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I
Machiavelli on Himself, His Family,
and Friends



Figure 1. Portrait of Niccolò Machiavelli. Private Collection/Bridgeman Images.

As for turning my face toward Fortuna, I should like you to get this pleasure from these troubles of mine,* that I have borne them so bravely that I am proud of myself for it and consider myself more of a man than I believed I was.

Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori,† March 18, 1513

Fortune has seen to it that since I do not know how to discuss either the silk or the wool trade, or profits or losses, I have to talk about the state. I must either take a vow of silence or discuss this. Niccolò Machiavelli, former Secretary.

Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, April 9, 1513

Therefore, if at times I laugh or sing, I do so because I have no other way than this to give vent to my bitter tears.

Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, April 16, 1513

The story is called *Mandragola*. You will see the reason when it is acted, I foretell. The writer is not very famous, yet if you do not laugh, he will be ready to pay for your wine. A doleful lover, a judge by no means shrewd, a friar living wickedly, a parasite the darling of Malice will be sport for you today.

And if this material—since really it is slight—does not befit a man who likes to seem wise and dignified, make this excuse for him, that he is striving with these trifling thoughts to make his wretched life more pleasant, for otherwise he doesn't know where to turn his face, since he has

*Machiavelli had lost his post as Secretary of the Republic in November 1512; in February 1513, he was imprisoned under the charge of conspiracy against the Medici. He got out of prison on around March 13.

† Francesco Vettori (1474–1539), Florentine diplomat.

been cut off from showing other powers with other deeds, there being no pay for his labors.

Prologue to *Mandragola*

Since your departure I have had so much trouble that it is no wonder I have not written to you. In fact, if anything, it is a miracle that I am alive, because my post was taken from me and I was about to lose my life, which God and my innocence have preserved for me. I have had to endure all sorts of other evils, both prison and other kinds. But, by the grace of God, I am well and I manage to live as I can—and so I shall strive to do, until the heavens show themselves to be more kind.

Machiavelli to his nephew Giovanni Vernacci,

June 26, 1513

I know this letter is going to seem disordered to you, not of the consistency you might have expected. Excuse me for being alien in spirit to all these political discussions, removed from any human face and ignorant of matters going on around me, as my being restricted to my farm bears witness. Thus I am obliged to discourse in the dark; I have based everything on the information you have given me. Therefore I implore you to consider me excused.

Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, April 29, 1513

I do not think the moon is made of green cheese, and in these matters I do not want to be persuaded by any authority lacking reason.

Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, April 29, 1513

Magnificent ambassador. Your very kind letter has made me forget all my past suffering; and although I was more than certain of the love that you bear me, this letter has been most welcome to me. I thank you as much as I can and pray God that, to your advantage and benefit, He will give me the power to be able to give you satisfaction for it, because I can say that all that is left to me of my life I owe to the Magnificent Giuliano and your Paolo.* And if these new masters of ours see fit not to leave me lying on the ground, I shall be happy and believe that I shall act in such a way that they too will have reason to be proud of me. And if they should not, I shall get on as I did when I came here: I was born in poverty and at an early age learned how to scrimp rather than to thrive. If you stay there, I shall come and spend some time with you when you tell me that it is all right. And, to cut this short, I send you and Paolo my regards; I am not writing to him because I do not know what else to say.

Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, March 18, 1513

I am living on my farm, and since my latest disasters, I have not spent a total of twenty days in Florence. Until now, I have been catching thrushes with my own hands. I would get up before daybreak, prepare the birdlime, and go out with such a bundle of birdcages on my back that I looked like Geta when he came back from the harbor with

* Giuliano de' Medici (1479–1516), son of Lorenzo de' Medici (the Magnificent); Paolo Vettori (1477–1526), Florentine politician, brother of Francesco Vettori.

Amphitryon's books. I would catch at least two, at most six, thrushes. And thus I passed the entire month of November. Eventually this diversion, albeit contemptible and foreign to me, became impossible—to my regret. I shall tell you about my life. I get up in the morning with the sun and go into one of my woods that I am having cut down; there I spend a couple of hours inspecting the work of the previous day and talking with the woodsmen, who always have some dispute on their hands, either among themselves or with their neighbors. I could tell you a thousand good stories about these woods and my experiences, and about Frosino da Panzano and other men who wanted some of this firewood. In particular, Frosino sent for some loads of wood without saying a word to me; when it came time to settle, he wanted to withhold ten lire that he said he had won off me four years ago when he beat me at *cricca* at Antonio Guicciardini's house. I started to raise hell; I was going to call the wagoner who had come for the wood a thief, but Giovanni Machiavelli *eventually* stepped in and got us to agree. Once the north wind started blowing, Battista Guicciardini, Filippo Ginori, Tommaso del Bene, and some other citizens all ordered a load from me. I promised some to each one; I sent Tommaso a load, which turned into half a load in Florence because he, his wife, his children, and the servants were all there to stack it—they looked like Gaburra on Thursdays when he and his crew flay an ox. Consequently, once I realized who was profiting, I told the others that I had no more wood; all of them were angry about it, especially Battista, who includes

