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Prophetic Statebuilding: Machiavelli and the Passion of the Duke

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI'S use of Cesare Borgia has always posed a puzzle for interpreters of *The Prince*.¹ For those who denounced the scandalous quality of Machiavelli's "*piccolo libro*," the laudatory presentation of Borgia—cunning, lascivious, ambitious, and brutal—proved decisively that the Florentine secretary cared little for piety, morality, good government, or basic decency. In attempting to shield Machiavelli from such charges, no less a luminary than Jean-Jacques Rousseau insisted that Machiavelli's use of Borgia was instructively ironic: Machiavelli didn't really mean for Borgia to serve as an exemplar for anything other than the kind of tyranny that inevitably emerges in circumstances where republics do not abide.² Interpreters more willing to take Machiavelli at his word detect in the Borgia example Machiavelli's head-on confrontation with the dire political realities of his day: Jacob Burckhardt, for instance, understood Machiavelli's account of Borgia's career to illustrate how a ruthless, mendacious warlord could use the authority of the papacy to accumulate power and even create circumstances where the papacy itself might be converted into a proper hereditary monarchy, a more conventional principality that might expel foreign invaders and unify Italy.³

My interpretation of Machiavelli's use of Borgia highlights the biblical resonances of Machiavelli's account of the rise and fall of this exemplary new prince—a prince whom both his subjects and the Florentine himself call by the exalted title "Duke Valentino." I agree with Rousseau that everything that Machiavelli wishes to communicate about Borgia's career is less than obvious; but I dispute his contention that Machiavelli means for Borgia's actions and

ABSTRACT This essay traces Biblical resonances within Machiavelli's account of Cesare Borgia, or "Duke Valentino," in *The Prince*. It challenges the idea that Machiavelli's goal is to detheologize politics (in fact, my reading suggests that the founding of all principalities must be consecrated in religious terms); it dispels the notion that the "armed prophet" is armed exclusively with a sword rather than with a book; and it raises questions concerning the ambiguous meaning of "success" in a practical "how-to" manual on political success. I demonstrate that Machiavelli's intentions are not necessarily so antireligious, or even so anti-Christian, as interpreters conventionally present the Florentine's views on religion. Most fundamentally, perhaps, my interpretation prompts readers to reimagine what, on Machiavelli's view, a genuinely political founder of a Christian polity might look like. REPRESENTATIONS 115, Summer 2011 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 1-19. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI:10.1525/rep.2011.115.1.1.

“spirit” to serve in anything less than an exemplary role. Like Burckhardt, I believe that Machiavelli has practical goals in mind as he chronicles the duke’s career; but I will demonstrate that these goals are not necessarily so antireligious, or even so anti-Christian, as they might first appear, and Machiavelli’s views on religion are certainly not so inherently impious as interpreters conventionally present them.

Machiavelli’s “Duke” and the People’s Prince of Peace

In chapter 7 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli holds up Cesare Borgia as the best example of someone who came to power through fortune (that is, through some other prince’s power) but who almost solidified his own authority through virtue (that is, with his own arms and efforts). In this sense, Cesare is already an inferior example to Moses, Romulus, Theseus, Cyrus—the founders of peoples or religions who came to power exclusively through their own virtue, arms, ability, cunning, and so on.

However, this deficiency notwithstanding, Machiavelli goes to great lengths to associate himself both with Cesare Borgia personally, and, via Borgia, with the common people as a class. In the first place, he uses phrases to describe Cesare that he applies to himself in the book’s “Dedicatory Letter”: both, he writes, suffer a “malignity of fortune” and endure “infinite hardships and dangers” (*P*, Dedicatory Letter, 7). Curiously, the only instances where Machiavelli inserts himself as an interlocutor into *The Prince* occur in the two chapters, 3 and 7, where Cesare figures prominently. In these two chapters Machiavelli mentions that Cesare was called “Duke Valentino” by “the people,” or “by the vulgar”; and then Machiavelli himself, in a popular or vulgar manner, exclusively refers to Cesare as “the duke” for the duration of his account of Borgia’s short but striking career (*P*, 3, 7). Machiavelli alludes to the circumstances through which Pope Alexander VI formally acquires for his son Cesare a noble title: while granting the French king’s request for a marriage annulment, the pope elevates the archbishop of Rouen to cardinal in exchange for a title, Duke of Valentinois, for Cesare. However, Machiavelli suggests that Cesare, through his own accomplishments, earns the title “duke” in the eyes of the people and, apparently, in the eyes of Machiavelli, as well. The people’s judgment, *not* that of popes and kings, is what matters ultimately. Again, Machiavelli insists on calling Cesare Duke Valentino precisely because that’s what the people do.⁴

As Machiavelli famously remarks elsewhere in *The Prince*, the people are captivated by appearances and outcomes, but since “in the world there is no one but the vulgar,” appearances and outcomes may be, in the end, all that count (*P*, 18). While this remark is often taken as Machiavelli’s criticism of

popular judgment, Machiavelli's self-association with the duke and with the people—with both the virtuous and the vulgar—actually affirms the validity of this perspective. Indeed, while serving as advisor and minister to Piero Soderini, chief executive of the ill-fated Florentine Republic, Machiavelli wrote to Soderini's nephew in words that presage *The Prince* by seven years: "I am looking not through your glass [that is, that of a young patrician], in which nothing is seen but prudence, but through the glass of the many, who have to judge the end of things as they are done, and not the means by which they are done."⁵ Machiavelli is concerned with ends, with outcomes over means, because these are the people's chief concerns. Neither can afford the luxury of fussing over means, as do the few. The direct relationship between the people and the duke—the bond between them forged by the former's appreciation for outcomes delivered by the latter—increases in importance throughout Machiavelli's account of Borgia's career in *The Prince*. In fact, Machiavelli celebrates it or, as we'll see, rather, *consecrates* this relationship, this bond.

