"As the Toad Said to the Harrow": Machiavelli's
La Vita di Castruccio Castracani

by

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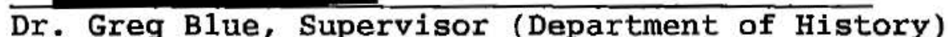

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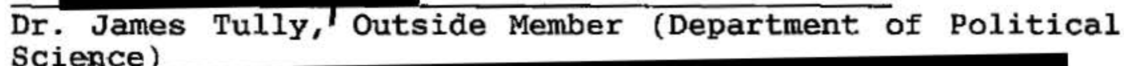

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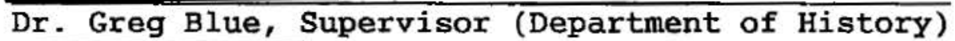
Abstract

Machiavelli's *La Vita di Castruccio Castracani* (1520) presents certain interpretive problems. The traditional approach to this text was that Machiavelli used the biography of this 14th-century Lucchese tyrant to reiterate his theory of the "perfect prince". This was undermined in 1953 by J.H. Whitfield, but no new theory has yet been proposed which satisfactorily replaces it. The problem is shown to be essentially that which haunts all of Machiavelli studies: the author seems both to extol and condemn the tyrannical, dictatorial prince.

My approach is to consider *La Vita* in the broadest possible context, including both textual and political considerations. The solution, I conclude, is that *La Vita* criticizes the Medici for their failure to capitalize on the opportunities presented to them between 1513 and 1519. However, *La Vita* was intended as a model for work which would be acceptable to exactly those whom Machiavelli criticized. The criticism is therefore cast in such a manner that those who were not familiar with a broad range of his work would miss it. *La Vita* thus provides a significant opportunity to see the private Machiavelli at work, revealing not only what he thought worth telling, but also what he thought worth hiding.



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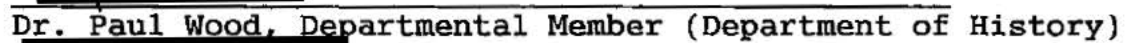

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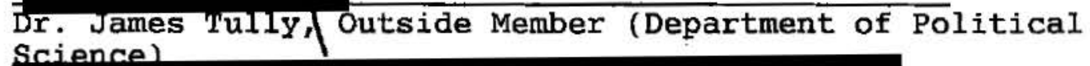

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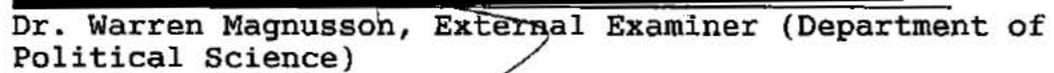

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction p. 1

2. *La Vita* p. 6

3. Historiography p. 30

4. *La Vita* in the context of Machiavelli's other works p. 45

4.1 *The Prince*, *Discourses*, and *Florentine Histories* p. 46

4.2 Letters, *Mandragola*, and *Clizia* p. 83

4.3 Conclusion to Chapter 4 p. 102

5. *La Vita* in Personal Context p. 104

6. Epilogue p. 122

Bibliography p. 124

1: Introduction

On the 9th of July 1520 Niccolo Machiavelli left Florence for Lucca, a small town to the west of Florence. His friends had obtained a minor commission for him to deal with Florentine interests in the bankruptcy of one Michele Guinigi. From his position running the Second Chancery of the Florentine Republic seven years before he had been reduced to this state by the distrust of the Medici, who had exiled him in 1513 and kept from him all public positions ever since. His fortunes however seemed to be on the mend. Lorenzo de Medici, who had ruled Florence single handedly and in an increasingly autocratic manner since the death of his brother Giuliano early in 1516, had died fourteen months before. Giulio de Medici, an illegitimate member of the family, who had taken over from the childless Lorenzo, seemed to be better disposed toward Machiavelli. Indeed, a commission to write the history of Florence had been obtained from the Florentine Studio, of which Giulio was the head. The final determination of the terms of the commission, however, were not due to be settled until the fall, so Machiavelli went to Lucca to earn a little money for the summer.[1]

He stayed in Lucca until the end of August, writing during this time a biography of a man named Castruccio

[1] Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Machiavelli*, trans. Cecil Grayson, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 178-182.

Castracani di Interminelli. The Interminelli were a prominent Lucchese family of which the Castracani of the 14th century were a minor but rising branch. Castruccio, who was born in 1281 and died in 1328, was a figure well worth writing about. From 1309 until his death he had murdered, duped, and manoeuvred his way from being an exiled member of a relatively minor noble family to being Duke of Lucca and the ruler of a considerable realm, including Pisa, and, at times, a very real threat to Florence herself. A man, one might think, much after Machiavelli's heart. Another biography had already been written about 25 years previously by Nicolas Tegrimi, but Machiavelli, despite the fact that he seems to have read Tegrimi's account, wrote something significantly different.[2]

La Vita di Castruccio Castracani seems to have been intended as a model upon which the commission that he had received from Giulio - which would become *Florentine Histories* - could be executed. He sent it from Lucca to his friends in Florence, and they approved it on this basis.[3] However, the strange blend of fact and fiction in

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[2] Louis Green, "Machiavelli's *La Vita di Castruccio Castracani* and it Lucchese model", *Italian Studies*, 42, (1987), pp. 37-55, p 47.

[3] Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli*, (Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 79; Ridolfi, p. 181. Also below, pp. 28&29, 34.

Machiavelli's biography has become something of a puzzle. It has tradionally been explained that Machiavelli had written a laudatory ode to another Cesare Borgia - that the author of *The Prince* had found another exemplar of virtuosity, albeit one who needed a little polishing. Since 1953, however, when J.H. Whitfield pointed out that this position is untenable, there have been a variety of other interpretations.[4] In fact, about the only agreement seems to be that *La Vita* is an exceptionally contentious text. As one commentator has remarked

> ...it is hardly surprising that there has been considerable scholarly disagreement about Vita. Just who is this person that stands up in it? What was Machiavelli's intention? Some of its interpreters have looked backward to Machiavelli's earlier theoretical writings, such as Il Principe, a reasonable enough direction considering the Vita's [sic] princely theme. Others, looking mostly forward, have viewed it as a sort of model or anticipation of his Florentine Histories; something the author's own testimony in part supports. Accordingly, some have seen it as thoughtful and considered, others as light-hearted or even frivolous -- "a summer month's diversion". Its mood has been variously described as pessimistic, realistic, optimistic, or idealistic. Its content has been seen as revealing Machiavelli's "innermost thought", his vision of an archetypal hero or Italian prince-saviour, a late melancholic "backward glance into the past", or as a depiction of the overwhelming power of fortuna. Its character has been described as philosophical, political, historical, literary and aesthetic. Why, one wonders, has such a

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4 J.H. Whitfield, "Machiavelli and Castruccio" in *Italian Studies*, vol. VIII, 1953, pp. 1-28.

little work led to such divergent readings?[5]

Quentin Skinner has argued that before Machiavelli's thought can be properly understood the context within which specific works, *The Prince, Discourses,* and so on, were written must be reconstructed and the specific problems which those works confronted recovered.[6] I suggest that the reason that "such a little work" has led to such divergent readings is that this point has been largely ignored: that insufficient attention has been paid to the problems to which it was a response and the situation upon which it commented.

I take context to be a fairly broad field. It must, of course, include the political and social circumstances in which Machiavelli wrote *La Vita*. However, I am also required to make a plausible guess as to what Machiavelli's response to the problems that these conditions posed might have been. For this reason the political and social factors of the context must themselves be placed within the context of his work. I therefore consider his other works - among them *The Prince, Discourses,* and *Florentine Histories,* but also his

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[5] Michael Evans, "A Machiavellian Game: Will the Real Castruccio Castracani Please Stand Up?", *Selected Papers From the West Virginia Shakespeare and Renaissance Association*, Vol. IX, Spr. 1984, pp. 45-55. p. 48.

[6] Skinner, *Machiavelli*, pp. 1 & 2.

letters and his plays - to be an ineluctable part of the context of *La Vita*.

My argument is that *La Vita* is neither the poor cousin amid the grandees of the Machiavelli oeuvre (*The Prince*, *Discourses*, and *Florentine Histories*), nor something frivolous and forgettable, but rather a revealing intersection of many facets of Machiavelli. I will argue this from the interpretive position that *La Vita* is a criticism of the Medici.

In order to support this argument I will first summarize the contents of *La Vita*. Then I will consider what has been written about the text to date. Then I will bring together what I feel to be the salient aspects of his other works. Finally I will suggest a manner in which these considerations can be brought to bear on the interpretation of *La Vita*.

2: *La Vita di Castruccio Castracani*

The first paragraph of *La Vita* is cast as though the work were a personal letter to Zanobi Buondelmonti (the man to whom *Discourses* was dedicated) and Luigi Alamanni, Machiavelli's companions of the Orti Oricellari:

> Those who consider it, my dearest Zanobi and Luigi, think it wonderful that all, or the larger part, of those who in this world have done very great things, and who have been excellent among the men of their era, have in their birth been humble or obscure... Because all of them either have been exposed to wild beasts or have had fathers so humble that, being ashamed of them, they have made themselves out sons of Jove or of some other God.[7]

From here Machiavelli leads into the story proper, shifting from the form of a personal letter to that of a formal biography: It was early morning in a vineyard where the widowed sister of the canon Castracani was picking herbs. Hearing a rustling among the vines she bent down and found a tiny baby there, weeping forlornly. She was "partly astonished, partly frightened, [but] full of

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7 I have used, generally, Allan Gilbert's translation of *La Vita di Castruccio Castracani* in *Machiavelli: Chief Works and Others*, vol. II (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1958), but have resorted to my own translation from the original in the Franco Gaeta edited collection (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1962. VII, pp. 9-41) where, as in the mottoes on Castruccio's senatorial toga, Gilbert seems to have mistranslated. I have provided for each quoted passage a page reference both for the Gilbert translation and for the Gaeta original. Gilbert II:533; Gaeta VII:9.

compassion".[8] She took it back into the house, bundled it up, and presented it to her brother when he came home (they lived together). As she had had none of her own, the pair adopted the child, named him Castruccio, and raised him for the priesthood.

This part of Machiavelli's story is completely fictional. There was no canon Castracani, no canon Castracani's sister, and, as I have mentioned, the Castruccio of historical record (the "real" Castruccio), was no orphan. The real Castruccio, as Machiavelli knew, was a member of the Lucchese Interminelli family.[9] The Interminelli were exiled from Lucca along with a large section of the city's aristocracy (the *castichi*) in early 1301, when a loose organization of artisans and lesser merchants constituting themselves as *il popolo* seized control of the government. They returned in 1308 as part of a peace treaty imposed on Lucca by the *de facto* prince of Pisa, Uguccione del Faggiuola. Castruccio in the meantime had travelled first to England (where he got into some difficulties by murdering a man) and then served

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[8] Gilbert II:535; Gaeta VII:10.

[9] J.H. Whitfield and Louis Green agree that Machiavelli had read Tegrimi's account, and Machiavelli gets most of these facts "correct" in *Florentine Histories*.

Henry VII in France and northern Italy as a mercenary.[10]

According to Machiavelli the happy couple's plans to make a priest of Castruccio did not come to fruition. The boy, it turned out, was not of priestly character. By the time he was fourteen he had grown brave enough to defy his surrogate parents, laid aside his books, and was playing with the other boys at wrestling, running, and practising with weapons. His talents and charisma ("in addition to outdoing them [the other children], he [Castruccio] had over them a Kingly authority..."[11]) were quickly recognized by a local man of arms by the name of Francesco Guinigi "who in riches and affability and *virtù* far exceeded all the other Lucchese."[12] Guinigi adopted the boy, taking him into his house and raising him with his own son, considerably younger than Castruccio, whose name

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10 Louis Green, *Castruccio Castracani: A Study on the Origins and Character of a Fourteenth-century Italian Despotism*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 12-24. p. 42. Green makes use of Tegrimi's biography and attests to its accuracy in the matter of Castruccio's early life. It is noted by Theodore Mommsen in "Castruccio Castracani and the Empire", *Medieval Studies*, ed. Eugene F. Rice jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), pp. 19-32, that Castruccio's service with Henry VII before his return to Lucca represents his initial commitment to the Ghibellines, who would, throughout his career, be the basis of his power and legitimacy, and also that he named his three sons for Henry VII and his brothers (p. 20).

11 Gilbert II:536; Gaeta VII:12.

12 Gilbert II:535; Gaeta VII:11. Gilbert translates "virtu" as "vigour" but I have retained the original.

was Pagolo. Under Guinigi's tutelage, claims Machiavelli, Castruccio's progress was prodigious:

> First of all, he made himself an excellent rider, managing even the most fiery horse with the greatest skill; and in jousts and tournaments, though he was a mere boy, he was more notable than anybody else, so that in every feat, whether strength or skill, no man could be found who surpassed him.[13]

The real Castruccio seems to have been similarly, if not quite so spectacularly endowed. During his exile he gained a reputation as a mercenary and earned the admiration of Uguccione della Faggiuola, serving at the time in Genoa.[14]

Machiavelli's Castruccio rose quickly to general and thence to Duke. When he was eighteen years old Guinigi, a Ghibelline, was sent to aid the Ghibellines of Pavia, who had been driven from their city. Machiavelli reports that Castruccio went along, having been given charge of his own company, and that "no one in that campaign gained such favour as he carried off... in all Lombardy his name became great and honoured."[15] Then - in Machiavelli's account at least - Guinigi promptly died, entrusting Pagolo to Castruccio's care. At this point Castruccio's fame began to work against him.

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13 Gilbert II:536; Gaeta VII:12.

14 Green, *Castruccio*, p. 48.

15 Gilbert II:537; Gaeta VII:13.

His meteoric rise had engendered envious slander and fear, which was encouraged by a certain Giorgio del Opizzi, head of the Guelf's of Lucca. Giorgio, who intended to replace Guinigi as the city's foremost citizen, plotted both with the envious grumblers and with the vicar of King Robert of Naples to have Castruccio removed from the city. Castruccio, however, out-manoeuvred him. He had already allied himself to the ruler of the Pisan Ghibellines, Uguccione della Faggiuola, and was plotting with him and some exiled Lucchese Ghibellines to eliminate Giorgio and return the exiles to Lucca. Castruccio barricaded himself in the home of the Onesti family and awaited Uguccione's arrival. With Castruccio on the inside and his own forces on the outside, Uguccione quickly mastered Lucca's defenses and drove the Guelfs out of the city. Giorgio was killed in the process.[16]

At this point Machiavelli's account starts to converge with the truth. As I have already noted, the *castichi* of Lucca, including the Interminelli, having been exiled for seven years, were returned by Uguccione. Hired by the Pisans to protect them in the wake of Henry IV's death, he had first razed a significant sector of the Lucchese *contado,* seized control of Pisa, and then negotiated a favourable peace with Lucca which included

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16 Gilbert II:538; Gaeta VII:14.

the return of the exiled families.[17] The Interminelli were the most important of these families, and upon their return Castruccio made himself their leader.[18] Then the exiles, claiming that the Lucchese regime had not honoured their side of the treaty, plotted with Uguccione to seize the city.[19] Inside the walls Castruccio fortified himself in the houses of the Onesti family, and outside the Pisans attacked the gates. Confronted with this double threat the ruling families of the regime fled, leaving Lucca to be sacked by the Pisans.[20]

In Machiavelli's account the Guelfs of Tuscany banded together under the Florentines in the wake of the fall of Lucca to attack Uguccione and restore the expelled Guelfs. Their army took Montecatini and laid seige to Montecarlo. Uguccione raised an army from Lucca and Pisa, added some German cavalry to it, and encamped outside Montecarlo for a counterattack. Having done this, however, he promptly became ill, which left Castruccio in charge.[21]

In reality the Florentines and their allies did mount an attack in the wake of Uguccione's seizure of Lucca, but

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17 Green, *Castruccio*, pp. 30-38.

18 ibid., p. 39.

19 ibid., p. 52.

20 ibid., pp. 54&55.

21 Gilbert II:539; Gaeta VII:15 & 16.

Uguccione did not fall ill, and in fact won a victory at Montecatini worthy of Castruccio himself. Castruccio probably played a minor role, if any, in this battle, and the manner in which it unfolded seems to have borne little relation to Machiavelli's description (though he gets many of the details of casualties - Uguccione's son, for instance - correct).[22]

In *La Vita*, on the other hand, Castruccio is the central figure in this first battle with the Florentines. Machiavelli reports that at first he did nothing, believing, rightly, that the delay would give his attackers a false confidence. Every day the Guelfs came to his camp to offer battle, and every day he kept his men behind their fortifications. When at last he did fight he employed the same tactic as, according to Machiavelli in *Arte del Guerra*, Scipio had against Hasdrubal in Spain: Hasdrubal knew that Scipio always placed his strongest men in the centre, and accordingly did the same. Scipio, however, reversed the arrangement when he came into battle, and ordered the men in the centre to move slowly so that they would not make contact with the Spanish

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[22] Green, *Castruccio*, pp. 61-71. For Castruccio's role, see p. 71. Ferdinand Schevill, *History of Florence*, (New York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing, 1961), p. 199. Schevill makes more of Castruccio's role at Montecatini, saying that he was Uguccione's "chief lieutenant", but offers no evidence to contradict Green's argument that he probably, for the most part, remained at the back of the fray.

soldiers. Meanwhile his strongest soldiers met Hasdrubal's weakest, and slaughtered first them and then the outnumbered and encircled remnants.[23] In *La Vita* Machiavelli's Castruccio copied Scipio's rearrangement and won a great victory:

> without much difficulty, both wings of the enemy were put to flight, and those in the centre - denuded of their flanking forces, without having had any chance to show their valour - fled. The defeat and the slaughter were great: in that battle more than ten thousand men were killed, with many leaders and great knights of the Guelf party from all Tuscany.... Yet on Castruccio's side they did not amount to three hundred...[24]

The spectacle of the Guelf forces engaging in pointless chivalric challenges to a well dug-in Castruccio bears some similarity to the behaviour of the real Castruccio a few years later. In 1328, his well entrenched troops besieging Pistoia, Castruccio was offered the gauntlet by the Florentine force that came to relieve the city. He accepted it and replied fittingly, but remained safely behind his spikes and ramparts. The exchange was repeated a number of times with the same result: Castruccio stayed where he was, despite his blandishments,

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23 Gilbert II:650&1.

