wrote, he displayed the sensitivity and tact of the developed literary temperament. He was delicately aware of the tastes and probable reactions of his public. No one could have written that magnificent satiric soliloquy of Fra Timotheo in *Mandragola*, for instance, who had not an instinctive feeling for the response of an audience. But the effect of the publication of *The Prince* on the first several generations of its readers in Italy (outside of Florence) and in the rest of Europe was shock. It horrified, repelled and fascinated like a Medusa's head. A large part of the shock was caused, of course, by the cynical immorality of some

of the proposals, but instead of appeasing revulsion and insinuating his new proposals as delicately as possible, Machiavelli seems to delight in intensifying the shock and deliberately employing devices to heighten it. Of these not the least effective is the way *The Prince* imitates, almost parodies, one of the best known and most respected literary forms of the three preceding centuries, the handbook of advice to princes. This literary type was enormously popular. Its exemplars ran into the hundreds of titles of which a few, like St. Thomas' *De Regno* and Erasmus' *Institutio principis christiani* are not quite unknown today. In some ways, Machiavelli's little treatise was just like all the other "Mirrors of Princes"; in other ways it was a diabolical burlesque of all of them, like a political Black Mass.

The shock was intensified again because Machiavelli deliberately addressed himself primarily to princes who have newly acquired their principalities and do not owe them either to inheritance or to the free choice of their countrymen. The short and ugly word for this kind of prince is "tyrant." Machiavelli never quite uses the word except in illustrations from classical antiquity, but he seems to delight in dancing all around it until even the dullest of his readers could not mistake his meaning. Opinions about the relative merits of republics and monarchies varied during the Renaissance, depending mainly upon where one lived, but about tyrants there was only one opinion. Cristoforo Landino, Lorenzo the Magnificent's teacher and client, stated the usual view in his commentary on Dante, written when Niccolò Machiavelli was a child. When he came to comment on Brutus and Cassius in the lowest circle of hell, Landino wrote: "Surely it was extraordinary cruelty to inflict such severe punishment on those who faced death to deliver their country from slavery, a deed for which, if they had been Christians, they would have merited the most honored seats in the highest heaven. If we consult the laws of any well-constituted republic, we shall find them to decree no greater reward to anyone than to the man who kills the

tyrant." So said the Italian Renaissance with almost unanimous voice. If Machiavelli's friends were meant to read the manuscript of *The Prince* and if they took it at face value—an objective study of how to be a successful tyrant offered as advice to a member of the species—they can hardly have failed to be deeply shocked. And if the manuscript was meant for the eye of young Giuliano de Medici alone, he can hardly have been pleased to find it blandly assumed that he was one of a class of whom his father's tutor had written that the highest duty of a good citizen was to kill them.

The literary fame of *The Prince* is due, precisely, to its shocking quality, so if the book was seriously meant as a scientific manual, it owes its literary reputation to an artistic blunder. And if it was meant for a Medici prince, it has at its core an even more inexplicable piece of tactlessness. For to the Medici prince, "to a new prince established by fortune and the arms of others," Machiavelli offers Cesare Borgia as a model. There was just enough truth to the suggestion that Giuliano de Medici owed his principate "to the arms of others"—after all, it was the Spanish troops who overthrew the republic as it was French troops who established Cesare in the Romagna—to be wounding. There was just enough cogency in the comparison between the duke of Valentinois, a pope's son, and the duke of Nemours, a pope's brother, to make it stick. These things merely heightened the affront. A Medici, of a family as old and as illustrious as any in Florence, a man whose great-grandfather, grandfather and father had each in turn been acknowledged the first citizen of the republic and who now aspired to no more than to carry on their tradition (or so he said) was being advised to emulate a foreigner, a Spaniard, a bastard, convicted, in the court of public opinion anyway, of fratricide, incest and a long role of abominable crimes, a man specially hated in Tuscany for treachery and extortion and for the gross misconduct of his troops on neutral Florentine soil, and a man, to boot, who as a prince had been a notorious and spectacular failure.

This almost forgotten fact lies at the heart of the mystery of *The Prince*. We remember what Machiavelli wrote about Cesare in his most famous work, and we forget what Cesare was. But in 1513 most Italians would not have forgotten the events of 1503, and unless we assume that Machiavelli himself had forgotten what he himself had reported ten or eleven years before, we can scarcely believe that his commendation of the Borgia was seriously meant. If we take *The Prince* as an objective, scientific description of political reality, we must face contradiction not only by what we know of Machiavelli's political career, of his usual opinions and of his literary skill, but also by the facts of history as reported by, among others, Machiavelli himself.

