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I CAPITOLI: Machiavelli's New Theogony

Haig Patapan

The article considers Machiavelli's *terza rima* poems on Ingratitude, Ambition, Fortune and Occasion, generally called *I Capitoli*, in the context of Renaissance hermeticism, cabbala, erotic magic, and astrology. It argues that these poems, taken together and read as a whole, reveal Machiavelli's playful yet subversive cosmology that ousts the old gods by instituting a new theogony. At the same time, *I Capitoli*, addressed and dedicated to his friends, discloses Machiavelli's own ambitions and desires, delineating the subtle link between Niccolò the poet and Niccolò the prophet and benefactor.

Machiavelli consistently praises the manly virtues of the *vita activa*, while condemning the dissipating, dissolute force of *ozio* or life of leisure and the unhealthy fruits of idleness and *studia humanitati*. Yet throughout his life he never ceases to write. Though required as the secretary and chancellor to correspond, report and advise regularly, he goes further, drafting reports on various aspects of political life while entertaining his friends with his letters, poems and historical works. Even when he is ousted from office in 1512, imprisoned, tortured and finally exiled to San Casciano, he chooses writing over magnanimous silence, drafting his greatest political and historical works as well as poems and famous plays.

One attempt to resolve the problem of "Machiavelli the author," the ambiguous status writing has for Machiavelli, is to suggest that for him writing was never trivial; as one of the most powerful devices for political gain or acquisition it was an essential implement in the art of war.¹ At its highest writing was the proper tool for the struggle between the "most excellent brains" who, by writing about princes and republics, real and imaginary, influenced, indeed directed, those "less excellent" brains who understand and are advised by these authors.²

In this light we need to consider Machiavelli's poetical works not merely "female" and vain works of whimsy, enter-

I am grateful to the editor and the anonymous referees of *The Review of Politics* for their helpful comments and suggestions.

1. On the importance of books and writing see generally the Dedicatory Letter to *The Prince* and the Prefaces to Books I and II of the *Discourses*.

2. Regarding the "three kinds of brains" see *The Prince*, chap. 22. In particular see Machiavelli's reference to the authors of imaginary republics in chapter 15, and the specific reference to Xenophon who, by writing about Cyrus, influenced Scipio (chap. 14).

tainment and, as he protests too much, an attempt to divert himself from his sorrows, but also as powerful political interventions that seek to change the world. In this essay I consider Machiavelli's *terza rima* poems *Ingratitude*, *Ambition*, *Fortune* and *Occasion*, generally called *I Capitoli*, to bring to light his political use of poetry.³ Though specific poems, for example *Fortune*, have received scholarly attention, my argument is that these poems, taken together and read as a whole, reveal a larger work that "sings" into existence what I call Machiavelli's theogony, a new cosmology that exploits the occult, magical, and astrological traditions retrieved in the Renaissance to oust the old gods.⁴ *I Capitoli*, however, is not simply about the new gods. To the extent that each poem, addressed or dedicated to his friends, is an intimate meditation by Machiavelli on his own hopes and longings, *I Capitoli* provides a penetrating insight into Machiavelli's own ambitions and desires; it delineates in fine and intimate detail the subtle link between Machiavelli the poet and Machiavelli the prophet and benefactor.

Eros, Magic, Astrology

To understand Machiavelli's use of occult literary tropes and arguments in *I Capitoli* it is necessary to appreciate the magical, astrological, hermetic, and cabbalistic traditions retrieved in the Renaissance.⁵ The importance of these traditions in the Renaissance, and their implication for literature, philosophy, and

3. References to *I Capitoli* (by line number) are to the Gilbert translation of *Ingratitude*, *Ambition* and *Fortune* (*The Chief Works and Others*, trans. Allan Gilbert [Durham, N C: Duke University Press, 1965]) and to the Tusiani translation of *Occasion* (Joseph Tusiani, *Lust and Liberty: The Poems of Machiavelli* [New York: Ivan Obolensky, 1963]). I have also referred to Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, ed. Ezio Raimondi, 6th ed. [Milano: Ugo Mursia, 1973]).

4. For commentary on specific poems and themes see, for example, Albert Russell Ascoli and Victoria Kahn, *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); John M. Najemy, *Between Friends: Discourses of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli-Vettori Letters of 1513-1515* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Anthony J. Parel, *The Machiavellian Cosmos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Russell Price, "The Theme of Gloria in Machiavelli," *Renaissance Quarterly* 30 (1977): 588-631 and "Ambizione in Machiavelli's Thought," *History of Political Thought* 3 (1982): 383-445.

5. For general references see Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1964); Charles Schmitt, and Quentin Skinner, *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Christianity can be seen in a brief examination of the works of Ficino and Pico.

The son of Cosimo de' Medici's physician, Marsilio Ficino was a philosopher, scholar, priest, and physician.⁶ Supported by Cosimo de' Medici, Ficino's Latin translation of the entire Platonic corpus, and importantly his commentaries, became influential for subsequent philosophers and poets. Ficino's understanding of Plato was fundamentally shaped by his conception of a *prisca theologia* or ancient wisdom that combined philosophical and religious wisdom. Thus Ficino saw Plato as an heir to the great hermetic tradition and regarded the neoplatonism of Plotinus as the unfolding of a comprehensive Christian truth.

Ficino's syncretic *prisca theologia* gave rise to his influential teaching on erotic magic and astrology. His commentary on Plato's *Symposium* established a new genre of *tratti d'amore* and the concept of "Platonic Love" (*amore platonico*), first coined by him.⁷ Drawing on Christianity and Plato, Proclus and Plotinus, Ficino's theology and cosmology saw a vital nexus between magic, love and astrology. In his *De vita coelitus comparanda* (1489), a medical treatise on health and longevity, Ficino added a third and final part, a commentary on Plotinus, where he elaborated the role of the philosopher as magician who used charms to transplant heavenly into earthly objects. The soul as immortal and divine, and eros as a powerful magic force, justified Ficino's erotic magic, based on talisman and astrological songs.⁸

The rebirth of the occult that is evident in Ficino can also be seen in the works of his gifted student, the philologist and theologian Pico della Mirandola.⁹ To Ficino's licit magic, the *magia naturalis* or natu-

6. Marsilio Ficino (1433-99), hunchbacked and with a slight stammer, was often burdened with fits of melancholic despair. He became a priest in 1473 and later canon of Florence Cathedral. He was tutor to Lorenzo de' Medici and became the head of the Platonic Academy in Florence, based at Cosimo de Medici's villa in Careggi (Kristeller, *Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*).

7. The commentary, *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis de Amore* was first written in 1469 and printed in 1484, translated into the vernacular as *Sorpa Lo Amore O ver' Convito di Platone* (John Charles Nelson, *Renaissance Theory of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 69; Kristeller, *Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, p. 286).