24 Gilbert II:540; Gaeta VII:17.

and the Florentines wasted time and energy.[25]

To Machiavelli's Castruccio the victory at Montecarlo brought greater fame and greater jealousy. Uguccione, recovered from his illness, decided that Castruccio had to be done in before he could become a threat. He instructed his son, to whom he had given Lucca, to arrest him on a pretext (Castruccio had sheltered a man accused of murder) and kill him. The son, however, having captured Castruccio, delayed his execution, and the people of Lucca used his liberation as an excuse to overthrow Uguccione's son. Uguccione senior left Pisa with his cavalry in order to expedite Castruccio's demise, only to find the gates immediately closed behind him by Pisan rebels. When he arrived at Lucca he found much the same situation: Castruccio's supporters held the gates to the city and he was unable to enter. Machiavelli reports that Uguccione was forced to flee to Lombardy, where he died in poverty.[26]

In general outline this conforms to what we know of historical fact, though in detail it does not. In fact the incident, which took place in April of 1316, which gave Nieri del Faggiuola, Uguccione's son, the excuse to have

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[25] Green, *Castruccio*, pp. 247-8. This seige - in fact Castruccio's last battle - is accurately portrayed in *Florentine Histories* II:30.

[26] Gilbert II:541; Gaeta VII:17.

Castruccio imprisoned (which was accomplished with the same ruse - an invitation to supper - that Machiavelli reports) was Castruccio's summary execution of thirty members of a nearby town.[27] In fact, Uguccione senior was in Lucca for the arrest, but was forced to leave (by rebellion in Pisa) before Castruccio could be killed. He found himself unable to enter Pisa, and was then forced to return to Lucca, where he found that Castruccio's supporters had mobilized enough discontent that he and Nieri were forced to flee from that city as well.[28] Castruccio was then made co-captain of the city's military forces with one Pagano Cristofano. By the end of the year he had deposed Pagano and consolidated his position as de facto ruler of Lucca.[29]

Machiavelli's Castruccio then set about regaining the cities that had declared themselves independent upon Uguccione's flight. Machiavelli quickly glosses over Castruccio's victory over the towns of Sarzana, Massa, Carrara, Lavenza, and Potremoli, and reports that he took advantage of his even further enhanced reputation to have himself officially invested, by popular decree, as Lucca's

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[27] Green, *Castruccio*, p. 72.

[28] ibid., p. 73.

[29] ibid., p. 76-8.

ruler.[30]

In fact, the period between 1316 when Castruccio seized power and 1320 when he had himself elected "dominus generalis" for life was probably dominated more by constitutional wrangling than it was by war. He did, however, take advantage of the lack of conflict with any major power (King Robert of Naples and Fredrick of Hapsburg had signed a peace treaty in 1316 which had some degree of influence over events in Tuscany) to regain for Lucca many of the outlying towns and villages that she had lost since 1314. And, since, according to Green, Castruccio's power was based on the personal loyalty of his troops, this can only have enhanced his domestic position.[31]

According to Machiavelli, Castruccio's meteoric rise continued. The Emperor, Fredrick the Fair, came to Italy and Castruccio, leaving Pagolo in charge, went to him with five hundred cavalry. The Emperor made Castruccio his viceroy in Tuscany and gave him Pisa (who, fearing the Guelfs of Florence, accepted him). After the Emperor had left, all the Ghibellines of Tuscany and Lombardy took Castruccio as their leader. At the behest of some Lombard Ghibellines who were threatened by a Florentine army he

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[30] Gilbert II:541; Gaeta VII:19.

[31] Green, *Castruccio*, pp. 80-92; Mommsen, p. 22.

then attacked Florence, forcing her to withdraw troops.[32]

In relating this episode Machiavelli seems to be telescoping several moments of the real Castruccio's life into one. Fredrick, in fact, was too preoccupied with contesting the Imperial throne with Ludwig of Bavaria to come to Italy. In May of 1320, however, in exchange for being appointed lifetime lord of his city and Imperial vicar in Tuscany, Castruccio swore an oath of obedience to Fredrick through his ambassador.[33] At this time Castruccio was involved in several small engagements with the Florentines, with the aims of regaining Cappiano, Montefalcone and Santa Maria a Monte, and of relieving the pressure on his Ghibelline allies.[34] When, two years later, Ludwig triumphed over Fredrick at Mulhdorf, Castruccio did not hesitate to change his allegiance, and in 1327 when Ludwig came to Italy he added Pisa to his dominions.[35]

In Machiavelli's account, just as Castruccio was consolidating his position as the head of the Ghibelline party in northern Italy, he was forced to return to Lucca to put down a rebellion. The Poggio family, feeling that

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32 Gilbert II:541; Gaeta VII:19 & 20.

33 Green, *Castruccio*, p. 124; Mommsen, p. 23.

34 ibid., p. 129.

35 ibid., p. 218; Mommsen, p. 24.

they had not received sufficient reward for their support of his ascent, had united the nobility and were leading a riot. Upon his return he was approached by Stefano di Poggio, "an old and peaceful man who had not taken part in the conspiracy", who offered to mediate. Castruccio agreed and Stefano brought the family before him, whereupon Castruccio had them all killed, including the hapless Stefano.[36]

In this case, Machiavelli's account differs significantly from what actually happened. In fact it was Stefano di Poggio alone who offended Castruccio by killing one of his officers while he was away from the city. Castruccio hurried back, invited the entire Poggio family to supper in an apparently conciliatory gesture, and then had them all either killed or exiled.[37]

Having nipped in the bud what Machiavelli represents as a potential rebellion, the Castruccio of *La Vita* ended the conflict with Florence in order to be able to concentrate on securing his power in Lucca against similar episodes in the future. Using "various excuses and pretexts" he rid himself of all those in the city "who through ambition might aspire to the princedom... [,] depriving them of country, of property, and - for those he

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[36] Gilbert II:543; Gaeta VII:21.

[37] ibid., pp. 92-96.

could get his hands on - of life..."[38]

Meanwhile, thinking ahead to further conflicts with Florence, Machiavelli's Castruccio set about taking Pistoia. He accomplished this by way of a rather peculiar stratagem: he arranged that he should meet secretly with the head of one of the two factions that controlled the city at the same time as Pagolo should meet with the other, in similar secrecy, on the other side of town. On a signal they each killed their respective hosts, and Pistoia was then taken with little difficulty.[39]

Not surprisingly, the process by which the real Castruccio gained Pistoia was rather more complex and drawn out (and was, on at least one occasion, subject to failure and reversal). The most that could be said for Machiavelli's historical accuracy on this point is that Castruccio did in fact rely on factional divisions within the city, and played upon them masterfully.[40]

Machiavelli then moves to the climax of Castruccio's career. His empire achieved and his base secure, Castruccio, he reports, was officially recognized by Rome and by the Emperor as the prodigy and marvel that he was. Henry, the Emperor's deputy in Rome, was forced to ask

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[38] Gilbert II:544; Gaeta VII:21 & 22.

[39] Gilbert II:544; Gaeta VII:22.

[40] Green, *Castruccio,* pp. 157-61.

that Castruccio save him from unrest which had been brought about in the city by the high cost of food, and which he feared would provide the opportunity for the Guelfs to seize it from him. Castruccio, arriving with shiploads of grain and six hundred cavalry, saved the day. He was rewarded by being made a senator. Machiavelli reports that

> This office Castruccio assumed with the greatest pomp, putting on a toga of brocade, with letters on the front which said: "He is the man whom God wills", and on back which said: "He shall be what God wants"[41]

Meanwhile, Machiavelli adds, the Florentines retook Pistoia.

The historical events to which this episode corresponds most closely are those which surrounded Ludwig of Bavaria's stay in Italy in 1327. It was in fact Ludwig who was summoned to Rome by the leader of the fragile Ghibelline government there. Castruccio, obliged to him for his help in reducing Pisa and for the dukedom which Ludwig had conferred on him, accompanied him with about eight hundred cavalry. While in Rome Ludwig had himself crowned Emperor, a ceremony in which Castruccio took part as a count of the Lateran Palace. He was also made a senator and had a toga made which was inscribed with a motto similar to that mentioned by Machiavelli. And, as *La*

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[41] Gaeta VII:24.

Vita claims, lost control of Pistoia to Florence during his absence from Lucca.[42]

Having come close to the truth, however, Machiavelli veers away again at this point. According to Machiavelli, the battle to regain Pistoia took place in a narrow pass near the town of Serravelle. Castruccio again proved the brilliant tactician. The night before the battle he secretly, and fraudulently, acquired the hitherto neutral town which overlooked the pass, and then ambushed the Florentine force at the moment when they were most vulnerable. As usual, the result was slaughter:

> They were not expecting to find Castruccio on the hill, because they did not know that he had mastered the town [Serravelle]. Hence the Florentine cavalry, having climbed the hill, unexpectedly beheld Castruccio's infantry; the cavalry was so near that they scarcely had time to lace their helmets... as the report went down through the rest of the Florentine army, everything fell into complete confusion. The cavalry was crowded by the infantry, the infantry by the cavalry and the baggage; so narrow was the place that the leaders could not go either forward or backward... Meanwhile the cavalry, who were at close quarters with the hostile infantry were being killed and defeated without being able to defend themselves...[43]

Pistoia immediately gave itself back to Castruccio and he marched his army to within two miles of Florence, where he

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[42] Green, *Castruccio*, pp. 224-7. Mommsen emphasizes the increase in power represented by Castruccio's promotion from vicar to Duke, but otherwise offers the same account with less detail, pp. 26 & 27.

[43] Gilbert II:547; Gaeta VII:26.

encamped and made merry for a few days ("to rejoice over the victory gained, in derision of the Florentines having money coined and races run by horses, by men, and by harlots") while he attempted to buy his way through the city gates.[44] His attempt at bribery failed however, and he was forced to leave Florence when Benedetto Lanfranchi, "unable to endure having his native city enslaved", incited the people of Pisa to rebel.

Castruccio quickly had Benedetto killed and his family and co-conspirators exiled, and was soon ready to face the Florentines again.[45] The second battle with the Florentines and their Guelf allies was the high point and the end of Castruccio's military career.[46] Because they were committing all their resources to the battle (the Florentines "summoned to aid them almost all the Guelfs of Italy, and formed a very large army of more than thirty thousand infantry and ten thousand cavalry") and despite the fact that he would be badly outnumbered (he had only twenty thousand infantry and four thousand cavalry), Castruccio saw the battle as an opportunity to defeat the Florentines decisively.

Castruccio fortified himself at Fucecchio, near Pisa,

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[44] Gilbert II:548; Gaeta VII:27.

[45] Gilbert II:549; Gaeta VII:28.

[46] Gilbert II:549; Gaeta VII:29.

on the banks of the Arno. When the Florentine army tried to ford the river to attack him, he held the bank against them.

> The Florentine infantry were weighed down by the water and by their equipment... The horses, after some of them had crossed, since they had broken up the bottom of the Arno, made passage by others difficult.... Castruccio's men attempted to plunge them back into the river; the Florentines attempted to shove them back.[47]

The fight was "fierce and terrible", and "on either side many fell".[48] Castruccio, however, did two things which Machiavelli had advised in *Arte della Guerra*. In the third book of the *Arte* Machiavelli wrote that the single most important thing to keep in mind when arraying an army for battle was:

> never draw up an army in such a way that those who fight in front cannot be relieved by those posted in the rear; he who commits this error makes the greater part of his army useless...[49]

Castruccio had so arranged his defense that as his men tired he could insinuate his reserves to the front line without letup. He also took advantage of another factor noted in the *Arte*: that horses are easy to balk. Machiavelli argues there that

> the horse is a perceiving animal which recognizes dangers and is unwilling to enter

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[47] Gilbert II:550 & 551; Gaeta VII:30.

[48] Gilbert II:551; Gaeta VII:31.

[49] Gilbert II:642. See also p. 644.

> them... I say that if a horse at a distance sees that he is going to strike the points of pikes... he slackens his course, and when he feels himself pricked stops entirely. If you wish to experiment with this, attempt to run a horse against a wall.[50]

When the Florentines attempted to outflank Castruccio's main position on the river bank with cavalry, they found themselves confronted by infantry armed with darts who

> with loud shouts wounded the horses in the face and in the breast, so that frightened by the wounds and the shouts, not wanting to go ahead, they fell on one another.[51]

When it was all over it had been - of course - another great victory for Castruccio. Machiavelli claims that for a loss of only fifteen hundred and seventy of his own men, Castruccio had succeeded in killing more than twenty thousand of his enemy's.[52] It was, however, to be his last. Considering "it the duty of a good general to be the first to mount his horse and the last to dismount", Castruccio, though soaked with sweat and water (and presumably hatless, since Machiavelli notes in the aphorisms that he was never seen to wear one) remained on his horse to the very end of the day and caught a severe chill from the "wind that generally rises at midday from

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[50] Gilbert II:604.

[51] Gilbert II:551; Gaeta VII:31.

[52] Gilbert II:554; Gaeta VII:32.

up the Arno and is almost always unhealthful"[53] And so it proved. Racked with fever, Machiavelli's Castruccio called Pagolo in order to deliver his final speech to him.

The facts are again quite different. Castruccio left Rome on the 1st of February 1328 and did not take Pistoia back until the 3rd of August, and then only after a seige which had lasted from the beginning of May. The battle at Serravelle did not happen at all, and, despite the Florentines' best efforts to force one, there was no pitched battle with the enemy at all, either at Serravelle or Fucecchio.[54]

Castruccio's final speech, his swan song, is the point in Machiavelli's text at which the hyperbolic quality of his career, at every point emphasised and made more spectacular by Machiavelli, begins to take on a rather different cast. First he laments that had he known "Fortune was going to cut me off in the middle my journey" he would have pursued a different course - he would have been content with a smaller and more secure estate. Then he explains that out of loyalty and gratitude to his adoptive father, Francesco, he has remained childless so that Pagolo may inherit "not merely what was left you by your father but also what Fortune and my ability have

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[53] Gilbert II:552; Gaeta VII:32 & 33.

[54] Green, *Castruccio*, pp. 227-250.

gained".

In actual fact, the assertion by Machiavelli that Castruccio remained unmarried and childless is as fictional as his origins as an orphan. He had in fact married Pina Streghi, the daughter of a minor but exiled Lucchese family some time before they returned to the city. Later he had three sons, Arrigo, Giovanni, and Valerano, by her.[55]

In *Discourses* Machiavelli comments of Livy that "Our historian has Camillus do and say magnificent things in order to show us how a fine man ought to behave."[56] It is worth, then, considering carefully the speech which Machiavelli placed in Castruccio's mouth:

> You [Castruccio is speaking directly to Pagolo] control Lucca, which will never be content under your rule; you rule Pisa, where the citizens are by nature treacherous and fickle, and which, however used to being dominated it has been at times, will never tolerate a Luccan as its lord. Pistoia is still yours, but it is somewhat untrustworthy because of internal divisions and it remains angry at our family because of recent injuries. Nearby, you have the offended Florentines, harmed by us in a thousand ways but not destroyed, to whom the news of my death will be more pleasing than the conquest of all Tuscany. In the princes of Milan and in the emperor you cannot trust, because they are far off, slow, and their assistance late. You must not, therefore, trust in anything except your own cleverness and the memory of my ability, and in the reputation brought to you by the present

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55 ibid., pp. 48-51.

56 *Discourses* III:31 (Gilbert II:499; Gaeta I:470).

> victory. The last, if you can use it with prudence, will aid you in making an agreement with the Florentines, who, since they are terrified by the present defeat will certainly be eager to accept your terms. As to them, where I sought to make them my enemies and thought their hostility must bring me power and glory, you must with every effort seek to make them your friends, because their friendship will bring you security and ease.
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> It is in this world of great importance to know oneself, and to be able to measure the forces of one's spirit and of one's position. He who knows that he is not suited to war ought by means of the arts of peace endeavour to reign. To them, in my opinion, it is well that you apply yourself, and that you strive in this way to enjoy the results of my labours and dangers. In this you will succeed easily if you will accept as true these reflections of mine; and to me you will have two obligations: one that I have left you this realm; the other that I have taught you how to keep it.[57]

This is the key point in the text. Castruccio asserted that his legacy was constituted of two things: a state, which he had built up through his strength and intelligence, and some advice. His plan was that, once he was dead, Pagolo should employ the advice to preserve the state. By his own words, however, the state was "weak and insecure", and his subsequent observations, that Lucca would never be satisfied with his rule, that Pisa was populated by the fickle and deceitful who would hold him in disdain, that Pistoia was hardly loyal, and so on, makes this seem something of an understatement. And his advice thereafter, the advice which was supposed to enable

[57] Gilbert II:554; Gaeta VII:34.

Pagolo to hold the empire together, amounted to little more than "know thy weakness".

The point of the speech is summed up, I believe, by the sentence with which Machiavelli then relates Pagolo's fate: "not much later he lost Pistoia and then Pisa; and with difficulty kept the sovereignty of Lucca."[58] In other words, as soon as Castruccio died, everything collapsed. Tens of thousands had been killed and the situation was not even as good as it had been when Castruccio started.

