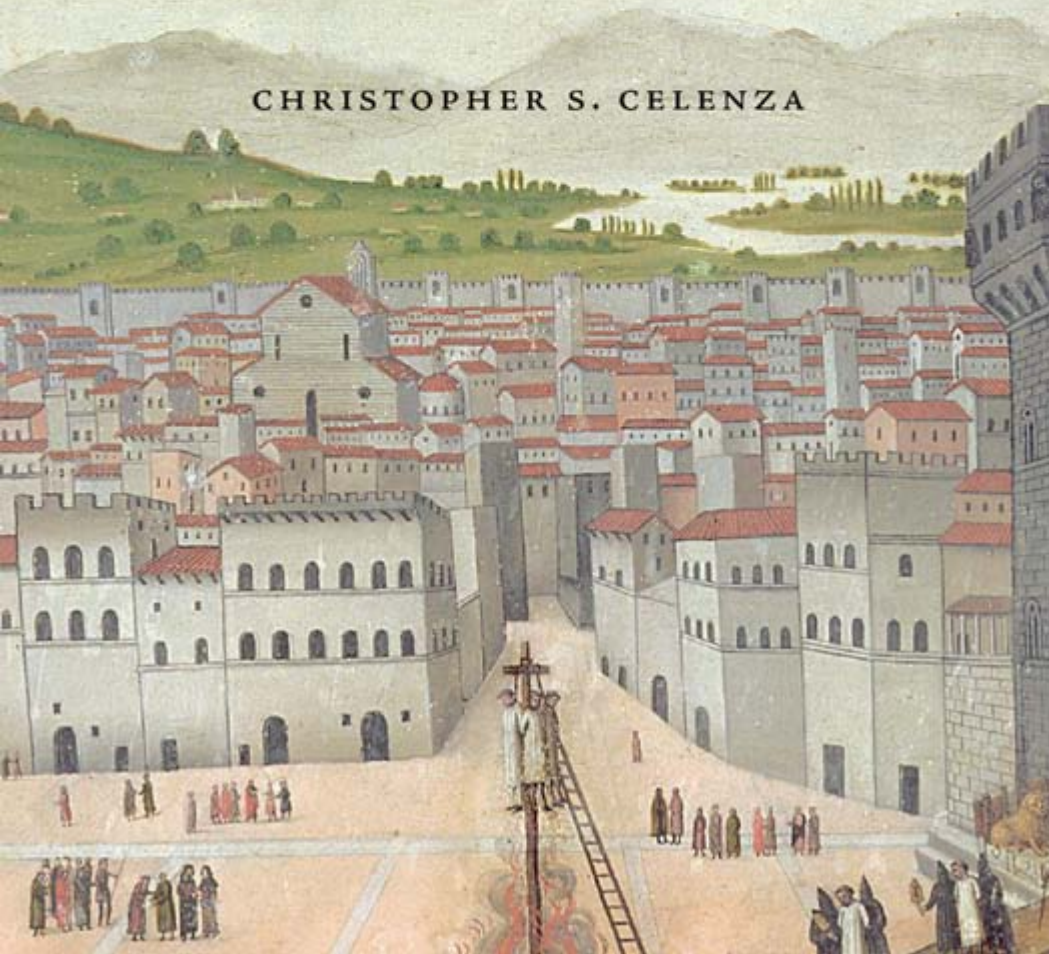


Machiavelli

A Portrait

CHRISTOPHER S. CELENZA



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For Anna Harwell Celenza

Contents

- Prologue 1
1. Renaissance, Conspiracies, Bonfires: Machiavelli's
Little-Known Youth 4
2. Highs and Lows: Machiavelli Emerges 31
3. Interlude: Machiavelli's Letter 57
4. *The Prince* 65
5. Conversing with the Ancients: The *Discourses* 102
6. The Comedy of Life: Letters and Plays,
Wives and Lovers 134
7. History 160
8. Ghosts 190

NOTES 213

BIBLIOGRAPHY 227

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 233

INDEX 235

Machiavelli

Prologue

Machiavelli. His name conjures up a vision of amoral conduct and the idea that the ends justify the means in everything from introductory political science classes to business manuals. These days he appears as a character in a wildly popular role-playing video game, *Assassin's Creed*, and he was a regular in Showtime's hit television series *The Borgias*. Pair the word "Machiavellian" with the name of almost any politician in an Internet search, and you will find a whole world of journalism to explore. Why are we so fascinated by him? Why has his name retained such a powerful hold on our imaginations?