8. See generally Joan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

9. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) left his estate in Modena to devote his life to philosophy and theology and spent seven years traveling extensively, visiting the chief universities in Italy and France. Toward the end of his life he was converted by Savonarola (Brian P. Copenhaver, "Astrology and Magic," in Schmitt and Skinner, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 264-300).

ral magic that sought to join powers sown and separated in nature by using the *spiritus mundi* and the manipulation of material objects, Pico introduced the cabbala.¹⁰ Pico is the instigator and founder of the union of hermetic and cabbalistic tradition: his appropriation of Arabic, Hebrew, and Chaldean traditions to the Greek and Latin allowed the Renaissance *Magus* the cabbalistic techniques of scriptural exegesis—*notorikon* (abbreviations), *gematria* (letter numerology), *themurah* (anagrams)—and the invocation of angels, archangels, the ten sephiroth (the names or power of god) and even God.

In 1486, the precocious twenty-three year old Pico went to Rome with his *Conclusiones* or 900 theses on philosophical, cabbalistic, and theological subjects that he wanted to defend publicly. When thirteen of these were criticized for heresy he wrote his *Apologia* in 1487, which resulted in the condemnation of all 900 theses by Pope Innocent VIII.¹¹ After a brief imprisonment in Lyon, Pico was invited to Florence by Lorenzo de' Medici where, under the influence of Savonarola, he withdrew to a life of pious austerity, dying of fever at the early age of 31. It is under Savonarola's influence that he wrote his *Disputations Against Astrology*, published in 1493 after his death, where he admits the influence of the stars on physical objects but denies their power on the human soul or will.

In this brief overview of the works of Ficino and Pico we discern the radical aspects of the Renaissance. The great importance of antiquity in the Renaissance, which led to a rebirth of all forms of knowledge, especially classical philosophy and literature, inevitably gave weight and authority to the occult sciences, including hermeticism, cabbala, astrology, magic, and all their attendant rituals and techniques. Thus the Renaissance represented a rebirth of theology as much as philosophy, literature, and the arts. Clearly these views and practices presented a challenge to orthodox Christianity.¹² One way of meeting this chal-

10. Upon seeing a copy of Moses de Leon's *Zohar* in the early 1480s, Pico became enraptured with cabbalistic ideas, to the point of persuading Pope Sixtus IV of the importance of translating Leon's text and other cabbalistic works into Latin (Philip Beithchman, *Alchemy of the Word: Cabala of the Renaissance* [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998], p. 65).

11. Among the 900 theses were twenty-six *Conclusiones Magicae* on natural and cabbalistic magic. His short and subsequently influential oration celebrating human freedom and dignity, intended as an introduction to the disputation of the 900 theses, subsequently became *On the Dignity of Man* (Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964], p. 87).

12. Consider, for example, the ambiguous place of stars and magic in Christianity. See Augustine's condemnation of idols (*City of God*, VIII, xxiii) and Thomas' differentiation between legitimate use of herbs and gems and illicit use of engraved stones, invocations and incantations (*Contra Gentiles*, III, civ-cvi; *Summa Theologica* 2da 2dae, q 96, art ii.; Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, pp. 42-43).

lenge was to argue, like Ficino, that there was a fundamental agreement in all these forms of knowledge, attesting to the truth of the Christian teaching. But such accommodation had the limitations of all forms of syncretism, as well as the real and everpresent danger of heterodoxy as Pico and Savonarola were to discover.

Machiavelli's *I Capitoli*, his poems on the genealogy and influence of the gods Ingratitude, Ambition, Fortune and Occasion, seem to place him in this tradition. Is he, like Ficino and Pico, a believer in humors, stars, spiritual magic?¹³ What does this say about his piety?¹⁴ Of his innovative "modernity"?¹⁵ It is to engage these questions in the context of eros, magic and astrology, as well as Christian eschatology and soteriology, that we turn to the theogony of Machiavelli's *I Capitoli*.

I CAPITOLI DELL'INGRATITUDINE

Dell'Ingratitudine is a deeply personal poem for Machiavelli. After the return to power of the Medici in 1512 Machiavelli was removed from the Florentine Chancellery. This was soon followed by an even more painful blow—Machiavelli and his friend Giovanni Folchi became entangled in the Boscoli conspiracy.¹⁶ Addressed to Folchi, *Dell'Ingratitudine* is an unhappy reflection on the injustices

13. See Parel, *Machiavellian Cosmos*.

14. On Machiavelli's piety compare generally Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. Cecil Grayson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) and Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) with Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli's Three Romes: Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996).

15. On the "modernity" of Machiavelli see *The Prince*, Dedicatory Letter and chapter 15; *Discourses*, Prefaces to books I and II, and generally J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), Harvey C. Mansfield, *Taming the Prince* (New York: Free Press, 1989).

16. In mid-February 1513, after the return of the Medici, Peitropaolo Boscoli accidentally dropped a piece of paper containing a list of names in the house of a family related to the Soderini. As Boscoli was known to be an opponent of the Medici the list was brought to the notice of the government and a plot suspected. Both Boscoli and his closest associate, Agostino di Luca Capponi, confessed they intended to change the government by assassination but denied that those on the list were part of the conspiracy. Nevertheless, on 12 February 1513 all on the list were arrested, including Machiavelli and Folchi. Machiavelli was imprisoned, tortured and fined, finally let off due to a general amnesty at the election of Leo X. Folchi, his close friend, was sent away for two years to the notorious castle at Volterra. He died in 1518 (Machiavelli, *Opere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, p. 1276; J. R. Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy* [London: English Universities Press, 1961], p. 137).

both have suffered. As Machiavelli declares at the start of the poem, it is an attempt to bridle his own sorrow and pain and perhaps, by doing so, comfort his friend.

Dell'Ingratitudine outlines the birth of the goddess Ingratitude, and the three cruel and deadly arrows with which she wounds the populace and rulers. According to Machiavelli, "When the stars, when the heavens were indignant at human / pride, for man's abasement Ingratitude then was born in the world" (22-24). Though it seems that the stars and heavens caused the birth of Ingratitude and therefore human sorrow, implicit in this story is the view that both the sky and heavens were themselves victims of ingratitude—human pride, a mistaken notion of self-sufficiency, did not duly acknowledge the beneficence of the gods. Therefore Ingratitude is not born after the "Fall" but is coeval with the sky and the heavens, even superior: where someone gains great fortune through heaven's "good wishes and her joyous aid, in no long time afterward he unsays his words" due to the actions of Ingratitude (31). What then is the origin of Ingratitude? According to Machiavelli, "Of Avarice she was the daughter and of Suspicion; she was nursed in the arms of Envy" (25). He later states, "Never does Ingratitude perish; never is she destroyed; a thousand times she rises up, if once she dies, because her father and her mother are immortal" (58). Thus Avarice and Suspicion are immortal gods or divine principles that rule heaven and earth. Their daughter, who like Cupid is an archer of desires, unleashes three types of arrows from her quiver. The first recognizes benefits without reciprocating, the second forgets or denies any benefits received, the third, which "cuts through to the bone" and is "more deadly," never remembers or returns a favor and "rends and bites his benefactor."