In reality Castruccio did die quite soon after retaking Pistoia but it had nothing do with either a battle with the Florentines or with chills caught from unhealthy breezes off the Arno.[59] It is clear, however, that his realm did collapse very soon after he died, and that his sons were unable to hold onto Pisa, which had not been officially annexed to his dukedom, or even Lucca, which rebelled against them and was granted to another family by Ludwig as he was on his way north.[60]

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58 Gilbert II:555; Gaeta VII:35.

59 Green, *Castruccio*, p. 253. It may have been a poisoned peach, but Green surmises that some minor epidemic did him in.

60 ibid., pp. 253-259. Mommsen, p. 30. Mommsen asserts that it was Ludwig's lack of loyalty which led to the sons' downfall; Green attributes it to a combination of misfortune and incompetence. Again Machiavelli's account in the *Histories* is quite different and accords closely

The work concludes with a series of aphorisms which Machiavelli attributes to Castruccio, but most of which he borrowed from *Lives of the Saints* (a Christianized version of *Lives of the Philosophers*) by Diogenes Laertius.[61]

To sum up, there are three major points of invention in *La Vita*. First there is Castruccio's orphanage; second there is his remaining unmarried in order to preserve a rather strange succession; and third are the events surrounding his death, including his deathbed speech. The rest of the text is a version of the historical truth which has been compressed and modified in order to exaggerate Castruccio's achievements.

I will argue that the key to understanding *La Vita* - both its fictive passages and its exaggerated facts - is that Castruccio committed the crime for which - in Machiavelli's eyes - there could be no excuse: in the end, after the wars, the murders and the chaos, he had been ineffective.

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with historical fact. See II:30&31.

61 Louis Green, "Machiavelli's *Vita di Castruccio Castracani* and its Lucchese model", *Italian Studies*, 42, 1987. pp. 37-55. p. 54.

3: Historiography

Professor Whitfield's 1953 analysis seems to be the logical point at which to start a review of recent literature on *La Vita di Castruccio Castracani*.[62] Until then the prevailing opinion, that of Chabod, Villari, and Tommassini, was that *La Vita* was not only a minor text, but also one that was ancillary: either to *The Prince* as another study of the virtuous prince, or to *The Art of War* as a "practical" demonstration of its strategic recommendations. Whitfield, however, points out that none of these interpretations made much sense.

Whitfield makes three important points against them. First he attacks the notion, taken for granted by Chabod, that *The Prince* transcended the immediate political context of its composition and represented a lifelong preoccupation. He points out that *The Art of War* and the third book of *Discourses* were written more or less contemporaneously with *La Vita* and that they demonstrate quite different preoccupations than those of *The Prince*, focusing as they do on the relationship of the prince to laws (*ordini*).[63]

Secondly he points out that were Machiavelli in fact

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[62] J.H. Whitfield "Machiavelli and Castruccio" in *Italian Studies*, vol. VIII, 1953, pp. 1-28.

[63] ibid., p. 6.

looking for another example of the Cesare Borgia type he would have done better to have retained more of the factual Castruccio and invented less. He cites Tegrimi's account of Castruccio's "care for military topography", his faith in *virtute militum* over numbers, the manner in which he gave priority to public rather than his own private usage of resources, the measures he took to protect commerce, his low opinion of mercenaries, and "especially his warnings to his sons and household to abstain from injury to the womenfolk of their subjects".[64] And, Whitfield points out, Machiavelli seemed to have passed up clear opportunities despite the fact that Tegrimi cast the facts in a manner particularly suited to his use. Whitfield comments on the passage in which Tegrimi describes Castruccio's thoughts on mercenaries: this "is the language of the *Arte del Guerra* ready for Machiavelli's use: but it is missing from the *Vita di Castruccio*."[65] On the passage concerning Castruccio's orders against abusing womenfolk he writes that "those two adverbs, *saepius* and *maxime*, fit Machiavelli's warnings on this topic within the pages of the *Prince*."[66] Moreover, he points out, direct

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[64] ibid., pp. 4&5.

[65] ibid., p. 5.

[66] ibid., p. 5.

association of *La Vita* with *The Art of War* falls down on similar points: the battles which Castruccio fights and wins do not always fit the strategic models set out in that work, and that even when they do, they are presented with an uncertainty about detail that is unlikely to have been present in a purely set piece.[67]

Whitfield observes, finally, that Agothocles, upon whom it was generally assumed - "on obscure counsel" as Whitfield puts it - Machiavelli's Castruccio had been modelled, makes less sense in this role than do Moses, Romulus, or Cyrus.[68]

The interpretation that Whitfield gives of *La Vita* centres on Castruccio's death bed speech. He justifies this focus first by quoting a letter from Zanobi Buondelmonti (to whom Machiavelli had just sent *La Vita*). In it Zanobi stated:

> Et sopra ogni cosa mi pare che vagliate in quella horatione, credo che sia perche vi alzate piu con lo stilo che non fate altrove, come la materia anche richiede.[69]

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[67] ibid., pp. 9 & 10. Two of the three examples that I have cited above of Castruccio acting as though he had read *The Art of War* (those concerning the re-enforceability of infantry and the ease with which horses are balked) are not mentioned by Whitfield, but nonetheless conform to his point concerning detail.

[68] ibid., pp. 11&12.

[69] ibid., p. 8. For Buondelmonti's letter see Gaeta VI:394-5. Whitfield refers to Machiavelli, *Opere*, ed. Fanfani-Passerini, 1873, I, lxxxvii. "And above all it seems to

Whitfield's interpretation of the passage runs counter to Villari's, according to which Buondelmonti was approving of the whole work. According to Whitfield,

> ...*quella horatione* is not synonymous with the *Vita* itself, but with the last speech of Castruccio: this is the normal sense for Machiavelli himself of the word *orazione*, [a note refers the reader to *Discorsi* III, xlvi] and *altrove* therefore looks to the less interesting rest of the *Vita di Castruccio*, and not outside it to Machiavelli's other works, which would be a strange and impertinent direction.[70]

The point is an important one. Buondelmonti, who knew Machiavelli well, immediately picked out the deathbed speech as the best part of the work. If, as I will argue, there was a subtext to the story of Castruccio's life, Buondelmonti was clearly on to it.

Having argued strongly that Castruccio's last words are the point upon which the text turns, Whitfield concludes swiftly and logically: Castruccio, despite his manifold success, is not, ultimately, an idealized prince, but is in fact condemned as a failure for having neglected the establishment of laws and measures which would have ensured the stability of his realm beyond his death. As Whitfield puts it

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me that you have excelled in this oration. I think that perhaps you have reached higher here with your pen than you have elsewhere, as indeed the material demands."

[70] ibid., p. 8.

> What we look for is a state of things which is *securo* and *fermo*. What is left after all Castruccio's *virtus* is one that is *debole e inferno*.[71]

Whitfield argues that this interpretation fits well with the emphasis on laws and maintainability in the two other major works that Machiavelli produced at about the same time. Moreover, he argues that it fits well with the political context of Florence in 1520, when possessed of the same set of neighbours (Pistoia, Lucca, Pisa, Siena) she should measure her strength and proceed with caution.[72]

In 1956 Guido A. Guarino published a short paper on *La Vita*, but contributed little of substance to the field.[73] Contrasting Tegrimi's biography with Machiavelli's, Guarino asserts the former to have been a "brilliant factual biography", and the latter a "highly imaginative and fictionalized" example of the "theoretical prince".[74] In doing so he ignores Whitfield's arguments,

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71 ibid., p. 25. Add to this the fact, which Whitfield emphasizes, that Machiavelli, unlike Tegrimi (notice the difference in the titles of their respective works) chose to emphasize the Castracani (which means, literally, "castrator of dogs") part of his subject's name rather than the Interminelli.

72 ibid., pp. 26&27.

73 Guido A. Guarino, "Two Views of a Renaissance Tyrant", *Symposium*, 10, (1956), pp. 285-90.

74 ibid., p. 285.

which would seem to make this position untenable, and fails to propose any fresh reasons to reconsider the old position. The result is confused. For instance Guarino asserts both that "in Castruccio he [Machiavelli] discovered the perfect application" for his "theoretical prince", but also that the work required of Machiavelli a high degree of imagination.[75] Whitfield had pointed out that had Machiavelli been interested in the "perfect prince" he would have done better to have stuck to the facts. So why is the work so often at odds with Tegrimi's account and the facts? In Guarino's account the question is not raised. In addition, Guarino's arguments rest on broad, and often unsupported, generalizations. On the topic of Machiavelli's historical accuracy, for example, he asserts that "he never shrank from changing the statement of this historian [Livy] to serve his own purposes" but he provides not a single example.[76] He asserts that "Machiavelli always showed great interest in the art of war" and claims that *La Vita* was intended to demonstrate the practical application of theories arising from this interest.[77] However, again, no specifics are offered.

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[75] ibid., p. 285. Italics mine.

[76] ibid., p. 286.

[77] ibid., p. 288.

Peter Bondanella's first paper, published in 1970, is concerned with Castruccio only insofar as he is seen to be the object of one "character sketch" among many in Machiavelli's work.[78] In addition to Castruccio, Bondanella considers the manner in which Machiavelli represents Plutone (the devil bested by Gianmatteo or Onesta in *Belfagor*), Cesare Borgia, Lucrezia (the object of lust and intrigue in *Mandragola*), and the selfish Duke of Athens (Book II of the *Discourses)*. He concludes that in both fictional and historical characters "Machiavelli is interested in the moral and intellectual attributes of an individual" and that "physical descriptions, when used at all, tend to take on a symbolic importance and only complement his general opinion of a character's moral qualities."[79] He also finds that "Machiavelli is ultimately a moralist and reflects this concern in his narrative style - especially in his treatment of 'historical' characters."[80]

Ignoring Whitfield's paper, as did Guarino, Bondanella asserts that Castruccio, like Cesare Borgia, was intended as a model to emulate and as an historical

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[78] Peter E. Bondanella, "The Style and Function of Machiavelli's Character Sketches", *Forum Italicum*, 4, (1970), pp. 58-69.

[79] ibid., p. 66.

[80] ibid., p. 67.

myth.[81] Notwithstanding the implausibility of his argument, which depends on ignoring the final speech all together, Bondanella makes two interesting points. First he observes, as had Whitfield, that Castruccio's origins bring to mind Moses and Romulus.[82] However, he makes little of the association, except insofar as it fits with his second interesting point, namely that the whole work is an exercise in hyperbole and exaggeration, with making Castruccio larger than life.[83]

In 1972 Bondanella published a second paper in which he recognized and argued against Whitfield's 1953 work. Here he asserts that a proper understanding of *La Vita* depends not on a close reading of the final speech as Machiavelli's opinions, but on an appreciation of the "literary, fictitious quality" of the work.[84] The final speech, Bondanella argues, is simply a further "exemplary quality":

> ...Castruccio's self-awareness is the final proof of his exemplary character ... [he] has grown in wisdom during the narrative and is able to extract meaning from his own life before he

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81 ibid., p. 62.

82 ibid., p. 62.

83 ibid., p. 63.

84 Peter E. Bondanella, "Castruccio Castracani: Machiavelli's Archetypal Prince", *Italia*, 49, (1972), pp. 302-314. p. 310.

dies.[85]

The speech, he asserts, thus reflects "the pattern common to the heroic life". Forcing *La Vita* into such a universalizing formula fails to shed much real light on the specifics of the text however. The rest of his argument is better founded. He examines the manner in which Machiavelli fictionalized the real Castruccio's life to fit a heroic mould, to make Castruccio cleverer, braver, and physically larger than he was in "real life". He repeats his 1970 assertion that Castruccio's fictional origins must have inevitably suggested an association with Moses and Romulus.[86] Made this time within a discussion of Renaissance biography the suggestion seems to carry greater weight.[87]

In 1984 Michael Evans achieved some degree of reconciliation between Bondanella's and Whitfield's positions by arguing that *La Vita* at once glorified Castruccio and, in the deathbed speech, pointed up his

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85 ibid., p. 310.

86 ibid., p. 305.

87 ibid., pp. 302-305 are concerned with a discussion of the nature of Renaissance biography with reference to work by Felix Gilbert, Johan Huizinga, Peter Burke, and Thomas R. Hart.

fatal flaw.[88] Evans sketches the fictionalized aspects of the biography which serve to magnify Castruccio's achievements and repeats Bondanella's 1970 point that the physical description of Castruccio should be read as symbolic of his character. He continues that

> On a first reading he [Castruccio] not only appears to be a political and aesthetic exemplum of the new prince of the Renaissance, but an almost archetypal hero who through great deeds and self-overcoming attains genuine wisdom and moral greatness. High praise indeed...[89]

This would seem to reproduce Guarino's and Bondanella's position almost verbatim, or at least until Evans adds "...but is it genuine?" He answers the question with a minimal but definite reading of Castruccio's last words. They were, he argues, designed to show that despite his *virtù*, Castruccio lacked real political understanding.[90]

Evans uses Machiavelli's correspondence to underpin his claims that *La Vita* was intended by Machiavelli as a model upon which his projected history of Florence could be based and that on this basis it met with Buondelmonti's approval.[91] He implies, however, that those friends who

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[88] Michael Evans, "A Machiavellian Game: Will the Real Castruccio Castracani Please Stand Up?", *Selected Papers From the West Virginia Shakespeare and Renaissance Association*, Vol. IX, Spring 1984, pp. 45-55.

[89] ibid., p. 47.

[90] ibid., p. 50.

[91] ibid., p. 51.

initially read the work missed the point of the final speech and approved it merely for the fact that it demonstrated the literary abilities necessary to win the commission for the larger work. This seems to me unlikely, if only on the basis of Whitfield's interpretation of Buondelmonti's letter (above, pp. 32&33).

Evans asserts that rather than a model upon which to prove his literary abilities, Machiavelli intended *La Vita* to show that he could write the history of a prince of whom he did not approve. In *La Vita,* he argues, Machiavelli managed at once to glorify Castruccio and to make his own republican sentiments, and thus his disapproval for precisely that which he was glorifying, clear.[92] That Machiavelli was doing just that seems very likely; that his friends to whom he addressed the work missed the point does not.

In 1983 Louis Green wrote a paper in which he attempted to place *La Vita* within the context of previous biographies of Castruccio.[93] This was essentially the same project that Bondanella undertook in 1972, but more thoroughly carried through. Green considers far more

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92 ibid., p. 52.

93 Louis Green, "Machiavelli's *Vita Di Castruccio Castracani* and its Lucchese Model", *Italian Studies*, 42, (1987), pp. 37-55.

works, and his reading is more detailed and exhaustive.[94]

He is particularly interesting on Tegrimi's biography. Tegrimi, he argues, also magnified Castruccio and his achievements, but was unqualified in his praise.[95] Tegrimi's work is germane to Green's argument because, he asserts, it is from this work that the largest part of the material in *La Vita* is taken.[96] He draws two conclusions from this: first that Machiavelli's rampant fictionalizing resulted from a simple lack of detail in Tegrimi's work; and second that Machiavelli's biography shares Tegrimi's central theme, the ultimate power of *fortuna* over even the most powerful and "virtuous".[97]

His first point, in my opinion, is contradicted by Whitfield's comparison of Tegrimi's biography to *La Vita*, in which he discovered that in fact much detail from Tegrimi's biography was discarded in favour of fictional material. Green's second point leads him to disregard the importance of contemporary political conditions and

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94 On p. 38, for instance, Green cites the examples of Villani, Granchi, Petrarch, Sacchetti, Cavalcanti, Sercambi, and Streghi.

95 ibid., p. 46.

96 ibid., p. 47. He cites Tegrimi, Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of the Philosophers* (from which many of the aphorisms were drawn) and *Arte del Guerra* as the main texts from which the material for *La Vita* was drawn.

97 ibid., p. 48.

Machiavelli's other works, and to interpret Castruccio's final speech as advice on how the effects of bad fortune might be mitigated.[98] Despite these limitations, however, Green makes some valuable points, including the assertion that the examples of Romulus and Moses may be associated with Castruccio's fictional orphanage.[99]

Jeffrey Schnapp's 1992 paper "Machiavellian Foundlings: Castruccio Castracani and the Aphorism" recasts *La Vita* in interesting light.[100] Schnapp argues that it is Machiavelli's point that "Castruccio ... is at once a remedy and a symptom, a living monument to ancient glory and a sign of modern fragmentation."[101] He points first to Machiavelli's pessimism about the effects of time: that decay and degeneration are inevitable.[102] Then he points to the hyperbolic description of Castruccio's career and the manner in which he is at every turn described as something unnatural and prodigious, a "liminal being" - not the least by his origins, or lack

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[98] ibid., p. 51.

[99] ibid., p. 50.

[100] Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "Machiavellian Foundlings: Castruccio Castracani and the Aphorism", *Renaissance Quarterly*, 45, (1992), pp. 653 - 676.

[101] ibid., p. 670.

[102] ibid., p. 654.

thereof.[103] Finally he turns to the manner in which Castruccio sprang from nowhere, and did not reproduce himself.[104] He concludes that Castruccio is a "telling emblem of modern instability, of foundering foundations in modern times."[105]

Schnapp's central concern is to establish that the figure of Castruccio is somehow equivalent to an aphorism:

> Like Castruccio himself, the aphorism or maxim is an outsider. It inhabits an unstable middle zone between art and science, between individual virtues and universal principles. It circulates without precise source... And like Castruccio the precise legacy it leaves remains uncertain.[106]

From this Schnapp draws two conclusions concerning *La Vita*. First that it represents modernity as an impasse, with its inhabitants stuck between the urge to imitate the old and the conviction that time's passing has made that impossible. Second that *La Vita* is emblematic of Machiavelli's project: cut off from actual participation he sought both consolation for himself and conservation of

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103 ibid., p. 670.