Let us take just a few instances, the crucial ones. Relying on assertions in Chapter Seven of *The Prince*, most historians in the past hundred years have written as if the Borgia had restored peace and order in the Romagna, unified its government and won the allegiance of its inhabitants. Part of the time this must have been going on, Machiavelli was an envoy in the duke's camp. Although he does warn the signory repeatedly that Valentino is a formidable ruffian, daring, unscrupulous and of unlimited ambition, he never mentions these statesmanlike achievements—nor do any of the other reports from observers in the area, Spanish, French, Venetian, Siennese; nor do any other contemporary sources. All the indications are quite contrary. The most probing recent study of Valentino's career, Gabriele Pepe's *La Politica dei Borgia*, sums the matter up by saying that the duke did nothing to end factional strife and anarchy in the Romagna; he merely superimposed the brutal rule of his Spanish captains on top of it.

We can make a concrete check on a related instance. After saying in Chapter Thirteen that the duke had used first French troops, then mercenaries under *condottieri* captains and then his own men, Machiavelli comments, "He was never esteemed more highly than when everyone saw that he was complete master of his own

forces." But in the *Legazione*, Machiavelli never once refers to the military capacity of the duke or praises the courage or discipline of his army. Instead, as late as December 14, 1502, he writes from Imola of the troops under Cesare's own command: "They have devoured everything here except the stones . . . here in the Romagna they are behaving just as they did in Tuscany last year [of their passage then, Landucci had noted in his diary that none of the foreign armies that had crossed Tuscany in the past seven years had behaved so abominably as these Italians under the papal banner] and they show no more discipline and no less confusion than they did then." There is no subsequent indication that Machiavelli ever changed his mind.

Nowhere is *The Prince* more at odds with the facts of history or with Machiavelli's own previous judgments than in the famous concluding passage of Chapter Seven on which any favorable opinion of Cesare's statecraft must be based. The passage in *The Prince* reads: "On the day Pope Julius II was elected, the Duke told me that he had thought of everything that might happen on the death of his father and provided for everything except that when his father died he himself would be at death's door. . . . only the shortness of the life of Alexander and his own sickness frustrated his designs. Therefore he who wants to make sure of a new principality . . . cannot find a better model than the actions of this man." Could Machiavelli have believed this in 1513? He certainly did not believe it in 1503. He did not even record then that Cesare ever said anything of the sort; and though it would not be unlike some of the duke's whimperings, he could not have said it on the day of Julius II's election, when he was boasting to everyone that the new pope would obey him. In any case, Machiavelli would have believed what, in *The Prince*, he said the duke said, as little as he believed the bluster that, in 1503, he actually reported. By November of 1503, nobody could have believed it. In fact, even in August, when Alexander VI died, at the age of seventy-two after a pa-

perity of eleven years (not such a short life and not such a short reign), most people in Rome, including all of the ambassadors whose reports survive and most of the cardinals with whom they had talked, felt sure Cesare was finished. He had always ridden on his father's shoulders, and he was hated, feared and despised even by most of the faction who had stood by the old pope. No one trusted him, and there was no one he could trust. No pope would dare support him, and without papal support his principate was built on quicksand. He had never, in fact, faced this eventual predicament, and he did not face it when it arose. It is true that he was ill in August with a bout of malaria, but not too ill to stall the election and then maneuver the choice of the old and ailing Pius III, thus delaying an unavoidable doom. Julius II was not elected until November. In all those months and even after the election, Italy was treated through the eyes of its ambassadors to the spectacle of the terrible Borgia duke writhing in an agony of indecision, now about to go to Genoa to raise money, now ready to start for an interview with the king of France, now on the point of leading his troops back to the Romagna, but in fact hovering about the curia, plucking the sleeves of cardinals and bowing and smiling to envoys he used to bully, sometimes swaggering through the streets with the powerful armed guard he felt he needed to protect him from the vengeance of the Orsini, sometimes shaking beneath bedclothes with what might have been fever and might have been funk. We catch a glimpse of him at midnight in the chamber of Guidobaldo de Montrefeltre, the duke of Urbino, who had been newly restored to his former estates by the loyalty of his subjects, and to his former rank of *gonfaloniere* of the Church by the new pope. There Cesare kneels on the floor, sobbing in pure terror, begging the old friend whom he had betrayed and robbed, with incredible meanness, not just of his duchy, but of his books and his antique medals, not to kill him, please not to kill him, to leave him at least his life, until Guidobaldo, beyond any feeling about this

curious monster, says he does not wish to kill him; he only wishes him to go away.

