

NORTHROP FRYE AND NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

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Summary. This essay seeks to answer the questions, how can we explain the numerous references in Frye's notebooks and elsewhere to the political theory in Machiavelli's *The Prince*? What in Machiavelli's thought did Frye believe deserved our attention, and why? Toward this end the essay examines the Renaissance idea of the Machiavellian villain, the concept of *virtù*, and the idea of hypocrisy.

Machiavelli's *The Prince* was one of the texts Northrop Frye taught in his undergraduate course at Victoria College, University of Toronto—English 2i: English Poetry and Prose, 1500–1660. In his diary entry for 20 January 1949 he writes, “The 2i lecture was on Machiavelli: I'm clarifying my view of a militant organization as pyramidal. In Machiavelli all peacetime activities are geared to a war economy, of course: it's a state militant as the Roman Catholic Church is a Church militant” (CW 8: 91). By the time Frye made this diary entry he had been teaching English 2i for a decade. During the summer of 1940 he writes to his friend Roy Daniells, “There's a vast Renaissance survey course, 1500 to 1660, and I'm expected to include Machiavelli, Castiglione, Montaigne and Erasmus in it” (*Selected* 29). About a later lecture on Castiglione, he notes, in what would become a common refrain in his reading of *The Prince*, that the “lecture said very little except to point out the Prince–Courtier link, & link Machiavelli's doctrine that appearance (e.g. of virtue) is essential in government with Castiglione's similar doctrine of the continuous epiphany of culture” (CW 8: 98). That is, the reality of virtue in politics is irrelevant; its pretense is everything. Three years later at a party for R.S. Crane Frye reports that he said “Machiavelli's Prince, if he had a courtier to advise him, wouldn't draw Castiglione's *Courtier*: he'd get something more like Ulysses, full of melancholy Luciferian knowledge of good & evil, of time & the chain of being” (ibid. 562).

Machiavelli's name appears more than 100 times in Frye's work. He owned and annotated two editions of *The Prince*,¹ as well as Ralph Roeder's study of Machiavelli as one of four Renaissance lawgivers.² Almost all of

¹The Dent and Collier editions. See Works cited.

²Roeder's book is mainly biographical, though chapter 6—on Machiavelli and

Frye's references to Machiavelli are to *The Prince*, but on several occasions he does refer to Machiavelli's comedy *La Mandragola*.

In the mid-nineteen eighties Frye registered his intention to write a book, framed by "the four early 16th c. books that define the nature of Renaissance secular society": the prince (Machiavelli's *The Prince*), the courtier (Castiglione's *The Courtier*), the statesman (More's *Utopia*) and the fool (Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly*) (CW 5: 178). Frye did manage to write essays on Castiglione and More,³ but he never got around to the ones on Erasmus or Machiavelli. What might he have said had he written the essay on Machiavelli? What lies behind the numerous references in his notebooks and elsewhere to the political theory in *The Prince*? What was it in Machiavelli that Frye thought deserved our attention?

"Machiavellian" in English Renaissance Drama

In Renaissance drama Machiavelli became, as Frye says in *Fools of Time*, an ogre (Frye calls him "a conventional bogey") (CW 28: 263). "The legend of Machiavelli's depravity," writes one of the translators of *The Prince*, "was already established by the time the first English translation appeared in 1640. The Elizabethan dramatists found suitably exotic settings for their tragedies in Renaissance Italy, and Machiavelli supplied them with a useful cliché to describe enormities they would have depicted without his help. . . it became as acceptable to call the Devil Machiavellian as it was to call Machiavelli diabolical" (Bull 9).

The Machiavellian villain is, in Frye's taxonomy of characters in *Anatomy of Criticism*, the tragic counterpart of the "vice" or tricky slave of comedy. Examples of this "self-starting principle of malevolence" are Iago in *Othello* and Edmund in *King Lear*, along with Bosola in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (CW 22: 202). The Machiavellian villain "often acts without motivation, from pure love of evil" (CW 28: 38). In his *Notebooks*

Castiglione—has a fairly extensive summary of the argument of *The Prince*. In a note to his paper on "The Augustinian Interpretation of History," Frye records his indebtedness to Figgis on Machiavelli (CW 3: 500, n. 34), but Figgis's book makes only a cursory reference to Machiavelli at the beginning of chapter 6 (pp. 101–2), commenting briefly on the lack of an interest in both natural law and justice in *The Prince*.