104 ibid., p. 673. And on this point Schnapp makes a most interesting reading of Machiavelli's recasting of Laertius's aphorism about physicians in the doorways of the sick and its possible links to his emphasis (in contrast to Tegrimi's attempt to distract from) the literal meaning of Castruccio's name: dog castrator.

105 ibid., p. 673.

106 ibid., p. 656.

experience for the future.[107]

From this review of the secondary literature several things can be concluded. For one thing, it is no longer possible to take the assertion seriously that *La Vita* is simply an idealized portrait of Machiavelli's "perfect prince", though there does seem to be some consensus that there is an aspect of idealization in at least some parts of the work. The question remains open as to the nature of this idealization, however. For those who consider Castruccio's final words there also seems to be agreement, though it is not unanimous, that the deathbed speech is important and that it does not contribute to the idealization of his character. Finally there is a consensus that Castruccio's fictional orphanage would have suggested an association with the figure of Romulus. The matter of his fictional bachelorhood remains almost unmentioned in the literature, apparently too insignificant to have attracted any attention.

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[107] ibid., pp. 674&675.

4: The relation of *La Vita* to Machiavelli's other works

In this section I am going to attempt to set *La Vita* in the context of Machiavelli's other works. *La Vita* relates to a very broad section of the Machiavellian oeuvre. It was political and historical, but it was also intended to amuse. I will therefore attempt to bring together the many different facets of his work that have a bearing on it. First I will examine *The Prince, Discourses*, and the *Florentine Histories*. The question of how these works relate to *La Vita* revolves around a perhaps surprising point: the ethics of leadership. In this context the central thing to remember is Whitfield's point that whereas Tegrimi's biography noted Castruccio's care to protect public over private interests, including his own, Machiavelli's reworking of Castruccio's life failed entirely to mention this.[108] Secondly I will examine some of Machiavelli's correspondence and parts of his dramatic works in an attempt to shed some light on a different side of Machiavelli, what Ridolfi referred to as his "lack of gravity", his "extravagance" and "the curse of poetry".[109]

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[108] Whitfield, "Machiavelli and Castruccio", p. 5.

[109] Ridolfi, p. 177.

4.1: *The Prince, Discourses* and *Florentine Histories*

Machiavelli's major works constitute a well, and expertly, tilled ground. Felix Raab asserted, moreover, that "there is no closed system of thought in Machiavelli - no real meat for the analytic philosopher...".[110] This being the case a degree of circumspection is called for in venturing any comment on them. I shall argue, however, that it is possible to establish firmly where Castruccio stands with respect to these works.

If one takes Frederico Chabod's view of the matter, one understands *The Prince* to represent the high water mark of Machiavelli's energies and ambition: *The Prince* was the masterpiece, and all the works which followed it were somehow epigonous. *La Vita,* he asserted, was the product of an "introspective melancholy" and the "disappointment of hope".[111] According to Whitfield, *La Vita* is just a "summer month's diversion", a not particularly important, at least half playful, footnote to Machiavelli's serious and better considered works.[112]

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110 Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli: A Changing Interpretation 1500-1700,* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 5.

111 Frederico Chabod, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance,* trans. David Moore, (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1958), p. 17.

112 Chabod, *Machiavelli*, p. 27.

Guarino's view, which finds its place in Bondanella's comments as well, is similarly that *La Vita* is a footnote.[113] These views are all half right. To the extent that, as I shall attempt to argue, *La Vita* formed a comment on the Medici, it did spring from the disappointment of a hope (though it is hard to see it as particularly melancholy, let alone introspective). Insofar as it was composed in a single summer's month and was certainly not a work of the dimensions or intent of *Discourses* or of *Florentine Histories*, Whitfield is also right in an obvious sense. Insofar as it, at least in some manner, magnifies and glorifies Castruccio's *virtù* and the success which it brought him, the claim that *La Vita* presents another Cesare Borgia has some merit as well. None of these commentators, however, with the partial exception of Whitfield, make a serious attempt to situate *La Vita* in relation to what Machiavelli wrote elsewhere concerning men like Castruccio. It is upon Whitfield's comments on Machiavelli's emphasis on law and maintainability that I will expand.

The first step toward doing so is to consider the status of *The Prince* within the context of Machiavelli's thought. I will then consider what Machiavelli thought generally of princes and of what constituted a good prince

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[113] Guarino, "Two Views", pp. 285-90.

and what a bad. Having done that, I will attempt to assess how his Castruccio fit with this general view.

Chabod took the subject of *The Prince* to be the untrammelled ruler, and, further, took that to be the *leit motif* of Machiavelli's thought. I will argue both that Chabod was not wholly correct in his assessment of the subject of *The Prince* and that that work, far from being representative of all Machiavelli's thought, is tightly bound by context. While it is not exceptional, and neither does it make arguments in which Machiavelli had no sustained investment, it must be read as a political act aimed at achieving a specific set of ends, and not as a general resume of the author's thought.

Whitfield thought that the question of the relationship between *The Prince* and *Discourses* is the most important one in understanding Machiavelli's politics.[114] It is certainly the one which has provoked some of the most contentious debate, and the answer clearly has broad implications, particularly for the interpretation of *La Vita*. *Prima facie*, the two works appear to be of radically different natures. The first seems absolutist in its sympathies, the second staunchly republican. And therein lies the problem. How could the individual who authored a handbook of tyranny then author, or at least begin to

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[114] J.H. Whitfield, *Machiavelli*, (New York, 1975), pp. 74-5.

author, within a year or two, a monumental work lauding republics?

The mainstream - if there can be said to be a mainstream in a field which Isaiah Berlin described in 1972 as already being constituted of "over a score of leading theories ...[and] a cloud of subsidiary views"[115] - has veered back and forth, stressing first one work and then the other. For a while now the tendency has been to try to subsume the apparent advocacy of power politics and tyranny in *The Prince* to the republicanism of *Discourses*: to find a way to argue that Machiavelli somehow didn't really mean what he wrote between 1513 and 1516, and that what he wrote from 1517 on was what he really meant.[116] Garret Mattingly suggested that *The Prince* was satire. Stephen Fallon and Mary Dietz have suggested that it was a trap set for the Medici designed not to promote tyranny but to bring about the downfall of those who heeded its advice. Others, like Thomas Greene, in a strange flanking manoeuvre, have suggested that it doesn't actually refer

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115 Isaiah Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli" in *Studies in Machiavelli*, ed. M.P. Gilmore (Florence: Sansoni, 1972), pp. 149-206. p. 149.

116 I take David Wootton's dating of the composition of the two works to be correct. See his introduction to *Selected Writings*, trans. David Wootton, (Hackett: 1992), pp. xxiii-xxv.

to anything anyway.[117] In so far as Mattingly and satire are concerned I agree with Isaiah Berlin's comment that "no work seems to me to read less like one".[118] The arguments that *The Prince* was a trap for the Medici, while entertaining, are implausibly made. Dietz argues, for example, that chapter five first advises the Medici to live in Florence, and then states as an iron rule that those who live in a former republic which they have overthrown are bound to be destroyed by it.[119] Thus, she asserts that

> ...if this is the case, then what should we make of his advice? It seems that a prince who lives within a conquered republic would stand to lose rather than to benefit...[120]

And then she concludes that this is precisely Machiavelli's intention. However, she neither considers the implications of the possibility that Machiavelli is simply advising the Medici not to live in, or at least not

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117 Garret Mattingly, "Machiavelli's *Prince*: Political Science or Political Satire?", *American Scholar*, 27, 4 (1958) pp. 482-491. Stephen M. Fallon, "Hunting the Fox: Equivocation and Authorial Duplicity in the Prince.", *PMLA*, 107 (1992), pp. 1181-95. Mary G. Dietz, "Trapping the Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception.", *American Political Science Review*, 80, (1986), pp. 777-99. Thomas M. Greene, "The End of Discourse in Machiavelli's Prince", *Yale French Studies*, 67, (1984), pp. 57-71.

118 Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli", p. 151.

119 Dietz, p. 783.

120 ibid., p. 783.

to concentrate on, Florence, nor does she attempt to explain the stratagem's sheer crudity: Machiavelli as the cunning conspirator Ligurio from *Mandragola* seems to be winking a little too obviously to the audience.[121] It is hard to believe that the Medici would be stupid enough to fall for it, or that Machiavelli would have been stupid enough to think that they might - let alone risk the consequences. The deconstructionist approach is more productive in some ways. Victoria Kahn's analysis of *virtù*, for instance, is arrived at by a sensitive reading and is useful in underwriting the essentially identical arguments arrived at from a more traditional methodological direction.[122] Eugene Garver has contributed to our understanding of the manner in which the structure of *The Prince* teaches the political lessons that the text presents.[123] Robert Hariman has written on

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121 Dietz makes the comparison, p. 795.

122 Victoria Kahn, "Virtu and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli's Discourses.", *Representations*, 13 (1986) pp. 63-83. Also in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, ed. A. R. Ascoli & V. Kahn. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993, pp. 195-217. See David Wootton's "traditional" description of *virtu* in the introduction to his translation of the *Prince*, p. xxix. In this he follows in the footsteps of Quentin Skinner. See Skinner, *Machiavelli*, p. 35.

123 Eugene Garver, "Machiavelli and the Politics of Rhetorical Invention", *Clio*, 14:2, 1985, pp. 159-178. And "Machiavelli's *The Prince*: A Neglected Rhetorical Classic", *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 13:2, 1980, pp. 99-120.

the ontology of *The Prince*, analyzing the manner in which the text presents itself as reality and extra-textual, and at the same time reworks both reality and textual forms to Machiavelli's advantage.[124] Michael McCanles's book, *The Discourse of Il Principe* relates *The Prince* to a broad discursive context, encompassing Renaissance art and literature as well as politics and political theory, and makes an interesting argument on the nature of discursive power.[125] John Najemy's book on the correspondence between Machiavelli and Francesco Vettori is similarly valuable.[126] Ultimately, however, such techniques must only be half the picture. If text is shorn of context it must in a very real sense be meaningless. Thomas Greene's "The End of Discourse in Machiavelli's *The Prince*" is an excellent example of the sterility which a purely deconstructionist approach risks. Greene himself concludes that *The Prince* has virtually no meaning, or, as he puts it

> Machiavelli's book is progressively usurped by a signifier which is essentially vacant [*virtù*],

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[124] Robert Hariman, "Composing Modernity in Machiavelli's Prince.", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 50, 1989, pp. 3-30.

[125] Michael McCanles, *The Discourse of Il Principe*, (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1983).

[126] John Najemy, *Between Friends: Discourses of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli letters of 1513-1515*, (Princeton University Press, 1993).

> pretending to denote a referent which cannot be shown to exist.[127]

One has only to consider what meaning "The End of Discourse" would have shorn of its academic context to appreciate the pointlessness of such effort.

Machiavelli's reason for writing *The Prince* seems to have been to gain employment with the Medici.[128] However, not only were Machiavelli's job skills highly specialized, he was also subject to some restriction. He had been a loyal supporter of the Republic; he had served prison time shortly after the Medici's return - suspected of being party to a republican plot - and he was subsequently exiled from Florence.[129] He was not a very good candidate, in other words, for any government employment within the walls of Florence.[130] On the other hand it was widely rumoured that Leo X, the Medici Pope upon whose accession Machiavelli had been released from gaol, was

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127 Thomas M. Greene, "The End of Discourse in Machiavelli's Prince", *Yale French Studies*, 67, 1984, pp. 57-71. p. 70.

128 See Ridolfi, chapters 13 & 14. Also Wootton, p. xvii; Skinner, pp. 22-23.

129 J. R. Hale *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1960), pp. 134-140.

130 If only because, as Machiavelli puts it in *Discourses* III:17 (Gilbert, I:471, Gaeta I:438), "A republic should be careful not to put any important business under the charge of a man to whom someone has done significant injury". See also *Discourses* II:31 (Gilbert I:412, Gaeta I:371), "How dangerous it is to believe banished men" (my trans).

looking to establish a *nepote* for Giuliano de Medici which would become a hereditary Medici princedom. Attention was at first focused on the throne of Naples, but turned subsequently to the North where it appeared that a number of small states might be cobbled together.[131] At any given moment there was a good deal of uncertainty concerning where exactly the Medici's attentions were aimed. And Machiavelli, barred from leaving the lands immediately surrounding Florence and cut off from his government contacts, was not well placed to know what was going on. In January of 1515, however, Giuliano visited Florence with Paolo Vettori, Francesco's brother, who seemed likely to be made governor of the new state. Machiavelli, writing to Francesco at the end of the month, seemed to feel that there was a chance that he might be hired as Paolo's advisor.[132]

In 1953 Hans Baron took advantage of this situation to date the composition of chapter 26, the nature and dating of which had long been a source of debate.[133] In

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[131] See Humfrey Butters, *Governors and Government in Early Sixteenth Century Florence 1502-1519*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 223.

[132] See Gilbert II:960-3; Gaeta VI:372-6 for the letter to Francesco Vettori in which Machiavelli mentions the visit. Hale mentions the incident on p. 165.

[133] Hans Baron, "The *Principe* and the Puzzle of the Date of Chapter 26.", *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 21 (1991), pp. 83-102. The paper was first

the eight month period prior to the Battle of Marignano, from December 1514 to September 1515, Baron pointed out, Leo X was manoeuvring to assemble an alliance of northern states to ward off another French invasion.[134] The deal would have included the *nepote* for Guiliano. The possibility was dashed, along with the possibility of the *nepote* for Giuliano (who died shortly thereafter), by the Italian defeat at Marignano.[135] This was the only period in which there was any real possibility that the French might be forced to leave Italy alone. Baron concludes very plausibly that it is also the only period in which Chapter 26 looks right.

Unfortunately for Machiavelli, any real possibility that he might be hired was foreclosed early in the game. Cardinal Giulio de Medici had written to Rome in January - about the same time that Machiavelli met Paolo - stating that to employ the suspected republican was out of the question.[136]

David Wootton, building on Baron's insight, has argued that there is little reason to suppose that *The*

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presented in 1972 but published posthumously. The approach that he takes is not entirely original. See Hale, *Machiavelli*, p. 166.

134 Baron, "The *Principe...*", pp. 83-102 and pp. 93-95.

135 Baron, "The *Principe...*", p. 99.

136 Najemy, *Between Friends*, p. 311.

Prince is about Florence at all. He points out that Machiavelli knew that, being under suspicion, there was little chance of his getting a job in Florence and argues instead that it was a job in Rome, at least until December of 1514, that seemed to be the best prospect.[137] The point of *The Prince* then was at once to display his qualifications and to encourage the Medici to apply their power - and, hardly incidentally, his own abilities - outside Florence. Concerning chapter five ("How you should govern cities or kingdoms that, before you acquired them, lived under their own laws"), which seems to be the chapter most relevant to the Medici's position in Florence, and which figures large in the argument that *The Prince* was a trap (above, p. 50), Wootton argues that

> Machiavelli is advising the Medici to concentrate, not on Florence, but on their other, safer opportunities for territorial acquisition. And, indeed, many Florentines complained that this was exactly what they were doing in 1513...[138]

If these analyses are correct, and I believe them to be, then the question of the relationship between *The Prince* and *Discourses* is answered. Indeed, it scarcely arises. Machiavelli, after all, was no advocate of the pacific republic. It was the martial republic of Rome,

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[137] Wootton, p. xviii.

[138] Wootton, p. xx.

ruling at the height of its power the entire Mediterranean world, which fascinated him and which he urged upon the Medici as the example to follow. If he advocated freedom it was because, as he argued in *Discourses*, the freedom afforded by the Roman republic to engage in limited dispute, properly channelled, gave it the power to spill out and subsume other states.[139] If Florence were to revive classical greatness it would be by acting itself as a "prince". Here it is perhaps Gramsci who, in one way, struck closest to the truth when he asserted that *The Prince* might be thought of as "political ideology expressed ... by a creation of concrete phantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organize its collective will."[140]

The more general question of the place in Machiavelli's thought of "the prince" is one which is less complex to answer. The most important passage comes in *Discourses* I:9. Here he outlines the manner in which they

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139 See for example *Discourses* I:20 (Gilbert I:246, Gaeta I:185) or *Discourses* II:2 (Gilbert I:328-333, Gaeta I:279-284).

140 Whether Machiavelli would have understood "the people" to refer to all "Italians", as did Gramsci, or merely to the citizens of Florence, seems to me arguable. In *Discourses* III:31 (Gilbert I:498, Gaeta I:469) Machiavelli notes that republics may in quite a broad manner be treated as individuals; see Humphrey Butters, "Good Government in Machiavelli". See the preface to the *Histories* for Machiavelli's concern that factional dispute within Florence was excessive.

are useful:

> This we must take to be a general rule: seldom or never is any republic or kingdom organized well from the beginning, or totally made over, without respect for its old laws, except when organized by one man.[141]

Princes, in other words, are necessary for founding and for revitalizing. Moreover, if they are to achieve their purpose, it is necessary that they concentrate power into their own hands.[142]

This theme does not disappear, but recurs from time to time throughout *Discourses*.[143] However, having asserted that a single strong reforming or founding figure is required, Machiavelli goes on to warn that

> though one alone is suited for organizing, the government organized is not going to last long if resting on the shoulders of only one...[144]

Princes, whether founders or reformers, must invest in and adhere to a legal structure if their creation is to

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141 *Discourses* I:9 (Gilbert I:218; Gaeta I:153).

142 Gilbert I:218; Gaeta I:153. See also *Discourses* III:16 (Gilbert I:468-470; Gaeta I:436-437) on the use of strong leaders in bad times.