Shortly thereafter Cesare slinks off to Naples and imprisonment, followed by the scornful laughter of Italy. For nothing is more absurd than the great straw-stuffed giants of carnival, and when such a giant has for a season frightened all Italy, the laughter is that much the louder. Machiavelli was one of the ambassadors in Rome. He knew all this as well as anyone. One can read in his dispatches his growing impatience with the duke, his growing contempt for Cesare's wild talk, aimless shifts of plan, alternate blustering and whining. "The duke, who never kept faith with anyone," he wrote, "is now obliged to rely on the faith of others." And later, "The duke, who never showed mercy, now finds mercy his only hope." Later in his historical poem, *Decennali*, Machiavelli made his distaste for the Borgia clear enough. Did he really mean to propose him in 1513 as a model prince? Was he writing as a friend of tyrants or as a dispassionate scientific observer when he said he did?

There is, of course, an alternative view, never predominant and now hopelessly old-fashioned, but one that was once held by some quite respectable people. The earliest explicit statement of it I know comes from Alberico Gentili, an Italian who lectured on the civil law at Oxford in the reign of Elizabeth I. Speaking of his fellow countryman, Gentili wrote, in part: "He has been much calumniated and deserves our sympathy. He was, indeed, a praiser of democracy (*Democratiae laudator*) and its most zealous champion. Born, educated and honored with office in a republic, he was a supreme foe of tyrants. It was his purpose not to instruct tyrants but to reveal their secret machinations, stripping them bare before their suffering people. . . . he aimed to instruct [those] people under the pretext of instructing the prince, hoping that thus his teaching might be tolerated." Toward the end of the seventeenth century, Baruch Spinoza, without, I think, ever having read Gentili, expressed a similar opinion, and nearly a hundred years later Jean Jacques Rousseau con-

curred. In the course of those centuries before violent nationalism had blurred men's vision, enough writers must have identified *The Prince* as a satire so that Herder felt compelled to begin his defense by indignantly repudiating this view.

Perhaps nobody should be rash enough today to call *The Prince* a satire, not in the teeth of all the learned opinion to the contrary. But when one comes to think of it, what excellent sense the idea makes! However you define "satire"—and I understand that critics are still without a thoroughly satisfactory definition—it must include the intention to denounce, expose or deride someone or something, and it is to be distinguished from mere didactic condemnation and invective (when it can be distinguished at all) by the employment of such devices as irony, sarcasm and ridicule. It need not be provocative of laughter; I doubt whether many people ever laughed or even smiled at the adventures of Gulliver among the Yahoos. And though satire admits of, and in fact always employs, exaggeration and overemphasis, the author, to be effective, must not appear to be, and in fact need not be, conscious that this is so. When Dryden wrote, "The rest to some faint meaning make pretense / But Shadwell never deviates into sense," he may have been conscious of some overstatement, but he was conveying his considered criticism of Shadwell's poetry. And when Pope called "Lord Fanny" "this painted child of dirt that stinks and stings," the language may be violent, but who can doubt that this is how Pope felt? Indeed the satirist seems to put forth his greatest powers chiefly when goaded by anger, hatred and savage indignation. If Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* out of the fullness of these emotions rather than out of the dispassionate curiosity of the scientist or out of a base willingness to toady to the destroyers of his country's liberty, then one can understand why the sentences crack like a whip, why the words bite and burn like acid, and why the whole style has a density and impact unique among his writings.

To read *The Prince* as satire not only clears up puzzles and resolves contradic-

tions; it gives a new dimension and meaning to passages unremarkable before. Take the place in the dedication that runs "just as those who paint landscapes must seat themselves below in the plains to see the mountains, and high in the mountains to see the plains, so to understand the nature of the people one must be a prince, and to understand the nature of a prince, one must be one of the people." In the usual view, this is a mere rhetorical flourish, but the irony, once sought, is easy to discover, for Machiavelli, in fact, takes both positions. The people can only see the prince as, by nature and necessity, false, cruel, mean and hypocritical. The prince, from his lofty but precarious perch, dare not see the people as other than they are described in Chapter Seventeen: "ungrateful, fickle, treacherous, cowardly and greedy. As long as you succeed they are yours entirely. They will offer you their blood, property, lives and children when you do not need them. When you do need them, they will turn against you." Probably Machiavelli really believed that this, or something like it, happened to the human nature of a tyrant and his subjects. But the view, like its expression, is something less than objective and dispassionate, and the only lesson it has for princes would seem to be: "Run for your life!"

Considering the brevity of the book, the number of times its princely reader is reminded, as in the passage just quoted, that his people will overthrow him at last is quite remarkable. Cities ruled in the past by princes easily accustom themselves to a change of masters, Machiavelli says in Chapter Five, but "in republics there is more vitality, greater hatred and more desire for vengeance. They cannot forget their lost liberty, so that the safest way is to destroy them—or to live there." He does not say what makes that safe. And most notably, with savage irony, "the duke [Borgia] was so able and laid such firm foundations . . . that the Romagna [after Alexander VI's death] waited for him more than a month." This is as much as to put Leo X's brother on notice that without papal support he can expect short shrift.