³ "Il Cortegiano" in *Myth and Metaphor* 307–20, rpt. in CW 28: 346–60. The Italian text was published as *Il "Cortegiano" in una società*, trans. Francesca Valente and Alfredo Rizzadri (Urbino: Università degli studi di Urbino, 1979); the original English text was published as "Il Cortegiano" in *Quaderni d'italianistica* 1: 1 (1980), 1–14. The essay on More is "Natural and Revealed Communities" in *Myth and Metaphor* 289–306, rpt. in CW 28: 625–41.

on *Renaissance Literature* Frye has several references to this unmotivated, autonomous principle of evil that makes the villain Machiavellian (CW 29: 130, 144, 275, 278), at least in the eyes of the Elizabethans. The hallmark of Machiavellian politics is a “hard intellectual ruthlessness, arising from a disciplined grasp of reality and an anything but enthusiastic view of the human race” (CW 3: 405). In the prologue to *The Jew of Malta*, Marlowe has Machiavelli say, “What right has Caesar to the empire?” (l. 19). In Marlowe’s view Machiavelli admires Caesar for the ruthless seizure of power even though he had no legitimate claim to be emperor. Marlowe calls him “Machevil,” which is perhaps a pun on “make evil.” In any case, Machiavelli’s reputation had spread across Europe as a proponent of the callous exercise of power on the part of the prince in imposing his will—a descendent of Thrasymachus in Plato’s *Republic* and a forerunner of Nietzsche: “Machiavelli’s conception of the prince,” Frye writes, “belongs to a tradition of absolutizing the will that reaches its culmination in Nietzsche” (CW 28: 359).⁴ The prince as a man of will is a prince committed to *forza* (violence) and *froda* (fraud), the second and third categories of sin in Dante’s *Inferno*. The conventional view was

that there exists a special relationship between moral goodness and legitimate authority. Many authors (especially those who composed mirror-of-princes books or royal advice books during the Middle Ages and Renaissance) believed that the use of political power was only rightful if it was exercised by a ruler whose personal moral character was strictly virtuous. Thus rulers were counseled that if they wanted to succeed—that is, if they desired a long and peaceful reign and aimed to pass their office down to their offspring—they must be sure to behave in accordance with conventional standards of ethical goodness. In a sense, it was thought that rulers did well when they did good; they earned the right to be obeyed and respected inasmuch as they showed themselves to be virtuous and morally upright. (Nederman pt. 2, par. 1)

This was the view that Machiavelli’s *Prince* turned upside down.

The Elizabethans typically saw Machiavelli as a secular cynic interested only in expediency (CW 29: 192–3). A latter-day version of the prince of darkness theory has been most notably promulgated by Leo Strauss, who asserts that “Machiavelli’s teaching is immoral and irreligious” and that “Machiavelli was an evil man” (12, 9).⁵ Isaiah Berlin, who surveys

⁴ On the absolutizing of the will in the person of the prince, see also CW 13: 105; CW 15: 233; CW 27: 40; and CW 28: 271).

⁵ On Strauss’s views, see McShea.

scores of widely differing views of Machiavelli, concludes that “the commonest view of him, at least as a political thinker, is still that of most Elizabethans, dramatists and scholars alike, for whom he is a man inspired by the Devil to lead good men to their doom, the great subverter, the teacher of evil, *le docteur de la scélératesse*, the inspirer of St. Bartholomew’s Eve, the original of Iago. This is the ‘murderous Machiavel’ of the famous 400 references in Elizabethan literature” (44).⁶ If Strauss sees the principles of princely behavior advocated by Machiavelli as immoral, Benedetto Croce sees in Machiavelli the separation of politics and ethics so that the Machiavellian principles are essentially amoral. Isaiah Berlin says “For Benedetto Croce and all the many scholars who have followed him, Machiavelli is an anguished humanist, and one who, so far from seeking to soften the impression made by the crimes that he describes, laments the vices of men which make such wicked courses politically unavoidable—a moralist who wrings his hands over a world in which political ends can only be achieved by means that are morally evil, and therefore the man who divorced the province of politics from that of ethics” (37). Frye’s position, as we will see, is close to Croce’s: Frye wants to distinguish moral virtue from political virtue. Or to put it another way, he agrees with those who see Machiavelli as separating the power and authority of the prince, on the one hand, from moral action, on the other.

