

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI



1469–1527

Niccolò Machiavelli (nē´ kô lô´ mak´ ē ə vel´ ē) embodied one side of Renaissance culture in his fearless devotion to reason and his concern with worldly rather than religious goals. Like Dante he was a citizen of Florence, Italy, and played an important role in advancing that city's interests. Eventually forced out of office by political changes, he produced many of his literary, historical, and political works during his involuntary retirement.

We know little about Machiavelli's early life. Born to a family of poor Florentine nobility, he was educated in the classics and was proficient in Latin. (At that time Latin was the language of diplomacy as well as of scholarship.) In 1498 he was appointed secretary to the governing body of Florence. The duties of the post were many, and they involved him in frequent diplomatic trips to the various Italian and European powers that dealt with Florence: France, Spain, Germany, and the Italian city-states. From these places he sent home descriptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the rulers and governments he observed.

Florence had need of such information. At that time Italy was made up of small states frequently at war with one another. In addition, these states were often at the mercy of France and Spain, which used Italy as a battleground for their rivalries. Florence was especially vulnerable. In 1594 the city had driven out the family of merchant princes, the Medici (med´ ə chē´), who had unofficially ruled the city for three generations. Although Florence became a self-govern-

ing republic, the Medici were always attempting to make a comeback. Meanwhile, the city was weakened by internal clashes between the nobles and the smaller merchants, who wanted more political power.

During his years in government, Machiavelli worked faithfully as an ambassador, as a civil servant, and even as a man of war, directing a successful siege of the town of Pisa. Eventually, however, Spanish forces overthrew the Florentine Republic and restored the rule of the Medici. Machiavelli was too closely identified with the former government to keep his position long. Indeed, he may briefly have been tortured on suspicion of having joined in an anti-Medici plot.

The years after 1512 were enormously frustrating for Machiavelli. Poor and out of favor, he tried desperately to work in government again. While he preferred a republic, he was willing to settle for the Medici rule if the new rulers would only allow him to engage in political activity. The works he wrote during his enforced retirement were meant in part to recommend him to the Medici. As he wrote in a letter, he wanted to demonstrate that "for the fifteen years while I have been studying the art of the state, I have not slept or been playing. . . ." His most famous work, *The Prince*, was dedicated to a member of the Medici family.

The dating of many of his works is uncertain, but most of them were probably written during this period of political inactivity. In addition to *The Prince*, he wrote a comedy, *Mandrake*, a *History of Florence*, a treatise entitled *Art of War*, and a political work entitled the *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy*. (Livy was a Roman historian who lived from 59 B.C. to A.D. 17.)

Eventually Machiavelli did succeed in attracting the favor of the Medici. After giving him some minor positions, they assigned him to oversee the reconstruction of the walls around Florence in order to make them invulnerable to attack by artillery. He died the following year while on a diplomatic mission.

from The Prince

Historical Context

Renaissance Italy was divided into small states, each with its own form of government and its own laws. Machiavelli's Florence was one of the most brilliant of these states. Since the twelfth century, it had prospered from its trade, production of cloth, and banking. It was, however, weakened by internal rivalries and by the tendency of political factions to bring in outsiders to support their bids for power. This tendency made Florence easy prey to the aggression of other Italian states, European powers like France and Spain, and the bands of soldiers who roamed Italy selling themselves to the highest bidder.

Cultural Context

Political philosophy goes back to the Greek philosophers Plato (see page 414) and Aristotle, both of whom Machiavelli had read in translation. Romans like Cicero and the historians Livy and Tacitus carried on this tradition of thought. One of Machiavelli's literary works was a lengthy essay on the writings of Livy, in which he considered the conditions that make for a successful republic. Machiavelli's work thus develops a tradition of political philosophy revived from the ancient world. Yet Machiavelli believed that his work differed from that of his predecessors because he dealt with how things were and not how they ought to be.

Literary Context

The form that Machiavelli gives his work was commonly used in the Renaissance. It is a treatise on the education of a prince, discussing the qualities that a good prince possesses and the education necessary to create those qualities. Erasmus had written such a book in his *Education of a Christian Prince*, as had many other humanists (for a discussion of humanism, see pages 659–662). These books usually stressed the need for the prince to act like a kindly father to his subjects. Machiavelli, on the other hand, concerns himself with one thing only: how the prince is to survive in a dangerous and uncertain world. The religious emphasis that so often appears in humanist writings about kingship is nowhere apparent in *The Prince*.

from **The Prince**

Niccolò Machiavelli

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Cultural Context: The word *prince* derives from the Latin *princeps*, meaning “leader or general.” To us it signifies “a young ruler”; however, Machiavelli used it in keeping with its origin to mean “the ruler of a state.”

