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NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI

THE PRINCE

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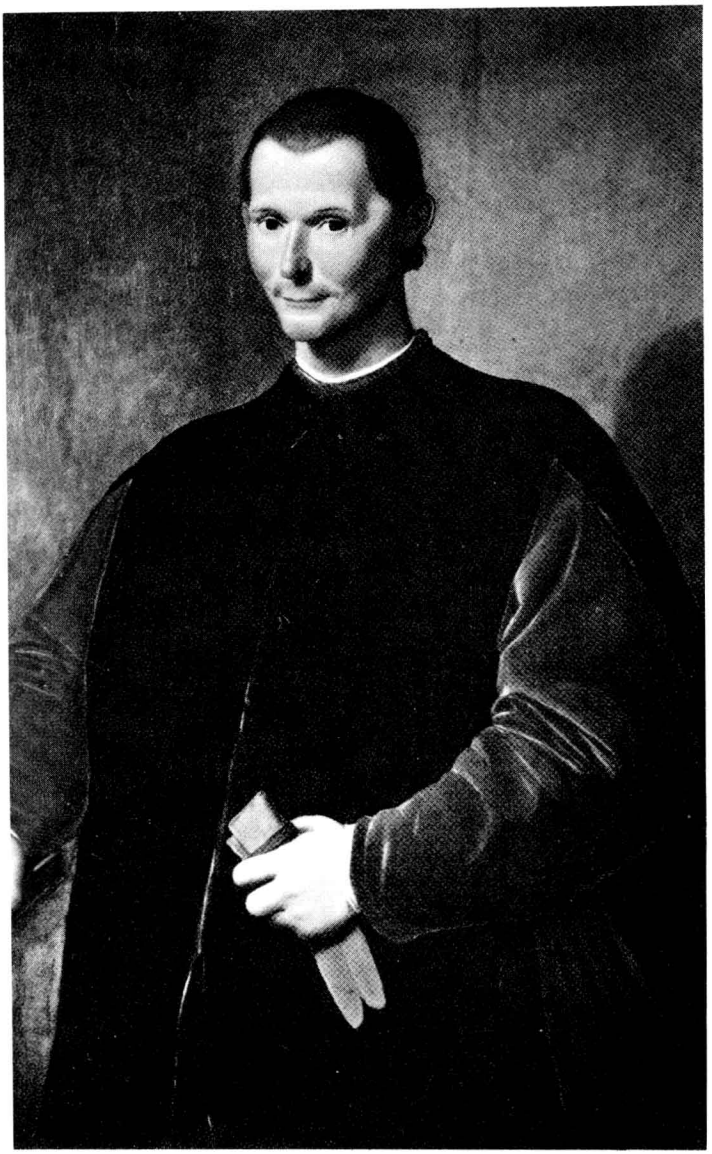
INTRODUCTION



Niccolo Machiavelli by Santi di Tito

Machiavelli is a name that has been transformed into an adjective; moreover, one of not very good repute. Machiavellian has been a synonym for political artfulness and ruthless conspiracy. It is the sobriquet of that diplomacy which is as shrewd as it is false and is as smooth outwardly as it is sharp inwardly, and shameless. The name conjures up not a man nor, for most people, even a book. It identifies an attitude, a point of view, the principle of politics without principle. Machiavellian, when it is intended as a compliment, is meant to celebrate a bad eminence.

But it is also clear from the record that Machiavelli has been something of an intellectual and even a moral hero to romantic idealists like Rousseau, to ardent nationalists like Mazzini. He has been praised, again, for very different reasons by political philosophers who have placed him not far below Aristotle in

political wisdom and with Hobbes in political realism. He has been applauded for having an exact and wordly sense of political realities and for understanding the actual and operative forces in political life. He has been endorsed by scholars for having been, in a serious sense, one of the founders of political science, for a refreshing and responsible analysis of actual causes and their observable consequences in the field of political relations. *The Prince*, for all that it is clearly characteristic of Italy in the early sixteenth century, and clearly assumes a set of small states governed by an absolute monarch, patently transcends its origins and its audience (Lorenzo de Medici, to whom it was addressed) and the readers of that day on that European peninsula. It is a meditation and analysis made by a man not willingly retired from the active political scene. Machiavelli had had a plenitude of experience in diplomacy among the small states of Italy in which, as a diplomat, he had seen the force which so often underlies flexibility, the realities of power behind the rhetoric of public utterance.