In a student essay on Wyndham Lewis, Frye writes, “Elizabethan drama developed a curious villain type, the Machiavellian, with which dramatists frequently identified their own attitude” (CW 3: 368). But even as a student Frye, who was twenty-three at the time, recognized that identifying Machiavelli with the demonic prince was a caricature. In an Emmanuel College essay on Calvin, he wrote “Machiavelli, of course, has suffered far more even than Calvin from misrepresentation and confusion with the prince of darkness, the main influence at work there being Elizabethan drama” (ibid.).

Virtù

In contrast to the “vice” of comedy Frye refers to the Machiavellian counterpart in tragedy as the “virtue,” which is another of his coinages but also one of the central terms in *The Prince*, the word appearing more than sixty times. *Virtù* is what W.B. Gallie calls an “essentially contested concept,” an idea that is open to interpretation and so involves disagreements about its

⁶ In his *L'antimachiavel* Frederick the Great twice uses the phrase “*le docteur de la scélératesse*” (doctor of villainy) to describe Machiavelli (94, 216).

meaning and use. “Everyone,” writes Harvey C. Mansfield, “knows that there is something remarkable about Machiavelli’s use of the word *virtù*. Almost every book on Machiavelli discusses *virtù*, and a number of scholarly studies are devoted to explaining the Machiavellian meaning of the word” (6). In a note to this last sentence, Mansfield lists some twenty-four such studies, to which must be added his own book, *Machiavelli’s Virtue*.

One of these studies, Quentin Skinner’s, understands *virtù* as a set of qualities: the quality that offsets or counters the prince’s luck (*fortuna*); the quality that enables the prince to seize and hold power; the quality that permits him to take advantage of an opportunity; and the quality that enables him to maintain his status as a ruler and so avoid a coup d’etat. Skinner also isolates what he calls “the princely virtues”: justice, liberality or generosity, and clemency. The prince must sometimes do evil, says Skinner, in order that good may result (“How Machiavellian”). In *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* Skinner offers a slightly different version of the amoral theory. “Hitherto,” he writes, “it had generally been assumed that the possession of *virtù* could be equated with all the major [Classical and Christian] virtues. With Machiavelli, by contrast, the concept of *virtù* is simply used to refer to whatever range of qualities the prince may find it necessary to acquire in order to ‘maintain his state’ and ‘achieve great things’” (1:138).⁷

Frye has a somewhat different view of the princely virtues of force, martial courage, and cunning. He calls these “demonic gifts” (CW 16: 122), and he connects them with *forza* (violence) and *froda* (fraud) in Homer, to two of the three categories of sin in Dante’s Lower Hell (as already noted), and to the demonic parts of *Paradise Lost*.⁸ In *The Secular Scripture* Frye writes that the study of literature requires

a principle which is that of Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* in reverse: public vices become private benefits.⁹ *Forza* and *froda* being the two essential elements of sin, it follows that they must be the two cardinal virtues

⁷ On Skinner’s view of *virtù* and *fortuna* in Machiavelli, see Newell, who questions Skinner’s interpretation of “the classical, Christian, and humanist understandings of virtue and fortune” (613).

⁸ In Milton *forza* and *froda* “are contrasted in the speeches of Moloch and Belial respectively in book 2, where Moloch wants an all out assault on heaven and Belial suggests concealment. The Limbo of Vanities, or Paradise of Fools, in book 3 consists of souls who have tried to take the kingdom of heaven either by violence, through suicide, or by fraud, through hypocrisy” (CW 18: 44).