CHAPTER XV

**Of the Things for Which Men,
and Especially Princes, Are Praised or Blamed**

It now remains to be seen what are the methods and rules for a prince as regards his subjects and friends. And as I know that many have written of this, I fear that my writing about it may be deemed presumptuous, differing as I do, especially in this matter, from the opinions of others. But my intention being to write something of use to those who understand, it appears to me more proper to go to the real truth of the matter than to its imagination; and many have imagined republics and principalities which have never been seen or known to exist in reality; for how we live is so far removed from how we ought to live, that he who abandons what is done for what ought to be done, will rather learn to bring about his own ruin than his preservation. A man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good. Therefore it is necessary for a prince, who wishes to maintain himself, to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge and not use it, according to the necessity of the case.

Leaving on one side, then, those things which concern only an imaginary prince, and speaking of those that are real, I state that all men, and especially princes, who are placed at a greater height, are reputed for certain qualities which bring them either praise or blame. Thus one is considered liberal, another *misero* or miserly (using a Tuscan term, seeing that *avarro* with us still means one who is rapaciously¹ acquisitive and *misero* one who makes grudging use of his own); one a free giver, another rapacious; one cruel, another merciful; one a breaker of his word, another trustworthy; one effeminate and pusillanimous,²

Literary Context: Machiavelli calls attention to the way in which his own writing differs from that of contemporaries like Erasmus, who advises princes to act with Christian virtue. Such writers, he suggests, avoid the truth about human nature, pretending that people are loyal, honest, and patriotic.

1. **rapaciously** (rə pā' shəs lē) *adv.*: Greedily.

2. **pusillanimous** (pyōō' si lan' ə məs) *adj.*: Cowardly.



LORENZO THE MAGNIFICENT
The famous Italian merchant prince Lorenzo the Magnificent, a contemporary of Machiavelli, was an astute politician and a patron of the arts.
Giorgio Vasari

Literary Context:

Machiavelli stresses that different virtues conflict with one another. In choosing between two opposed virtues, rulers should base their choice entirely on the need to stay in power.

Historical Context:

Generosity was traditionally one of the primary signs of a good prince. The custom of a leader's rewarding his followers is age-old, but it was very much part of the medieval and Renaissance view of nobility. Machiavelli thus opposes one of the most established of Renaissance beliefs.

another fierce and high-spirited; one humane, another haughty; one lascivious,³ another chaste; one frank, another astute; one hard, another easy; one serious, another frivolous; one religious, another an unbeliever, and so on. I know that everyone will admit that it would be highly praiseworthy in a prince to possess all the above-named qualities that are reputed good, but as they cannot all be possessed or observed, human conditions not permitting of it, it is necessary that he should be prudent enough to avoid the scandal of those vices which would lose him the state, and guard himself if possible against those which will not lose him, but if not able to, he can indulge them with less scruple. And yet he must not mind incurring the scandal of those vices, without which it would be difficult to save the state, for if one considers well, it will be found that some things which seem virtues would, if followed, lead to one's ruin, and some others which appear vices result in one's greater security and wellbeing.

CHAPTER XVI

Of Liberality and Niggardliness⁴

Beginning now with the first qualities above named, I say that it would be well to be considered liberal; nevertheless liberality such as the world understands it will injure you, because if used virtuously and in the proper way, it will not be known, and you will incur the disgrace

3. **lascivious** (lə sɪv' ē əs) *adj.*: Lustful.

4. **Niggardliness** (nɪg' ərd lē nis) *n.*: Stinginess.

of the contrary vice. But one who wishes to obtain the reputation of liberality among men, must not omit every kind of sumptuous display, and to such an extent that a prince of this character will consume by such means all his resources, and will be at last compelled, if he wishes to maintain his name for liberality, to impose heavy taxes on his people, become extortionate, and do everything possible to obtain money. This will make his subjects begin to hate him, and he will be little esteemed being poor, so that having by this liberality injured many and benefited but few, he will feel the first little disturbance and be endangered by every peril. If he recognizes this and wishes to change his system, he incurs at once the charge of niggardliness.