The answer is found in *The Prince*, a short book he wrote in 1513. Though it was unprinted in his lifetime, *The Prince* went on to become an enduring bestseller, translated into numerous languages. Is it better to be loved or feared? How much does fortune influence human affairs? Should a leader be impetuous or measured? How do leaders plan for the future when there are always so many possible paths to take? How much do appearances matter? Machiavelli's answers to these and many other questions emerge in *The Prince*. It is the Italian Renaissance's most famous book, and it deserves the attention it has traditionally received. But it had a context. At first glance, the

circumstances that led to the composition of *The Prince* seem almost unbelievable.

The year was 1512. Machiavelli, an active diplomat and political figure in Renaissance Florence, found himself and his city immersed in wars, tumultuous politics, and conspiracies. The Medici family had not been part of Florence's government since 1494. But after a good deal of back and forth, the Medici returned to Florence with Spanish backing. Machiavelli's name was discovered on a list of possible anti-Medici conspirators. He was arrested, imprisoned, and subjected to the *strappado*, that ingenious form of torture whereby your hands are tied behind your back, you are lifted up into the air by a rope on a pulley, and you are then dropped almost, but not quite, to the ground. At that final moment, the rope is jerked tight, and your arms almost come out of their sockets. Machiavelli was dropped six times.

Giovanni de' Medici, the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, had been made a cardinal when he was a teenager. On March 9, 1513, he became pope. Amid the celebrations in Florence, an amnesty was declared, and the authorities released Machiavelli from prison on the condition that he remain in Florentine territory. So he went to a small family property in the countryside outside of Florence, and there he began to write what became *The Prince*.

Understood within the development of a life lived with such drama, as was Machiavelli's, with ups and downs that few of us could fathom or would want to consider, it is all the more impressive. And when we realize that Machiavelli's writings cover so much more than what is in *The Prince*—that he wrote histories, treatises on politics, even comedies, and that before

he wrote these works he had a substantial political and diplomatic career—we are propelled to find his origins, to see what shaped him, to tell the story of his life. Only then can a clear portrait emerge, a portrait that, like all such endeavors, must be selective in order to communicate the essence of the subject.



I

Renaissance, Conspiracies, Bonfires

MACHIAVELLI'S LITTLE-KNOWN YOUTH

• • •

If you are reading this book, you have probably never witnessed a public execution or been close to someone who has. Most likely, you have not been physically tortured during legal proceedings. And in all probability you don't live in a world where war is on your doorstep, literally, not outsourced and far away. Finally, in the course of your education, you were almost certainly not taught in a language that was neither your mother tongue nor a living language—but rather Latin. These are just some ways your world differs from that of Niccolò Machiavelli. The world you inhabit was not his world.

What was his world like? What did Machiavelli see, growing up in Florence? What did he learn? Why did Machiavelli express himself—in his language, style, and vocabulary—as he did? Biography, culture, and politics all played a role.

He was born in 1469 to Bernardo Machiavelli and Bartolomea de' Nelli. Bernardo possessed an advanced degree in law, and though not especially well off financially, he was a cultured man. Like many Florentines of his station, he kept a book of *Ricordi*—memories—as a way of documenting and pre-

serving the major events in his life and those of his family.¹ From that book we learn that the young Machiavelli was sent to grammar school in 1476, where he learned some Latin as well as basic reading and writing in Tuscan. Then, in 1480, he learned the “abacus,” which is the way Florentines of the time referred to basic mathematics, of the sort that was appropriate to a merchant society, such as Florence in the fifteenth century. The year 1481 saw young Niccolò placed under the tutelage of Paolo da Ronciglione, a teacher of Latin who, though little known today, counted a number of prominent Florentine intellectuals as his students.