Recall that Machiavelli first introduces Cesare as the natural son of Pope Alexander VI in chapter 3. On the one hand, Cesare enjoys prominent—indeed religiously exalted—parentage and patronage. On the other, he is a bastard, which, in some sense diminishes, even vulgarizes, the quality of his origins. Like those of many founders and prophets, Cesare's beginnings are ambiguously exalted and humble, theologically validated and conventionally transgressive. What's immediately important for Machiavelli is that Cesare inherits someone else's conquests and kingdoms. The very next chapter (4) seems to emphasize this point as it concerns the fate of territories conquered by "Alexander" after his death, even if the Alexander mentioned here is *not* the Borgia pope mentioned in the preceding chapter, but rather Alexander of Macedon. Machiavelli instructs readers that Alexander the Great's conquests would have been easy to maintain if his successors had been united—that is, for instance, if he'd left behind a son who was a worthy successor.

There is, of course, a venerable tradition, most notably represented by Dante, that understands the Roman Caesars to be the heirs of Alexander: the emperors built upon his example in order to conquer the world.⁶ Indeed, Machiavelli remarks how Julius Caesar imitated Alexander, just as Alexander and Scipio imitated, respectively, Achilles and Cyrus (*P*, 14). A central question in these early chapters of *The Prince* is whether *this* Caesar, Cesare Borgia, is capable of maintaining and building upon the foundations that he inherits from *his* Alexander. In fact, since the ancient and modern Caesars and Alexanders are spelled the same way in the Italian text, Machiavelli often compels his readers to pause and reflect upon which "Cesare" or "Alessandro" he may be discussing at any particular time. More specifically, Machiavelli graphically, visually prompts readers to consider whether, or to what

extent, the Holy Father and his natural son imitated their more renowned ancient namesakes. Machiavelli invites readers to consider the similarities and differences between these ancient and modern examples with identical names: do Alexander and Cesare accomplish as much as their ancient counterparts? Why or why not? By calling Cesare by another name, Duke Valentino, does Machiavelli suggest that Cesare could have established something new and different from the accomplishments of the ancient conquerors, or does this renaming only validate how far short the duke falls?

The Parable of Cesare Borgia



FIGURE 1. Friedrich Herlin de Nördlingen, *The Circumcision of Jesus*, 1466. Detail from *Twelve Apostles Altar (Zwölf-Boten-Altar)*, St. Jakobskirche, Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Germany.

Machiavelli reports that Pope Alexander initially cannot find arms to help support Cesare's military endeavors, specifically the reconquest of the Romagna for the papacy, because all his potential allies worry about increasing the church's territorial reach (*P*, 7). In response to this impasse, Alexander shakes up Italy to distract and disorient his adversaries. The pope encourages the Venetians to bring France into Italy, from whom, in turn, Alexander acquires arms to help Cesare wage battle against the Venetians (*P*, 7). In short, Alexander effectively tricks the French into helping him take the Romagna, and then he places Cesare in charge there. But despite the fact that the duke takes the province with troops provided to him by others (in the largest sense by the church, by the Venetians, and by the French), Machiavelli demonstrates Borgia's capacity to behave "virtuously" when he describes how the duke himself handles these troops and their commanders.

Cesare recognizes immediately that these inherited troops are unreliable: they are either too "cool" and, hence, reluctant to fight, or too much of a threat, that is, readily inclined to turn against their new captain (*P*, 7).

The duke flatters, bribes, or corrupts most of the lords who provide arms and pose threats to him, thus winning them over. In the paragraph describing these actions, a transformation takes place, a transfiguration of sorts: it begins with the proper nouns “Alexander” and “the pope” performing the primary action, but after the deployment of some indefinite pronouns, it concludes with “the duke” or “Valentino” as prime actor in the proceedings.⁷ And this is where Machiavelli’s narrative starts to take on strange overtones. One of the lords with whom Cesare has recently been at odds, and from whom the duke needs arms, is Pagolo Orsini. Orsini apparently has two names: although Machiavelli refers to him elsewhere by his official name, Pagolo, here he calls him, “Signor Paolo,” Mr. Paul.⁸ The duke wins over Paolo with gifts, including horses. You might say that he converts Paul, his erstwhile adversary.⁹

The duke then enlists the help of Mr. Paul to convert the rest of Cesare’s enemies. Through Paolo, Cesare invites them to a celebration of reconciliation, as Machiavelli describes it (*P*, 7). The participants are not quite aware of it, but this will be their last supper. Unlike other notable last suppers, however, this gathering will not conclude with its *host* suffering betrayal, arrest, and execution.¹⁰ Rather, the duke consummates this gathering of reconciliation by having his guests strangled. While on a diplomatic mission for Florence, Machiavelli was present in Senigallia to observe, firsthand, the duke’s actions on this New Year’s Eve of 1502. Indeed, here in chapter 7 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes as if he were a chronicler of the duke’s life, having both observed and spoken with Valentino. Machiavelli repeatedly insists that he wishes to record the duke’s sayings and actions so that those who had not experienced them firsthand might follow them in the future.¹¹

After the assassinations at Senigallia, Cesare no longer depends on the arms of others—at least in his efforts to acquire power. But the task of maintaining power is a different matter altogether: auxiliaries will prove necessary for the consolidation of the duke’s authority within the Romagna. Cesare finds the province badly disordered; the local barons would rather “despoil their subjects than correct them,” and Machiavelli writes of the crimes, feuds, and insolence that plague the people there (*P*, 7). In order to help him bring peace and obedience to the Romagna, Cesare resorts to a “kingly arm”: he promotes Remirro d’Orco, a “cruel and ready man,” to do the job for him (*P*, 7). As readers of *The Prince* know, Remirro succeeds at this task and consequently gains a great reputation for himself.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Machiavelli reports that Cesare begins to fear that Remirro’s excessive authority will become hateful to the people (*P*, 7). However, he leaves it less than fully clear whether Cesare fears that such hatred will be directed toward Remirro or Cesare himself. Or perhaps what really disturbs Cesare is the reputation that Remirro has acquired for himself

as much as, or more than, the hatred he arouses within the people. Will they blame the prime actor or the mere instrument? The prince or his kingly arm? And who exactly is the prime mover in these circumstances? Remirro, who did the dirty work of making the Romagna peaceful? Cesare, who ordered Remirro to do so? Alexander, who effectively gave Cesare the Romagna? Or Machiavelli, for that matter? After all, Machiavelli has put them all there, at least in the context of this little parable.