If the Romagna, accustomed to tyranny, waited only a month before it rose in revolt, how long will Florence wait? Tactlessness like this is unintelligible unless it is deliberate, unless these are not pedantic blunders but sarcastic ironies, taunts flung at the Medici, incitements to the Florentines.

Only in a satire can one understand the choice of Cesare Borgia as the model prince. The common people of Tuscany could not have had what they could expect of a prince's rule made clearer than by the example of this bloodstained buffoon whose vices, crimes and follies had been the scandal of Italy, and the conduct of whose brutal, undisciplined troops had so infuriated the Tuscans that when another band of them crossed their frontier, the peasants fell upon them and tore them to pieces. The Florentine aristocrats on whom Giovanni and cousin Giulio were relying to bridge the transition to despotism would have shared the people's revulsion to Cesare, and they may have been rendered somewhat more thoughtful by the logic of the assumption that nobles were more dangerous to a tyrant than commoners and should be dealt with as Cesare had dealt with the petty lords of the Romagna. Moreover, they could scarcely have avoided noticing the advice to use some faithful servant to terrorize the rest, and then to sacrifice him to escape the obloquy of his conduct, as Cesare had sacrificed Captain Ramiro. As for the gentle, mild-mannered, indolent Giuliano de Medici himself, he was the last man to be attracted by the notion of imitating the Borgia. He wanted no more than to occupy the same social position in Florence that his magnificent father had held, and not even that if it was too much trouble. Besides, in the days of the family's misfortunes, Giuliano had found shelter and hospitality at the court of Guidobaldo de Montefeltre. Giuliano lived at Urbino for many years (there is a rather charming picture of him there in Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*), and all his life he cherished deep gratitude and a strong affection for Duke Guidobaldo. He must have felt, then, a special loathing for the

foreign ruffian who had betrayed and plundered his patron, and Machiavelli must have known that he did. Only a wish to draw the most odious comparison possible, only a compulsion to wound and insult, could have led Machiavelli to select the Borgia as the prime exemplar in his "Mirror of Princes."

There is one last famous passage that reads differently if we accept *The Prince* as satire. On any other hypothesis, the final exhortation to free Italy from the barbarians sounds at best like empty rhetoric, at worst like calculating but stupid flattery. Who could really believe that the lazy, insipid Giuliano or his petty, vicious successor were the liberators Italy awaited? But if we have heard the mordant irony and sarcasm of the preceding chapters and detected the overtones of hatred and despair, then this last chapter will be charged with an irony turned inward, the bitter mockery of misdirected optimism. For before the Florentine republic had been gored to death by Spanish pikes, Machiavelli had believed, as he was to believe again, that a free Florentine republic could play the liberator's role. Perhaps, since he was all his life a passionate idealist, blind to reality when his desires were strong, Machiavelli may not have given up that wild hope even when he wrote *The Prince*. If he had not, then the verses at the end take on a new meaning, clearer perhaps to his contemporaries than they can be to us.

Virtù contro a furore
Prenderà l'arme, e fia il combatter corto;
Chè l'antico valore
Nell'italici cor non è ancor morto.

The antique valor Petrarch appealed to was, after all, that of republican Rome. Perhaps that first sharp combat was not to be against the barbarians.

However that may be, we must agree that

if *The Prince* was meant as a satire, as a taunt and challenge to the Medici and a tocsin to the people of Florence, then it must have been recognized as such by the Florentine literati and by the Medici themselves. If so we have the solution to two minor puzzles connected with this puzzling book. A rasher ruling family than the Medici might have answered the challenge by another round of torture and imprisonment or by a quiet six inches of steel under the fifth rib. But brother Giovanni and brother Giovanni's familiar spirit, cousin Giulio, though in fact they were aiming at exactly the kind of despotism that Machiavelli predicted, hoped to achieve it with a minimum of trouble by preserving for the time being the forms of the republic. It would not do, by punishing the author, to admit the pertinence of his satire. So the Medici did nothing. But they were not a stupid family, and they cannot have been very pleased. This would explain some puzzling things: why, for example, the ardent republicans among Machiavelli's friends, like Zanobi Buondelmonti, were not alienated by *The Prince*, and why the former republicans in Medici service among his correspondents, like Vettori, for instance, refer to it so seldom and with such muffled embarrassment. It would also explain why, among all the manuscripts of *The Prince* dating from Machiavelli's lifetime (and it seems to have had a considerable circulation and to have been multiplied by professional copyists), we have never found the copy which should have had the best chance of preservation—I mean that copy, beautifully lettered on vellum and richly bound, presented with its dedication to the Medici prince. Not only is it absent from the Laurentian library now, there is no trace that it was ever there. There is no evidence that it ever existed. Probably Machiavelli figured that the joke was not worth the extra expense.