ENRICHED CLASSIC

# THE PRINCE

## ICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

Includes detailed explanatory notes, an overview of key themes, and more

# THE PRINCE

## *Niccolò Machiavelli*

*Supplementary material written by*
*Benjamin Beard*
*Series edited by Cynthia Brantley Johnson*

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# Introduction

## *The Prince:* A Primer in Power Politics

Italian thinker Niccolò Machiavelli's reputation rests almost solely on *The Prince,* a short political tract written in 1513 that advises ruling figures on how to govern. Machiavelli thought the book would stay relevant for fewer than ten years. Nearly five hundred years have now passed since the book was first penned, and it seems just as current now as it did then. Without question, *The Prince* has had a huge impact on international politics. It has provoked anger, sparked debate, and influenced scores of historical leaders—both petty and grand. But Machiavelli's original intentions, and an uncontested understanding of the book's meaning, have eluded readers since its initial publication.

*The Prince*'s structure is simple: a series of chapters, each advising a new ruler on how to deal with a specific situation. The advice is aimed at a type of ruler that was fairly new in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, a "prince" (Machiavelli uses this term to refer to any head of state) whose power lay not in his-

tory, tradition, or custom but rather in military power, money, and ambition. Machiavelli illustrates his points with examples from history and uses the failings and successes of the great rulers of ancient times—such as Philip of Macedon, Hannibal of Carthage, and Alexander the Great—to bolster his arguments. Machiavelli explains how to deal with foreign occupations, how to make a conquered people love you, how to tax, how to allocate offices, how to succeed. He explains how to gain glory, how to advance your country's power—ultimately, how to be a strong ruler. Many of the situations he describes are still faced by today's corporate and political leaders, one of the main reasons the book still seems so current.

But being a ruler, Machiavelli explains, also requires deceit and cruelty, and he offers copious justification and practical advice for employing craft and terror in political dealings. Seemingly unconcerned with the moral consequences of his ideas, Machiavelli tells the new ruler how to accomplish his goals, and does not hide the brutality and violence that must sometimes accompany a campaign for power. In fact, *The Prince* seems to endorse totalitarianism, and Machiavelli seems to recommend tyrants, oligarchies, and military regimes over democratic governments. It is this facet of *The Prince* that has caused Machiavelli's name to become synonymous with amoral politics.

But was Machiavelli writing of the world as it was, or the world as he thought it should be? Was he simply describing the status quo, or laying out a program for maximum efficiency? Was he being serious or satirical? Did he believe in what he was writing, or did he simply say what the ruling family of Florence wanted to hear? Was

Machiavelli a political realist or an advocate of absolute amorality? These questions should be kept in mind when reading *The Prince,* as they remain largely unanswered to this day.

## Historical Context of *The Prince*: An Outline of the Italian Renaissance

Machiavelli lived during the Italian Renaissance, a time of unparalleled artistic, scientific, and philosophical achievement. Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Machiavelli are just three of the hundreds of important artists and thinkers working in the time period. The invention of the movable-type printing press in 1455 had made books easier and cheaper to print, causing an explosion in writing as well as publishing and wide circulation of new philosophical and scientific thought. But this intellectual progress took place amid great political and religious upheaval. The absolute power of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe was weakening, in large part because of popular disgust over the sensuality and decadence of some of the popes. To support their lavish courts, several popes used the sale of indulgences to raise money. Popularized by Pope Sixtus IV, the selling of indulgences refers to the practice of charging churchgoers money for the remission of their sins (though this is not, according to Catholic doctrine, how indulgences are supposed to be used).

In 1478, Pope Sixtus IV authorized the Spanish Inquisition with the intention of rooting out the unfaithful in Spain. Suspected heretics and infidels were rounded up and tortured into submission or confession. It was a dark, intolerant, superstitious period in the history of

Christianity that stretched until the early nineteenth century (when the Inquisition was formally ended by decree). During this time, many thousands of accused heretics were burned alive at the stake and maimed by unspeakable tortures.