Initially, it seems as though the establishment of legal and representative institutions will alleviate the people's anger over being rendered "peaceful and united" via cruelty and violence: Cesare establishes a court with a respected presiding officer and representatives from all parts of the region (*P*, 7). In conventional Weberian terms, the policies of a new prince must be enacted, at first by agents with whom he has a directly personal relationship and then subsequently by more formal and impersonal institutions. Again, according to Weber, this can eventually lead to the establishment of a legally rational form of government that is free, at least theoretically, of any "personal" relations of domination, the modern *Rechtsstaat*.¹² Certainly, the duke seems to be transitioning from rule through a henchman—Remirro had been Cesare's majordomo—to procedurally based governance in the Romagna. However, formally rational institutions are not sufficient for either Machiavelli or Cesare at this point in the latter's mission to establish a state in north-central Italy. Routinized administration is not all that the duke provides the people; he also brings them food for their souls. Machiavelli suggests that Cesare wishes to purge the people's "spirit" of their *hatred* more fully, and that he wants to show them from whom the cruelty that ordered the province really derived: not from Cesare but from his minister (*P*, 7).

As Machiavelli tells it so unforgettably: one morning in the town square of Cesena, the people find Remirro in two pieces, "*in dua pezzi*," with a bloody knife and a piece of wood beside him (*P*, 7.30). As anyone even slightly acquainted with *The Prince* knows, Machiavelli, who was there, reports: "The ferocity of this spectacle left the people at once satisfied and stupefied" (*P*, 7). There are myriad ways of interpreting this spectacle, this *spettacolo*.

One way is to think of it as an illustration of specific Machiavellian precepts. Earlier in the book, Machiavelli claims that anyone who is the cause of another's power will himself come to ruin. He concludes chapter 3 by emphasizing the danger faced by anyone who has helped someone else come to power because a prudent, newly powerful prince will naturally fear the industry or force of their own lieutenants and will vigorously counteract the potential threat that they pose. In short, one becomes a threat to the very person one helps to gain power, and if that person is at all astute they will neutralize all erstwhile aids as potential threats. In the case at hand, Remirro solidified Cesare's power for him and receives bodily bisection as his reward. However,

Remirro may also have gone too far and thus may have deserved his fate: Machiavelli notoriously instructs elsewhere that it is better for rulers to be feared than loved, but that one must avoid hatred in order to be truly secure (*P*, 17, 19). Popular hatred is precisely what Remirro's cruelty caused, a "spirit" that the duke can scarcely afford.

But Cesare and Remirro are *both* described as cruel by Machiavelli. Why is the duke's cruelty preferable? Why does his cruelty result in fear but not hatred? In a celebrated discussion, Machiavelli contrasts Cesare's cruelty to the supposed kindness of the Florentine republic in dealing with subject cities (*P*, 17). Florentine "charity" allowed disorders to continue—war after war, rebellion after rebellion—that cost more lives than the single, solitary life (Remirro's), which Cesare expends at a stroke for the sake of all the people of the Romagna. In this sense, at least, Cesare's cruelty is more Christian than is Florence's charity. It is a Christian tenet, after all, that one individual be sacrificed for the sake of everyone else; one person, Jesus Christ, must pay for everyone else's "sins," *peccati* (one of Machiavelli's favorite words).¹³ Indeed, one might consider whether the block of wood that Cesare left near Remirro's two bodies is a visual allusion to the cross and the ultimate meaning of the Crucifixion.¹⁴

Further reflection yields additional interpretive possibilities. Later, in chapter 21, Machiavelli advises princes on the subject of holidays: at suitable times of the year a prince should entertain the people with festivals and spectacles—*spettacoli*, the plural form of the same word he uses to describe the Remirro incident (*P*, 21). Machiavelli need not mention something that almost anybody reading *The Prince* at the time would have known: Remirro was cut in two pieces on December 26, 1502. Given this fact, Remirro's death is a Christmas present, or more specifically, a Saint Stephen's Day or "Boxing Day" present, for the people of the Romagna. Christmas is a festival celebrating God's covenant with mankind, His promise to redeem humanity.¹⁵ The day after, the feast of Saint Stephen, is the holiday when European nobles traditionally bestowed provisions (in leather boxes) on the poor so they might enjoy sustenance through the balance of the winter. Machiavelli's duke, it seems, has provided sustenance for the common people's "spirit" with a holiday spectacular. Perhaps this is part of Machiavelli's lesson that a prince must "appear" to be generous or pious (*P*, 16, 21). Or maybe there is an even more substantive message behind appearances or even the appeal to appearances in this circumstance.

After all, the spirit of Christmas is captured by much more than presents and pageants. The Holy Father sends his son to save the people, to bring the latter peace and unity on earth. Cesare is also a prince of peace sent by his "Holy" father to the people of the Romagna. In this sense, Remirro's execution at Christmas is a covenant, a promise of faith. Indeed, perhaps the duke

is thinking of Christmas, as it was traditionally understood, as a season rather than a day, a season comprising several important feast days. After Christmas Day and Saint Stephen's Day, the next major feast in the Christian calendar is a reminder of another covenant between God and His people. Until fairly recently, the Feast of the Circumcision, celebrated on January 1, was the day when Roman Catholics acknowledged Jesus's ties to the Jewish people, the fact that Jesus came not only to bring new laws but to fulfill old ones as well. Jesus, like all Jews since Abraham, bore the physical mark of God's covenant with Israel, a covenant signified by a cutting, a severing of one's member.¹⁶ Remirro, we should recall, was Cesare's "kingly arm," his princely extension—in several senses, his extremity (*P*, 7). He is a prominent symbol of the duke's authority, a political phallus, if you will. I suggest that it is notable that Remirro would be severed and publicly rendered in two bloody pieces during this significant holiday season in the Christian liturgical calendar.