⁹ The subtitle of Mandeville’s fable was “Private Vices, Public Good.”

of human life as such. Machiavelli personified them as the lion and the fox, the force and cunning which together make up the strong prince. So it is not surprising that European literature should begin with the celebration of these two mighty powers of humanity, of *forza* in the *Iliad*, the story of the wrath (*menis*) of Achilles, of *froda* in the *Odyssey*, the story of the guile (*dolos*) of Ulysses. (CW 18: 44)¹⁰

Frye never tires of pointing out that the virtues of force and courage and cunning are not moral virtues but tactical virtues based on the art of illusion. “A man in authority,” Frye writes, “must transcend good & evil if society is to hold together at all.” Frye calls this the Machiavelli paradox (CW 20: 262). This means that for the prince his virtue is not actually virtue at all but only seems to be—a public relations enterprise that requires keeping up appearances by cunning pretense, like that of the crafty fox:

Machiavelli’s prince is a person for whom moral principles are something of an inhibition, in short, hangups. He has to remember that the people over whom he rules are animals as well as men, and have the animal qualities that he himself needs to rule them, the ferocity of the lion and the cunning of the fox. As the prince is constantly on view, his reputation, or what we should call his image, is much more important than the reality behind that image. It is good for the prince to be reputed virtuous, much more important than for him to be virtuous. It is essential for the prince to be reputed liberal, though he is probably more sensible if he saves his money. (CW 7: 528)¹¹

What the prince has to do is pretend to exhibit the princely virtues. Appearance becomes more important than reality, and so the prince is like a character in a play—one who puts on a mask.

¹⁰ On *forza* and *froda* in Machiavelli see also CW 15: 233, 265. The celebrated metaphor of the lion and the fox comes from chapter 18 of *The Prince*: “So, as a prince is forced to know how to act like a beast, he must learn from the fox and the lion; because the lion is defenseless against traps and a fox is defenceless against wolves. Therefore he must be a fox in order to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten off wolves. . . . So it follows that a prudent ruler cannot, and must not, honour his word when it places him at a disadvantage and when the reasons for which he made his promise no longer exist . . . because men are wretched creatures who would not keep their word to you, you need not keep your word to them” (trans. Bull 99–100.)

¹¹ On cunning as a tactical virtue in Frye’s reading of *The Prince*, see CW 7:266, 528; CW 15: 88; CW 16: 122; CW 18: 44–5; CW 20: 260; CE 28: 262–3, 358.

Hypocrisy

Frye often contrasts Machiavelli's view of the prince with Castiglione's of the courtier.¹² He gives the most extended account of the differences in his essay on Castiglione:

We have derived two words from the metaphor of the masked actor: hypocrite and person. The former contains a moral value judgment, the latter does not. If we compare Castiglione on the courtier with Machiavelli on the prince, we see a remarkable parallel: both are constantly on view: what they are seen to do is, socially speaking, what they are; their reputations are the most important part of their identity, and their functional reality is their appearance. The difference is that Machiavelli's prince, being the man who must make the decisions, must accept the large element of hypocrisy involved; must understand how and why the reputation for virtue is more important for him than the hidden reality of virtue. It is essential for the prince to be reputed liberal, Machiavelli says, though he is probably better off if in reality he saves his money. For the courtier, whose social function is ornamental rather than operative, the goal is an appearance which has entirely absorbed the reality, a persona or mask which is never removed even when asleep. In regard to women, we are told that men "are ever fearful of being deceived by art" (1.40) [bk. 1, sec. 40], that is, of being manipulated. For the prince manipulation is essential; for the courtier it is not. (CW 28: 354).

The prince, then, must put on what Roeder calls the "shining coat of hypocrisy" (276). We all recognize that hypocrisy can lead to cynicism. As Frye remarked, "I said of Bolingbroke that situations change, and the leader does what fits the new situation, not what's consistent with what he did before. The fact that hypocrisy is the central political virtue makes some people very cynical. The Catholic Church maintains that it has preserved both consistent continuity and adaptability—that's Newman's point—but it's not easy for anyone outside the Church to believe that. (Nor necessary for anyone inside it to believe it, whatever is officially said.)" (CW 5: 409). We are cynical about advertising and public relations, as well as political statements, because we recognize in much of it that what's said isn't really true. But Frye is not so quick to label all hypocrisy a vice. Here are several of his reflections on the matter:

