

The Prince

Niccolo Machiavelli

Biographical and Historical Background:

Niccolo Machiavelli was born on May 3, 1469, in Florence, Italy, and passed his childhood peacefully, receiving the humanistic education customary for young men of the Renaissance middle class. He also spent two years studying business mathematics, then worked for the next seven years in Rome for a Florentine banker. After returning to Florence in 1494, he witnessed the expulsion of the Medici family, oligarchic despots who had ruled Florence for decades, and the rise of Girolamo Savanorola, a Dominican religious zealot who took control of the region shortly thereafter.

Italy at that time became the scene of intense political conflict. The city-states of Florence, Milan, Venice, and Naples fought for control of Italy, as did the papacy, France, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire. Each of these powers attempted to pursue a strategy of playing the other powers off of one other, but they also engaged in less honorable practices such as blackmail and violence. The same year that Machiavelli returned to Florence, Italy was invaded by Charles VIII of France—the first of several French invasions that would occur during Machiavelli’s lifetime. These events influenced Machiavelli’s attitudes toward government, forming the backdrop for his later impassioned pleas for Italian unity.

Because Savanorola criticized the leadership of the Church, Pope Alexander VI cut his reign short by excommunicating him in 1497. The next year, at the age of twenty-nine, Machiavelli entered the Florentine government as head of the Second Chancery and secretary to the Council of Ten for War. In his role as chancellor, he was sent to France on a diplomatic mission in 1500. He met regularly with Pope Alexander and the recently crowned King Louis XII. In exchange for a marriage annulment, Louis helped the pope establish his son, Cesare Borgia, as the duke of Romagna. The intrigues of these three men would influence Machiavelli’s political thought, but it was Borgia who would do the most to shape Machiavelli’s opinions about leadership. Borgia was a cunning, cruel, and vicious politician, and many people despised him. Nevertheless, Machiavelli believed Borgia had the traits necessary for any leader who would seek to unify Italy.

In 1500, Machiavelli married Marietta di Lodovico Corsini, with whom he had six children. Three years later, Pope Alexander VI became sick with malaria and died. Alexander VI’s successor died after less than a month in office, and Julius II, an enemy of Borgia’s, was elected. Julius II later banished Borgia to Spain, where he died in 1506.

Meanwhile, Machiavelli helped raise and train a Florentine civil militia in order to reduce Florence’s dependence on mercenaries. Later that year, he served as Florentine diplomat to Pope Julius, whose conduct as the “warrior pope” he observed firsthand. In 1512, the Medici family regained control of Florence, and Machiavelli was dismissed from office. A year later he was wrongly accused of participating in a conspiracy to restore the republic, held in jail for three weeks, and tortured on the rack. He left Florence for the quiet town of Sant’ Andrea and decided to pursue a career in writing. In 1513 he began writing his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, a book that focused on states controlled by a politically active citizenry. It was not finished until 1521, mainly because he interrupted his work on *Discourses* to write *The Prince*.

Machiavelli desperately wanted to return to politics. One of his goals in writing *The Prince* was to win the favor of Lorenzo de’ Medici, then-governor of Florence and the person to whom the book is dedicated; Machiavelli hoped to land an advisory position within the Florentine government. But Medici received the book indifferently, and Machiavelli did not receive an invitation to serve as an official. The public’s reaction to *The Prince* was also indifferent at first. But slowly, as word spread, the book began to be criticized as immoral, evil, and wicked.

Besides the *Discourses*, Machiavelli went on to write *The Art of War* and a comedic play, *The Mandrake*. After Lorenzo's premature death in 1519, his successor, Giulio, gave Machiavelli a commission to write *The Florentine History* as well as a few small diplomatic jobs. Machiavelli also wrote *The Life of Castruccio Castracani* in 1520 and *Clizia*, a comedic play. In 1526, Giulio de' Medici (now Pope Clement VII), at Machiavelli's urging, created a commission to examine Florence's fortifications and placed Machiavelli on it.