What might be the substance of the covenant between Duke Valentino and the people of the Romagna? Cesare sets up courts establishing law and accountability and then jettisons the part of himself that resorted to extraordinary, extralegal violence. He dismembers himself from the very body that signifies excessively cruel violence. He dramatically cuts himself off from the very embodiment of arbitrary violence. In Machiavelli's account, the duke leaves the bloody knife behind at the scene of the crime. In some sense, this conveys the message: "I didn't do this, Remirro is responsible." The knife symbolizes Remirro's excessively cruel policies, and so it remains with *him*. Yet, the duke may be communicating a deeper, more profound form of separating, of distinguishing *that* from *this*. The duke also seems to say: "Now that the Romagna is well ordered, I have no use for either Remirro *or* a knife." Going forward, a prince would certainly have recourse to a sword, while commanding troops or at the behest of the courts; but not a knife, which is functionally and symbolically a very different instrument. Indeed, Machiavelli later remarks how a prince who misuses cruelty and rouses his subjects' hatred must always "keep a knife in his hand" (*P*, 8). On the contrary, a prince who uses cruelty well, who provides good government and avoids popular hatred, can afford to rely on laws and representative institutions. He has no need of criminal means; he can leave behind the criminal weapon and perhaps criminality itself.

Now we begin to understand more fully why the "vulgar," the common people, call Cesare by the exalted title, Duke Valentino. At the Feast of the Circumcision, Roman Catholics traditionally celebrated the consecration, by blood, of Jesus's name and its affiliation with the name of "savior." The people of the Romagna seem to understand the name Valentino in precisely this sense. The people may not be unaware of the behavior that Machiavelli catalogs in *The Prince*: that Cesare wages war, lies, strangles, and betrays his way to

acquiring and consolidating power in the Romagna. Likely, moreover, they've heard the rumors surrounding Cesare that were so ubiquitous at the time that Machiavelli doesn't even bother to mention them: that Cesare keeps his sister as a concubine, that he slew his own brother, and that he raped and murdered the boy prince of Faenza—this, after guaranteeing the child's safety in return for the town's surrender.¹⁷ However, as far as the people are concerned, the following facts are much more consequential: Duke Valentino beat down the nobility who misruled the people for so long; he ended the arbitrary violence that continually plagued them; and he established judicial and representative institutions for them. In short, Valentino provided "good government" and allowed them to "savor well-being" (*P*, 7). The people, recall, are concerned with outcomes and appearances. Well-being and good government are tangible outcomes that satisfy the people. The bloody execution of Remirro stupefies them into accepting the appearance that the duke is less than fully complicit in the cruel policies that Remirro deployed to deliver good government.

Through his description of Cesare's actions, an account that would not be lost on Max Weber, Machiavelli draws the blueprint that statebuilders like the Tudors, Bourbons, Hohenzollerns, and their illustrious ministers would follow in creating the national dynastic states of Europe. Weber demonstrates that the modern state rests upon a historically unprecedented level and extent of popular legitimacy, a kind of popular legitimacy described and foretold by Machiavelli in his account of Cesare Borgia.¹⁸ Despite oft-quoted passages where Machiavelli pronounces on the ingratitude of men or the fickleness of humanity (*P*, 17), when the Florentine describes the behavior of "the people" specifically as a class, he emphasizes this fact: as the duke's political good fortune starts to fade with his father's death, his own illness, and the election of an unfriendly pope, the people of the Romagna do not erupt into anarchy, rebel against his rule, or invite foreign forces to invade. On the contrary, they wait faithfully for the return, the second coming, of the prince who'd brought them peace (*P*, 7). The people's faithful obedience is the reward for a prince who suppresses the nobility, curtails arbitrary violence, and establishes law—the very stuff of modern state legitimacy. While modern statebuilders did not put down roots as deeply into popular soil as Machiavelli recommended, they nevertheless forged more intimate ties with the people than did most of their historical antecedents.¹⁹

Machiavelli is the first major thinker in the history of political thought to favor the people unequivocally over the aristocracy when discussing the stability of principalities and republics. As he asserts in chapter 9, princes may establish their power on the social foundation of either the people or the nobles, the *popolo* or the *grandi*. These classes are motivated by two opposing "humors" that exist in every polity: the people's desire not to be dominated

and the nobility's desire to oppress (*P*, 9). According to Machiavelli, these humors interact to cause principality, liberty, or license. When the parties successfully interact, liberty or a republic is the result; when their conflict approximates civil war, the result is license or anarchy. But for Machiavelli's purposes in *The Prince*, when one part of the polity is not satisfying their humor—when the *grandi* are not oppressing with some level of satisfaction, or the people are not living free of such oppression to a sufficient extent—one or the other, or both, will raise up a prince to enable them to do so (*P*, 9).