What is it about Avarice and Suspicion that gives birth to Ingratitude and the pains from her arrows? Why do we want to disavow our benefactors and even do them harm? In *Dell'Ingratitudine* Machiavelli makes a political distinction between princes and the people. Though "everything is pierced and bitten" by Envy's tooth, ingratitude appears to be a princely vice: she has her "nest" in the breasts of princes and kings from where "she anoints the hearts of all other men with the poison of her treachery." Why are rulers in particular ungrateful? At the end of the poem, after giving "modern" examples of princes in whom "Nature" has placed ungrateful hearts, Machiavelli notes that "shifters of governments and givers of kingdoms" are repaid with death or exile

because when you cause a government to shift, the prince you have made then fears your taking what you have bestowed and does not keep faith

or compact with you, because more powerful is his dread of you than the obligation incurred, and for just so long this terror lasts as he requires to see your family destroyed, and the sepulchre of you and yours (172-180).

Machiavelli is fully aware that conferring a benefit raises expectations and imposes obligations. He calls it a sort of "contract." But this contract of obligation is alloyed with fear: the beneficiary is made to realize that since the act of conferring a benefit is voluntary, the benefit can be taken away—the recipient of benefits is reminded of his weakness and vulnerability. Ingratitude varies with the extent of these sentiments. For example, we are content to acknowledge small benefits. But where the benefit conferred is overwhelmingly grand, when the benefaction "makes" the prince, then the obligation is not only forgotten but returned with harm. This ingratitude is due to the dread of losing the benefit. Desire to acquire or Avarice, combined with Suspicion of loss and ill-intent, nurtured by Envy of the benefactor's superiority, fosters and sustains the Ingratitude that unleashes the cruelest arrow, harm instead of gratitude.

The problem seems to be worse with the people—Ingratitude "triumphs in the heart of every ruler, but takes more delight in the heart of the populace when it is master" (61). The reason is twofold. The people are more suspicious because they are more ignorant: "where little is known, more is suspected." As well, the people are more envious, making them willing to hear slanders (64-67). Consequently great deeds such as the taking of towns and honoured wounds "are wiped from the record by the slightest censure for a tiny fault" (145). Machiavelli's example is Scipio, whose great deeds were repaid by the Romans with harm.¹⁷

The poem reveals Machiavelli's fundamental diagnosis of politics—the common good and justice are not possible. The ardent patriot, the loyal courtier, the bravest general will be rewarded with ignominy, exile, death. Principalities and republics need, but cannot afford, faithful captains and patriots. Based on these

17. To show the universality of this problem Machiavelli looks to Athens where "Ingratitude made her nest fouler than elsewhere" (130). Athens was foolish because "she knew what was good and chose not to follow it" (136). In the *Discourses* Machiavelli acknowledges that ingratitude is a "vice" though his subsequent discussion shows its necessary or "natural" basis (book I, chaps. 29, 30). What is remarkable in the *Discourses* is the Machiavellian advice to princes and republics on how to avoid ingratitude and his advice to captains and citizens on the modes to avoid being crushed by it (chap. 30)—Machiavelli's apparently dispassionate advice reveals the obdurate, perhaps insoluble problem of justice in the city.

irreconcilable differences between the prince and the captain, the people and the great citizen, Machiavelli offers dispassionate, clear-sighted advice to everyone for overcoming ingratitude. Two political alternatives are anticipated in *Dell'Ingratitudine*. Referring to Caesar and apparently defending tyranny, Machiavelli claims that Caesar's "snatching the throne" was due to "rightful anger and rightful resentment." Ingratitude will transform a mild and humane citizen into a tyrant: "Often a citizen becomes a tyrant and goes beyond the bounds of his country's law in order not to suffer Ingratitude's injury" (151). Machiavelli, however, appears to favor the example of Scipio Africanus, who did not give in to the "evil desire of others" when he realized Rome must "love freedom or himself"; instead he took his revenge by refusing to leave to his native city "those bones she did not deserve to keep" (124). Nevertheless at the end of *Dell'Ingratitudine* Machiavelli seems to advocate a third alternative:

So then, Ingratitude not being dead, let everyone flee from courts and government, for there is no road that takes a man faster to weeping over what he longed for, when once he has gained it (184-187).

This option appears to point to Machiavelli himself, the poet who occupies that indeterminate place between private and public. He claims, as we have seen, that he "sings" to bridle the sorrow and pain he feels and to comfort his friend. But how does "singing" balm his pain? And does he, who admits to being "bitten by Envy's tooth," have greater ambitions?

The "sweet strings" of Machiavelli's harp, his poetry, make the Muses receptive to his singing—unlike Homer and Virgil Machiavelli will sing this epic without the aid of the Muses (1-5). But he denies that he writes to win the *corona* or victor's wreath; nor does he think he will add one drop to *Elicona*. Though denying his ambition ("I know I have not breath enough to reach the top of the longed-for hill"), he does claim a certain knowledge ("I know well how long the road is"). His more modest claim is that "such a desire all the time drives me that I believe I can pluck as I go, perhaps, some of the tiny plants (*arbuscel*) that cover that slope" (13). What are these tiny plants? How is this desire different from the sorrow that "madly pursues" his soul? How will poetry provide solace and satisfy his longing?

If *Dell'Ingratitudine* is seen as Machiavelli's new theogony, then it becomes clear how his singing, a meditation on benefaction and justice, can shelter him from the cruel arrows of Ingratitude. In Machiavelli's poem there is something perversely sensible about

ingratitude—it is the unavoidable offspring of the overwhelming desires that dominate us. This realization frees Machiavelli, and his friends like Folchi who will read the poem, of unrealistic expectations. The new gods Machiavelli introduces can replace the old because of the Machiavellian understanding of piety: if overwhelming benefits terrify, forcing us to return favor with harm, then our natural response to divine favours that “make” us (by giving us life, for example) is to fear the gods and to seek to repay them with ingratitude. Beneficence is the true weakness of the gods and pride is the inevitable consequence of divine gifts. The greatest benefits will compel the greatest ingratitude—though longing to kill or exile the gods, we know we are unable and remain in pious terror. Machiavelli understands and satisfies this desire by supplanting boundless and overflowing generosity—Providence and Charity—with less beneficent gods. Expecting less we are less disappointed; we are no longer pained by the arrows of ingratitude.