this among the other calamities of Prato. . . . Then I make my way along the road toward the inn, I chat with passersby, I ask news of their regions, I learn about various matters, I observe mankind: the variety of its tastes, the diversity of its fancies. By then it is time to eat; with my household I eat what food this poor farm and my minuscule patrimony yield. When I have finished eating, I return to the inn, where I find the company usually of the innkeeper, a butcher, a miller, and a couple of kilnworkers. I idle away the time with them for the rest of the day playing *cricca* and backgammon: these games lead to thousands of squabbles and endless insults and vituperations. More often than not we are wrangling over a penny; but nonetheless people can hear us yelling even in San Casciano. Thus, having been cooped up among these vermin, I get the mold out of my brain and let out the malice of my fate, content to be ridden over roughshod in this fashion, if only to discover whether or not my fate is ashamed of treating me so!

Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, December 10, 1513

When evening comes, I return home and enter my study; on the threshold I take off my workday clothes, covered with mud and dirt, and put on the garments of court and palace. Fitted out appropriately, I step inside the venerable courts of the ancients, where, solicitously received by them, I nourish myself on that food that *alone* is mine and for which I was born; where I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about the motives for

their actions, and they, out of their human kindness, answer me. And, for four hours at a time, I feel no boredom, I forget my troubles, I do not dread poverty, and I am not terrified by death. I lose myself in them completely.

Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, December, 10, 1513

Besides, there is my desire that these Medici princes should begin to engage my services, even if they should start out by having me roll a stone [like Sisyphus]. For then, if I could not win them over, I should have only myself to blame. And through this study of mine, were it to be read, it would be evident that during the fifteen years I have been studying the art of the state I have neither slept nor squandered my time, and anyone ought to be happy at the chance to make use of someone who has had so much experience at the expense of others. There should be no doubt about my word; for, since I have always kept it, I would not start learning how to break it now. Whoever has been honest and faithful for forty-three years, as I have, is unable to change his nature; my poverty is a witness to my loyalty and honesty.

Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, December 10, 1513

May your Magnificence [Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino]* then accept this little gift in the same spirit in which I send it; and if you will read and consider it well, you will recognize in it my desire that you may attain that

* Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino (1492–1519), son of Piero de' Medici.

greatness which fortune and your great qualities promise. And if your Magnificence will turn your eyes from the summit of your greatness toward those low places, you will know how undeservedly I have to bear the great and continued malice of fortune.

Dedicatory letter to *The Prince*

In this city of ours—a magnet for all the world’s pitchmen—there is a friar of Saint Francis, who is half hermit, and who to increase his standing as a preacher professes to be a prophet; and yesterday morning in Santa Croce, where he preaches, he said many things great and wonderful: That before much time elapses, so that whoever is ninety years of age will live to see it, there will be an unjust pope created against a just pope, and the unjust pope will have false prophets with him, he will create cardinals, and he will divide the Church. The king of France is to be crushed and someone from the House of Aragon will be master of Italy. Our city will go up in flames and be sacked, the churches be abandoned and crumble, the priests dispersed, and we will have to do without divine services for three years. There will be pestilence and widespread famine; in the city not ten men will remain; on farms, not two. He said that for eighteen years there has been a devil in a human body—and he has said mass. That well over two million devils were unleashed in order that they might oversee all of this; they would enter into many dying bodies and not allow those bodies to putrefy, so that false prophets and clerics might resuscitate the dead and be believed. These activities so demoralized me yesterday that

although I was supposed to go this morning to see La Riccia, I did not go; I am not at all sure whether, had I been supposed to go see Riccio, I would have been concerned.* I myself did not hear the sermon, for I do not observe such practices, but I have heard it told about in this manner throughout all of Florence.

Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, December 19, 1513

Fortune truly has brought me to where I may be justly able to requite you, for while in the country I have met a creature so gracious, so refined, so noble—both in nature and in circumstance—that never could either my praise or my love for her be as much as she deserves. I ought to tell you, as you did me, how this love began, how Love ensnared me in his nets, where he spread them, and what they were like. You would realize then that, spread among the flowers, these were nets of gold woven by Venus, so soft and gentle that even though an insensitive heart could have severed them, nevertheless I declined to do so. For a while I reveled within them, until their tender threads hardened and locked into knots that could not be loosed. And do not think Love employed ordinary means to capture me, because aware that they would be inadequate, he resorted to extraordinary ones about which I was ignorant and against which I declined to protect myself. Suffice it to say that although I am approaching my fiftieth year, neither does the heat of the sun distress me,

*Machiavelli is playing with words here. La Riccia was a florentine courtesan and a lover of Machiavelli; il Riccio was a young homosexual offering his services to adult males.

nor do rough roads wear me out, nor do the dark hours of the night terrify me. Everything seems easy to me: I fall in with her every whim, even those that seem different from and contrary to what my own will ought to be. And even though I may now seem to have entered into great travail, I nevertheless feel so great a sweetness in it, both because of the delight that rare and gentle countenance brings me and because I have laid aside all memory of my sorrows, that not for anything in the world would I desire my freedom—even if I could have it. I have renounced, then, thoughts about matters great and grave. No longer do I delight in reading about the deeds of the ancients or in discussing those of the moderns: everything has been transformed into tender thoughts, for which I thank Venus and all of Cyprus.

Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, August 3, 1514

So I am going to stay just as I am amid my vermin, unable to find any man who recalls my service or believes I might be good for anything. But I cannot possibly go on like this for long, because I am rotting away, and I can see that if God does not show a more favorable face to me, one day I shall be forced to leave home and to place myself as a tutor or secretary to a governor, if I cannot do otherwise, or to plant myself in some forsaken spot to teach reading to children and leave my family here to count me dead. They would do much better without me. I am causing them expense, for I am used to spending and cannot do without spending. I am writing you this not because I want you to go to any trouble for me or to worry about me, but simply

to get it off my chest, and I will not write any more about this matter. It is as odious to me as a subject can be.

Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, June 10, 1514

Dearest Giovanni,* I have written to you twice during the last four months, and I am sorry that you have not received my letters, because it occurs to me that you will think I do not write because I have forgotten you. That is not true at all: Fortune has left me nothing but my family and my friends, and I make capital out of them—and particularly out of those who are closest to me, as are you.

Machiavelli to Giovanni Vernacci, November 19, 1515

As for me, I have become useless to myself, to my family, and to my friends, because my doleful fate has willed it to be so. The best I can say is that all I have left is my own good health and that of all my family. I bide my time so that I may be ready to seize good Fortune should she come; should she not come, I am ready to be patient.

Machiavelli to Giovanni Vernacci, February 15, 1516

But since the adversities that I have suffered, and still am suffering, have reduced me to living on my farm, I sometimes go for a month at a time without thinking about myself—so it is not surprising if I neglect to answer you.

Machiavelli to Giovanni Vernacci, June 8, 1517

Lately I have been reading Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*; the entire poem is really fine, and many passages are marvelous. If he is there with you, give him my regards and tell

* Machiavelli's nephew.

him that my only complaint is that in his mention of so many poets he has left me out like some prick and that he has done to me in his *Orlando* what I shall not do to him in my *Ass*.

Machiavelli to Lodovico Alamanni, December 17, 1517*

Nevertheless, so that we can appear to be alive, Zanobi Buondelmonti, Amerigo Morelli, Battista della Palla, and I sometimes get together and discuss that excursion to Flanders with so much energy that we dream we are already on the road—so that it seems we have already used up half of the pleasures we might have been able to have. In order that we may plan for it more systematically, we shall make a small trial run the last Thursday of Carnival by going as far as Venice; we cannot make up our minds, however, whether we should set off early and go down there [to Rome] for you or wait for you to come here so we can go straight to Venice.

Machiavelli to Lodovico Alamanni, December 17, 1517

While in many matters I may have made mistakes, at least I have not been mistaken in choosing you [Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai] before all others as the persons to whom I dedicate these *Discourses*; both because I seem to myself, in doing so, to have shown a little gratitude for kindness received, and at the same time to have departed from the hackneyed custom which leads many authors to inscribe their works to some prince, and

* Prominent Florentine aristocrat.

blinded by hopes of favor or reward, to praise him as possessed of every virtue; whereas with more reason they might reproach him as contaminated with every shameful vice. To avoid which error I have chosen, not those who are, but those who from their infinite merits deserve to be princes; not such persons as have it in their power to load me with honors, wealth, and preferment, but such as, though they lack the power, have all the will to do so. For men, if they would judge justly, should esteem those who are, and not those whose means enable them to be generous; and in like manner those who know how to govern kingdoms, rather than those who possess the government without such knowledge.