143 Gilbert I:420-21; Gaeta I:379-383. See *Discourses* III:1 (Gilbert I:419; Gaeta I:379) where Machiavelli asserted that the excellence of one man could return a state to greatness. Also *Discourses* I:55 (Gilbert I:309; Gaeta I:254), and also *Discourses* I:58 (Gilbert I:313; Gaeta I:261-265).

144 *Discourses*, I:9.

last.[145] Such laws sustain the order that the prince imposed. As Machiavelli put it,

> ...happy is that republic whose lot it is to get a man prudent enough to give her laws so planned that without revision she can live safely under them.[146]

In Machiavelli's view the laws should also govern the actions of the prince himself. In *Discourses* III:5, for instance, he explains that the reason that Tarquinas Superbus lost his position was that he failed to respect the laws that he himself had made.[147]

Though several examples (including Moses) are provided in this chapter of leaders "who, because they appropriated to themselves sole power, could form laws adapted to the common good", the central figure in this chapter is Romulus. The first lines of the chapter pose the problem of whether he should be forgiven for the murder of his brother and for being party to the murder of Titus Tatius the Sabine. Having passed through the theoretical statements about the role of the prince that I have noted, Machiavelli concludes that

> though the deed accuses him, the result should

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145 *Discourse* I:16 (Gilbert I:235-237; Gaeta I:173-176) and *Discourses* III:3 (Gilbert I:424-425; Gaeta I:386).

146 *Discourses* I:2 (Gilbert I:196; Gaeta I:129). Machiavelli was referring specifically to Sparta under Lycurgus in order to make the point generally.

147 *Discourses* III:5 (Gilbert I:427; Gaeta I:388-389).

> excuse him... what he did was for the common good and not for his own ambition, [which] is shown by his immediate organization of a Senate, with which he could consult and according to the opinion of which he could decide.[148]

Romulus, in other words, should be forgiven for the thoroughly "Machiavellian" reason that the end justified the means, the end in this case having been the founding of the Roman state.

Moses, too, according to Machiavelli, had had to employ brutal means to achieve his ends:

> He who reads the Bible sensibly sees that if Moses was to put his laws and regulations [*le sue leggi...li suoi ordini*] into effect, he was forced to kill countless men who, moved by nothing less than envy, were opposed to his plans.[149]

He is never condemned for his brutality however, and this was precisely because it was judged necessary to the implementation of his legal system.

In *Discourses* I:10, "The Founders of Tyranny are as Deserving of Censure as those of a Republic or a Kingdom are Deserving of Fame", Machiavelli lists a series of notable rulers and divides them into several groups.[150] The best men are those who have founded stable regimes,

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148 Gilbert I:218; Gaeta I:153.

149 *Discourses* III:30 (Gilbert I:496; Gaeta I:468). I have altered Gilbert's translation slightly, rendering "sensatamente" as "sensibly" rather than "intelligently".

150 *Discourses* I:10. Gilbert I:220-223; Gaeta I:156-159.

either religious or secular (in which category he includes Romulus). The worst (who are "infamous and detestable") are those who destroyed a kingdom or a republic by pursuing private ends; by not following the advice of the previous chapter (in which category he includes Caesar, who was so admired by Castruccio that the Duke expressed his desire to be buried like him).[151] Machiavelli concludes the chapter thus:

> Truly if a prince is seeking glory in the world, he should wish to possess a corrupt city, not to ruin it wholly like Caesar but to reform it like Romulus... In short, then, those to whom the Heavens give such an occasion should observe that two roads are put before them: one that makes their lives secure and after death renders them famous [gloriosi]; the other makes them live in continual anxieties and after death leaves an ill repute that never ends.[152]

It is not difficult to see where Castruccio Castracani fits into this schema.

Like the theme of the founder or reformer, the theme that the prince must be subject to his own legal structure does not disappear. Brutus, for instance, who is mentioned in the first and third books, ordered his own sons stripped, flogged and beheaded to prevent the freedom

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151 In light of my argument below, this is a typically Machiavellian irony.

152 Gilbert I:223; Gaeta I:159. Gilbert's translation of the last line, while correct, fails to capture something of the original: "l'altri li fa vivere in continove angustie, e dopa la morte lasciare di se una sempiterna infamia."

which Brutus had established, by overthrowing the Tarquin tyranny, from being eroded.[153] In the first mention of Brutus, Machiavelli asserts that

> When a prince does this [makes laws which define his own power and protect the general security] and when people see that under no circumstances will he break those laws, in a short time they feel secure and contented.[154]

A case can be made in support of my argument by comparing the treatment which Agothocles of Syracuse and Cesare Borgia receive in *The Prince*. It is implausible to suggest that this text is not concerned, sincerely and genuinely, with the methods by which a single man might place himself in the position of a prince. The methods - dishonesty, brutality, duplicity, and ruthlessness - seem to admit to no restrictions. The case of Agothocles and Borgia, however, shows that there are both restrictions and goals beyond the concentration of power into the hands of one man.

References to Borgia, of course, are sprinkled

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153 For killing the sons of Brutus, *Discourses* I:16 (Gilbert I:235-237; Gaeta I:173-176) and III:3 (Gilbert I:424-425; Gaeta I:386). In book III Machiavelli is most interested in applying the example to the case of Soderini. For the overthrow of Tarquin tyranny and the establishment of freedom, one of Machiavelli's favourite events, see *Discourses* I:2-4 (Gilbert I:195-203; Gaeta I:129-137), 9 (Gilbert I:217-219; Gaeta I:153-154) 16 & 17 (Gilbert I:235-239; Gaeta I:173-178), and III:3 (Gilbert I:424-425; Gaeta I:386).

154 *Discourses* I:16 (Gilbert I:237; Gaeta I:176).

liberally throughout *The Prince*, and, without exception, they are approving. Cesare Borgia, a lying, cheating thug who murdered his way toward domination of the Romagna, is to *The Prince* what Romulus, Moses, Cyrus, and Camillus are to *Discourses*: one of the *virtuosi* whose example should be copied as closely as possible. As Machiavelli put it in chapter 13, "I never hesitate to cite Cesare Borgia as a model to be imitated."[155] And he didn't. In chapter 7 he cited Borgia as a model of ruthless efficiency in public relations when he murdered an unpopular minister. Remiro d'Orco was cut in two and laid in the town square beside a chopping board and a knife.[156] In chapter 17 Machiavelli cited Borgia as a model in discussing whether it is better to be cruel or compassionate. Borgia, he noted approvingly, was cruel.[157] This is the sort of advice that earned Machiavelli his bad reputation, and it was the shock value of it, perhaps, which led Chabod to assert that *The Prince* was Machiavelli's "masterpiece" after which he was "less than himself." In the light of what *Discourses* has to say on leaders and founders, however, quite a different aspect of these examples is illuminated. In the case of Remiro d'Orco, Machiavelli reported that

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[155] Wootton, p. 43; Gaeta I:59.

[156] Wootton, pp. 24&25; Gaeta I:37.

[157] Wootton, p. 51; Gaeta I:68-69.

Cesare Borgia first gave him absolute power, which "in short order" allowed him to establish "peace and security", but which also made him unpopular. Then, law and order having been established, Borgia decided that "such unchecked power was no longer necessary", so he had Remiro killed and established civil courts on which every city was provided representation.[158] In the other case, that of Borgia's cruelty, Machiavelli notes that while Borgia was considered cruel, he was in fact practising an economy of violence:

> ...this supposed cruelty of his restored order to the Romagna, united it, rendered it peaceful and law abiding.[159]

In both cases, then, Borgia's actions were justified by Machiavelli on the grounds that his means were justified by his ends: law and order. Like Romulus, the deed accused him but the result excused him (or at least, presumably, until he had his run in with *Fortuna* and lost the whole shooting match).

Agothocles, on the other hand, plays Julius Caesar to Cesare Borgia's Romulus. He was of such strength and possessed of such great *virtù* that he did not even require good luck. Machiavelli wrote in chapter 8 that

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158 Wootton, p. 24; Gaeta I:37.

159 Wootton, p. 51; Gaeta I:68. Nowhere does Machiavelli suggest that the supposition of cruelty was based on anything but actual behaviour.

> If you consider Agothocles' *azioni e virtù*, you will not find much that can be attributed to *fortuna*... he did not come to power because he had help from above, but because he worked his way up from below, climbing from rank to rank by undergoing infinite dangers and discomforts until in the end he obtained a monopoly of power, and then holding his position by bold and risky tactics.[160]

However, despite having held on to his power while Borgia lost his through bad luck, Agothocles is cited as an example of the irredeemably evil man who "from start to finish lived a wicked life."[161]

The point at which Agothocles and Borgia diverge for Machiavelli is this: while Borgia set out to found a state and brought a measure of unity, peace and stability to the Romagna, Agothocles made himself king of his own republic by slaughtering its senate.[162] Thus, Machiavelli wrote, immediately following the generally laudatory passage on Agothocles that I have quoted above, "One ought not, of course, to call it *virtù* to massacre one's fellow citizens [and] betray one's friends..."[163] Which, of course, is precisely what Castruccio did.

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160 Wootton, p. 28; Gaeta I:41-42. Wootton has "bold achievements" for "*azioni e virtu*", but leaves the original in square brackets. I have inserted the original "*fortuna*", replacing Wootton's "luck".

161 Wootton, p. 28; Gaeta I:41. The adjective which Wootton translates as "wicked" is "scellerato".

162 Wootton notes this in his introduction, pp. xxi & xxii.

163 Wootton p. 28; Gaeta I:42.

On the question of what place the prince occupied in Machiavelli's thought my point is that there is a reasonably well defined, or least at sufficiently described, role for a founder or reformer. Such a man needed to concentrate power in his own hands and to act brutally to do so - follow, in short, the methods of *The Prince*. There were limits, however. If he failed to found a state which lasted, or reform an existing but corrupt institution in such a manner that it would last, he was neither a founder nor a reformer and his actions could not be justified, and he was "infamous and detestable". Machiavelli places emphasis on the importance of constitutions and legal, constitutional bodies like a senate, and on the devolution of some portion of his power to such bodies within the leader or reformer's lifetime. He also places emphasis on the importance of acting not for private ends, but for, ultimately, public ends.[164] For these ends Machiavelli is willing to justify any means.

Now, as both a complement to what I have argued concerning founders and reformers and as a prologue to

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[164] Notwithstanding that he is approaching the question from a different angle, Quentin Skinner is interesting on this point in "The republican ideal of political liberty", *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 293 - 309.

what I will argue concerning the ideal leader, I shall consider, briefly, the status of religion in Machiavelli's thought. There are two points to be made. First, Machiavelli had a rather low opinion of the church as an institution; second he had a very high opinion of the potential of religion as a political tool. His position on the subject is neatly summed up in the title of *Discourses* I:12: "How Important it is to take Account of Religion, and how Italy, having been without it because of the Roman Church, is ruined".[165]

There are two main reasons that Machiavelli had a low opinion of religion, both of which he stated in this chapter. First, he argued, the Church had fostered impiety, the deplorable behaviour of the clergy having destroyed Italy's religious faith.[166] He claimed that

> This has innumerable unfortunate consequences, and is the cause of numerous disorders. For respect for religion has a whole range of beneficial consequences while contempt for religion has a whole range of evil consequences. So we Italians, then, have as our first debt to the Church and our clergy that we have become

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165 Gilbert I:226; Gaeta I:163. "Ruined" is the correct translation for "e rovinata", but in its intransitive form it has connotations of buildings fallen into disrepair and disuse which are lost to a great extent in translation. In the original the associations would lead one to think of the ruins of Rome and the fragmentation of the empire and would condition one's response to Machiavelli's subsequent references to "Italia".

166 See below, p. 58, for the advantages of religion and why piety was thus a good thing.

> irreligious and wicked.[167]

Secondly, he argued that Italy had been prevented by the church from becoming united and happy. The church, he argued, had just enough power to prevent the consolidation of the country and too little to consolidate it itself:

> the Church has kept and still keeps this region divided... [though] she is possessed of temporal power, she has not been so strong or of such ability that she could grasp sole authority in Italy and make herself ruler of the country. Yet on the other hand she has not been so weak that, when she feared to lose dominion over her possessions, she could not summon a powerful man to defend her against anyone who in Italy had become too powerful.[168]

On the other hand, the political advantages offered by religion itself, according to Machiavelli, were manifold. Chief among them was its power, in the hands of a wise leader, to manage the masses both at home and in the army. In *Discourses* I:13 he notes several instances in which the Romans used religion in order to reorganize and maintain their state.[169] In the subsequent chapter he described how Roman leaders manipulated signs and auspices "with expedients and schemes" so that they would prove to their armies that their actions and plans were divinely

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167 Gilbert I:228; Gaeta I:165. Unlike Agothocles, who was "scellerato", this "wicked" is merely "cattivi". This statement echoes in form and content what Machiavelli wrote with respect to Caesar in *Discourses* I:10.

168 *Discourses* I:12 (Gilbert I:228; Gaeta I:166).

169 *Discourses*, I:13 (Gilbert I:230; Gaeta I:167).

ordained.[170] Like Machiavelli's thoughts on leaders and on laws, his comments on the political efficacy of religion reoccur, both in *Discourses* and in *The Art of War*.[171] The point is most bluntly made, however, in *The Prince*. In chapter 11 he points out that in some ecclesiastical states religion had been so ingrained that their rulers could remain in power "no matter how they live[d] or behave[d]."[172]

For Machiavelli, religion, laws and *virtù* come together in chapter 6 of *The Prince* in the person of the ideal leader, the "armed prophet".[173] The armed prophet was the leader who could wield both arms and religion in pursuit of his ends. First, by force of arms a new order could be imposed, and then it could be stabilized with religion. The population could be pursuaded to accept the

> new institutions and customs [*nuovi ordini e modi*] they [the leaders] are obliged to establish in order to found their governments and make them secure.[174]

Arms and religion, then, are to be used by the armed

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170 Gilbert I:232; Gaeta I:170.

171 See, for instance, *Discourses* III:33 (Gilbert I:503; Gaeta I:475) and *The Art of War*, book 4 (Gilbert II:661).

172 Wootton, p. 36; Gaeta I:51.

173 Wootton, p. 20; Gaeta I:32. "armed prophet" is originally "profeti armati".

174 Wootton, p. 19; Gaeta I:31.

prophet at once to goad and to persuade the recalcitrant masses into the new order.

The armed prophet reappears in chapter 26 of *The Prince* as the Medici themselves. Machiavelli urges them to look to the examples of the men, like Moses and Romulus, whom he has mentioned, and to exercise a similar *virtù* to consolidate Italy under their command. In order to persuade them to take up the role that he offers he uses two sorts of arguments, one military and the other religious. He asserts that

> It is true that the Swiss and Spanish infantries are thought to be intimidating; nevertheless, they both have their defects... the Spanish cannot withstand a cavalry charge; and the Swiss have reason to be afraid of infantry...[175]

But also that

> God has already shown his hand: the sea has been divided; a cloud has escorted you on your journey; water has flowed out of the rock; manna has fallen from on high.[176]

Machiavelli felt, then, at least in 1515, that there was an opportunity to achieve a number of his goals at the same time. The fragmentation of the Roman empire could be reversed; corrupt, ineffective Italy could be reformed, and a new state founded. He called upon the Medici to

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[175] Wootton, p. 79; Gaeta I:104-105.

[176] Wootton, p. 78; Gaeta I:103. The reference is, of course, to *Exodus* chapters 14, 16 & 17 and thus, implicitly, to Moses.

repute that never ends."[178]

To this point I have been discussing how the Castruccio depicted in *La Vita* looks against a backdrop of Machiavelli's thoughts on leadership and the state. I have argued both that Machiavelli presented a reasonably cohesive theory of how rulers should behave and that in this respect Castruccio comes off rather badly, embodying everything, in fact, that Machiavelli thought made a leader bad in the long run. Next I will examine the treatment which Castruccio received in the *Florentine Histories*.

Even notwithstanding arguments about the mere possibility of "value neutral" history, it is clear that Machiavelli did not cease to grind his regular axes in *Histories*. As in *Discourses*, his central concern was the internal machinations of a state. Foreign policy is almost a secondary concern, and is certainly seen to flow directly from internal matters. But this doesn't put the *Histories* on the same plane as *Discourses*, *The Prince*, or *The Art of War*. While in the latter he set out explicitly to draw lessons from the material of history, in the former he set out to provide the material. Referring both to his subject matter and the manner of its presentation Machiavelli wrote in the preface (first blaming d'Arezzo

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[178] Gilbert I:223; Gaeta I:156.

and Poggio for concentrating too exclusively on external matters) that

> if nothing else delights or instructs in history, it is that which is described in detail; if no other lesson is useful to the citizens who govern republics, it is that which shows the causes of the hatreds and the divisions in the city, so that when they become wise through the dangers of others, they may be able to maintain themselves united.[179]

Perhaps he wrote with the assumption that the lessons were self evident. In any case, his comment to Francesco Guicciardini in 1525 that in the writing of the *Histories* he was "relieving" himself of frustration "by blaming princes" should be taken as a joke, albeit one useful in gauging his mood and in interpreting *La Vita*.[180]

The Castruccio of *Histories* is quite different from that of *La Vita*. In the first two instances of his mention - in chapters 26 and 28 of book I - Castruccio is one among many bit players in the chaos of the fourteenth century. Machiavelli passed over him quickly and with no description, merely noting that he led some forces in the wars and persecutions engendered by Henry of Luxembourg's imperial visit to Italy.[181]

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179 *Florentine Histories*, Preface. (Banfield and Mansfield, p. 6; Gaeta VII:68).