Despite such terrifying deterrents, clergy and common folk across Europe began to voice their dissatisfaction with the Church, and various non-Catholic Christian sects sprang up. In 1517, Martin Luther, a German monk, inadvertently started the Protestant Reformation when he nailed his famous "Ninety-Five Theses," a tract decrying the sale of indulgences, to the door of the church in the town of Wittenberg. Luther's act ushered in hundreds of years of violent religious wars in which Catholics and Protestants slaughtered one another and the exact terms of one's religious faith became a life-and-death issue. Understandably, since the constantly changing political landscape brought various religious beliefs in and out of favor and almost anyone could be denounced as a heretic on almost any pretext, an atmosphere of fear, hysteria, and paranoia dominated much of Europe.

The political landscape of Italy was just as fractious as the religious landscape of Europe. Italy as a nation did not exist until the nineteenth century. In Machiavelli's time, Italy was composed of squabbling city-states, each with its own ruler, battling over land on the Italian peninsula. The five dominant powers—Milan, the Kingdom of Naples, Venice, the Papal States, and Florence—jockeyed over land and influence, constantly forming then breaking alliances with one another.

Milan was dominated by the Visconti family—a

vengeful, aggressive clan that ruled Milan for more than a hundred years and controlled much of northwest Italy. Milan was a wealthy, extravagant place. Eventually, Francesco Sforza, the treacherous soldier much talked about in *The Prince,* took over. Milan, like many of the Italian city-states, experienced numerous changes in government, including a ten-year occupation by the French.

After Milan, Venice was the second strongest power in Italy and one of the oldest existing republics. The city-state was ruled by regularly elected doges, with the strong natural defense of the sea protecting it. Venice had the relative peace it needed to become a thriving city of craftsmen, selling products all over the known world through a lucrative shipping trade. Venice was a powerful, majestic place and, for its time, progressive in its politics.

The Kingdom of Naples was a highly contested region, rich in port cities and land, with monarchs all over Europe laying claim to its throne. The Papal States were the collective cities owned by the Roman Catholic Church. Powerful landowners with the wealth and influence of the Church behind them exploited the power of the temporal authority of heaven that the Church represented.

And then there was Florence, Machiavelli's home and a thriving, business-oriented, mercantile state, which had been dominated by the Medici family until they were expelled by the people and the republic was formed. The Florentine republic was a fast-paced, exciting place, with regular elections. To keep ambitious politicians from accumulating too much personal power, the Florentines kept terms of office very short—some terms were as short as two months. Unfortu-

nately, this lack of continuity hurt the government, as no stable infrastructures could develop under such conditions.

An uneasy equilibrium existed among the five powers, as none was strong enough to conquer the other four. The balance was precarious. Each state at one point or another desired the wealth of its Italian neighbors. Further jeopardizing the balance of power was the fact that Italy was surrounded by strong, centralized countries with large standing armies—countries such as France, Germany, and Spain. The Italian city-states relied on mercenary armies in their conflicts, which were expensive and often hard to control.

The Italians all considered themselves Italian. They all spoke the same language, more or less. They were all Roman Catholic (publicly, at least). They recognized the sanctity of the Italian borders. They resented the interference of outside countries. But the Italians could not agree on who should rule over a unified Italy or what type of government an Italian nation should have. This problem would plague Italy for centuries.

In Machiavelli's opinion, Italy's best hope for a unifying leader was Cesare Borgia, a strong, ambitious man who was a capable military commander. Cesare's father, Alexander VI, was the pope, and together they had plans to unify, and then control, Italy.

In 1502, King Louis XII of France, at the bidding of Pope Alexander VI, backed Cesare Borgia's military campaign to unify Italy. Louis owed Alexander a favor because Alexander had granted Louis a divorce in 1498 so he could marry Anne of Brittany and maintain the unity of Brittany and France. At first, Alexander and Cesare's plan worked; with the French army supporting

him, Cesare began accumulating land in the area of Italy known as Romagna. But fortune turned against Cesare, as his father died unexpectedly and Cesare grew sick. The result was a French army, too strong for any individual Italian city-state to defeat, in control of half of Naples and all of Milan. Spain got involved, attacking the French and eventually gaining control of Naples for itself. So Cesare's attempt to gain control over Italy ended with two foreign armies, and innumerable foreign mercenaries, running rampant up and down the Italian peninsula.