Machiavelli provides several reasons why a prince should ally with the people instead of the great. He warns that the prince who has been elevated by the nobles is always in danger because the latter view the prince as just one of their own who can be unmade at any time and replaced with another from their ranks (*P*, 9). On the other hand, the people give the prince much more leeway, since they don't assume, as do members of the *grandi*, that they can rule as well as he can. Moreover, Machiavelli avers that it is an easier task to side with the people: the nobles cannot be satisfied as readily as the people because their desire to oppress is infinite, while the people's desire not to be oppressed is fixed (*P*, 9). Relatedly, the people will be pleasantly surprised when they are not oppressed, while the nobles will always be unimpressed by a prince's efforts; they inevitably assume that more could be done to facilitate their oppression of the people. Machiavelli also suggests that it's much less dangerous to side with the people: when offended, the worst the people will do is abandon a prince, but a disaffected nobility is very likely to kill him (*P*, 9). The example of Duke Valentino demonstrates that the people will remain faithful if a prince has successfully defended them from the great and quelled the disorder that corrupt rule by the few invariably entails.

In any case, to quote Machiavelli at this point: "Let us return to where we left off" (*Ma torniamo donde noi partimmo*; *P*, 7). He writes this immediately following the description of the Remirro *spettaculo*. After recounting a story about cutting, severing, and separating, Machiavelli points to a rupture, a disjuncture in his narrative: where did we "leave off," indeed?

Malignity of Fortune or Deficiency of Virtue?

Duke Valentino seems to have done pretty well for himself at this point in Machiavelli's account. He has strangled enemies, cut to pieces erstwhile friends, and won over the people. In short, he has eliminated all those on whom he might have depended—except the people. Dependence on the people is, after all, the only infringement on absolute autonomy that

Machiavelli countenances in *The Prince*. But there is still Cesare's initial dependence on his father to consider. Pope Alexander VI, who had disappeared from the proceedings, returns to the narrative. Machiavelli reports that Cesare was secure in the Romagna and would have been able to proceed with further acquisition in Italy *if* Alexander had lived (*P*, 7). The duke's father, the pope, is dying, and his successor will likely take away what Alexander had given him. In other words, a new prince will take away Cesare's patrimony, and Machiavelli expresses the following with brutal frankness: men forget the death of their father before the loss of their patrimony (*P*, 17). Therefore the duke may not mind the passing of his father so much as what it portends for his own inheritance. In a race against the clock, in a race against mortality, his father's mortality, Machiavelli recounts how Cesare sets about eliminating the bloodlines of all those he's heretofore despoiled. In other words, he kills everyone of whom *he's* deprived *their* patrimonies. The duke has to liquidate the heirs of anyone he's already robbed or killed; in so doing, he must remove a new pope's opportunity for moving against him and retaking the Romagna. In Machiavellian terms, Cesare does not want to give a "new founder" the occasion to exploit someone else's loss into the new pope's gain. He must not give a new Moses, Romulus, or Theseus disgruntled or dispossessed persons to redeem at the duke's expense (*P*, 6).

As Dante, for one, had documented years before, possessions like the Romagna were plums that pontiffs consistently dispensed as patronage to clients and relatives.²⁰ Indeed, Machiavelli's own *Florentine Histories* reads like a litany of invasions by French, German, and Spanish forces, who have been summoned by new popes hoping to dislodge the clients of their predecessors from central Italian territories.²¹ Thus, the threat posed to the duke's new principality by the papacy, his initial source of power, is very real indeed. As Machiavelli intimates throughout *The Prince*, a prince of any ability faces a daunting task in attempting to fortify a territorial base in north-central Italy. Given the structure of the papacy and its status in Italy, such a regime would have to be established under papal auspices but could not be maintained under the same. Machiavelli observes that the papacy is too strong to allow a rival power that might unify Italy to emerge in the region, and yet it is too weak to do so itself (*P*, 11). Since the papacy has no army of its own, papal elections are influenced by foreign powers and the reign of a single pope tends to be quite short—Machiavelli estimates it at about a decade (*P*, 11). More conventional monarchies, on the contrary, control their own arms, determine succession in a hereditary fashion, and do not depend on the lifespan of any particular prince for success, since political projects can be maintained across the lifespans of fathers, sons, grandsons, and so on.

But Machiavelli insists that the duke, despite the odds stacked against him, could have accomplished several tasks before his father's death that would have secured his own power—a few last things, as it were (*P*, 7). Cesare must win over the nobles in Rome to keep the new pope in check. He must control as much of the College of Cardinals as he can so as to influence the election of the next pontiff. And he must acquire as much empire as possible so as to survive a first assault should the latter attack him. The duke accomplishes most of these by the time of Alexander's death: Machiavelli describes with relish how the duke kills almost everyone he can get his hands on and how he wins over the Roman gentlemen, and the fact that he gains control of a sufficient number of cardinals so as to block anyone from the papacy, if not enough to elect his own choice. Moreover, Cesare expands his conquests to include nearly all of Italy not already controlled by France, Spain, Milan, or the Venetians. If he could have done this, Machiavelli suggests, the duke would have stood by himself as “arbiter of Italy,” depending no longer on fortune but only on his own considerable virtue.

Yet Machiavelli writes that Alexander died five years after “he” had begun to draw his sword. It is not exactly clear to whose sword—Cesare's or Alexander's—he refers. As Machiavelli begins to recount the duke's demise, the distinction between father and son is once again ambiguous: Cesare's mission is jeopardized only a few years after he had set about his father's business. Alexander left the duke with just the Romagna, and all the other states, as Machiavelli describes them, “in the air” (*P*, 7). These other potential conquests remain unreal, ideal cities—kingdoms not of this world.²² In other words, the duke's imperium, arguably the most important polity described in *The Prince*, is very much the kind of imaginary regime that Machiavelli dismisses when he boasts about his purported concern with, above all other things, “effectual truth” (*P*, 15).

