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Identifying Machiavelli's Prince

Niccolò Machiavelli was a Florentine politician and writer born in 1469 while Florence was ruled by the Medici family. After the Medici family was deposed in 1494, Machiavelli obtained two public government positions – the Second Chancellor of the Republic and Secretary to the Ten of War (Benner xxiii). The Medici's 1512 restoration to power — one year prior to Machiavelli authoring *The Prince* — led to Machiavelli's forced departure from political life due to the Medici's suspicion of Machiavelli conspiring against them (Benner xxvi). Machiavelli's rationale for writing *The Prince* is widely debated amongst historians and literary experts, and several theories regarding his inspiration have therefore emerged. Many of these theories can be synthesized to create a cohesive plot in which Machiavelli was influenced to write *The Prince* in 1513 as a response to the contemporary political and military climate of Italy and his embarrassing forced departure from political life by the increasingly powerful and ruthless Medici family.

In his article “Machiavelli, Leonardo & Borgia A Fateful Collusion” (March 2009), Paul Strathern argues that “Machiavelli [made] [Cesare] Borgia the exemplary hero of his notorious political treatise *The Prince*” (18) following some of the acts Machiavelli witnessed Borgia commit in the service of his ambition to create his own Italian Empire in the Romagna region. Strathern focuses on Machiavelli's travels with Borgia in 1502, claiming that “Borgia and Machiavelli formed a close, if somewhat wary, friendship” (17) during this period, in which

Machiavelli was serving as a Florentine spy on Borgia's military campaign backed by his father, Pope Alexander VI.

Strathern claims that "where treachery was concerned [Borgia] was second to none — in an age where treachery was very much the norm" (17) and Machiavelli's witnessing such treachery from his companion allowed him to "embrace the 'evil nature of man'" (19). One incident in particular may have been a source of inspiration for Machiavelli's amoral treatise: "the occasion when Borgia charmed his treacherous commanders into meeting him for a reconciliation at the town of Sinigallia, assuring them that he could not fulfill his ambitions without them - then had them all murdered" (Strathern 18). Despite his subsequent report to Florence indicating his being "almost out of his wits with terror" (Strathern 18), Machiavelli's witnessing of "Borgia's duplicitous ruthlessness" (18) allowed him to understand that "if a prince was to conquer a territory, rule it and continue to govern it amid the treacherous politics of Renaissance Italy, then Borgia's ruthless lack of moral concern was the only way [such a prince] could succeed" (19). Machiavelli, seeing Borgia's "astonishing ability to outwit his enemies by means of treachery beyond wildest imagination" (Strathern 19) and Borgia's reliance on "daring and sensational plans" (16) rooted in "secrecy and betrayal" (16) understood such behavior to be "the key to Borgia's success" (19), and therefore may have idealized such qualities in his work.

In their article "Patricide and the Plot of the Prince: Cesare Borgia and Machiavelli's Italy" (December 1994) John T. Scott and Vickie B. Sullivan mention and expand upon the implications of Borgia's ruthless betrayal of his commanders at Sinigallia (Sinigaglia). Similarly to Strathern, Scott and Sullivan also adduce the events at Sinigaglia as ones that led to "Machiavelli [praising] Cesare's turn to deceit to eliminate those on whom he had formerly depended and [savoring] the Duke's elimination of these 'heads' at Sinigaglia" (Scott and

Sullivan 894). Despite this similar association of Borgia's actions at Sinigaglia with *The Prince*, Scott and Sullivan diverge from Strathern in their argument that Cesare Borgia served as an "ambiguous portrait" (887) through which Machiavelli presented which good and bad qualities may be found in a prince, rather than focusing on Borgia as an "idealized 'man of virtue'...or the model for his own method of statecraft" (887). In fact, Scott and Sullivan argue that Machiavelli's *The Prince* served more as a criticism of the Catholic Church in which he "indicts not just the Church for Italy's woes but Christianity for the ills of modern states generally" (890). Rather than allowing *The Prince* to serve as a guidebook for how a prince should rule, Machiavelli "counsels someone who possesses both the virtue and the fortune to act where Cesare and others shrank" (888) in order to counteract "the Church's ruinous influence on Italy" (887).

As such, *The Prince* may have been Machiavelli's response to the corrupt religious and political climate of Italy and the country's reliance on foreign mercenaries due to the Church's misunderstanding of warfare and defense. Machiavelli criticized the Church in his *Discourses* and "expands on the Christian clergy in connection with the political corruption of the moderns" (Scott and Sullivan 890), comparing those who serve the Pope to a noble class "particularly inimical to 'any political life,' those 'who without working [*oziosi*] live in luxury on the returns from their landed possessions'" (890). Borgia, as the son of Pope Alexander VI "represented the blood line" (Scott and Sullivan 892), and because the Pope's ministers had "no independent source of rule" (892), the Papacy would be "difficult to conquer but easy to hold after the initial assault" (892). Machiavelli therefore accuses Borgia of not going far enough to "eliminate another group of 'heads,' the cardinals" (Scott and Sullivan 895) and secure his position as an hereditary prince rather than one of virtue. This interpretation is more sensible than

unequivocally associating Machiavelli's prince with Borgia, as Machiavelli examined multiple other princes and situations which were not directly related to Borgia, nor did he commend all of Borgia's actions. By citing deeds of other princes, whether they were real or imagined, Machiavelli effectively uses Cesare Borgia's actions as "an example but not one of the greatest kind" (Scott and Sullivan 893) in order to educate new princes on how to rule more effectively by comparison. Unlike other princes, Borgia was never able to act independently and was therefore unable to "maintain his acquisitions" despite Machiavelli's admiration of Borgia's actions which led to him making such territorial strides (Scott and Sullivan 894). Therefore, "Machiavelli calls on a prince with both the virtue and fortune to remedy Italy's ills and thus to provide the conditions necessary for a reinvigorated political life in Italy" (Scott and Sullivan 898), primarily by eradicating the Church which had "disarmed the country and made it weak," forcing Italy to "[depend] on the plunderous whims of others" (897) in the wake of political, social, and economic upheaval.