In 1527, the diplomatic errors of the Medici pope resulted in the sack of Rome by Charles V's mercenaries. The Florentines expelled their Medici ruler, and Machiavelli tried to retake the office he had left before. But his reputation got in the way of his ambitions. He was now too closely associated with the Medicis, and the republic rejected him. Soon, Machiavelli's health began to fail him, and he died several months later, on June 21, 1527.

Philosophical Context

The most revolutionary aspect of *The Prince* is its separation of politics and ethics. Classical political theory traditionally linked political law with a higher, moral law. In contrast, Machiavelli argues that political action must always be considered in light of its practical consequences rather than some lofty ideal.

Another striking feature of *The Prince* is that it is far less theoretical than the literature on political theory that preceded it. Many earlier thinkers had constructed hypothetical notions of ideal or natural states, but Machiavelli treated historical evidence pragmatically to ground *The Prince* in real situations. The book is dedicated to the current ruler of Florence, and it is readily apparent that Machiavelli intends for his advice to be taken seriously by the powerful men of his time. It is a practical guide for a ruler rather than an abstract treatise of philosophy.

Machiavelli's book also distinguishes itself on the subject of free will. Medieval and Renaissance thinkers often looked to religion or ancient authors for explanations of plagues, famines, invasions, and other calamities; they considered the actual prevention of such disasters to be beyond the scope of human power. In *The Prince*, when Machiavelli argues that people have the ability to shield themselves against misfortune, he expresses an extraordinary confidence in the power of human self-determination and affirms his belief in free will as opposed to divine destiny.

Since they were first published, Machiavelli's ideas have been oversimplified and vilified. His political thought is usually—and unfairly—defined solely in terms of *The Prince*. The adjective “Machiavellian” is used to mean “manipulative,” “deceptive,” or “ruthless.” But Machiavelli's *Discourses*, a work considerably longer and more developed than *The Prince*, expounds republican themes of patriotism, civic virtue, and open political participation.

Overview:

Machiavelli composed *The Prince* as a practical guide for ruling. This goal is evident from the very beginning, the dedication of the book to Lorenzo de' Medici, the ruler of Florence. *The Prince* is not particularly theoretical or abstract; its prose is simple and its logic straightforward. These traits underscore Machiavelli's desire to provide practical, easily understandable advice.

The first two chapters describe the book's scope. *The Prince* is concerned with autocratic regimes, not with republican regimes. The first chapter defines the various types of principalities and princes; in doing so, it constructs an outline for the rest of the book. Chapter III comprehensively describes how to maintain composite principalities—that is, principalities that are newly created or annexed from another power, so that the prince is not familiar to the people he rules. Chapter III also introduces the book's main concerns—power politics, warcraft, and popular goodwill—in an encapsulated form.

Chapters IV through XIV constitute the heart of the book. Machiavelli offers practical advice on a variety of matters, including the advantages and disadvantages that attend various routes to power, how to acquire and hold new states, how to deal with internal insurrection, how to make alliances, and how to maintain a strong military. Implicit in these chapters are Machiavelli's views regarding free will, human nature, and ethics, but these ideas do not manifest themselves explicitly as topics of discussion until later.

Chapters XV to XXIII focus on the qualities of the prince himself. Broadly speaking, this discussion is guided by Machiavelli's underlying view that lofty ideals translate into bad government. This premise is especially true with respect to personal virtue. Certain virtues may be admired for their own sake, but for a prince to act in accordance with virtue is often detrimental to the state. Similarly, certain vices may be frowned upon, but vicious actions are sometimes indispensable to the good of the state. Machiavelli combines this line of reasoning with another: the theme that obtaining the goodwill of the populace is the best way to maintain power. Thus, the *appearance* of virtue may be more important than true virtue, which may be seen as a liability.

The final sections of *The Prince* link the book to a specific historical context: Italy's disunity. Machiavelli sets down his account and explanation of the failure of past Italian rulers and concludes with an impassioned plea to the future rulers of the nation. Machiavelli asserts the belief that only Lorenzo de' Medici, to whom the book is dedicated, can restore Italy's honor and pride.