By singing into being a new, weaker divinity, Machiavelli also introduces a new model for greatness, a “man divine,” “someone who wrought countless noble deeds of piety, of fortitude and charity”:

Never in human hearts has been seen or will be seen—however worthy, splendid, and godlike—so much courtesy; and among those who are dead and those who live, and among all peoples ancient or modern, there is not a man who equals Scipio (106-111).

The warrior prince replaces the Prince of Love and the philosopher. But how admirable is someone who “a harvest contrary to his sowing he gathered,” dying in dishonor? And how are we to reconcile this hero with Machiavelli’s advice to flee from courts and governments? Finally, should we not acknowledge that Niccolò himself is superior to Scipio in overcoming Ingratitude?

These questions take us to the core of the problem of ingratitude. Machiavelli relies on the image of farming to show the treachery of ingratitude: public service is like sowing in sand or water (22). If sowers seek to reap, then it would seem that benefactors also long for gain. This suggests that there is no such thing as a gift or a favor, all benefactions anticipate a return, at the very least thanks. Giving therefore is a means of getting, a form of acquisition. The giver is as needy as the receiver, hence Machiavelli’s claim that conferring benefits is a sort of contractual obligation. What, then, do benefactors seek? If we accept Machiavelli’s praise of Scipio, then the greatest thing, it seems, is the “highest glory.” As a consequence all who seek to serve will ultimately undermine or even overthrow the rule of the prince or the people and assume the great-

est honor. Ingratitude, apparently unjust, is in fact the just response to the politically ambitious. How then are we to interpret Machiavelli's own generosity in *Dell'Ingratitudine*? He claims he does not seek honor, but would he not consider himself the greatest benefactor and therefore the neediest person? Moreover, why would he think he can escape ingratitude in his "singing" when it is the just response to all benefactors? We can only infer from these observations that Niccolò would have anticipated his "Machiavellian" reputation and seen it as proof of his beneficence. But this is perverse logic, where the undeserving are honored, the great maligned. It is not clear how Machiavelli's singing escapes this injustice and therefore salves the pains of ingratitude. Perhaps if Ingratitude is forever born again then temporary respite in poetry is all that is possible.

DELL'AMBIZIONE

Machiavelli has not clarified in *Dell'Ingratitudine* why some seek to "sow"—to give to others and generally to be benefactors. As a result we cannot know the true nature of the goddess Ingratitude unless we also understand the character of ambition. In *Dell'Ambizione* Machiavelli examines the origins of Ambition and Avarice and their influence on nations and governments.

Dell'Ambizione presents itself as a poetic response to a letter from Luigi Guiccardini, who it seems was amazed at the events taking place in Sienna. In 1509 the League of Cambrai had been formed between Pope Julius II, Louis XII, Maximilian of Germany and Ferdinand of Aragon with the aim of recovering church territory from Venice. Machiavelli was instructed to report on the progress of the war and probably received Guiccardini's letter in Verona, the headquarters of the imperial army after Maximilian had raised his fruitless siege of Padua. Unlike the famous self-deprecatory letter to Guiccardini of 8 December 1509 where Machiavelli recounts his erotic misadventures with an old woman, this poem-epistle presents Machiavelli as Guiccardini's superior concerning "l'umano appetito" or human desire (6).¹⁸ Guiccardini's apparent superiority in love is somehow connected to his inability to see the world "as it really is"; he "marvels" (the appropriate response to miracles) because he lives in an imaginary world. As a parody of a Pauline Epistle, *Dell'Ambizione* is the companion piece to the December letter that seeks to humble Guiccardini with the intention of educating

18. Regarding this famous letter see James Atkinson and David Sices. *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence* (DeKalb, IL : Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), pp. 176, 190-191.

him ("If from others a man will deign to learn the ways of Ambition":160). Here Machiavelli outdoes Guiccardini in his knowledge of worldly things and human desire or love, in the horror of the sights he has witnessed ("turn your eyes, Luigi, to this region"; especially lines 124-159), and in his prescience—he foretells dangers for Florence (Ambition "flying over Tuscan mountains," 181ff).

What stops Guiccardini from seeing the world as it really is? Put differently, what obstacles does Machiavelli have to overcome to present his "realistic" view of the world? The lesson which "San Marco" or Venice has learned late is that "he needs to hold the sword and not the book in his hand" (166). Venice erred, it would seem, in emphasizing humanistic studies over martial arts.¹⁹ But of course *the* book is the Bible, which warns that he who lives by the sword, dies by the sword, and advocates turning swords to plowshares. Thus it seems that Guiccardini does not see because he may be relying on what is imaginary, made real by books or the Book. Or as Machiavelli diagnoses the problem, people are astonished because "in the world most men let themselves be mastered by Fortune" (176-7). Accordingly, *Dell'Ambizione* is meant to overcome most peoples' loyalty to books, which effectively subjects them to "Fortuna."

It seems obvious, then, that this teaching should start at the beginning, with *Genesis*. But consistent with his new theogony, Machiavelli appropriates and transforms the Bible. In Machiavelli's telling "Adam and his wife" were banished from Paradise for their tasting of the apple. But the Fall did not lead to human unhappiness—Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, "were living happy in their poor dwelling"(25) when

a hidden power which sustains itself in the heaven, among the stars which heaven as it whirls encloses—to man's being by no means friendly—to deprive us of peace and to set us at war, to take away from us all quiet and all good, sent two Furies to dwell on the earth (25-30).

The status of this *potenzia occulta* or hidden power is uncertain—one wonders whether it gave rise to the pride of the angels and caused the Fall in the first place. It does seem, however, that without this power fallen humanity would have been happy, though living "naked and destitute of all riches." There was, then, contrary to *Genesis*, no real difference between heaven and earth (52).

According to the poem the causes of unhappiness in the world are Ambition and Avarice, the two Furies that penetrate all re-

19. See his letter from Verona on 7 December 1509, where he states that the Venetians have found out to their cost that "for holding states, studies and books are not enough"(cited in Gilbert, *Chief Works*, p. 739).

gions, cities, villages and even hovels. Indeed, in describing these Furies Machiavelli seems to outdo Aristophanes' "round" humans that needed to be punished by Zeus: Ambition and Avarice are naked with four faces and eight hands that carry bottomless urns (15).²⁰ Though difficult to distinguish between the two, it is clear that the Furies represent what is unique to human beings and therefore the source of their unhappiness: limitless desire. Limitless desire is accompanied by Cruelty, Pride and Deceit as well as Envy, Sloth and Hatred (37-40).