Late in the account of Cesare's fall from grace, Machiavelli actually adds to the duke's woes by reporting the following: not only is the father dying but the son, Cesare himself, is also seriously ill in the midst of this political crisis (*P*, 7). The duke finds himself sick to death and caught between the hostile states of France and Spain. Machiavelli insists that if Cesare hadn't been sick, he would have pulled off the task—easily. One of the resources that the duke clearly possesses is the popular basis of his power: again, despite his vulnerabilities, Machiavelli states that the Romagna does not rebel against Cesare. The people are certainly not one of the duke's problems: they keep their covenant with their prince of peace. And here Machiavelli reinserts himself into the story as one who witnessed the young prince's actions firsthand, and who subsequently put Cesare's words and actions to paper. Machiavelli relates how he conversed with the duke on the day the new pope was “created” (*P*, 7). Cesare tells Machiavelli that he had considered what would

happen when his father died, but *not* the fact that he himself would be ill as well. Apparently, a son interested in a patrimony may consider a father's death but not his own mortality. Part of the duke's illness seems to have something to do with a certain understanding of mortality, or, as it were, a belief in his own immortality. But why should the young duke be concerned with his own death? What perverse and unnatural way of thinking focuses on the death of a son rather than the death of a father? Fathers are supposed to die; sons grow to become fathers, at which time, according to the natural course of things, they may die.

Cesare admits to his chronicler that he never considered such a thing. And Machiavelli does not reproach him for this. He cannot blame the duke, he tells readers (*P*, 7). He, like Machiavelli, remember, suffered from bad luck, from a terrible "malignity of fortune." But this exoneration is not Machiavelli's final word: It turns out that Cesare made a mistake. His fate was in his own hands, after all; it rested with his own free choice or free will. What is this mistake? Caesar allows Julius to become Alexander. That is, the duke allowed Giuliano della Rovere—a man he had offended—to become Pope Julius II. Machiavelli suggests that Cesare could have vetoed the candidacy of any cardinal, and he could have safely permitted the election of a French or Spanish cardinal, who might not have turned on him immediately. But instead, taken in by Giuliano's assurances, the duke sanctions the election of a prince he has wronged who consequently deprives him of his state. This mistake violates another important Machiavellian maxim: great men never forget an old injury (*P*, 7). In this light, Cesare's ultimate mistake is that he believes in forgiveness.²³

Is this possible? Cesare Borgia certainly doesn't seem to believe in forgiveness earlier in the parable. He preys on his enemies' belief in reconciliation, luring them under this pretext to holiday gatherings where he proceeds to murder them. In this instance it is not so much that the duke forgives, but rather that he "deceives" himself into thinking that others forgive him. And why shouldn't he think this? Anybody reading this account at the time would know that Cesare hadn't offended Giuliano, as Machiavelli states misleadingly. The duke hadn't done anything to Julius. Alexander, the duke's father, had offended Giuliano by exiling him from Rome for ten years. Cesare has spent this whole passion play trying to free himself of dependence on the Holy Father. He wants his patrimony from his father, but without dependence on him. But the offense committed against Julius, every bit as much as the territory of the Romagna, *is* Cesare's patrimony. Machiavelli's lesson seems to be that the duke is more dependent on his father than he can possibly estimate; he doesn't consider that he might be held accountable for offenses committed against a great man by his predecessor. In this sense, the advice seems to be: don't allow someone to come to power whom

you *or* your family has offended. (One wonders if the Medici prince to whom Machiavelli dedicates this book apprehends and heeds this lesson. Just because a different Medici, Giuliano, sacked, tortured, and confined Machiavelli to internal exile for his republican allegiances, should Lorenzo trust this book-bearing office-seeker?)

Ultimately, the coincidence of Cesare's illness and his father's demise, emphasized by Machiavelli, suggests the extent to which the duke's political viability is tied to his father, and that even though he did everything he could, he underestimated just how much he was his father's son. After all, the extreme danger that a new pope poses to the duke's fledgling kingdom suggests that the son's political health is tied directly to his father's physical health. Clearly extrapolating on Machiavelli's account, Burckhardt, as mentioned earlier, suggests that a healthy Cesare would have been able to intimidate the College of Cardinals into electing his man as pope—or that he might even have engineered something more drastic like annihilating the papacy as such.²⁴ However, even if the duke had prevented the election of a successor to his father in Rome, the non-Italian powers that had long benefited from the papacy would certainly have concerted in a vigorous effort to reinstate it. Indeed, the duke could even have declared the Holy See a hereditary office and appointed himself pope. But this radical change in the nature of the institution—this secularization or normalization of it—likewise would have provoked a violent reaction on the part of the rest of the Christian powers.

Alternately, the duke might simply have claimed for himself all of the church's secular holdings in Italy and dared the foreign powers to relocate the Court of Rome elsewhere, if it was so important to them. If not Switzerland—which Machiavelli jokingly mentions to emphasize the papacy's unlimited capacity to corrupt even the most virtuous regions of the earth—Cesare might have suggested, say, Avignon as a repeat location for the Holy See.²⁵ But besides wishing to keep at some distance the corruption that Machiavelli described from infecting their own territories, France, Spain, and the German Emperor would have worked exceedingly hard to reestablish the papacy in Rome. So greatly did they benefit from its location: the very structure of the papacy insures frequent occasions for them to meddle in Italian affairs and invade the peninsula.

The Gospel According to Niccolò

In the foregoing discussion I revisited Machiavelli's account of the rise and fall of Duke Valentino. Cesare Borgia, like other famous founders, was of questionable birth, and a foreigner to the people he attempts to recreate as subjects. This illegitimate child, of Spanish descent, rises to the

rank of almost-arbiter of all of Italy. Having taught *The Prince* for some years, I'm always amused by students' assumptions concerning Cesare's ultimate fate. Machiavelli writes that the duke was deathly sick but never states that he actually dies. Yet students inevitably and overwhelmingly refer to Cesare's *death*, as if he perished from his illness, or was executed by Pope Julius. Machiavelli makes no reference to Cesare's fate beyond his political failure. If one goes looking for the duke's body in the book, one will find it missing. Contemporary readers would know that Cesare was imprisoned by Julius, stripped of his power, and sent packing, a disgrace. But, textually, the body is nowhere to be found. In a book littered with corpses, the duke's body disappears.²⁶