If one is to call Machiavelli a political philosopher,

however, one must do so with reservations. It is true that he sometimes, especially in his famous *Discourses*, takes the long view; and even in *The Prince*, within the limits of what he sets out to do, he takes the long view too. It is true that he constantly accents the expedient, but it is long-term expediency considered with respect to establishing or saving the state. There is another sense in which he is a man of perspectives wiser than those of immediate political necessity. He was living, and what is more he was aware that he was living, in a time of extraordinary political transition. The sanctions and powers of both the Empire and the Church had broken down, and even the dream of their revival had faded from men's minds. The political Italy which Machiavelli knew was a small world of quarreling adventurers. Within men's souls the old sanctions, too, had been called into question. There was something approaching anarchy both in the outward scene and in the inner psyche. Machiavelli saw that what was needed was authority; he recognized, too, that authority was possible only in strong princes who knew their own

minds and enforced their own wills. He foresaw a prince strong enough to be ruler of a united Italy in which there should be peace and a kind of justice. In a country divided among rival bands of feuding noble bandits and profligate and ambitious Popes and Cardinals, he saw no other hope.

Machiavelli may then, in a limited sense, be described as a political philosopher. He saw the need of authority and he recognized that the sources of authority were always in some sort of power. He thought that the sources of power should be distinguished from the illusions of political rhetoric. He thought that in a time of chaos and freebooting the first necessities of power were that it should be absolute and that it should be secure.

But if Machiavelli was a political philosopher, he was one who concentrated on politics almost as if it were an autonomous technique and an isolated human enterprise having little connection with the ends which government served (save those of the ruler). He conceived of government without reference to the more ultimate values of morals and religion and art. In

politics itself the first and almost the last thing for him was the gaining and the holding and the exercise of power and, as Machiavelli conceived it, the power of a prince.

The Prince turns out, therefore, to be a handbook for princes, in which general principles are alluded to only insofar as is necessary for help in the guidance of a ruler who puts first things first; the establishment and the preservation of the state through the preservation of the prince's own power. If there is one general principle assumed throughout, it is precisely this. The seductively sinister reputation of the book called *The Prince*, therefore, becomes clear. The usual obeisances to conventional morality, political or otherwise, are *not* observed. Machiavelli cooly keeps his eye on the object and, from the point of view of a ruling prince, on the main chance. Politics is, as it has been called, the art of the possible. It resembles most closely a military campaign. The general does not and need not consider moral or civilian values. He breaks eggs to make the omelettes of victory and does not cry over the broken eggs nor fret about the breakage.

The prince likewise does not consider conventional judgments on the morality of what he does. He does not disdain conspiracy because it is frowned upon, nor treachery because it is condemned, nor murder because conventional minds deplore it. He used all these as instruments; they are devices, however devious; means, however ruthless.

Machiavelli treats the technique of government as he would treat any other apparatus. He considers what is the purpose of government: It is the establishment and the maintenance of ordered rule by a prince. He reflects on what are the means of rendering such order permanent. He calmly assesses the effectiveness of varied means. He quietly suggests that in establishing his rule a prince had better have all the cruelties over with at the beginning; and that he dispense favors gradually, so that subjects may live not in fear of the worst but in constant expectation of something better. He advises a prince to rely on being feared rather than loved: "Men love at their own free will but fear at the will of a prince . . . A wise prince must rely on what is in his power and not on what is in the