In spite of their apparent ugliness, Ambition and Avarice "come with such grace (*grazia*) that, to the eyes of many, in grace and in happiness they abound" (31-33). What is this grace that seems to deceive the many about the happiness of the Furies? In less primitive times, when it is possible to distinguish between poverty and wealth, the apparent wealth of the Furies appears divine to those impressed by wealth; plenty hides the true nature of Ambition as limitless longing. Yet even in the most primitive time of extreme poverty Ambition was influential. Machiavelli's theogony sees Cain's killing of Abel as the first instance of the mighty power of Ambition. The most primitive and powerful example of unlimited desire—its "evil seed" (61)—is the desire for love of god and divine favour, or to appear good (or better) before god. It is this "seed," the limitless and unbounded longing for the divine, that matures and multiplies into the wider range of desires, including the desire for wealth and riches.

This new version of the Fall, which starts with discord in the "earthly" family of Adam, and Abel's death, undermines what Machiavelli initially sought to elicit, our anger and indignation at a human spirit that is "insatiable, arrogant, crafty, and shifting, and above all else malignant, iniquitous, violent and savage" (55-57). For he argues that we cannot repent something that is inevitable or beyond our control—we need not feel guilty for our sins because, "Since the evil seed is now mature, since evil's cause is multiplied, / there is no reason for men to repent of doing evil" (61-63). The new gods allow us to understand the shifting aspect of international politics, why France invaded Italy, how monarchies (King Alfonso of Naples), duchies (Lodovico of Milan) and republics (San Marco or Venice) have been overcome. These gods challenge the promise of the Resurrection and Last Judgment: "and so always the world has been, modern and ancient." They also explain the apparently irrational actions of human beings—we seek not merely the good but our enemy's seeming good; we crush others to climb

20. For Aristophanes' speech praising eros see Plato's *Symposium* 188e-193e.

higher; we are vexed by another's success, making us watchful and alert for another's ill (64-78).

It would seem that this theogony should issue in sadness, Stoic indifference or even pious resignation. In fact it culminates and concludes in the abandonment of these new gods and a Machiavelian promise of hope. We have seen how Machiavelli appropriates and alters Genesis by introducing "hidden powers" who have sent the pests of Ambition and Avarice. It now becomes evident that his real intent was to replace the authority of the Book altogether. In his explanation of the apparent perfidy of humanity he states: "to this our natural instinct [*istinto natural*] draws us, by our own motion and our own feeling, if laws or greater forces [*maggior forza*] do not restrain us" (79-81). Nature, a notion that does not exist in the Bible, is counterpoised with laws and forces (human or divine). But in subsequent discussion Machiavelli abandons the divine by suggesting that our happiness rests with us, provided we are prepared to learn from him. Accordingly, the remainder of the poem is a type of dialogue where Machiavelli anticipates questions and meets objections.

The first question which Machiavelli himself raises about his own views is, if the world is indeed a chaotic and dangerous place moved by our limitless desires, why is it that "one people commands and the other weeps"? If the "pest" of Ambition seems to profit some at the expense of others—France over Italy—then the obvious question posed by the ambitious is how can one command instead of being a slave? Machiavelli's answer is where Ambition is joined with a "valiant heart" (or fierce heart: *cor feroce*) and "armed vigor" (or armed virtue: *virtute armata*) then "for himself a man seldom fears evil" (91-92). It seems that Machiavelli is simply praising courage, especially when he later criticizes Cowardice. But this armed virtue encompasses more, including the political and juridical arts, for he states that the "natural" state of a country, which is violent and unbridled, needs to be organized by good laws. Our natural condition is lawless and warlike; it needs human intervention to introduce order. This ordering does not remove the violence that results from Ambition—Ambition only permits the diversion of violence. Good laws are therefore those rules that organize the nation's ambition against others; they are human artefacts that marshal and channel violence rather than guiding individuals to virtue. The solution to the problem of ambition is unobtrusively but decidedly "this-worldly": of the possibilities he notes in the last line of the poem, it is not "grace" but "better government" that will save Tuscany (187). Such an

unambitious understanding of law and legality is meant to reveal the severe limits and, ironically, the great potential of a humanity abandoned by gods and beset by limitless desire.

Perhaps we should blame "Nature" for the absence of ferocious and hardy men in Italy? If Machiavelli has replaced the gods with Nature then this question seems to be the obvious explanation for Italy's condition. Machiavelli's answer—"I say that this does not excuse and justify our lack of worth, for discipline (or education: *educazione*) can make up where Nature is lacking" (117)—seems to take up the suggestion, made in the context of laws, that nature is limited, or may be improved upon by human intervention; education can supplement, indeed remedy, nature. This statement is made in the context of his assessment of the problem of Italy at present, diagnosed as Sloth or leisure (*l'ozio*). The Italian response to Ambition, which is leisure or idleness amounting to cowardice, is the cause of the "wounds that have killed the Italian provinces." The horrible war scenes that follow—foul blood in ditches, wild beasts preying on the dead, severed limbs and "earth wet with tears / and blood, and the air full of screams, of sobs and sighs" (158)—explains why some accuse "cruel and ungrateful gods." These dreadful sights justify Machiavelli's implicit attack on a life that elevates leisure over work, contemplation over action. The study of books and especially of the Book, as the aim and culmination of politics or even superior to politics, is unmanly, cowardly, unpatriotic.

Machiavelli himself, however, will also use books and poetry to provide a new education. As we have seen in broad outline, he seeks to liberate human beings from the tutelage of God by first recounting a new theology of Ambition, then replacing it with the world of nature, and finally showing how nature's lack can be remedied by humans. Thus God vies with "hidden powers" and Ambition, Ambition is a limitless natural human desire, and the parsimony or indifference of nature points to the need for a new education and to Machiavelli the prudent as the savior of Tuscany and all humanity. Nevertheless, aspects of Machiavelli's education remain obscure. What specifically does he mean when he speaks of the need for judgment, sound intellect, method and vigor (164)? What are the laws that the courageous should implement to channel ambition to the "sheepfolds of others"? Finally and importantly, what does he mean when he introduces a new god, when he states that "in the world most men let themselves be mastered by Fortune"? Is Fortune that "hidden power"? How does Fortune change the character of virtue, laws, and education that Machiavelli has

proposed? It is in the light of these questions that we need to consider Machiavelli's poem, *Di Fortuna*.