Preface to the *Discourses on Livy*

I was completely absorbed in imagining the style of preacher I should wish for Florence: he should be just what would please me, because I am going to be as pig-headed about this idea as I am about my other ideas. And because never did I disappoint that republic whenever I was able to help her out—if not with deeds, then with words; if not with words, then with signs—I have no intention of disappointing her now. In truth, I know that I am at variance with the ideas of her citizens, as I am in many other matters. They would like a preacher who would teach them the way to Paradise, and I should like to find one who would teach them the way to go to the Devil. Furthermore, they would like their man to be prudent, honest, and genuine, and I should like to find one

who would be madder than Ponzo, wilier than Fra Girolamo, and more hypocritical than Frate Alberto, because I think it would be a fine thing—something worthy of the goodness of these times—should everything we have experienced in many friars be experienced in one of them. For I believe that the following would be the true way to go to Paradise: learn the way to Hell in order to steer clear of it. Moreover, since I am aware how much belief there is in an evil man who hides under the cloak of religion, I can readily conjure up how much belief there would be in a good man who walks in truth, and not in pretense, tramping through the muddy footprints of Saint Francis.

Machiavelli to Francesco Guicciardini, May 17, 1521

As for the lies of these citizens of Carpi, I can beat all of them at that, because I have long been a doctor of this art—and good enough . . . so, for some time now I have never said what I believe and never believed what I said; and if indeed I do sometimes tell the truth, I hide it behind so many lies that it is hard to find.

Machiavelli to Francesco Guicciardini, May 17, 1521

If my virtue / Were as immense as my desire, / Pity now
still asleep, awake would be. / But since desire and
strength / Do not go well together, / Suffer I must the
length / Of all my woes, my lord. / And you I do not
blame / I blame myself for this: / Great beauty wants / I see
and I confess / a much greener age.

“Alla Barbera” (sonnet)

To My Dear Son Guido di Niccolò Machiavelli.

In Florence.

My dearest son Guido. I received a letter from you that has given me the greatest pleasure, especially since you write that you have quite recovered; I could not have had better news. If God grants you and me life, I believe that I may make you a man of good standing, if you are willing to do your share. For, besides the influential friendships I have now, I have made a new one with Cardinal Cibo so close that I am astonished at it myself—that will prove to be opportune for you. But you must study and, since you no longer have illness as an excuse, take pains to learn letters and music, for you are aware how much distinction is given me for what little ability I possess. Thus, my son, if you want to please me and to bring profit and honor to yourself, study, do well, and learn, because everyone will help you if you help yourself.

Since the young mule has gone mad, it must be treated just the reverse of the way crazy people are, for they are tied up, and I want you to let it loose. Give it to Vangelo and tell him to take it to Montepugliano and then take off its bridle and halter and let it go wherever it likes to regain its own way of life and work off its craziness. The village is big and the beast is small; it can do no one any harm. Thus, we can observe what it wants to do without causing ourselves any problems, and whenever it comes to its senses, you will be on the spot to catch it again. As for the rest of the horses, do whatever Lodovico has told you to do. Thank God he has recovered and that he has sold

them. Since he has sent some money, I know he has profited, but I am surprised and saddened that he has not written. Greet Madonna Marietta* for me, and tell her I have been expecting—and still do—to leave here any day; I have never longed so much to return to Florence as I do now, but there is nothing else I can do. Simply tell her that, whatever she hears, she should be of good cheer, since I shall be there before any danger comes. Kiss Baccina, Piero, and Totto, if he is there; I would dearly appreciate hearing whether his eyes are any better. Live in happiness and spend as little as you can. And remind Bernardo, whom I have written to twice in the last two weeks and received no reply, that he had better behave himself. Christ watch over you all.

Machiavelli to his son Guido, April 2, 1527

And I repine at Nature, who either should have made me such that I could not see this or should have given me the possibility for putting it into effect. Since I am an old man, I do not imagine today that I can have opportunity for it. Therefore I have been liberal of it with you who, being young and gifted, can at the right time, if the things I have said please you, aid and advise your princes to their advantage.

The Art of War VII

I love Messer Francesco Guicciardini, I love my fatherland more than my own soul.

Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, April 16, 1527

*Marietta Corsini, Machiavelli's wife.

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