

4. Machiavelli's *The Prince*

T MIGHT SEEM ODD to include Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* – allegedly described by Bertrand Russell as a 'handbook for gangsters' – in an anthology of Humanist masterpieces. For 500 years its author has been a demonic figure, synonymous with ruthlessness, cunning and backstabbing. For Shakespeare and his contemporaries he was the 'murderous Machiavel', 'the Devil's partner in crime', and 'Old Nick'. In the 18th century Frederick II of Prussia went so far as to argue that Machiavelli "corrupted politics, and in so doing hoped to destroy the very precepts of sound morality". Lord Macaulay doubted "whether any name in literary history be so generally odious".

Yet this is far from being the whole story. *The Prince*, written in 1513 but not published until 1532, has actually been the subject of an amazing range of interpretations. For example, Francis Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning* argued that "We are much beholden to Machiavelli and others that write what men do, and not what they ought to do", and Napoleon thought that *The Prince* was the only book worth reading.

We can understand Napoleon's praise, but Bacon's seems a little more puzzling, until we check the context. Bacon means that an understanding of how men *do* in fact behave and why is a necessary preliminary to any philosophy about how they *ought* to behave. In ethical terms, to know the good, one must investigate the evil. Indeed; and this is why today we have social sciences. An ethic which ignores the reality or potential of human nature for good or bad is a mere fantasy with no application to the world as we know it.

Bacon was, however, equivocal towards Machiavelli. He shared Machiavelli's opinion that virtue and utility are not always compatible, but he was critical of many aspects of his philosophy. He referred to the advice that one should cultivate the appearance of virtue without practising it and that men are best controlled by fear as 'evil arts' and 'corrupt wisdom'.

One of the first writers to praise Machiavelli was Alberico Gentili in his *De Legationibus libri tres* (1585). He



"If an injury has to be done to a man it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared".

"Whoever desires to found a state and give it laws, must start with assuming that all men are bad and ever ready to display their vicious nature, whenever they may find occasion for it".

"A prince should therefore have no other aim or thought, nor take up any other thing for his study but war and its organisation and discipline, for that is the only art that is necessary to one who commands".

"Since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved".

"A wise ruler ought never to keep faith when by doing so it would be against his interests".

"Politics have no relation to morals".

claimed that people did not understand Machiavelli's ideas at all and had in fact slandered him. His intention, according to Gentili, was not to instruct the tyrant but, by making all his secrets clear, he was actually educating the people.

Spinoza in his *Tractatus Politicus* (1677) took a similar view. He confessed that he didn't know precisely Machiavelli's intention but could only have a suspicion about it. He thought that Machiavelli, famous as a wise man fight-

ing for liberty, pictured the tricks of tyrants in order to warn us against their diabolical threatening of peaceful commonwealths. A free multitude ought to be on its guard not to entrust its welfare absolutely to one man.

A possible implication of Spinoza's surmise is that *The Prince* is actually a satire. Diderot in the *Encyclopédie* (1765 edition) spelt it out: "It was the fault of his contemporaries if they misunderstood what he was getting at; they took a satire for a eulogy". Rousseau agreed and in the *Social Contract* (1782 edition) he wrote: "the choice of his detestable hero, Cesare Borgia, clearly enough shows his hidden aim; and the contrast between the teaching of *The Prince* and that of the *Discourses*... shows that this profound political thinker has so far only been studied by superficial or corrupt readers. The Court of Rome sternly prohibited his book. I can believe it; for it is that court it most clearly portrays".

A modern proponent of the view that *The Prince* is a satire was the American historian Garrett Mattingly. In an article in *American Scholar* 27 (1958) he argued that it contradicts everything else Machiavelli ever wrote and everything we know about his life. So the notion that it is what it pretends to be, a scientific manual for tyrants, has to contend not only against his life but against his other writings. The basic assumption of his life and writings was spelt out in the *Discourses*: "We know by experience that states have never signally increased either in territory or in riches except under a free government. The cause is not far to seek, since it is the well-being not of the individuals but of the community which makes the state great, and without question this universal well-being is nowhere secured save in a republic... popular rule is always better than the rule of princes".

Another clue lies in the style of *The Prince*, which is totally different from the tact and sensitivity of Machiavelli's other prose writings. Here he clearly sets out to shock and disturb his readers by parodying a well-known literary form, the handbook of advice to princes, which had been enormously

popular in the preceding three centuries. Aquinas had written one; so too had Erasmus. All of them thought that a prince should uphold Christian principles as they saw them. According to Mattingly, Machiavelli's is a diabolical burlesque of all of them, and the reason must be that he is ridiculing the very notion of tyrannical rule embodied in the government of the Prince. He is exposing tyranny and promoting republican government.