DI FORTUNA

Because fortune and its role in human affairs occupy a central place in Machiavelli's thought, *Di Fortuna* is at the heart of his new theogony.²¹ *Di Fortuna* tells of the goddess Fortune, her origin, kingdom, lovers and servants. After discussing the Wheel of Fortune the poem ends with a "painting" of her triumphs over kingdoms and individuals, how she shifted world affairs. Addressed to Giovan Battista Soderini, the brother of Piero Soderini the Florentine *gonfalonier* removed by the Medici on their return to power in 1512, the poem inevitably recalls Machiavelli's own fall as Soderini's *mannerino* or "puppet."²² In his own words, the poem is more than advice, commiseration, and even consolation; it is Machiavelli's invocatory song to the goddess Fortune "to look on him who has courage to sing of her dominion" (23). Machiavelli the supplicant wants to seduce Fortune with his songs of praise and hopefully raise himself from his low position.²³

Machiavelli is very knowledgeable about Fortune though her origins—whose daughter she is and from what family she sprang—remain profoundly mysterious. The goddess Fortune is a Queen who reigns in a palace that is open on every side, allowing all who are full of ambition and hope to enter and supplicate at the foot of her throne. Since her power is feared even by Jove, her kingdom encompasses heaven and earth (45). Fortune is an old witch with two faces, one fierce and the other mild, so that as she moves she does not see you, then beseeches you, and later menaces you. Those she loves she rewards with power, honor, riches and health; the rest she punishes with servitude, infamy, sickness and poverty (94-96). The "many" consider her omnipotent. She is a cruel, shifting creature who acts "without pity [or piety: *pieta*], without law or

21. There is of course an enormous scholarship on Fortune in Machiavelli: see for example Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*; Roger D. Masters, *Fortune Is a River: Leonardo da Vinci and Niccolò Machiavelli's Magnificent Dream to Change the Course of Florentine History* (New York: Free Press, 1998; Machiavelli, *Leonardo, and the Science of Power* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996). For references to Fortune in his political works see, for example, *The Prince*, chap. 25; *Discourses*, book III, chap. 9.

22. See Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy*, p. 113.

23. If Fortune "resists with the greatest might where she sees that nature is the strongest" (10-12) then Machiavelli, as someone who is brought low, is implicitly praising himself and deprecating Giovan Soderini.

right [or reason: *ragione*]" (35), punishing the just and giving to the unjust, and never keeping her promise. In her court we see Anxiety (or Fear: *Timor*) on the floor full of tears, fighting Penitence and Envy. Opportunity, the "tousle-haired and simple maiden" is there, as well as Usury and Fraud, with Liberality standing "ragged and torn." Above the gates to the palace sit Luck and Chance, without eyes or ears.

Fortune appears to be an old, all-powerful woman who welcomes all suitors and rewards her lovers with the greatest of goods. It would seem, therefore, that like a woman she may be seduced, especially by the young and audacious—our fate is to some extent in our own hands. But our hope of seducing Fortune is tempered with the realization that she is a fickle and impulsive lover who loves both the good and the wicked. She welcomes other lovers and rages against them when they seek to leave her. She does not keep her promises and indeed, seems to "consume" her lovers: like the eagle, she carries the tortoise on high only to break its shell and "feed on the dead flesh" (178). The darker aspect of this eroticism is evident in Machiavelli's suggestion that Fortune loves being taken—only excessive *virtù* can vanquish her, for she desires he "who pushes her, who shoves her, who jostles her" (14; 165). Machiavelli's reinterpretation of divine love as eroticised violence empowers the supplicant: *virtù* assures success, liberating us from the fickleness of powerful Fortune. This success is dangerous, however, because the richer and more powerful her lovers, the less grateful they are for her favors. Since ingratitude makes us attribute our success to ourselves and our misfortune to Fortune, it seems likely, perhaps inevitable, that at the height of our powers we will abandon her and she will justifiably punish us (67-72). Machiavelli's account of Fortune changes from an omnipotent goddess fickle in her tastes and favors that needs to be seduced, to a queen who longs for a true king to master her, whose kingdom is ready to be taken by the most virtuous. This new version allows her putative suitors greater hope and confidence as success is now based not on Fortune's discretion but on one's own *virtù*, even though the history of the famous nations and the eminent men Machiavelli "paints" suggest that no one to date has succeeded in mastering her (127-93).

Interwoven through this account, however, and concealed by the presence of a personal and sometimes providential goddess, is another story that shows Machiavelli overpowering and conquering Fortune. This story has as its starting point the famous metaphor of the Wheel of Fortune, where the lucky are those who pick a wheel favored by Fortune. The metaphor of the spinning wheel nicely captures the capriciousness of the goddess Fortune, for as he says, "while you are whirled about by the rim of a wheel that for the moment is

lucky and good, she is wont to reverse its course in midcircle" (110). On closer examination, however, the wheel topos proves to be subversive of an active and intelligent divinity. The wheels themselves are not moved by Fortune but by Heaven's irresistible command to Laziness (or leisure: *Ozio*), which lays the world to waste, and Necessity, which "puts the world in order again" (84). It would even appear that Fortune herself may be on a wheel (52-54). Importantly, it is in the nature of a turning wheel that any one point will reverse its direction in midcircle. Therefore there is no wheel befitting Fortune's wish, since all points on a wheel can be said to rise and fall. Rather, the fault lies in our inability to change:

And since you cannot change your character nor give up the disposition that Heaven endows you with, in the midst of your journey she abandons you (112-14).

Fortune's disfavor is now seen for what it is: bad fortune is no more than our inability to move from one wheel to another. The person who can change can overcome Fortune and be happy: "Therefore, if this he understood and fixed in his mind, a man / who could leap from wheel to wheel would always be happy and fortunate" (115-17). Our happiness lies in our own inclinations to act rather than in the discretion of Fortune (103). The problem, however, is that it seems our disposition is "given," or that we are ruled by "occult" forces (118). We are doomed to unhappiness. Machiavelli's response is that "Not a thing in the world is eternal"—the eternal is an appearance willed by Fortune or, in the context, a confusion caused by our lack of knowledge about the changeability of things. The lesson to be learned is to imitate Fortune: "Therefore a man should take her for his star and, as far as he can, / should every hour adjust himself to her variation" (124-26).

Our unhappiness is caused by our insistence that the world be ordered and open to humanity. Our experience, which constantly refutes this view, does not make us abandon it, but rather devises a personal, providential goddess to account for the discrepancies. True *virtù*, then, is to overcome our inclination and ironically imitate our own creation, the fickle goddess. To be variable, to change with the times because the times never stay the same, is the only way to vanquish chance.²⁴

24. See Machiavelli's famous *cose vane* letter of 31 January 1515 to Vettori (Atkinson and Sices, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, pp. 311-13), and his discussion of the "wise man," stars and Fates in his letter of 13-21 September 1506 to Giovan Battista Soderini, known as *Ghiribizzi* (fantasies or speculations) (*ibid.*, pp. 134-36). The possibility of conquering nature, fully elaborated by Bacon, is made more explicit by Machiavelli in *The Prince*, chap. 25, with his use of the river metaphor: Fortune is said to be like a violent river that can be dyked and dammed (see generally Masters, *Fortune Is a River*).