At all costs one should keep out of moral rat-traps. I was recently thinking how clear was Jesus' instruction not to swear, what a miserable dodge

¹² See, e.g., CW 23: 35; CW 7: 266–73, 528; CW 5: 178–9, 232; CW 27: 204; CW 13: 105; CW 20: 171; CW 28: 628.

the 39th (I think: the one on oaths anyway) Article [of the Church of England] was, & then I wondered whether I conscientiously take an oath in court. I shall not soon forget the sense of relief I felt when I suddenly refused to have anything more to do with this dilemma or any others of its kind. Again, a certain amount of hypocrisy, of pretending or giving the impression you've read something when you haven't, is inevitable. The self-directed life says: admitting that you shouldn't mislead students or kid yourself, your primary duty is to plug the gaps in your reading as soon as possible & in the meantime avoid distracting your students' attention from their own ignorance to yours. The superego says: your primary duty is to be absolutely honest with yourself & them—a murderous piece of nonsense. Oh well, maybe I'd have sacrificed to idols in Rome—certainly I'd have lapped up the meat offered to them fast enough. (CW 13: 11–12)

I used to say that hypocrisy was really a virtue, meaning it as half a joke. But when our worst impulses start clamoring that they're our "real" feelings, we realize how debased reality can be even when it's real. (CW 6: 232)

I don't think I have my hypocrisy-is-a-virtue point, except in a sermon, but it's essential to my moral distinction between advertising & propaganda. (CW 13: 121)

Jesus speaks of hypocrisy, which may be a vice in the gospel context but is the one absolutely essential cementing force that holds society together. Morally, it is the greatest of all virtues. I'm overstating, I know: I'm just trying to get clear the complete "otherness" of higher kerygma from the lower or social kind. As Milton says, in society we are contiguous, like bricks in a wall, not continuous as in the spiritual world. (CW 5: 270–1)

"Hypocrite" is a moral term and "person" is not: we accept that everyone has a personality, but it's supposed to be wrong for people to be hypocrites. Hypocrisy has been called the tribute that vice pays to virtue, but to know that you're saying one thing and thinking another requires a self-discipline that's practically a virtue in itself. Certainly it's often an essential virtue for a public figure. Situations change, and the good leader does what the new situation calls for, not what is consistent with what he did before. When Bolingbroke orders the execution of the king's favourites, one of his gravest charges against them is the way that they have separated the king from the queen, but an act or so later he himself is ordering a much more drastic separation of them. A successful leader doesn't get hung up on moral principles: the place for moral principles is in what we'd call now the PR job. The reputation of being virtuous or liberal or gracious is more important for the prince than the reality of these things, or rather, as in staging a play, the illusion is the reality. (CW 28: 509–10)

Machiavelli, Shakespeare, and Hypocrisy Upward

The connection in Frye's writing between Shakespeare and Machiavelli has already been remarked, and a good portion of what Frye maintained about the Machiavellian character is in a Shakespearean context. In "The Stage Is All the World," he writes, "Shakespeare . . . would have agreed with Machiavelli, whom he had not read, that the appearance of virtue in a prince is more important than the reality. The dramatic show, the PR job, as we should call it now, must go over according to its own rules: what happens behind the scenes follows a quite different rhythm." And then this example from *Antony and Cleopatra*: Mark Antony, "who at times puts on a show of the greatest generosity, sends his general Ventidius out to defeat the Parthians, which Ventidius does. But when a subordinate suggests that Ventidius could win a far bigger victory if he really cleaned the Parthians up while they were demoralized and routed, he responds that if he did that Antony would soon see him as blocking his own 'image,' and get rid of him by some means or other" (CW 28: 452–3).