What are we to make of the biblical, and especially Christian, allegories that make Machiavelli's account of Borgia's career read so much like a Gospel? Machiavelli is famous for being something less than an enthusiastic fan of Christianity.²⁷ Is Machiavelli performing a subversion-through-imitation with this allegorical rendering of Borgia? After all, the Antichrist is expected to arrive looking very much like his holy alter ego, despite his very different ultimate intentions.²⁸ Interestingly, in the "First Decennale," Machiavelli pronounced that Borgia's fall was a fate befitting all such "rebels against Christ."²⁹ In this sense, is Machiavelli's Duke Valentino anything other than a rather devoutly anti-Christian exemplar? Indeed, to render Christian themes, motifs, and strains, as Machiavelli does, so violent, conspiratorial, and cynical certainly seems to entail a subversion, perhaps a wholesale inversion, of Christian morality. After all, at the Last Supper, Jesus doesn't have Judas strangled. Moreover, Jesus does not offer His Father some other guy, a stooge like Remirro, to serve as a sacrificial victim in the passion play that redeems humanity. This much is clear. But are Machiavelli's alterations of the Gospel inherently or comprehensively anti-Christian? Does he turn all of the Christian elements he appropriates against Christianity itself?

To be sure, Machiavelli explicitly claims that strict adherence to Christian doctrine has weakened the princes and republics of Italy, and that excessive tolerance of the Roman Church's secular power has kept the peninsula from being unified and hence incapable of resisting frequent incursions by France, Spain, and the German emperor. Nevertheless, Machiavelli writes in the *Discourses* that the problem with Christianity is not so much "our religion" itself as it is reigning interpretations of it (*D*, 2.2). Recent reformers like Saint Dominic and Saint Francis, he suggests, misemphasize certain aspects of the Christian religion: they emphasize the poverty and self-abnegation of Christ's *life* and preach the deferring of punishment for the wicked into the next world. They do not emphasize the true meaning of Christ's *death*; the fact that sins must be paid for with blood in this world, not the next. And here, I believe, is a clue to the further significance of Remirro and

circumcision: Jesus *was* circumcised, and Christians *do* (or did) celebrate this link with Judaism. With this allegorical rendering of Remirro's execution, Machiavelli seems to recast a link between the two traditions, the two Bibles. Moses, of course, is Machiavelli's archetype for an armed prophet, while Savonarola, a Christian *Frate*, serves as his reviled poster child for Christianity's lack of arms (*P*, 6).

But the parable of Cesare Borgia suggests that Christianity offers unprecedented possibilities for founding princely authority upon the people—opportunities that Theseus, Cyrus, Romulus, or even Moses did not fully explore. What if a prophet could redeem the people, as Christianity teaches, more widely and substantively than did the ancient founders, without that prophet having to sacrifice himself for their sins? Machiavelli recounts with delight the “infinite” numbers of envious rivals to his authority that Moses killed rather than allow himself to be usurped by them (*D*, 3.30). Moreover, what if one could champion the weak, in principle, as does Christianity, but not simultaneously leave them weaponless, practically, as did the unarmed prophet?³⁰ The *Discourses* suggest that public executions of prominent citizens, reminiscent of both the Remirro *spettaculo* and Jesus's Crucifixion, are the surest ways to protect the many from abuse by the few (*D*, 3.1).

Clearly, Duke Valentino learned only half these lessons: On the one hand, he certainly kills Remirro rather than himself in a blood rite of popular redemption. However, on the other hand, he trusts too much in the possibility of reconciliation among enemies when he allows Julius to become pope. Nevertheless, Machiavelli and his duke do in fact point the way for princes to interact more directly with their peoples than did all the armed prophets named in *The Prince*. In fact, they do so in a manner reminiscent of the unarmed prophet whose name is never mentioned in that book.

There are suggestions throughout *The Prince* and *Discourses* that Machiavelli wishes to emphasize the sword as a symbol of Moses the founder, as opposed, say, to a symbol of Saint Paul, for whom it also serves as a symbol in Christian iconography. Paul, after all, is often considered the true founder of Christianity. Like Machiavelli's Signor Paolo, who facilitates both Cesare's consolidation of power as well as Machiavelli's written account of it, Saint Paul makes possible our knowledge of Jesus's words and deeds. In the case of Moses, the sword is the instrument of the prophet's often violent founding of a people, of Moses's imposition of his will on the Hebrews through the exercise of lethal force. Conversely, in the case of Paul, the sword is the symbol of the instrument by which the prophet is martyred. Who is the better “armed prophet,” to use Machiavelli's term? The answer seems obvious. We must leave aside for now a full examination of Freud's suggestion that the Hebrews actually killed Moses in the desert: that would in some respect equate the swords of the two founders.³¹

The possibility that Moses both lived and died by the sword does, however, compel us to consider whether it is possible for a successful founder to be armed with a book as well as, or in lieu of, a sword. Moses, Jesus, Paul, and Machiavelli were most fiercely armed with books—books that either they themselves composed or whose authorship was in some extended sense attributed to them. Books, in the right circumstances, allow one to succeed even when arms fail. The image of a prophet armed with a book prompts us to rethink the definition of political success. After all, books attributed to the executed Jesus, the assassinated Moses, the outmaneuvered Borgia, and the sacked and tortured Machiavelli allow such prophets to succeed despite short-term failures—even to succeed after their deaths and thus to win their greatest victories posthumously, in a kind of afterlife.