We now understand how Machiavelli's singing conquers Fortune. No one until Niccolò has understood the need to imitate Fortune to overcome her. But to see the poem as an overcoming of Fortune is to neglect the Machiavellian ambitions of the entire enterprise. From the beginning Machiavelli's song assumes the Kingdom of God is overthrown by the Kingdom of Fortune—he makes us conspire in a blasphemy before we are aware of it. The rule of the God of Righteousness, the Patriarchal God of the Book, is usurped by Fortune, an unpredictable, female goddess of eros that is indifferent to the good and the just. Consider, for example, Machiavelli's history of Fortune's triumphs, "painted in vigorous colors." His account of the Kingdom of Fortune from the early Egyptian period to the modern implicitly jettisons the divine history in the Bible. The story of Creation, the Fall, the Resurrection and subsequent history of the human race is replaced by the Kingdom of Fortune, where Jerusalem—along with Carthage, Athens, Sparta and Rome—is no more than one of her triumphs. This retelling of history is repeated with the account of the great leaders—there is no Adam, Abraham or Christ, only Alexander and Caesar, Cyrus and Pompey and only one philosopher, Tullius (Cicero). The frescoes in churches and palaces are thus repainted by Machiavelli's revised, and he would say corrected, history of Fortune's reign.

But Fortune's kingdom is merely a device to overcome our tendency to see the world in fixed and permanent terms. It is the introduction to a more unpredictable and changeable world that will culminate in our liberation from our own natures and our belief in an ordered cosmos. The apparent regular motion of a wheel conceals the relativity of up and down, right and wrong. Our admiration of that perfect figure makes us forget its indifference to our well-being. Variability, not order, is nature's way.

DELL'OCCASIONE

The transformation of Fortune from a goddess, to merely "occasion" or in the best instance, opportunity, is completed in Machiavelli's *Dell'Occasione*. This brief dialogue with the never-resting Occasion, whose winged feet are on the Wheel of Fortune, shows the difficulty of moving from wheel to wheel as Machiavelli had suggested in *Di Fortuna*. Few notice Occasion because from the front her hair covers her face and chest, disguising her. When she turns, however, one realizes who she is, but too late: the back of her head is shorn so that it is impossible to catch her when she passes by or turns around. Failing to grab her, people are left with Occasion's

companion, Penance. Initially it seems that the interlocutor of the poem has in fact seen Occasion and therefore will not settle for Penance. But the poem ends with Occasion announcing that while talking and wasting time, occupied with vain thoughts, the inquirer has not realized that Occasion has slipped from his hands.

Based on Austonio's epigram on occasion and penance, *In simulacrum Occasionis et Poenitentiae*, Machiavelli's *Dell'Occasione* shows that the problem lies not just with our natures, which are not sufficiently flexible to allow us to change course with fortune but with our inability to discern "occasion." We simply are unable to see opportunities or see them too late. Since we always regret what we do not do, the practical and prudent course of action would seem to be to take up all opportunities. Our natural deficiency in judgment that leads to regret (the new notion of penance) is corrected by taking greater risk and chances, living more dangerously. This is sensible because regret will accompany all indecision. Machiavelli favors sins of commission rather than omission. But as this very formulation reveals, he seeks to transform the notion of penitence and sin by making them this-worldly errors of judgment: it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.²⁵

The life of action as a remedy for our lack of judgment is most clearly seen in the poem itself. Unlike other people, the poet has been able to discern Occasion, ask questions and try to understand its nature. But this very process of acquiring knowledge merely repeats the errors of others—the poet too loses opportunity. Thinking merely confirms the importance of acting; it demonstrates the primacy of the active life and the weakness of reason in persuading Occasion to yield its favors. Dialogue or dialectic seems to lead inevitably to penance or sorrow. Therefore *Dell'Occasione* is that curious creature, the meditative defense of the active life, a liberation of those ambitions, loves and desires held down by fear, piety, and shame.

Machiavelli's Theogony

Our familiarity with Machiavelli's famous political works makes it difficult to do justice to the *I Capitoli*, to hear the singing of the poetry afresh. Nevertheless a close reading of *I Capitoli* shows that his poetry is informed by his profound and overarching political and philosophical meditations, pointing to a unity in Machiavelli's

25. Regarding Machiavelli's reformulation of penance see his *Exhortation to Penitence* and Paul E. Norton, "Machiavelli's Road to Paradise: The Exhortation to Penitence," *History of Political Thought* 4 (1983): 31-42.

thought. Yet poetry is clearly different from *de regimine principum* or mirror of princes, or a commentary on the books of Titus Livy. How are we to understand Machiavelli's use of poetry?

We noted above in our discussion of Ficino and Pico the way the Renaissance, in favoring antiquity, also retrieved a theology of eros, magic and astrology that had an ambiguous standing within orthodox Christianity. Machiavelli understood and exploited this ambiguity in Renaissance theology. He used the poetry—the language, forms, tropes and imagery of *prisca theologia*—as the safest means of presenting his political teaching.²⁶ That is why, in the spirit of the Renaissance, Machiavelli's *I Capitoli* initially appears to return to, or mimic, the theogonies of Homer, Hesiod and Virgil, as well as the hermetic, astrological, magical, and cabbalistic learning we saw in the Christian syncretism of Ficino and Pico.

Machiavelli, however, does not simply appropriate this tradition. Upon closer reading it is soon evident that the playful, mock-heroic tone of the poems conceals his more serious undertaking. Machiavelli never really returns to the ancients—his theogony of occult forces, the Kingdom of Fortune, the “pest” Ambition, the evil of Ingratitude and the slipperiness of Occasion are of his own “singing.” This Machiavellian cosmos, in appearing to be sustained by a *prisca theologia*, subverts it, and in the process challenges its victor, the God of Love. Thus the conspiracy hidden in this new theogony is the usurpation or overthrow of the God of Love.

The poems, as meditations on various aspects of love—as desire, as benefaction, as ambition, as ingratitude—superficially draw upon or support the Bible. Our sinful fallen nature seems to account for all our perfidy. But, as we have seen, at each step the poems challenge Christian eschatology. They question the possibility of beneficence and therefore Grace, the usefulness of piety and penitence, the role of “occult forces” that seem to rule the Heavens. Indirectly they retell a history that seems to forget the Creation, Fall, and Resurrection, painting a panorama of Fortune's rule that does not distinguish between Egypt, Jerusalem, and Athens. The model is no longer Moses or the Son of God, it is Scipio, a man of “infinite virtues” and a good citizen.

26. For a comparable case consider his other poetical work, the incomplete *The (Golden) Ass*, a parody of Dante's *Divine Comedy* that appropriates the hermetic and neoplatonic Apuleius' *Golden Ass*. According to Carlo Dionisotti (“Machiavelli, Man of Letter,” in Ascoli and Kahn, *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, pp. 17-52), Machiavelli abandoned this poem upon reading Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. This arguably marks his turn from poetry to drama, resulting in his famous *Mandragola* as well as *Clizia*.