To return to Machiavelli's question in *The Jew of Malta*: what right does Caesar have to rule the empire? Shakespeare shows us that the answer has as much to do with the personality of the prince as with the maxim that might makes right:

[T]he fact that one may do wrong with just cause is central to the whole paradox of ruling, and it is highly characteristic of Shakespeare's Caesar that he had the insight to see this. For Shakespeare's Caesar was in a position to answer Machiavelli's question in Marlowe about his right to the empire. The answer is not the simple one that might is right, but still less is it the idealistic one that might imitates right. The ruler is not, like the judge, a mere incarnation of law: he is a personality, and in tragedy the personality takes precedence over whatever is conceptual or moral. If we start with the view that the head of the state should be an instrument of law or a philosopher-king, we shall end with disillusioned reflections about the little wisdom with which the world is governed. In Shakespeare's histories and tragedies the world is not governed by wisdom at all, but by personal will. For Shakespeare's order-figures it would be more accurate to say that right imitates might. The process of holding power, however ruthless, is primary; whatever order and justice and stability there may be follow after that. (CW 28: 271)

The prince is a personality, a persona to his subjects, a *hypocritēs*, an actor, someone who plays the part, who projects an image to his subjects.

If public relations is based on the principle of projecting images, then, like the Machiavellian principle of appearance, it is a form of propaganda.

There is no difference between Watergate and the Stalin purge trials of the 1930s so far as the genre being employed is concerned. . . . We ask an actor to put on a good show, not to tell the truth, and when, say, a senator remarks approvingly that the president was very “believable” in his last interview, he reflects the confusion of standards. Such a confusion returns us to the Machiavellian principle of pure appearance, the basis of what we now call propaganda. It is not important that the prince should be virtuous; it is important only that he should seem so. (CW 11: 149–50)

The key passage for this distinction between being virtuous and seeming to be virtuous is in chapter 18 of *The Prince*:

A prince, therefore, need not necessarily have all the good qualities I mentioned above, but he should certainly appear to have them. I would even go so far as to say that if he has these qualities and always behaves accordingly he will find them harmful; if he only appears to have them they will render him service. He should appear to be compassionate, faithful to his word, kind, and devout. And indeed he should be so. But his disposition should be that, if he needs to be the opposite, he knows how. You must realize this: that a prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things which give men a reputation for virtue, because in order to maintain his state he is often forced to act in defiance of good faith, of charity, of kindness, of religion. And so he should have a flexible disposition, varying as fortune and circumstances dictate. As I said above, he should not deviate from what is good, if that is possible, but he should know how to do evil, if that is necessary. (Bull’s trans. 100–101)

Frye believes that hypocrisy can be a virtue if it is seen not as a moral principle but as a tactical one. “Machiavelli,” Frye writes in *The Great Code*, “attempted to distinguish and isolate the tactical use of illusion in the art of ruling” (CW 19: 34), meaning, once again, that hypocrisy is the mask that the prince presents to his subjects. Wayne Booth agrees that hypocrisy is not always a vice.¹³ There are good and bad forms of hypocrisy—what he calls “hypocrisy upward” and “hypocrisy downward.” In his autobiography, *My Many Selves*, he explores the idea of hypocrisy upward, the beneficent form of the hypocritical self, and hypocrisy upward is given further elaboration in his still unpublished *The Curse of Sincerity*. This little book argues that “we all need better education in the rhetorics of masking.” The point is not so

¹³ Another study that demonstrates there are good and bad forms of hypocrisy is Ruth W. Grant’s *Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics*.

much that we can all benefit from learning how to avoid the traps set by deceptive posers—everyone from con men to advertisers—but that because posing cannot be avoided, even by those who claim always to be completely forthright, we need to reflect more deeply about its better and worse forms. Booth presents the case for the universality of masking (it plays an essential role in all social interaction) and argues that in all efforts to communicate, we put on this or that mask. Some of these posings are defensible, some not. Thus we need to distinguish between lying and hypocrisy (both involve deceit, but not all lying is hypocritical); between good and bad forms of posing (hypocrisy upward and downward); between posing for practical benefit and posing for more noble ends, such as creating a better self; between this latter form of self and the self projected from completely disinterested inquiry, as in pure research; between masking as pretense only and the practice of masking that can turn virtue into a genuine habit; and between the forms of literary masking that can improve readers and those forms that lead them astray.

From this perspective, as Frye was well aware, we all have a good measure of Machiavelli in us.

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