Despite the duke's failure, through Machiavelli's recounting of his deeds and words, the Florentine *still* offers Cesare as the best example for new princes who must rely on fortune—and that is, in reality, of course, *all* new princes. Machiavelli emphatically reminds us that, despite his shortcomings, the duke is still deeply deserving of notice and imitation. Success, reconceived along these lines invites readers to rethink whether this book, *The Prince*, known above all others for a fixation on practical, real-world success, is in actuality an exercise in political idealism; an elevation rather than denunciation of hypothetical, ideal regimes. Machiavelli may feign indifference to republics and kingdoms that no one has ever seen (*P*, 15), but how else would one characterize Cesare Borgia's kingdom that, as Machiavelli concedes, proved ultimately to be made of "air" (*P*, 7)? Furthermore, how real is the Italian nation-state invoked in the final chapter of *The Prince* (*P*, 26)? Indeed, how factual or real is the Roman republic that Machiavelli reconstructs in the *Discourses*?

Conclusion

This reconsideration of Machiavelli's depiction of Cesare Borgia's career problematizes several established "truths" concerning the Florentine's intentions in composing *The Prince*. Among others, it challenges the idea that Machiavelli's goal is to detheologize politics; in fact, my reading suggests that the founding of all principalities must be consecrated in religious terms. It dispels the notion that the Machiavellian figure of the "armed prophet" is exclusively armed with a sword rather than a book. Moreover, it raises questions concerning the meaning of "success" in a book that appears to be a highly pragmatic "how-to" manual for political success. Most fundamentally, it prompts readers to reconceive the nature of a genuinely political *and* Christian founder.

Notes

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1. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe (De Principatipus)*, composed circa 1513 and published in 1532, ed. G. Inglese (Turin, 1995), abbreviated as “P” and cited parenthetically with chapter numbers within the text. Translations are my own, although I happily rely on the following translations: *The Prince*, trans. H. C. Mansfield (Chicago, 1998) and *The Prince*, trans. W. J. Connell (Boston, 2005).
 2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 3.6, trans. G. D. H. Cole (New York, 2008), 74n1.
 3. See Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London, 1904), 113–17.
 4. Note that the Florentine patrician Francesco Guicciardini, refers to him as Duke Valentino for a more conventional reason: “Cesare Borgia [was] called Valentino because he possessed a state in France by that name.” See Francesco Guicciardini, *History of Florence*, trans. M. Domandi (New York, 1970), 177.
 5. Machiavelli, “Draft of a Letter to Giovan Battista Soderini (September 13–27, 1506),” in *The Prince* (Connell trans.), 127.
 6. Dante Alighieri, *Monarchy*, trans. Prue Shaw (Cambridge, 1996), 52.
 7. Cf. Matthew 17:1–9, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36.
 8. Machiavelli, “A Description of the Method Used By Duke Valentino in Killing Vitellozzo Vitelli, Oliverotto da Fermo, and Others,” in Machiavelli, *The Chief Works and Others*, trans. Allan Gilbert, 3 vols. (Durham, NC, 1965), 1:163–69.
 9. Cf. Acts 9:1–19a, 22:6–11.
 10. Cf. 1 Corinthians 11:23–26, Mark 14:20–21, Matthew 26:23–26:25, John 13:26–13:27.
 11. Cf. Mark 1:14–15, 1 Corinthians 15:1–9, Justin Martyr 1 Apology.
 12. See Max Weber, “The Profession and Vocation of Politics,” composed circa 1917, in P. Lassman and R. Speirs, eds., *Max Weber’s Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1994).
 13. Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, 1 Peter 3:18, John 3:16, Hebrews 10:12–14.
 14. Sebastion deGrazia offers alternative explanations: see *Machiavelli in Hell* (Princeton, 1990), 84, 327.
 15. See Luke 2:11.
 16. See Genesis 17:23–27. Gentiles and observant Jews might understand the act of circumcision differently: the former could conceivably understand the act of “cutting” the foreskin to entail a “severing” of the “member” as a whole, while the latter are likely to distinguish the two such that the cutting of the foreskin leaves “the member” intact, that is, *not* severed. On the practice in medieval Europe, see Elisheva Baumgarten, “Circumcision and Baptism: The Development of a Jewish Ritual in Christian Europe,” in E. W. Mark, ed., *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite* (Hanover, NH, 2003), 114–27.

17. See Guicciardini, *History of Florence*, respectively, 197, 126, and 193–94.
18. See John P. McCormick, “Machiavelli, Weber and Cesare Borgia: The Science of Politics and Exemplary Statebuilding,” *Storia e Politica* 1, no. 1 (2009): 7–34.
19. See John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge, 2011).
20. See Dante, *Monarchy*, 58–59.
21. See Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. L. Banfield and H. Mansfield (Princeton, 1988).
22. Cf. John 18:36.
23. Cf. Matthew 5:38–42, Luke 6:27–31.
24. See, again, Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 113–17.
25. Nicolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago, 1996), 1.12, abbreviated as “D” and cited parenthetically with book and chapter numbers within the text.
26. Cf. Mark 16:1–8, Matthew 28:1–10, Luke 24:1–8, John 20:1.
27. See Isaiah Berlin, “The Question of Machiavelli,” *New York Review of Books* 17, no. 4 (November 4, 1971). For an account of Machiavelli’s critique of Christianity in which Borgia the latter figures prominently, see Clifford Orwin, “Machiavelli’s Unchristian Charity,” *American Political Science Review* 72, no. 4 (December 1978): 1217–28. Orwin closely follows Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, IL, 1958), for whom Machiavelli’s orientation to Christianity is more complicated.
28. See 1 John 2:18, 1 John 2:22, 1 John 4:3, 2 John 1:7.
29. Machiavelli, “First Decennale,” in *The Chief Works and Others* (Durham, 1965), 3:1444–57 at 1456.
30. Despite their failings, Machiavelli intimates that Savonarola and Soderini could have surpassed even Moses and Brutus by more extensively enlisting the people into their efforts to destroy enemies of the new modes and orders that they established: see John P. McCormick, “Machiavelli’s Political Trials and the ‘Free Way of Life,’” *Political Theory* 35, no. 4 (August 2007): 385–411 at 396–403.
31. See Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York, 1955).