180 Gilbert II:987; Gaeta VI:444.

181 I:26 - Banfield and Mansfield, p. 37; Gaeta VII:117. I:28 - Banfield and Mansfield, p. 39; Gaeta VII:119.

In book II, where Machiavelli dealt with two occasions upon which he caused problems for Florence, Castruccio received a little more attention. The first of these occasions was Castruccio's attack on Prato. Here Machiavelli got as close as he would to praise for Castruccio, referring to him in chapter 26 as "young, daring, and fierce, and fortunate in his undertakings".[182] Despite his youth and daring, however, the Castruccio of the *Histories* was "so frightened" by the army that the Florentines sent to defend Prato that "without wishing to try the fortune of battle, he withdrew to Lucca."[183] In *La Vita*, by contrast, Machiavelli depicted Castruccio taking Prato near the end of his life in one easy swoop, and did not mention any failed attempts.

The second instance of Castruccio causing problems for Florence concerned Castruccio's capture of Pistoia and the battle which followed it. In *La Vita* Machiavelli claimed that Castruccio had first taken Pistoia by subterfuge, then lost it while in Rome, then regained it by his brilliant victory at Serravelle, after which he went on to take Prato easily. In the *Histories* the account is again quite different, and closer to what we know of

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182 Banfield and Mansfield, p. 80; Gaeta VII:178.

183 ibid., Banfield and Mansfield, p. 81; Gaeta VII:179.

historical fact.

The Castruccio of the *Histories* laid seige to Pistoia and then held out against the Florentine efforts to dislodge him with such tenacity that he won the city more or less by default. Machiavelli reported in *Histories* II:30 that

> Castruccio went to encamp at Pistoia, and remained there with such *virtù* and obstinacy that, although the Florentines attempted many times to rescue it and attacked first his army and then his countryside, they were never able to deter him...[184]

Machiavelli then reports that upon returning home from Pistoia, Castruccio promptly died and his son was ousted from Lucca by the Emperor on his way back north.[185] This, again, is at once in accordance with what we know of historical fact and significantly at odds with what Machiavelli had reported in *La Vita*.

In the rest of the *Histories* Castruccio is only mentioned twice more. In chapter XI of book III he figures in a speech that Machiavelli placed in the mouth of Florence's *Gonfalonier*. According to Machiavelli, the *Gonfalonier*, attempting to bring to an end a particularly severe period of rioting in the city, admonished the populace, warning them of the potential effects of their

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184 Banfield and Mansfield, p. 85; Gaeta VII:183.

185 *Florentine Histories* II:31 (Gaeta VII:183&4; Banfield and Mansfield, pp. 85&6).

disunity (and remember that the expressed purpose of *Histories* is to instruct leaders of republics on how to maintain unity).

> To what will your disunions lead this city of yours? Do you not remember that when it was disunited Castruccio, a vile citizen of Florence, defeated it?

Machiavelli asserted that "These words, *because they were true*, moved the spirits of the citizens very much."[186]

In chapter XIX of Book IV Castruccio appears in the middle of Machiavelli's description of the discussion that surrounded a proposal to attack Lucca. Several arguments, he reported, were put forward against the proposed attack, including the fact that

> ...in the record of our things it will never be found that a free Lucca had offended Florence, but if anyone who had made it a slave, like Castruccio ... had offended Florence, one should place the blame not on it [Lucca] but on the tyrant.[187]

Neither of these comments - the one that Castruccio was a "vile citizen" and the other that he had enslaved his city - is expressed as Machiavelli's opinion. However, he did explicitly affirm the truth of the first and he

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[186] Banfield and Mansfield, p. 120; Gaeta VII:234. Italics mine.

[187] Banfield and Mansfield, p. 165; Gaeta VII:298. The phrase here referring to enslavement ("...l'aveva fatta serva...") evokes that in *La Vita* which describes Benedetto Lanfranchi's motivation for rebelling against Castruccio's rule of Pisa (above, p. 19): ("...non potendo sopportare che la sua patria fussi serva...").

wrote nothing to suggest that he did not agree with the implicit judgement of the second. Castruccio's actions, as Machiavelli reported them in Book I, demonstrated that he was lucky, tenacious and bold. The judgements of others, the only judgements that Machiavelli felt were worth reporting, however, were that he was a vile citizen and a tyrant.

I have already argued that it is not on the basis of competence alone that Machiavelli judges a leader, but it is still worth noting that he was more enthusiastic in *The Prince* in his praise of Agothocles - whom he condemns in the end for sins of which Castruccio is palpably guilty - than he was in *Histories* of Castruccio.

The ambivalence of Machiavelli's attitude toward Castruccio in the *Histories* can be clarified somewhat by looking to the other end of the spectrum, to one Michele di Lando. Like Castruccio, Michele represents the triumph of *virtù* over fortune. Unlike Castruccio, however, he also represents the triumph of prudence and goodness over ambition. As Mark Phillips has argued, Michele is one of the heroes of *Histories* because he resists the temptations of tyranny. As Phillips put it:

> In celebrating this hero, Machiavelli recounted a conspicuous triumph of *virtù* over fortune. At the same time, however, he was also giving quieter praise to the victory of virtue over

temptation.[188]

Michele was a wool carder who was at the head of the mob who stormed the *signoria* during the Ciompi revolt of 1378. The government fled and Michele was proclaimed *Gonfalonier*, an office which he held for two months.[189]

In Machiavelli's account, Michele, "barefoot and scantily clothed", entered the audience chamber of the *signoria* at the head of the mob and then turned to them asking "What should be done now?".[190] The mob immediately demanded that he install himself as *Gonfalonier*. Michele complied and then sent the mob off to find the *Bargello* while he set about establishing his government. The *Bargello* was dragged into the piazza, strung up, and dismembered by the mob so completely that all that was left was the foot from which he had been hung. While the mob was thus distracted Michele assigned administrative duties to those he could trust, reorganized the *signoria*, and generally established his government.[191]

Machiavelli reported, however, that the manner in

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188 Mark Phillips, "Barefoot Boy Makes Good: A Study of Machiavelli's Historiography", *Speculum*, 59:3, (1984), pp. 585-605. p. 605.

189 Schevill, pp. 278&9.

190 *Florentine Histories* III:16 (Gaeta VII:245; Banfield and Mansfield, p. 127).

191 Banfield and Mansfield, p. 128; Gaeta VII:245-6.

which Michele had secured his position angered the mob which had placed him in it - they felt that he had unduly favoured the great at the expense of the poor. They rioted again and then, Michele having censured them and demanded that they lay down their weapons, they retired to a nearby square where they formulated their own reforms and named their own officials. Their demands - and a threat of force if they were not met - were then formally delivered to Michele by two would-be members of the mob's government. The new *Gonfalonier*, however, would hear nothing of it:

> Michele was unable to bear such arrogance; and, as he was mindful more of the rank he held than of his low condition, it appeared to him that he must check this extraordinary insolence...[192]

And this he did in no uncertain manner, drawing his sword and wounding both men severely before having them bound and dragged away.[193] The mob then mounted an attack on the palace, only to find Michele gone.

Hearing of their impending attack, Michele had

> ... thought that it would be more to his glory to attack others than to wait for the enemy within the walls and to have to flee, as did his predecessors, with dishonour to the palace and with shame to himself.[194]

So by the time his attackers reached the *signoria*, he was

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[192] Banfeild and Mansfield, p. 129; Gaeta VII:245.

[193] ibid.

[194] ibid.

already raising an army in the streets. He returned to find the palace surrounded, and he promptly attacked and won, driving his opponents out of the city or, disarmed, into hiding. Thus, according to Machiavelli, "the tumults were settled solely by *virtù* of the Gonfalonier."[195]

In chapter XVII Machiavelli concluded his comments on Michele with the assertions that

> In spirit, prudence, and goodness he [Michele] surpassed any citizen of his time, and he deserves to be remembered among the few who have benefitted their fatherland, for had his spirit been either malign or ambitious the republic would have lost its freedom altogether and fallen under a greater tyranny than that of the Duke of Athens. But his goodness never allowed a thought to enter his mind that might be contrary to the universal good [la bene universale] ...[196]

In Michele's case, then, Machiavelli was explicitly and vociferously positive. This was in sharp contrast with his treatment of Castruccio, of whom he was generally either silent or reported the condemnation of others. With the two placed side by side it is, I think, fair to conclude that Machiavelli's treatment of Castruccio is hardly positive - and certainly not in the enthusiastic manner which one would expect if he had indeed taken

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[195] ibid.

[196] Banfield and Mansfield, p. 130; Gaeta VII:248. It is hard not to read into this passage a comment on Soderini's failure to deal with internal enemies and the resultant return of the Medici.

Castruccio to be "another Cesare Borgia". His implied judgement is, at least relatively, negative.

On the other hand, this might seem to pose a question. After all, if one allows that the reader knew something of Castruccio prior to picking up *Histories*, Castruccio and Michele seem to have behaved in a similar manner. Both used force and guile to impose their government on a city which was not always pleased to accept it. As Phillips put it, referring to Michele's use of the unfortunate *Bargello* to get rid of the mob while he organized his government: "...high-mindedness alone does not win battles, and Michele went on to demonstrate that he knew how to play the fox."[197] Pretty thin hairs would have to be split to differentiate Michele's readiness to sacrifice a man to the mob from, for example, Castruccio's willingness to sacrifice the Poggio family. But at this point Machiavelli's point should be abundantly clear: ultimately Michele served the common good, to his glory, while Castruccio served his own ambition, to his infamy.

It may seem odd to assert that the interpretation of *La Vita* may turn on an ethical point. It is my argument, however, that if there is one criterion that Machiavelli applies consistently throughout his theoretical works it is this one: did the actions of the leader in question

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[197] Phillips, p. 590.

ultimately contribute to the common good? He applied it in *The Prince* to Agothocles of Syracuse and Cesare Borgia, and in the *Discourses* to Romulus, Moses, and a host of others from Tarquinas Superbus to Julius Caesar. He applied it in the *Histories* to Castruccio and Michele di Lando. And, most importantly for my argument, he applied it in *La Vita* to Castruccio. The most interesting question, then, is raised by Whitfield. If Tegrimi's biography emphasised that Castruccio aimed to protect public over private interests, why did Machiavelli not do the same? Why not make him an example of a "good" prince? Before returning to this question I will examine briefly some of Machiavelli's less well known works.

4.2: Letters, *Mandragola*, and *Clizia*

It may seem that delineating the political themes which underlie *La Vita* largely solves the problem of its interpretation. However, while this delineation certainly resolves some of the main tensions in the secondary literature, there remain other problems posed by the manner in which these themes are presented. There is something which sets *La Vita* apart from such works as *The Prince, Discourses,* and *Florentine Histories.* The manner in which each of these texts opens is indicative of this difference.

The Prince opens with a note to the audience. It identifies the audience ("Niccolo Machiavelli to His Magnificence Lorenzo de' Medici"), and it describes the work: it is the "unornamented" vessel of the author's "most treasured possession", his "understanding of the deeds of great men".[198] *Discourses* also opens with a note to its audience. It too identifies them ("Niccolo Machiavelli to Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai") and describes the work: it is not a sycophantic work designed to promote the author in the eyes of a prince he ought to condemn, but one for "private citizens" who want

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[198] Wootton, p. 5.

to make "sound judgements".[199] *Florentine Histories* opens in much the same manner. The first words of the work are "To the most Holy and Blessed Father our Lord Clement the Seventh: His humble servant Niccolo Machiavelli", and those immediately following: "After I was commissioned [by you] ... that I might write about things done by the Florentine people, I used all the diligence and art lent to me by nature and experience to satisfy you."[200]

La Vita seems to open in much the same way:

> Those who consider it, my dearest Zanobi [Buondelmonti] and Luigi [Alamanni], think it wonderful [*marvigliosa*] that all, or the larger part, of those who in this world have done very great things, and who have been excellent among men of their era, have in their birth and origin been humble and obscure... So then, Castruccio Castracani was one of those...[201]

Machiavelli identified the work's immediate audience and seemed to begin to describe its subject. There is,

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[199] Wootton, pp. 81-2. I will return to the comment about princes who ought to be condemned.

[200] Banfield and Mansfield, p. 3; Gaeta VII:65. In this case Machiavelli broadened the audience and introduced a slightly different purpose to the work in the preface, where he addressed himself not to the Medici but "citizens who govern republics". It is to Clement the VII, Giulio de Medici, of course, to whom the "you" refers.

[201] Gilbert II:533. Gilbert's translation bears the title "The Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca, written by Niccolo Machiavelli and sent to Zanobi Buondelmonti and Luigi Alamanni, his very dear friends.". However, the text contained in Gaeta - which I take to be the authorative version - does not.

however, a very significant difference. Whereas *The Prince*, *Discourses*, and *Florentine Histories* all open with the claim that they represent the unvarnished truth, the first few lines of *La Vita* announce a thick coat of varnish. They are obviously factually inaccurate: not only was Castruccio raised by his own family, but it was a far from humble family at that. They make no claim, however, to *factual* truth. Instead they seem to promise another kind of truth, one metaphoric or conceptual, in the manner of a parable.

If *La Vita* is a parable, however, it is of an exceptionally evasive variety. The opening is opaque in terms of what lies beneath the varnish. It suggests that *La Vita* might have as its subject the effects of humble birth or the power of fortune. These possibilities, however, make little sense in light of my argument that Castruccio represents the worst kind of prince. It is implausible that Machiavelli would have set up a leader doomed to lasting infamy as an example of the benefits of a humble birth or of greatness toppled by bad luck. Instead, it seems clear that, despite the opening, the message of *La Vita*, broadly, is how a prince ought not to behave - this much is clear from the comparison to *The Prince*, *Discourses*, and *Florentine Histories*. But this raises interpretive questions which cannot be answered by

looking at those works. A first clue to their answer, I believe, can be found in the fact that in his opening blandishments on "those who in this world have done very great things" Machiavelli chose conditions which excluded - more or less out of hand - the Medici (as they excluded the real Castruccio Castracani). The complete answer requires that we examine those works which bear a greater stylistic similarity to *La Vita* than do the works with which I have so far been comparing it. These are Machiavelli's "extramural" works, material in which the emphasis was not on truth, but on diversion.

Very roughly there are three main areas to be delineated in Machiavelli's extramural work. There is a large body of poetry, many letters, and two plays. Because of the difficulties involved both with translation and interpretation I have not considered his poetry, but I have selected three letters from his correspondence and will examine his plays.

Most of Machiavelli's extant correspondence - and certainly the most studied part - deals with political matters of one sort or another.[202] Interwoven with the

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202 John Najemy's *Between Friends* is the best work on Machiavelli's correspondence. His readings tend to overreach my own purposes but the only real fault of his work is its restricted scope (though it is not quite as narrow as the title would suggest). Hale, in *Literary Works*, provides a small amount of annotation but he provides none of the critical depth of Najemy (nor does he claim

political on many occasions, however, are passages of no political import at all.[203] On rarer occasions he devoted an entire letter simply to his own and his correspondent's amusement.

In 1509, for instance, Machiavelli wrote a letter to Luigi Guicciardini from Verona, where he was observing the conflict between the Emperor and the Venetians.[204] Guicciardini (Francesco's brother) seems to have written to him a report of his latest love. Machiavelli responded ironically: for his part, he had recently been sold a prostitute by his washerwoman. He gave the following - rather *marvigliosa* - description of her:

> ...when it was over, since I had a fancy to see the merchandise, I took a burning piece of wood from the stove that was there and lit a lamp which was over it - and hardly was it alight when it nearly fell from my hand. Ugh! I nearly dropped dead on the spot she was so hideous. The first thing I saw was a tuft of hair, half white, half black; piebald, that is, with age, and although the crown of her head was bald - which baldness allowed one to see a louse or two taking a stroll - still, a few sparse hairs mingled with the whiskers sprouting from her face; and on top of her meagre and wrinkled head was a fiery scar which made her look as if she

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to).

[203] See Najemy's introduction to *Between Friends* for comments both on the interweaving and the manner in which it has been treated in the secondary literature.

[204] Ridolfi, pp. 109-111. Ridolfi mentions the letter but declines to comment on its content.

had been branded in the marketplace.[205]

He continued in this vein to excessive length: "There were colonies of nits in each eyebrow; one eye looked up, the other down... Her nose was screwed into her face at an angle" and so on. He then asserted that:

> I swear to heaven I don't think that I shall want a woman as long as I stay in Lombardy: so you can thank God for the hope you have of enjoying your pleasures over again, and I because I know that never again can I have such a ghastly experience.[206]

Then, without any transition whatsoever, he switched to a rather matter of fact manner. The next paragraph reads

> I think that I shall have a little money left after this trip, and when I am back in Florence I would like to invest in some small business. I thought of a poultry yard...[207]

Observing that "This is not a text which lends itself easily or comfortably to interpretation", John Najemy interpreted the letter in the light of Machiavelli's frustrations at his inactivity in Verona.[208] For my purposes, however, I feel no compulsion, as Najemy does,

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[205] In J.R. Hale, *The Literary Works of Machiavelli*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). p. 124; Gaeta VI:204-206. Hale's translation of Machiavelli's casual communications is by far the best available. He cannot be faulted except for the fact that he aims to make Machiavelli's language less offensive at several points.

[206] Hale, p. 125; Gaeta VI:205.

[207] Hale, p. 125; Gaeta VI:206.

[208] John M. Najemy, *Between Friends*, pp. 69-71.

to close any context around this letter, and I would suggest an interpretation which is a lot simpler. Machiavelli was simply being funny. The joke may be on his frustration, but it is, I think, unmistakeably, a joke.