A prince, therefore, not being able to exercise this virtue of liberality without risk if it be known, must not, if he be prudent, object to be called miserly. In course of time he will be thought more liberal, when it is seen that by his parsimony⁵ his revenue is sufficient, that he can defend himself against those who make war on him, and undertake enterprises without burdening his people, so that he is really liberal to all those from whom he does not take, who are infinite in number, and niggardly to all to whom he does not give, who are few. In our times we have seen nothing great done except by those who have been esteemed niggardly; the others have all been ruined. Pope Julius II,⁶ although he had made use of a reputation for liberality in order to attain the papacy, did not seek to retain it afterwards, so that he might be able to wage war. The present King of France⁷ has carried on so many wars without imposing an extraordinary tax, because his extra expenses were covered by the parsimony he had so long practiced. The present King of Spain,⁸ if he had been thought liberal, would not have engaged in and been successful in so many enterprises.

For these reasons a prince must care little for the reputation of being a miser, if he wishes to avoid robbing his subjects, if he wishes to be able to defend himself, to avoid becoming poor and contemptible, and not to be forced to become rapacious; this niggardliness is one of those vices which enable him to reign. If it is said that Caesar⁹ attained the empire through liberality, and that many others have reached the highest positions through being liberal or being thought so, I would reply that you are either a prince already or else on the way to become one. In the first case, this liberality is harmful; in the second, it is certainly

Cultural Context: It was commonly believed that Christians should be secretive about their generosity. For Machiavelli, such generosity is useless because it will not gain the prince the reputation he may need to survive as a ruler. In other words, Machiavelli is concerned with the *reputation* for generosity, and even this reputation may lead a prince to spend money he does not have, ultimately weakening his rule.

Historical Context: Machiavelli draws examples from recent history to prove his point. His use of actual historical figures as examples is in keeping with his argument that he is talking about the way people really act.

Cultural Context: Like any Renaissance scholar versed in the classics, Machiavelli uses figures out of ancient history to support his points.

5. **parsimony** (pär' sə mō' nē) *n.*: A tendency to be over-careful in spending.

6. **Pope Julius II:** He served as pope from 1503 to 1513, restoring the Papal States to the church and sponsoring great artists such as Michelangelo and Raphael.

7. **King of France:** Louis XII (1462–1515).

8. **King of Spain:** Ferdinand II (1452–1516), who drove the Moors from Spain and unified the country.

9. **Caesar:** Julius Caesar (102?–44 B.C.) made himself dictator of the Roman Empire.

Cultural Context: Here again Machiavelli opposes the ideas of most humanists. These writers stress that a prince should, if possible, never engage in war, and if he does so should spare the lives and possessions of those he conquers.

Literary Context: Machiavelli returns to one of the key themes of his book: the danger for a prince in being hated or looked down upon. If a prince is hated, his subjects will *want* to overthrow him. If he is looked down upon, they will not be afraid to overthrow him.

necessary to be considered liberal. Caesar was one of those who wished to attain the mastery over Rome, but if after attaining it he had lived and had not moderated his expenses, he would have destroyed that empire. And should anyone reply that there have been many princes, who have done great things with their armies, who have been thought extremely liberal, I would answer by saying that the prince may either spend his own wealth and that of his subjects or the wealth of others. In the first case he must be sparing, but for the rest he must not neglect to be very liberal. The liberality is very necessary to a prince who marches with his armies, and lives by plunder, sack and ransom, and is dealing with the wealth of others, for without it he would not be followed by his soldiers. And you may be very generous indeed with what is not the property of yourself or your subjects, as were Cyrus, Caesar, and Alexander,¹⁰ for spending the wealth of others will not diminish your reputation, but increase it, only spending your own resources will injure you. There is nothing which destroys itself so much as liberality, for by using it you lose the power of using it, and become either poor and despicable, or, to escape poverty, rapacious and hated. And of all things that a prince must guard against, the most important are being despicable or hated, and liberality will lead you to one or other of these conditions. It is, therefore, wiser to have the name of a miser, which produces disgrace without hatred, than to incur of necessity the name of being rapacious, which produces both disgrace and hatred.

10. Cyrus . . . Alexander: Cyrus the Great (died 529 B.C.) was the founder of the Persian Empire; Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.) conquered Greece and much of Asia.

Reader's Response *Have you observed anyone, in public or private life, who acts as Machiavelli suggests in this book? Explain.*