In other words, Machiavelli had a solid early education, one that would have given him literacy as we know it: the basic ability to read and write one’s own language. His education also made him, in the terms of his own era, *litteratus*, someone who had fluency in Latin. Latin mattered then, in ways that are difficult, if not impossible, to imagine today. For Machiavelli, as for those of his contemporaries who learned Latin, it provided a tool with which he could interpret the world as he experienced it.

* * *

The Latin language had died out as a “native” language (one spoken naturally in the home to children, say) centuries earlier, as it was transformed into what scholars term “vulgar” Latin after the fall of the Roman Empire: Latin, but in a register more attuned to the sentence structure and vocabulary of the emerging Romance languages of Italian, French, and Spanish. The first written documentation of something recognizable as

Italian, as distinct from vulgar Latin, occurs only in the tenth century, in a manuscript preserving some legal formulas in southern Italy. Beautiful Italian poetry was written in the thirteenth century, as the poet Giacomo da Lentini penned works of courtly love at the southern Italian court of Frederick II, an admired ruler and cultural patron. Then, in the fourteenth century what Dante called his *Commedia*, or *Comedy* (later so admired that it came to be called the *Divine Comedy*) emerged as the Italian language's great, foundational literary monument.

The exemplary beauty and linguistic limpidity of the *Comedy* served as an important model. Almost two centuries after its composition, during Machiavelli's lifetime, in the 1520s in fact, Italian thinkers who desired to draw up rules of grammar and vocabulary for the Italian language, picking among the various Italian dialects, chose Tuscan, the language of the *Comedy*, as their basis. The hope of these language experts was to mold Italian in such a way that it would be seen as appropriate for serious works of literature, history, and philosophy. As we shall see, Machiavelli did not have *The Prince* printed—officially “published”—in this lifetime. But he did circulate it in handwritten, or “manuscript,” form. And it is a curious fact that one of the reasons that the earliest readers of *The Prince* admired it was its use of a seemingly perfect Tuscan. Again, we ask: how could a native language *not* be seen as a legitimate vehicle for meaningful work? Why was Italian not seen, intuitively, as a language in which it was possible to write durable, permanent works? The answer to these questions brings us back, again, to Latin. Examining its history in the Middle Ages and then in the century into which Machiavelli was born allows us to begin to paint a picture of Machiavelli in the round, to see where

and how he was traditional, where he was unique, and where he was a product of his times.

Just as the Roman Empire went into decline—and decline there was, this is inarguable: far less trade took place across the vast territories from Africa to Britain, the idea of central civil governance practically collapsed, and obvious declines took place from previously higher standards of literacy—the Christian Church experienced growth and centralization in a manner that in retrospect seems preordained. It would not have seemed so then, of course: even as late as the sixth century AD, there were many people in the Mediterranean region who practiced other faiths. And it is certainly true that, as the saying goes, “history is written by the victors,” and that those early Christians who created the written record emphasized and indeed created the narrative of inevitability. But a line can be drawn from the era of Constantine, the first Christian Roman emperor, active in the early fourth century, through the epoch of Theodosius in the latter part of that century, and finally through the fifth century, that saw the church working through controversies by means of church councils and creating an ever more centralized orthodox doctrine through the writings of its most prominent thinkers.

Early Christian church fathers like Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine (all active in the late fourth and early fifth centuries AD), and, later, Gregory (pope from 590 to 604), created what turned out to be lasting visions of the Christian religion. Jerome had been heavily involved in translating the New Testament, written originally in Greek, into Latin. Ambrose wrote various works in which he assimilated aspects of ancient Roman culture into emerging Christianity (even going so far as to pen

a Christian version of Cicero's classic work of Stoic philosophy *On Duties*). And in his *Confessions* and *City of God*, Augustine provided a personal conversion narrative and a Christian scheme of history that became and remained touchstones thereafter. In his numerous other works, Augustine addressed and, in his own view, resolved many problems and questions that arose regarding how to reconcile the many competing ideas that the Christian faith needed to address: What was the nature of the Trinity? How could God have created something out of nothing? How do Christians incorporate pagan learning, with all of its literary and philosophical monuments from Plato to Virgil, into their own worldview? Augustine's writings and those of other early Christian thinkers provided relatively uniform answers to these and many other questions. As we shall see, the nature of the premodern world was such that no attempt in theory could ever succeed fully in practice: local forms of Christianity persisted all through the Middle Ages, often slightly (and sometimes more so) at odds with what the orthodox vision of Christianity seemed to be.