If only it were as straightforward as that. Take the model Machiavelli chooses for his prince, Cesare Borgia, overlord of the Romagna. Mattingly says that only in a satire can this choice be satisfactorily explained because he was a bloodstained buffoon whose vices, crimes and follies had been the scandal of Italy. But the fact is that Machiavelli praises Borgia, especially as a military commander, in other writings, though he is not totally uncritical. In *The Prince* he writes: "Cesare Borgia was reputed as a cruel man; nevertheless, this cruelty of his reformed the Romagna, brought it unity, and restored order and obedience"(Ch 17).

In chapter VII he tells the story with apparent approval of Remirro de Orco, Borgia's right-hand man, whom he had put in charge of pacifying the Romagna. Remirro terrified the citizens and was both feared and loathed. Borgia decided to show that the cruelties were not ordered by him but were Remirro's own doing. One morning Remirro was cut in two and dumped in the town square next to a bloody block and knife. Thus Borgia not only demonstrated his autocratic power but also presented the mutilated body of the detested Remirro as a gift to the people who had suffered under him. "The brutality of this spectacle kept the people of the Romagna for a long time appeased and stupefied".

This incident highlights one of Machiavelli's main preoccupations in his writings: the need to preserve the authority of the state both internally and externally against its enemies. He writes: "a prince ... cannot observe all of those virtues for which men are reputed good, because it is often necessary to act against mercy, against faith, against humanity, against frankness, against religion, in order to preserve the state". We have to remember that at that time Italy was split into many states constantly under threat from one another or from surrounding countries such as France and Spain.

Machiavelli longed for a popular ruler to establish a united Italy and,

although he didn't like Cesare and despised his father, Pope Alexander VI, he realised that someone like him could be the man to do it. Of course, as a man born and living in Florence, he would have wanted it achieved under a Florentine, and what he was in effect saying in *The Prince* was that if Florence wanted to protect itself and even provide leadership for the whole of Italy, then its rulers needed to be as ruthless as their enemies in pursuit of this aim. The ruler "must stick to the good so long as he can, but being compelled by necessity, he must be ready to take the way of evil... In all men's acts, and in those of princes most especially, it is the result that



Cesare Borgia by Altobello Melloni

renders the verdict when there is no court of appeal".

This utilitarian principle that the end justifies the means has been employed by almost every political leader in history. Machiavelli puts it in terms of separating politics from morals, not for the benefit of the rulers – Machiavelli was not interested in power for its own sake – but for the benefit of the people. In a famous essay on *The Originality of Machiavelli* (reprinted in *The Proper Study of Mankind*), Isaiah Berlin argues that to say he divided politics from morals is to create a false antithesis. What he institutes is a differentiation between two moralities.

As a Renaissance Humanist, Machiavelli wished to restore the values of the pagan world in place of Christian morality, upon which no satisfactory human community could be constructed. It is simply impossible to combine Christian virtues such as meekness or the search for spiritual salvation with a satisfactory, stable, vigorous, strong society on earth. Man must choose: either accept political impotence – to

being used and crushed by powerful, ambitious, clever, unscrupulous men; or build a glorious community like those of Athens and Rome at their best.

In the *Discourses* Machiavelli says that the Christian faith had made men 'weak' and 'a prey to the wicked', since they 'think more about enduring their injuries than about avenging them'. The general effect of Christian teaching has been to crush men's civic spirit, and make them endure humiliations uncomplainingly, so that destroyers and despots encounter too little resistance. Christianity is therefore inferior to Roman religion, which made men stronger and more 'ferocious'. It is easy to see why *The Prince* was placed on the Catholic Index.

Berlin suggests that the pagan world Machiavelli prefers is built on recognition of the need for systematic force and guile by rulers – 'the ferocity of the lion and the cunning of the fox'. But it is not concerned with the opportunism of ambitious individuals. The ideal before his eyes is a shining vision of Florence or Italy, and in this respect he is a typical impassioned Humanist of the Renaissance, except that his ideal is not artistic or cultural but political.

If Berlin is correct, then Machiavelli offers modern Humanists a challenge. Do we accept the private morality of Christianity or the public morality he espouses? Or is it possible for modern politics to be divested of its cruel and nasty elements and be 'better' and more 'humane' than Machiavelli's? Some recent examples might make us sceptical. Was Blair being Machiavellian in making a case for war in Iraq? And in contemplating up to a million Iraqis being killed in the process? Are not politicians always faced with choices between evils? How can they escape the inevitability of 'dirty hands'? Might it not sometimes be necessary to do a wrong act 'for the greater good'? How can a liberal state guarantee its citizens' security without some measure of Machiavellian deception?

Bacon was right. We are much beholden to Machiavelli, first of all, for telling us home truths about what people do to get power and keep it and, secondly, for exposing to the light of day some of the basic moral dilemmas of political decision-making. He also laid bare a fundamental paradox of the last 2,000 years of western civilisation: namely, that it is based on a totally incompatible mix of Christian and pagan values. *The Prince* is certainly a great eye-opener.