The Italian Wars—the collective term for the series of campaigns by Spain, France, and the Holy Roman Empire to take over parts of Italy—lasted until 1559. The wars spread the intellectual and artistic advances of the Italian Renaissance throughout the rest of Europe, but they were disastrous for Italy, with a particularly low point in Italian history coming in 1527, the year of Machiavelli's death. A grumbling army of underpaid mercenaries under the banner of the Holy Roman Empire took control of Rome and spent months sacking the city—plundering, raping, murdering, and maiming—while the defenseless Italian people could only watch in horror. This effectively ended the Italian Renaissance. Italy, the religious, and for a time intellectual, center of the Western world, was utterly devastated. It would be centuries before the country could pull itself back together.

## The Life and Work of Niccolò Machiavelli

Niccolò de Bernardo Machiavelli was born on May 3, 1469, to a middle-class Florentine family. Although his

family had a good record with public office, his father was neither successful nor wealthy. Instead, he offered his son a wealth of knowledge in books—an education in the classics that Machiavelli would put to good use.

In 1498, during the exile of the Medici family from Florence, Machiavelli was elected to the office of Chancellor to the Second Chancery, acting as a mid-level bureaucrat who dealt with correspondence and other matters of state, an office he would hold for fourteen years. During his role as chancellor, he met some important persons of the day, including Pope Julius II and the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I. Machiavelli's views on governing bodies and municipal politics were thus formed by both his classical education and his experience in the trenches of the Florentine bureaucracy. He saw firsthand the advantages of having a country united behind a strong ruler.

Early on in his career, he campaigned for the raising of a standing Florentine army. He eventually was given the job of creating a militia, and began gathering an army for the defense of Florence. When the Medicis returned in 1512, backed by the powerful Spanish army, Machiavelli's troops broke and ran. The Florentine republic was abolished, and Machiavelli was humiliated, both publicly and privately.

On February 12, 1513, Machiavelli was arrested by the Medicis and tortured for his possible involvement in an anti-Medici plot. He was then forced into retirement, where he lived in the countryside and began composing *The Prince*. Although the fall of the Florentine republic was a personal failure for Machiavelli, it fired his political and authorial imagination. It was during his retirement that he created his entire literary

oeuvre: *The Discourses on Livy, The Mandrake Root,* and *The Art of War,* among others.

Machiavelli was an enthusiastic letter writer, and much of his correspondence remains intact. From his personal writings, a witty, dramatic personality emerges, and it is clear that he enjoyed portraying himself as a rogue and relished the role of the villain. He was a fiercely independent thinker who used strong, clear prose, two qualities that set him apart even from the other intellectuals of the Italian Renaissance. His unapologetic pragmatism has led many historians to label him amoral, if not outright evil, but this is precisely why he is worth reading. The fact that he recognized the need to acknowledge those in power is seen by many as a weakness; however, he probably would have scoffed at the accusation.

His personal beliefs are hard to grasp. He wrote both *The Prince,* seen by many as a protofascist defense of totalitariansm, and *Discourses on Livy,* one of the first modern treatises on republics. This mercurial, almost chameleonlike ability to write convincingly about opposing philosophies of government is confounding. On the one hand, it may be seen as moral weakness; on the other hand, it may be a sign of mental flexibility.

Eventually, Machiavelli was given a small job by the Medicis, to write the history of Florence. Unfortunately, he was once again the victim of unfortunate timing and political upheaval; the Medicis were expelled again. Machiavelli was exuberant and applied for his old post, but the republic officials refused, seeing his behavior as duplicitous. The spark in Machiavelli went out, as the republic he valued so much had spurned him.

Machiavelli never attained the greatness of office that he desired, nor was he ever in a position to enact the principles of leadership about which he wrote. He witnessed many of the great personages and events of his time period but had little influence on them. In June 1527, he grew ill, suffering spasms of the stomach. He confessed to a priest, then died, twelve days later. His last words are supposed to have been: "I desire to go to hell and not to heaven. In the former place I shall enjoy the company of popes, kings, and princes, while in the latter are only beggars, monks, and apostles." To the last, he desired to be in the presence of great men.