Important, however, is the language in which those church fathers wrote: Latin. What this meant was that the Christian Church fostered the Latin language, boasted acknowledged "classics" in the writings of the church fathers by the early Middle Ages (let us say by the year 750 AD), and adopted the Latin language as its own. Latin became the language of the church and, since so much education was connected with the church, the language of education as well. Yet it is clear that by the early eighth century in Europe, vernaculars had emerged, some of which had grown out of Latin, and that the knowledge of classical Latin had weakened. Thinkers around the court of

Charlemagne, the Franco-German ruler who created the origins of the geography of modern Europe, saw the decline in Latin as a serious matter and one that could harm Christianity. One of these thinkers, the English cleric Alcuin, engaged, along with his colleagues in a reform campaign, in both collating scriptural texts to try to remove inconsistencies (inevitable in a world of handwritten books) and creating manuals and simple dialogues to teach Latin consistently. To some extent, this reform was successful, as ever more standardized versions of scripture began to circulate and minimum standards of Latin learning for clergy rose.

By the eleventh century, Europe's decline had begun to reverse itself: towns revived, trade and commerce increased, and the stage was set for a flowering of learning in the twelfth century. The works of Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher and student of Plato, began to be translated into Latin and became the basis for serious study. Scholars like Peter Abelard, whose account of his tragic affair with his student Eloise continues to inspire great emotion, gained fame and groups of students who followed them. When a large enough number of scholars gathered into one place, concentrated centers of learning developed in areas of certain cities, like the left bank of the Seine in Paris. It was there, in the early thirteenth century, that one of the earliest universities took firm root, the University of Paris. Elsewhere in Europe—in Oxford, Bologna, Salerno, and Naples, just to name a few cities—universities became centers of higher learning.

At all of them, Latin was the common language: classes were taught in Latin, all texts to be studied were written in Latin (or, as in the case of Aristotle, translated into Latin), and

students were expected to be proficient in the language. These early universities were cosmopolitan and exciting centers to which students traveled who wanted advanced training. A student would study grammar (which included much Latin literature) and logic (drawn from Aristotle) for up to six years in the “arts” faculty and arrive at the status of *baccalaureus artium* (a “bachelor of arts,” the distant origins of our bachelor’s degree). Thereafter the student could eventually enter one of the three “higher” faculties of theology, medicine, and law. Certain universities developed specialties: Paris for theology, Bologna for law, Salerno for medicine.

The fourteenth century saw more universities emerge and the development of relatively standardized curricula in the arts faculties. The proliferation of universities meant that students had less need to travel great distances to study a certain specialty. And this standardization and opening of opportunities for study proved professionally advantageous. But standardized curricula and a more local character also meant conservatism, in the most literal sense: preserving what has gone before. This useful function of all higher education is important, as tried and true methods and conclusions in many different fields endure. Yet at times those outside of the university world may come to believe that the methods and subjects cultivated inside universities (with the hyperspecialization and inside baseball that ensue) are not relevant to life outside the university. The fourteenth century was one of those times, as thinkers from both within and without universities raised voices of protest, sometimes exaggerated, against the sorts of learning, styles of thought, and types of Latin that had gained footholds. Within the context of universities one saw a figure like Jean Gerson,

who served as chancellor of the University of Paris, argue that forms of writing needed to be cultivated that addressed problems relevant to public life.²