There are two aspects of the manner in which Machiavelli tells his story to which I would like to draw attention. It is funny, firstly, because of the exaggeration of Machiavelli's description of the prostitute. She is not merely a woman who was dirty or smelly, but a creature of thoroughly superhuman grotesqueness. One or two details might have been worth a giggle, but Machiavelli went quite over the top, piling detail upon detail until the reader is quite overwhelmed. The joke, in other words, is in the ridiculous hyperbole of the account. Secondly, it is difficult to decide exactly where the joke ends. The effect of the hyperbole is heightened by the immediate juxtaposition of the mundane comment on the poultry business, but is that part of the joke? Like Castruccio's meteoric career and subsequent admission of failure, the two parts of the text work together and the tension which they generate magnifies the effect of both. Both these qualities represent tendencies - to hyperbole and abrupt abandonment or alteration of device - which recur in many of Machiavelli's jokes.

A letter, written to Francesco Vettori in 1514, exemplifies another aspect of Machiavelli's style: a tendency to a wry half concealment of what it is that he is saying under cover of a structure which at once conceals and accentuates his message. It is an account of an escapade involving a mutual acquaintance.

> Someone, let's say Giuliano Brancacci, was eager to go a-hunting, and after Ave Maria one evening recently, seeing that the weather was dark and windy, with a little rain - all signs that birds would be about - he went home and pulled on a pair of stout boots, strapped on a game bag, took a bird-lantern and a little bell and a good fowling-club. He crossed the Ponte alla Carraia, and went along the via del Canto de' Mozzi to Santa Trinita, then, entering the Borgo Santo Appostolo he began exploring the alleys in the centre of it.[209]

He is, in fact, not out "a-hunting birds", but cruising for young men. He is successful, or, as Machiavelli puts it:

> he hit on a young thrush and, with bell and lantern and club, caught it and skilfully led it down into the deep alley under Panzano's cave, and after playing with it and finding it right for the size, gave it some kisses, plucked a couple of feathers from its tail and ended, according to several persons, by putting it in the bag behind him.[210]

Ultimately Machiavelli admits that the metaphor can no longer be sustained he continues his account in somewhat more literal language. The parable, however, has served

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[209] Hale, p. 146; Gaeta VI:327.

[210] Hale, p. 146; Gaeta VI:328.

its function. Najemy's interpretation - that Machiavelli is actually writing about himself - again goes well beyond the point that I would like to make: that Machiavelli was amusing both himself and his reader by twisting events ironically into a somewhat incongruous parable.[211] The manner in which Machiavelli makes use of the style of a parable in this letter, as well as the manner in which he abandons that mode for one more matter of fact in tone, is quite similar to the opening of *La Vita*. There Machiavelli introduced the subject of his biography as though the work were going to be a parable, discoursing as to friends on the effects of abandonment and exposure and telling the patently unreal tale of Castruccio's adoption, before changing mode in order to deal with the politics and wars of his subsequent career (above, pp. 6&7).

Finally, there is a letter sent to Francesco Guicciardini a little less than a year after Machiavelli's trip to Lucca. At the time he was attempting to execute another minor commission, one which took him to the Franciscan monastery at Carpi.[212] He wrote:

> I stay here in idleness because I cannot execute my commission until they elect a general and assessors, and I spend my time pondering how to sow enough scandal, here and elsewhere, to make them fall to beating one another with their

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[211] Najemy, pp. 271-274.

[212] Ridolfi, pp. 186-194.

> clogs, and if I don't lose my wits I think I shall succeed...[213]

He went on to describe the trick he played on the monks after receiving Guicciardini's messenger by pretending that he had received all the news of the world and that his reply was urgently needed. He concluded his account by explaining that even as he was writing he was pretending to be thinking of great things while he was actually laughing up his sleeve. He moves from absurdity to a contention that this absurdity is a state of grace in which hypocrisy cannot harm him, and then to a serious comment on dissimulation:

> ... I pause from time to time with my pen in the air, and breathe deeply, while they goggle with admiration; and if they knew what I was writing they would marvel all the more! Your lordship knows how these friars say that when one is in a state of grace, the devil no longer has powers to tempt one. So I have no need to fear that these friars will infect me with hypocrisy, as I think I have been soundly confirmed.
>
> As for the lies of the inhabitants of Carpi, I can compete with the best of them, for it is long since that I graduated in the art, so well that I don't even need the assistance of Francesco Martelli; for some time I have never said what I believed, and never believed what I said, and if I do sometimes happen to say what I think, I always hide it among so many lies that it is hard to recover it.[214]

The point that this makes is an important one concerning

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213 Hale, p. 161; Gaeta VI:404. Note, with respect to my comments on *Mandragola* (below, p. 84), the suggestion of malicious scandal mongering.

214 Hale, p. 162; Gaeta VI:404.

the manner in which Machiavelli understood his ironic, cynical humour somehow to inoculate him from the hypocrisy around him. His habitual lying is somehow linked with his protective cover: he lies for fun, and the fun protects him from hypocrisy. And in addition to this the lying allows him to tell the truth in such a manner that it will not be obvious. This seems particularly germane to reading *La Vita*, which had been written just nine months before - well within the period which one might reasonably think was intended by "for some time". If we take *La Vita* to be a trial run for a manner of writing history which at once told the truth but remained acceptable to those who paid for it, we might also surmise that in this letter from Carpi Machiavelli revealed the secret of how he thought it could be done.

Machiavelli wrote two full length dramatic works. The first, *Mandragola*, he wrote in 1518.[215] *Mandragola* is the story of a young man, Callimaco, who wants to sleep with the wife of a Florentine lawyer, Messer Nicia. The problem is that, although the lawyer is gullible and quite frequently absent, his wife is known to be almost incredibly virtuous and pious; Callimaco seems to stand no chance. He is not to be deterred, however, and engages in

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[215] The best translation of *Mandragola* is again Hale's, in *Literary Works*, pp. 1-61; Gaeta VIII:53-112.

a complicated conspiracy to achieve his ends. Messer Nicia's marriage is childless and Callimaco convinces him that there is a medicine which will guarantee him a child. The catch, however, is that the first man to sleep with his wife after she has taken it will die. Callimaco proposes to the lawyer that they dose his wife and then smuggle some dupe into her bed. Needless to say, that "dupe" will be himself. He engages the services of a crooked young man named Ligurio to facilitate the whole thing, bribes a crooked monk to help him, co-opts the wife's crooked mother-in-law, and ultimately cuckolds Messer Nicia.

Some broad political lessons, probably about conspiracy, might be drawn from *Mandragola* if it were read as a political parable.[216] It is the most "Machiavellian" of Machiavelli's works. It is unremittingly cynical about the motivations of the central characters and it is uncompromising in its lack of ethical leavening. My concern, however, is for what it might tell us about Machiavelli. It was certainly intended to entertain, and if the author himself didn't think that this sort of deception was amusing how could he have expected an audience to enjoy it? That diversion was intended is

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[216] Chabod, predictably, asserts that it echoes themes from *The Prince*. He is probably quite right. See *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, pp. 109 & 112.

stated in the song with which the play opened. It runs

> We know that life is brief / With no reward but pain / So we desert the fight / And give Desire rein.
>
> The man who turns away / From pleasure and desire
> Is ignorant of life / Of all the strains that tire.[217]

It seems that it was also intended to make some money, at least by recommending its author to the patronage of Francesco Guicciardini, to whom the play was dedicated. Referring to himself in the third person Machiavelli stated in the prologue

> Forgive him [for the play]: for he tries with idle dreams / to make the hour less bitter than it seems. - Bitter, for he can turn no other way / to show a higher worth do what he may; / For graver themes / he sees no chance of patronage or pay.[218]

How seriously he regarded Guicciardini as a potential patron is uncertain, although later they exchanged letters in which Machiavelli offered him advice on the marriage negotiations concerning his eldest daughter and some business concerns.[219]

Mandragola, then, was written under the same, or very

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217 Hale, p. 3; Gaeta VIII:55.

218 Hale, p. 6; Gaeta VIII:58.

219 There are several letters, for instance, dating from August 1525 to November 1526 which discuss marriage contracts for Guicciardini's daughter. Gilbert II:978-1001.

the end of the play the plot makes a thoroughly nasty twist. Lucrezia, the virtuous, faithful wife turns out to be nothing of the sort, becoming a willing participant in the plot and happily takes Callimaco as her lover. This barb, carefully concealed until the last act, leaves the audience almost as much the cuckold as the old lawyer. Nobody remains untarnished.

Insofar as *La Vita* is concerned, Machiavelli's comment on flattery in the prologue to *Mandragola* immediately recalls the following anecdote appended to the end of the Castruccio's biography:

> Once when he [Castruccio] had a flatterer in his presence, and in contempt had spat on him, the flatterer said: "The fishermen to take a little fish let themselves be thoroughly wetted by the sea; I shall certainly let myself be wetted by a little spit in order to catch a whale." Castruccio not merely listened patiently to the man but also rewarded him.[222]

The story obviously refers just as well to Machiavelli's need to flatter the Medici as it does to Castruccio's life, and the passage from the prologue to *Mandragola* indicates that he was clearly aware of this. What is also indicated by the prologue, however, is that Machiavelli was equally aware that his ability to flatter sprang not from a craven desire to ingratiate, but from tough minded opportunism. Given the opportunity, he would place his

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[222] Gilbert II:555; Gaeta VII:36. See also Wootton, p. xxvii.

knives carefully. The question that this poses is this: if *La Vita* works in a manner similar to *Mandragola*, where is the knife? I will argue below that the knife is in the hidden denunciation of Castruccio and, by association, of members of the Medici family.

By way of concluding this section it is worth looking now at the prologue to *Clizia*, which Machiavelli probably wrote in 1524.[223] The play itself is amusing but unremarkable: a girl, Clizia, abandoned to a merchant family is wooed by both the merchant and his son. Both engage cyphers to wed the girl on their behalf in return for a promise of access to the wedding bed. Various pratfalls and tricks follow (the merchant ends up unwittingly spending an unproductive and painful night in bed with his groom and so on). The ending is, perhaps surprisingly, happy. Clizia's father returns, turning out to be quite respectable enough to warrant a good marriage for her, and she marries the son, whose love was true from the first.

The prologue is particularly germane to my argument. It was to be read either by Machiavelli himself or by somebody posing as him, before the curtain went up on the play; it is a piece of "pretend fact" before the "real fiction" begins. The story, explains Machiavelli, tells of

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[223] Ridolfi, pp. 208-210.

events that actually occurred both in Athens and, more recently, in Florence. But, he cautions the audience

> don't expect to recognize the family or those concerned, for the author has changed the real names into false ones to avoid trouble.[224]

He goes on to introduce each of the characters in turn and to explain their role in the story. Then he adds an ambiguous disclaimer:

> the author of this play is a most respectable sort of man, and he wouldn't like to feel that, watching the play, you thought that there were some passages that went a little too far. He doesn't think there are, but if it seems so to you, he excuses himself in the following way.[225]

And he goes on to explain that comedies have to elicit a reaction and to this end must have recourse to the absurd, the malicious, and the amorous. Besides, everyone, particularly the young, can benefit from seeing how ridiculous and untrustworthy people are. Then, having justified the fact that he is going to do what he has claimed he wasn't, he makes another half turn and claims that he has, in any case, cast the indecorous moments in a manner which half conceals them and will allow those who are easily offended to ignore them:

> if anything indecorous does occur, [and he has just explained how necessary, and indeed beneficial the indecorous is] it will be spoken

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[224] Hale, p. 67; Gaeta VIII:116.

[225] Hale, p. 68; Gaeta VIII:116.

> in such a way that you ladies can listen to it without a blush.[226]

In other words, the play is about a series of improper events both real and proximate to the audience, but to keep him out of trouble, both with those who were involved in the events themselves and the audience (and there is no suggestion that the two might not at some point be coextensive), a veil has been drawn around the "reality" to which it refers.

This is a mirror image of the introductory passages to *The Prince, Discourses*, and *Florentine Histories*. Rather than claiming to present the plain truth without ornamentation, the prologue to *Clizia* claims that there is truth to what will be told, but that, as Machiavelli put it in writing to Guicciardini, the truth is hidden "among so many lies that it is hard to recover". This is precisely where the Machiavellian amusement lay, not only in *Clizia*, in *Mandragola* and his letters, but also, I think, in *La Vita*, as well. The fun was in the twisting, turning path that the truth took. It vaulted magnificently into the gutter and snuck under bridges in the dead of night. It hid behind Machiavelli's professional inscrutability and laughed at monks, and sometimes it turned and bit maliciously. It remains, however, to decide

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[226] Hale, p. 69; Gaeta VIII:118.

quite what that truth was.

4.3: Conclusion to Chapter 4

In my introduction I asserted that rather than considering *La Vita* as the poor cousin among the grandees of Machiavelli's "major works" I would instead argue that it is a point of intersection between his professional, technical work and his private, less constricted work. I have attempted in this chapter to do so. I have argued that it has a place amongst those professional works - such as *The Prince*, *Discourses*, and *Florentine Histories* - which occupy those who would study the political Machiavelli, but also that it has a place of equal importance amongst those works which allow us a glimpse of the private Machiavelli.

Having constructed my argument as though this delineation (however it is labelled) were valid, the point that I would like to make by way of concluding this section is that it is not. To assert that there is a difference of some sort between *The Prince* and Machiavelli's letter to Luigi Guicciardini seems safe enough. The essential similarity, however, is more important: they are both Machiavelli. For certain analytic purposes such distinctions may be made, but it must be understood that in reality no such distinction exists.

It is for this reason that *La Vita* is important. Whereas it is possible to draw plausible conclusions,

conclusions which at least support their own academic weight, from *The Prince* without regard for the reality of the author, it is simply not possible to do so with *La Vita*. The secondary literature tells us that much, if little else for certain.

The task of the next section, then, is to re-integrate the various facets of *La Vita* and attempt to describe what Machiavelli might have intended to say with it.

5: La Vita in a Personal Context

There have been various, usually divergent, attempts to interpret *La Vita*. Most, however, ignore - at their cost - the manner in which the text is written and assume that if there is a political message to be read in it that, as in *Discourses* etc., it is presented plainly. Any attempt to read the text this way is bound inevitably for confusion. It is impossible, for example, to argue that *La Vita* is sincere in its glorification of Castruccio without unjustifiably ignoring his deathbed speech and that which follows it.[227] And once the speech and the collapse is taken into consideration confusion results: a verdict of failure is impossible to evade, but then why the glorification?

However, *La Vita* does repeat certain themes from *The Prince* and *Discourses*. It could, for instance, be argued that Castruccio is comparable to Julius II and should be understood in the context of the discussion of fortune in *The Prince*. Julius, according to *The Prince*, always acted rashly but nevertheless achieved things that no other Pope had managed because, for no reason other than blind luck, the circumstances happened to be right for rash

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[227] As, for example, do Guarino and Bondanella (1970) (above, pp. 29-32).

action.[228] Machiavelli cautioned, however, that fortune is unpredictable (like a lady or a river) and, additionally, that circumstances change and that that mode of action which was beneficial quickly becomes counterproductive.[229] Thus Castruccio's reversals might be an object lesson in fortune's power: he achieved a great deal, but was cut down by treacherously bad luck.

Detection of similarity does not, however, in this case, serve interpretation particularly well. At most this argument serves only to highlight the more important lesson of *La Vita*: that rulers should build a political structure which will survive them. Had Castruccio invested in a legal infrastructure his empire would have survived and Pagolo might have been able to maintain what his adoptive father had achieved. It is from this kind of analysis, I believe, that the most interesting thesis concerning *La Vita* flows.

Machiavelli's situation in 1520 presented him with a problem: how was he to write the history of Florence, and be paid for it, without offending the Medici? It is widely agreed that *La Vita* was intended as a model for *Florentine Histories*. If this is the case, then it also seems that it

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[228] Chapter 25 is central in this regard, and Chapter 13 is also interesting. (Wootton pp. 74-77 and pp. 42-45).

[229] Chapters 24 & 26.

was a successful model, since it is clear, in retrospect, that the problem was solved to Machiavelli's satisfaction. From this point one can speculate that there might be something to *La Vita* which was potentially offensive to the Medici and that it was concealed.

I have argued that Machiavelli felt it to be true that personal power should be placed at the service of the common good. I have argued that he felt it to be true that investment in structures which would promote and maintain stability was to the common good. I have also argued that these principles are negatively demonstrated by the example of Castruccio's fate and that of his empire. I would like to assert now that the tension between the larger part of the text, which seems to glorify Castruccio, and his deathbed speech and the account of the subsequent collapse of his empire, is indicative of a mode of concealment by which Machiavelli hid - at least from those unfamiliar with *Discourses* - both these principles and another meaning in *La Vita*.

The Prince and *La Vita* neatly bracket the career of Lorenzo de Medici as the ruler of Florence. The return of the Medici in 1512 was the event which led directly to Machiavelli's writing *The Prince*, and their ambitions for an independent state of their own prompted the concluding chapter. The promise of the two or three years between

their return and the addition of that final chapter, however, was never fulfilled. Not only did the battle of Marignano make it clear that the French were not going to be denied their role in Italian politics and that the Medici principate would have to wait, but Lorenzo proved to be a most unsatisfying leader.[230] He not only tried to recreate Medici control of Florence along the lines of the principate they sought, but he failed badly.[231] Not only did he make himself unpopular, he failed to expand Florentine territory significantly. During the six years or so for which he held power his only two conquests were Urbino, which involved expensive wars in which he did not acquit himself well, and a sickly French princess.[232] When he died (of syphilis and tuberculosis) in May of 1519, he left no male heir to whom the government could be

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[230] "empty-headed" in Ridolfi's characterization. p. 177.