On his grave, the monument reads: "No eulogy would do justice to so great a name." Virtually unknown in his lifetime, he now resides at the front of political thought. After his death, he achieved the fame, stature, and influence that in his lifetime he so longed for.

# Chronology of Niccolò Machiavelli's Life And Work

1469 On May 3, Machiavelli is born in Florence, Italy.

1494 The Medici family is expelled from Florence. Machiavelli is appointed clerk to Adriani in the Second Chancery.

1498 Adriani becomes chancellor, and Machiavelli succeeds him as second chancellor and secretary.

1500 Machiavelli is sent to France, where he meets with Louis XII and the cardinal of Rouen.

1502 Machiavelli marries Marietta Corsini. He is sent to Romagna as envoy to Cesare Borgia, where he witnesses the events leading up to Borgia's murder.

1503 In January, Machiavelli returns to Florence.

1504 Machiavelli's second mission to France.

1506 In December, Machiavelli submits a plan to reorganize the Florentine military, and it is accepted.

1508 He is sent to Bolzano to the court of the Emperor Maximilian.

1510 Machiavelli's third mission to France.

1512 The Medicis return to Florence with a Spanish army and retake control of the city. Machiavelli is dismissed from office, and he retires to San Casciano.

1513 Machiavelli is imprisoned and tortured after being accused of conspiracy. Once released, he returns to San Casciano and writes *The Prince*.

1515 Machiavelli writes *La Mandragola (The Mandrake Root)*.

1519 Machiavelli is consulted by the Medicis for a new constitution for Florence, which he offers in his *Discourses*.

1520 Machiavelli finishes *The Art of War* and *The Life of Castruccio Castracane*. He is commissioned to write the *History of Florence*.

1526 Clement VII employs Machiavelli as secretary of a five-man body constituted to inspect the fortifications of Florence.

1527 The Medicis are expelled again. Machiavelli applies for his old post but is refused. On June 20, Machiavelli dies of an illness in Florence.

# Historical Context of *The Prince*

1307–1321 Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) writes *Divina Commedia* in Italian.

1341 Petrarch crowned poet laureate of Italy, an event sometimes considered the start of the Italian Renaissance.

1347–1351 The Bubonic Plague sweeps through Italy and Europe, killing between a quarter and one half of the population.

1348–1353 Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) writes the *Decameron,* stories set during the period of the Black Plague, in Italian.

1366 Petrarch (1304–1374), writing in both Latin and Italian, produces *Canzoniere* in Italian, a model for sonnet form.

1412 Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) writes *Rules of Perspective.* In 1419, he designs the octagonal ribbed cupola of the Florence cathedral.

1420 The papacy returns to Rome, having been located in Avignon since 1305.

1434 Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464) becomes ruler of Florence.

1440 Platonic Academy founded in Florence.

1450 After a short experiment with republican government, Milan returns to monarchy when Francesco Sforza takes control of the city. His most prominent successor is Ludovico Sforza.

1453 Constantinople, center of Eastern Church and Byzantine Empire, falls to the Turks. Scholars flee to Italy bringing Greek manuscripts, further fueling the Renaissance.

1455 Johannes Gutenberg (1400–1468), a German, prints a copy of the Bible using a printing press set with movable type.

1469 Lorenzo de' Medici (1389–1464), called "the Magnificent," becomes ruler of Florence.

1471 Sixtus IV becomes pope, undertaking many successful projects in Rome but disgracing the Church through his corruption and practice of nepotism.

1475 Cesare Borgia born.

1484 Sandro Botticelli (1444–1510) paints *The Birth of Venus* for the Medici family.

1492 Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), sent by King Ferdinand of Spain to the West Indies, accidentally discovers America. Alexander VI, the notorious Borgia pope (father of Cesare Borgia), becomes pope.

1494 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) publishes *The Dignity of Man,* considered a major statement of Renaissance humanism.

1494 Charles VIII, king of France, invades the Italian peninsula at the request of Lodovico Sforza, tak-