In Italy, a movement developed that later scholars would term Renaissance humanism. The Tuscan thinker Petrarch (who spent much of his life in southern France) was the most prominent fourteenth-century humanist. Though Petrarch is known today more for his vernacular love poetry, in his own lifetime he was intent on recapturing a seemingly lost ancient Roman world, doing so first and foremost by the study and use of the Latin language. Like late medieval Italian thinkers before him, Petrarch drew inspiration from classical Latin, from the era that produced the great Roman orator Cicero, the powerful ancient historian Livy, and the poet Virgil, whose enduring monument, the *Aeneid*, told in twelve books the mythical story of Rome's foundation in a language both beautiful and profound. Petrarch's connection to these and other works was deeply intimate. To his friend, Giovanni Boccaccio, author of the ribald Italian collection of tales *The Decameron*, Petrarch wrote that he read certain ancient texts so often and so deeply, that they entered the marrow of his bones, and that he had internalized them to such an extent that he at times could not even distinguish where an ancient author's thought left off and his own began.³

Petrarch was a sensitive soul, perhaps too much so. He wrote letters to his ancient heroes, long since dead of course, lamenting the sorry state of the world in which he found himself, the loss of ancient glory, and the low state of politics in his day. In the chapter library of a church in Verona, Petrarch discovered the ancient orator Cicero's *Letters to Atticus*, in which Cicero

revealed himself as a gossipy politician rather than as the Stoic sage whom Petrarch's contemporaries had imagined. Disappointed that his hero was all too human, Petrarch chastised Cicero in 1345—in other words from almost a millennium and a half's distance in time—for having been too political and not philosophical enough: "These failings fill my heart with pity and shame . . . what does it profit a man, I ask, to teach others virtue, going on and on, if he fails to follow his own instructions? . . . Farewell forever, my Cicero. From the land of the living."⁴ *Relax, Petrarch*, you almost want to say. Yet he did sign these letters "from the land of the living" and, unlike the ancient pagan authors he prized, he was deeply Christian and attentive to the lamentable condition of the church. Petrarch, in short, devoted himself to ancient writers with his whole heart, but he always kept an eye on the world in which he lived. Studying those ancient Latin works intensively as he did, Petrarch recognized something important: that the Latin with which he and other thinkers were surrounded, in universities and in the church, did not correspond in register, diction, and syntax to the ancient Latin he loved so well.

Petrarch and others like him studied ancient Latin works ever more intensively, they compared differing manuscripts of the "same" text, and they traveled far and wide to search for ancient Latin texts that had been lost to the Middle Ages. Given these factors, it was inevitable that they would come to some fundamentally different ideas regarding history from those who immediately preceded them. They began to see that ancient authorities, though venerable, were all, themselves, figures in time, with their own historical context. For Dante, Aristotle had been "the master of those who know."⁵ For Renaissance humanists

Aristotle became one of a number of possible ancient masters, all of whom needed attention and study.

Fifteenth-century thinkers even researched the history of the ancient Latin language. Petrarch and his immediate predecessors were heirs of the medieval idea that Latin was in a sense a “timeless” language, an unchanging language of craft and rules that needed schools to teach it.⁶ Yet the more that fifteenth-century thinkers like Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini, and Biondo Flavio studied the problem, the more they realized that ancient Latin had been a “natural” language, one spoken in the home. Discoveries of hitherto unknown texts fueled research and vice versa. Around 1420, for example, humanists rediscovered a dialogue of Cicero lost to the Middle Ages, called *Brutus*. In it Cicero presents lively portraits of renowned speakers of his own day, offering anecdotes about them and assessments of their abilities. One of them, Curio, was said to have been the third-best speaker in the city of Rome, even though he had no formal education. How, Cicero’s avid fifteenth-century readers wondered, could he have become an expert in this timeless language without any education, since present-day thinkers needed years of education to master the language?

Here is another instance: fifteenth-century thinkers studied another great ancient master of oratory, Quintilian, who wrote a guide to educating the young. He made sure to say that parents should hire nursemaids who spoke Latin well.⁷ Again, the implication was that in the ancient world there was not a separate vernacular, like Italian, alongside another “high” language, Latin, requiring formal education. The humanists who preceded Machiavelli studied ancient Latin so intensively that they came to the conclusion, without saying so in so many words,

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