[231] This seems to be generally accepted as fact on the basis of contemporary perception and Lorenzo's actions (see Hale pp. 99-100; J. N. Stephens, *The Fall of the Florentine Republic 1512-1530*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 95-105; Ridolfi p. 176). Humphrey Butters attempts to come to a balanced conclusion on exactly what Lorenzo's plans were for Florence and comments that "...though we lack conclusive evidence of Lorenzo's intentions..., there can be no doubt that he had gone far beyond the unassertive management techniques of Cosimo and Lorenzo the Magnificent, and had made himself extremely unpopular by doing so" (Butters, p. 303).

[232] Stephens pp. 102-107. Stephens remarks, unkindly but not untruthfully, that "Lorenzo's short career soon came to a pitiful end."

passed. By the time Machiavelli was in Lucca, Cardinal Giulio was in Florence attempting to deliver power smoothly into the hands of Alessandro de Medici, the illegitimate son of either himself or Giovanni. Hale commented that "The line of Cosimo *pater patriae* was ... petering out in an epigonate of clerics and bastards."[233] Humphrey Butters responded that "the Gods were briefly standing up for bastards".[234]

Machiavelli's opinion of the situation, which he presented to Giulio in *A Discourse on Remodelling the Government of Florence* (published 1523), was that to carry on with Lorenzo's attempt to establish a Medici principate in the city would be a mistake. Rather, he argued, the time was right to set up a constitutional state which would run itself under Giulio's control during his lifetime, and then, upon his death, be able to maintain itself in stability and peace. Hardly surprising advice from the author of *Discourses*. It is, in fact, one of the principles which I am arguing he concealed in *La Vita*. In *Discourse on Remodelling*, however, he is quite explicit about it. He even went so far as to paraphrase himself:

> ...no man is so exalted by any act of his as are those men who have with laws and with

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233 J. R. Hale, *Florence and the Medici: The pattern of control*, (Thames and Hudson, 1977), p. 83.

234 Butters, *Governors and Government*, p. 307.

> institutions remodelled republics and kingdoms; these are, after those who have been gods, the first to be praised.[235]

Beyond establishing that Machiavelli was thinking along the same lines at the time he wrote *La Vita* as when he wrote *Discourses*, this raises an interesting question. If he was arguing the case openly to Giulio in *Discourse on Remodelling*, why should he bother to hide precisely the same point in writing *La Vita*? The answer, I believe, is that whereas in *Discourse on Remodelling* he was addressing the question of how the Medici should proceed in the future, in *La Vita* he was addressing the question of how they had behaved in the past, and it was at this point that the truth became offensive.

I have laboured the point that from about the time of Giovanni's elevation to that of the battle of Marignano, or perhaps of Giuliano's death, the Medici - at least in Machiavelli's analysis - had a tremendous opportunity. He pointed this out in the final chapter of *The Prince*: in uniting the power of the papacy and Florence they could found a large state and drive the foreigners from Italy. It is this unity of powers that prompted the frequent exemplification of Cesare Borgia in *The Prince*.

I have also made the point that there is a difference

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[235] Gilbert I:114. Compare *Discourses* I:10 (Gilbert I:220-223; Gaeta I:156-159).

between Cesare Borgia and Castruccio. One made use of a legal foundation, the other did not. There is, however, one essential - and obvious - similarity that Machiavelli, significantly, ignores: that they both failed. Borgia's failure is ignored in *The Prince*, Castruccio's is emphasised in *La Vita*. My point is that if the Medici of 1514 were in the position of being, as a whole, another Cesare Borgia (his failure conveniently ignored), then by 1520 they were in the position of Castruccio (his failure emphasised both by the hyperbole of his success and the explicitness of his ultimate recognition of failure).

This point in hand, I am going to outline what I feel is the most plausible interpretation of what Machiavelli intended by *La Vita*. The central question which must be answered is what meaning Machiavelli intended to impart by altering Castruccio's life.

The two most striking and important alterations Machiavelli made to the "real" Castruccio were, first, representing him as having been an orphan and, secondly, the omission of his legitimate children for the fictitious "Pagolo". First, the question of orphans and its implications.

The first paragraph of *La Vita* is an invitation to reflect on the consequences of a humble beginning and the parallels which exist to the infant Castruccio's plight:

> Because all of them have either been exposed to wild beasts or have had such base parents that, being ashamed of them, they have made themselves sons of Jupiter or some other God.[236]

That this passage is intended to evoke Romulus is one of the few points upon which there is majority agreement in the secondary literature. Firstly there is the fact that he was an orphan: he was exposed as a babe, as was Castruccio (allegedly). This seems to be the basis for the common acceptance of his evocation. Secondly there is Machiavelli's reference to "Jupiter or some other God", which would seem most immediately to suggest Mars. Mars was the second (the third being the deified Romulus) in the trio of Gods who looked after Roman interests, and he was reputedly Romulus's father. Quite what Machiavelli might have intended by evoking Romulus, however, is never discussed.

Romulus, of course, despite his humble origins, arose to found Rome. In *Discourses* Machiavelli argued that he should be excused of his crimes because he had given Rome the legal constitution which enabled her to become and remain great (above, p. 60). At this point the irony should be fairly clear. Romulus found his way into a wolf den and thence to the nipple of a she-wolf, upon whose

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[236] Gilbert II:533; Gaeta VII:9. It is worth noting at the same time that Agothocles comes to mind as another example of a man of humble origin.

milk he suckled. Castruccio found his way into quite another sort of den: the vineyard of quite the least fertile couple that it is possible to imagine. He was then suckled, not on the wolf milk which founded Rome, but on all that the church meant to Machiavelli: dishonesty, hypocrisy, and corruption. Ultimately the results are plain to see: a tyrant who left behind him a shambles of a state which could in no way maintain itself in the stability and health which Machiavelli admired in Rome and for which he hoped for Florence. Machiavelli provides no excuse for Castruccio's crimes.

The second figure who is evoked in the opening paragraph of *La Vita* is Moses. Moses, of course, was an orphan. There is another reason, however, to suggest that Machiavelli might have meant to refer to him. In chapter 26 of *The Prince* Machiavelli, urging the Medici to take control of Italy, asserted that adversity is necessary to greatness; "Moses could only demonstrate his *virtù* because the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt...".[237] This passage echoes Machiavelli's claims concerning greatness and adversity in the first paragraphs of *La Vita*. Moses was also, like Romulus, the founder of a state which endured because he used his personal power not merely to extend his tyranny, but to establish a firm foundation for

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[237] Wootton, p. 77; Gaeta I:102.

the future. Unlike Romulus, however, who created a legal constitution, Moses cemented his state with religion.

The epitome of all leaders, I have argued, is the armed prophet of *The Prince*. The armed prophet was the true "ideal prince" who was capable, as was the "casa Medici" at one point, of deploying both secular and religious power to the end of reforming or founding, and then of stabilizing and maintaining. In other words, the ideal prince was more or less Romulus and Moses rolled into a single man, or, as I would like to argue, a single family. This is the prince who should have worn the twin emblem of Romulus and Moses, the Roman toga emblazoned with the religious mottoes "He is the man God wills" and "He shall be what God wills". Instead, however, it is worn in *La Vita* by a man who is the antithesis of this ideal prince: a flash in the pan whose almost empire crumbles with his death, a man both "infamous" and "detestable" (above, p. 61).

It is my thesis that this ironic juxtaposition is aimed squarely at the Medici, who, in Machiavelli's opinion, allowed the opportunity to exploit the twin potentials of religious and military leadership to slip away from them.

Before turning to my second point, I would like to consider the possibility of broadening the application of

this criticism a little. The final paragraph of *La Vita* states that had Castruccio not had Lucca for his home he would have been as great or greater than Philip of Macedon or Scipio and that he kept a pair of handcuffs hanging on his wall as a reminder of this adversity.[238] It is possible then that the Medici were excused to a degree for their failure and the blame was placed to some extent on the state of Italy or of Florence.

My second point concerns the question of the fictional Castruccio's lack of children. Machiavelli claimed in *La Vita* that Castruccio had, in order to honour the wishes of Michele Guinigi, foregone marriage and children of his own in favour of Michele's son Pagolo. The resulting succession is, patently, disastrous. While it is clear that he was left a ruinous mess - Castruccio himself admits this - it is also clear that "Pagolo" was incapable of filling his father's boots (above, p. 28).

The most immediately striking aspect of this fiction is the resemblance that it bears to the situation of the Medici - who were casting about for an heir to succeed Lorenzo. In this it might have simply been the most fitting, though perhaps a little too hopeful, way for Machiavelli to conclude the parable of Medici fortunes: an illegitimate succession followed by a swift and nearly

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[238] Gilbert II:559; Gaeta VII:41.

complete collapse. There is a second possibility, however, which, though by no means exclusive of the first, seems more interesting. I have already mentioned Paolo Vettori in the context of Machiavelli's hopes for a job in 1513 and 1514 (above, p. 54). It is to him, both specifically, and as representative of his circle, that I would like to suggest Machiavelli may have intended to point with the character of "Pagolo".

Paolo Vettori was the second son - the first being Francesco - of a Florentine cloth and wool merchant. The family were *ottimati*, wealthy, and firmly in the Medici camp.[239] Both brothers were well connected enough or clever enough to survive both the downfall of the Medici and their return. Francesco served both the Republic and, after their return, the Medici, as an ambassador. Under Soderini, Paolo, though he was allied with a pro-Medici faction, feigned enough loyalty to gain favour.[240] He was, however, a member of the group which actually expelled the *Gonfalonier* from the city after the sack of Prato.[241] After the Medici's return Paolo was one of

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239 Rosemary Devonshire Jones, *Francesco Vettori: Florentine Citizen and Medici Servant*, (University of London, 1972). Jones's first chapter ("The Vettori Family", pp. 1-9) provides a good overview of this subject.

240 Butters, *Governors and Government*, p. 62.

241 ibid., p. 163.

their most active supporters inside the city. J. N. Stephens notes that Paolo belonged to a group who "...identified with [the Medici] cause and ... were wholly dependent upon them for honour and reward."[242] He was, moreover, in favour of an immediate Medici principate supported by an army.[243] In a note to Giovanni in 1512 Paolo recommended that Medici rule be imposed by force: "your forefathers, in maintaining their rule, employed skill rather than force; you must use force rather than skill."[244]

Once the Medici were established in Florence Paolo seems to have attached himself to Giuliano's camp - at least it is in this capacity that Machiavelli mentions him. I have already mentioned Machiavelli's letters to Francesco in which he expresses his hopes for the job through Paolo, and I argued that this job would have been advising Paolo in his capacity of governor of the new Medici principate. It is worth quoting a couple of passages, however, because in these letters Machiavelli refers to Paolo as "Pagolo". For instance, he wrote to Francesco on February fourth 1513: "I came yesterday from

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242 Stephens, p. 64.

243 Butters, *Governors and Government*, p. 167.

244 Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth Century Florence*, (Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 131.

my farm, and your Pagolo gave me your letter of the eighteenth...."[245] And then at the end of January of the following year he wrote, discussing Paolo's prospects that

> Your Pagolo has been here with the Magnificent, and in the course of his discussions with me on his hopes, he said His Lordship has promised to make him governor of one of those cities of which he is now taking the sovereignty.[246]

If my arguments so far are correct then Paolo Vettori occupied an important, perhaps for a short time central, position in Machiavelli's hopes for the future. He was, potentially, the key to Machiavelli gaining meaningful and remunerative employment. Unfortunately the only extant letter from Machiavelli to Paolo is not relevant to his hopes for employment in 1513-1515, but it does seem clear from the correspondence with Francesco that he was actively lobbying Paolo. It is easy enough to recognize that this would have been both personally and politically distasteful to Machiavelli; perhaps sufficiently distasteful to bring to mind the parable of the fisherman in *La Vita*. It is a situation to which I believe the passage in *Mandragola* - that in which Machiavelli asserts that he is capable of toadying but warns that malice comes as part of the package (above, p. 96) - is relevant. If one is looking for a barb in the tail of *La Vita*, I would

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[245] Gilbert II:936.

[246] Gilbert II:962.

suggest that it is to be found buried in Paolo Vettori's leg.[247] He and his kind - the rash, wealthy young *ottimati* who supported the Medici's return and advocated the immediate imposition by force of a principate - were, I am arguing, in Machiavelli's view, the real epigonate of the Medici line. They were not only dependent on Medici power; they were ineffectual in their attempts to capitalize on their favour. Giulio ignored their advice in setting up the new Medici regime, preferring to rely on Lorenzo's skill - an unfortunate misjudgment in retrospect - instead of force.

To approach the matter from a slightly different angle, it is hard not to associate the forlorn fictional Pagolo failing to maintain the conquests handed him by Castruccio with the situation which Machiavelli might have seen Paolo facing had Giuliano handed him the governorship of a city. In that case Paolo would needed a good advisor as badly as "Pagolo" did.

I do not believe that to this point there are any unresolvable tensions in my interpretation. This may be because it is correct, but on the other hand it may also be, to some extent, due to the nature of *La Vita*, which

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247 If Machiavelli was poking fun at Paolo it may be worth noting that at about the time that he was at his most potentially useful (1513), Paolo owned several factories in Lucca and was involved in some business disputes which blossomed into armed raids. Devonshire Jones, p. 94.

leaves itself open to a range of possibilities. My thesis rests on selecting those instances of broad and obvious congruence between contemporary circumstance and Machiavelli's tampering with "fact" which do not conflict with each other, and attempting to coordinate them in such a manner as to produce a plausible overall explanation.

There are, however, other interesting possibilities. If for a moment one sets aside the goal of achieving a sort of narrative state of grace in which there is reasonable closure and a comfortable lack of tension, then these need not necessarily be taken to be exclusive of my central argument.

For example, Felix Gilbert mentions that there was a spate of memoranda composed upon the return of the Medici (Paolo's being some of the more important among them) which depicted Lorenzo Magnifico as the "prototype of the successful statesman", and plans were suggested by which he might be imitated.[248] In this light it might be interesting to ask whether perhaps Machiavelli was meaning to characterize Lorenzo Magnifico as a Castruccio figure. After all, Lorenzo, who was glorified seemingly without limit during and after his lifetime, bequeathed his heirs

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[248] Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 106. J.N. Stephens has argued that *The Prince* argued against taking Lorenzo as a model upon which to base the new government. See J.N. Stephens, "Machiavelli's *Prince* and 1512", *Italian Studies*, 41, 1986, pp. 45-61.

something of a glorious disaster after having bankrupted the family with his largesse. Moreover his heirs - centrally Piero - were spectacularly incompetent.

I have delineated in this section what I feel to be the most plausible contextual associations with *La Vita*. These were, broadly, the unfulfilled promise of 1513-1515 and Machiavelli's relationship with Paolo Vettori. It is in this direction, I believe, that the ultimate solution lies to the problems this text presents.

In order to pursue this solution further, a more detailed analysis of Machiavelli's actions and motivations during the period of 1512-1516 needs to be attempted. Hans Baron provided the first vital step in this direction and David Wootton has provided a second. The third step, I believe, will require a reassembling of Machiavelli's correspondence along the lines of Najemy's work in *Between Friends* but with a broader scope. Placed over the framework that Baron and Wootton have built, this correspondence can lend depth and a more human aspect to the Machiavelli of this period.

In the same vein, Roberto Ridolfi's reconstruction of Machiavelli's private and social life in *Life Of Machiavelli*, excellent but now dated, must be superseded. There were, certainly, dark corners in which he spoke his mind to friends and if just one of these could be peered

into it might cast a great deal of light on works, such as *La Vita,* which have both private and public import.

6: Epilogue

In the third act of *Mandragola* the hapless Messer Nicia, embroiled and confused, leans aside from a conversation with the cunning fixer Ligurio and the crooked priest, and mutters "What the toad said to the harrow, to you!"[249] Francesco Guicciardini apparently queried this remark, for we have a letter from Machiavelli explaining the reference. According to Machiavelli there was an old tale of a toad who was sitting about in a field a long time before, soon after the invention of the harrow. It was so entertained and distracted by the marvels of the machine that it let itself be run over. As the harrow went on down the field, the toad, rubbing its sore back, exclaimed after it "And don't bother coming back!".[250]

The toad's situation was one with which Machiavelli could identify both figuratively and literally. The Medici had certainly run over his life in a similar manner, and, moreover, they had him strung up on the *strappado* - a device designed expressly to induce soreness of the

[249] Hale, *Literary Works*, p. 34; Gaeta IIX:85. The original reads "Come dise la botta all'erpice!"

[250] Hale, p. 168; Gaeta VI:440. The original reads "Senza tornata!"

back.[251] And perhaps it is even a reference to that unpleasant episode: "Messer Nicia" is close enough to "Messer Niccolo" to suggest that it might be deliberate. It is, however, the irony of the toad's comment which makes the tale of the toad an apt metaphor for Machiavelli's reworking of Castruccio's life. The harrow, having run the toad over during one pass across the field, was bound to return and maul it again. But for one brief moment the toad - like Messer Nicia and Machiavelli, both impotent in their own way - was able to spit its bitterness at its assailant's back and deny the inevitably of defeat.

In 1520 Machiavelli was faced with a dilemma. The Medici had hired him to write the history of Florence, and thus, inevitably, of the "*casa Medici*" as well. The truth, however, as Machiavelli understood it, was going to be unpalatable to his patrons. The problem that needed to be solved was how that truth could be presented to his patrons in such a manner that, while remaining true, it could still be made to pay. I believe that he found the solution in *La Vita di Castruccio Castracani*. As he put it himself a few months later, he hid the truth among so many lies that it was hard to recover.

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[251] See the sonnet to Giuliano (Gilbert II:1013; Gaeta IIX:362). Also the letter to Francesco Vettori of Aril 9, 1513 (Gilbert II:900; Gaeta VI:239). Also Wootton, p. xi.

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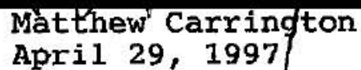
Author: 

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