Such upheaval, particularly Venetian and foreign imperialism and expansionism during the Italian Wars of 1494-1530, is cited as yet another source of inspiration for Machiavelli in writing *The Prince*. This assertion is overtly made by Robert Finlay in his article "The Immortal Republic: The Myth of Venice during the Italian Wars (1494-1530)" (1999), as opposed to the brief mentions made by Scott and Sullivan in their article, which focused more heavily on the influence of the Church on Machiavelli. Although foreigners were considered a threat to Italy, Venetians were seen as far more threatening to their own countrymen because they were seen as "far more successful than any northern kingdom at establishing and maintaining its dominion over others" (Finlay 936), with an increased understanding of "'the art of governance'" (936) within their native land. Italians of the period saw themselves as "the conquerors and tutors of

primitive peoples” (Finlay 936) and Venetians in particular were considered to have a “talent for politics — a compound of skill, guile, and persistence — that was inherent in the Italian experience and generally lacking in the supposedly unsophisticated kingdoms beyond the Alps” (936). As such, Finlay claims that Machiavelli “wrote his book of advice for the Medici with the assumption that the adventures of northerners in Italy necessarily were short-lived and with the aspiration of employing Italian political genius to liberate his native land from foreign domination” (936-7). A Machiavellian Prince might be able to accomplish such a task if he rejected the aid of foreign mercenaries and followed Venetian “diplomatic intrigue and prudence” (937), despite Machiavelli’s strong dislike of the Venetian Republic.

Given the information presented in Scott and Sullivan’s article regarding the political upheaval of the period and the Church’s reliance on foreign mercenary arms, the theory that Machiavelli wrote the Prince due to the actions of the Venetian Republic is plausible. Machiavelli, who was concerned by the military weakness of the Church and the lack of action taken by Florentine politicians in response to the rapidly changing international and domestic situation, may have written *The Prince* to push the Medici to take a more “Venetian” approach to aggressive foreign encroachments rather than following the Church’s passive approach. In her book, “Machiavelli’s Prince: A New Reading” (2013), Erica Benner suggests Machiavelli harbored a deep concern for Italy’s condition militarily, as “both his early and later writings show a strong interest in seeking to improve military collaboration among Italians to prevent the worst: the gradual ‘acquisition’ of all of Italy by large foreign monarchies with their formidable military forces” (xxiv). Much like Cesare Borgia as an individual, Venetian imperialism and expansionism alone cannot be accepted as the sole inspirations for Machiavelli’s treatise. Therefore, Erica Benner suggests that an amalgamation of issues plaguing Florence (and Italy at-

large) inspired Machiavelli to write *The Prince* as a satirical work designed to goad the Medici into instituting change.

Benner contends that in order to understand the irony hidden within *The Prince*, one must understand the world in which Machiavelli lived. Benner argues that contemporary readers — who are naturally far removed from the events which inspired Machiavelli to write *The Prince* — are inherently unable to grasp the work’s full meaning and context, because “ironic writings presuppose common understandings between writer and readers that the former play on to provoke recognition” (Benner xxii). According to Benner, Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* for manifold reasons — including his belief in the necessary reformation of Florence’s military (xxxiii-xxiv) and as criticism of the Church which led to its denouncement as a “godless handbook for tyrants” (xx) — but Machiavelli primarily wrote *The Prince* as a vessel through which he could covertly criticize the Medici without invoking their wrath. Benner proposes that Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in an attempt to “persuade [the Medici] to give up the tyranny or principality altogether, and voluntarily establish a republic” (xxviii) and allow him back into the fold of the government after his banishment from his political posts in November 1512 (xxvi). By placing his criticisms within a format that was commonly used to advise Renaissance rulers, Machiavelli was not only able to conceal his true aims but also warn “aspiring princes about the dangers of trying to assert absolute control over people who care about freedom” and “[teach] ordinary citizens to recognize early warning signs of control-hungry behavior in their leaders” and therefore “keep tyranny at bay” (Benner xxii).

The above theories, when combined, serve as the most likely explanation for Machiavelli’s decision to write *The Prince*. In order to identify Machiavelli’s prince, one must have a full understanding of the context of the period. The complex influences of the Church, the

Medici family, Cesare Borgia, and Venetian and foreign imperialism/expansionism on the contemporary Italian political climate were all key influences on Machiavelli. While some factors may have been more influential than others, Machiavelli was ultimately inspired to write *The Prince* to foster the changes he felt his government sorely needed to weather events both inside and outside of Florence. Writing a treatise that criticized both the Medici government and the Church was a risk; like any person, Machiavelli needed sufficient reason to push him to write such a potentially inflammatory document in the hopes of bettering his government and Italy as a whole. Understanding the historical context behind such an important work can help us to understand the work itself, the consequences of such a work, and separate what we think is appropriate for modern-day rulers and what we think should be left in the past.

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