Machiavelli's theogony provides lesser deities that are ruled by a goddess who can be seduced by mortals. Seduction, however, still assumes persuasion and consent. Before long Machiavelli insinuates the possibility of a Kingdom of Heaven that is subject to the will of the most virtuous—the new goddess longs to be conquered. The promise of liberation from wanton gods and the contemplation of just retribution, of war against the gods, seems to be an impious war cry, a blasphemous hymn to the gods. But it is a theogony nevertheless: Lucifer too believed in God. Ultimately the Just and Righteous God of the Book is not simply replaced by a pantheon of lesser gods but by human victory. For the theogony is a recounting of a cosmos that shrinks and expands, whirling in dark silent space indifferent to human desire. Machiavelli's radical theogony kills all the gods for those who have *virtù*, a Promethean gift of happiness.

In the spirit of the *contemptus mundi* literature there is an unavoidably dark tone to the *I Capitoli*, a consequence of meditating on our condition: we are contemptible, weak, ambitious without bound, ungrateful and cruel, lustful and voracious, unavoidably sinning.²⁷ Though seemingly reinforcing this understanding, Machiavelli alters it in profound ways. He undermines the possibility of a golden age, of a choice we had and of a freedom we misused. Our vices are an inevitable aspect of being human, forced upon us by pests such as Ambition or gods such as Ingratitude and Fortune. We could not sin if we had no real freedom to choose. The corollary to this argument is that it makes no sense to be penitent, to confess: since all action is fraught with regret, it is better to act than hold off.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Machiavelli does not contemplate redemption or salvation in *I Capitoli*. But his proposed solution seems to take two divergent paths. If we are to read the prescriptions offered in the poems together, we see that for Machiavelli, human beings, constituted by unlimited desire, are imprisoned in a world of penury. The only solution for our forsaken condition is to rely on ourselves. For most, who are unable to change their nature, the only possibility of happiness is to have order imposed upon them, either directly by the act of one or mediately through the laws. For a rare few who are made to realize the protean nature of humanity, true happiness lies in variability

27. On *contemptus mundi* see Kraye (Jill Kraye, "Moral Philosophy," in Schmitt and Skinner, *Renaissance Philosophy*, pp. 306-307) generally, and in particular her references to Pope Innocent III, *De miseria humane conditionis*; Bracciolini's *De miseria humane conditionis*; Garzoni's *De miseria humana*.

and change, a sort of lawlessness that imitates the randomness of nature. This twofold solution returns Machiavelli to the Socratics, reintroducing the difference between the few and the many, the philosopher and the city. But Machiavelli's appeal to the potential philosophers, the honor- and victory-loving few who have contempt for the merely bodily desires, appears contrary to the moderation advised by Socrates.²⁸ Machiavelli seems to relish unleashing the desires of the young, especially their eroticism, love of honor and rule, trammelled only by a limiting patriotism. His attack on books and learning, on contemplation and *ozio*, on chastity, modesty, and moderation, on all other-worldliness, introduces modernity in all its force: love and mastery of change; the celebration of the active life; a protean human nature; inseparability of virtue and vice; politics as a channeling of desire. Machiavelli may respond that to straighten a stick one needs to bend it the other way; the force of his rhetoric is accurately gauged to the plight of ancient thought made subject to "our sect." But it is not clear to what extent his perhaps all-too-persuasive attempt at refounding an older, pre-Christian politics, with the city as its horizon, forecloses attempts to transcend what is "one's own." Perhaps the only way to approach this question is to consider the problem of Machiavelli himself, his own bearing in the face of a malignant Fortune.²⁹

Machiavelli is the ominous, melancholic presence in *I Capitoli*. In a way these are intimate poems—about Niccolò, his friends, his problems, his times. We are therefore compelled to think of him and his plight, and compare him with those he nominates as the greatest, the Alexanders, Caesars, Scipios, and Ciceros. In this light he seems to be a complete failure, ousted from office, tortured, desperate for crumbs of distinction from the Medici. Here writing or "singing" seems to be the pitiable choice of one without hope, a view he encourages in his admission that he is "Fortune's victim." But if Machiavelli is that rare person who can recognize and speak to "Occasion" and knows that happiness lies in moving from wheel to wheel, then perhaps Machiavelli the poet is not a victim but a virtuous person who is happy because he changes his ways to suit the times. We are supported in this view by his comment in

28. On the difference between the honor-lover and the victory-lover in Plato's *Republic* see Leon Craig, *The War Lover* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994). For Socrates' political moderation see generally his defence of the laws in the *Crito* and his denigration of tyranny in the *Republic*, book 9. Contrast this with Machiavelli's sole reference to Plato in the *Discourses*, book III, chap. 6, where he is described as a mentor of conspirators.

29. On Machiavelli's "malignity of fortune" see, for example, the Dedicatory Letter, *The Prince*.

Dell'Ingratitudine that he seeks to climb "the longed-for hill," and his claim in *Di Fortuna* that writing will gain Fortune's attention. Machiavelli writes because, contrary to his overstated rhetoric that attacks books, he considers writing a profoundly active, political undertaking. This is how we should understand his theogony. His ambition is above all to institute new gods by using the very devices of those he seeks to usurp—books. If he does not make the grandest claims for his poetry—he will only half-climb the hill—his claims for politics and philosophy seem overweening: no-one before Machiavelli has known how to be truly happy.

We must take this claim seriously, for the rejection of Tullius (Cicero, the Academic) as unhappy in *Di Fortuna* is implicitly also a rejection of Plato and Socrates. Machiavelli can claim the greatest honor because he is the first to have discerned and made public this new teaching about love—of limitless desire, of limitless variability, and therefore potentially true happiness. As the discoverer of new continents his glory can never be extinguished. Yet the name Machiavelli has received little honor through the ages.³⁰ Does this not testify to his failure in both political and literary acquisition? If we accept Machiavelli's analysis in *Dell'Ingratitudine*, we would have to agree that the greatest benefactions produce the most ingratitude; Machiavelli would argue that his ambiguous historical reputation is proof of his great beneficence and great glory.

30. Consider the ambiguity of the epitaph on the memorial to Machiavelli in the Basilica Santa Croce, Florence: *Tanto nomini nullum par elogium* (for such a name, no eulogy) (Leo Paul de Alvarez, *The Machiavellian Enterprise: A Commentary on The Prince* [De Kalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999], p. 42).

I am pleased to announce that in recent months W. Carey McWilliams of Rutgers University and Bruce M. Russett of Yale University have accepted terms on the Editorial Advisory Board of *The Review of Politics*. The entire current Advisory Board is listed on the inside cover of this and each issue of *The Review*.

—Walter Nicgorski, Editor

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