

Petros Sklavounos

Professor Mary Stieber

HSS2: Texts and Contexts

27 March 2021

Machiavelli's Guide for the Demise of Princes

At face value, Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* appears to be a gift for successful and lasting rule. However, similar to the underlying deceit in centaur Nessus' gift to Deianeira that fatally poisoned Hercules, there is buried a sinister objective of actually leading new and prospective princes to their downfall. This is cunningly achieved by deeply embedding flawed advice and camouflaging it amongst sound rules. To identify these pitfalls, the ruling of states and the recommended character of a prince will be explored.

The Roman Empire and its methods of ruling are highlighted throughout the book, with the Empire making the first appearance as an example of successful rule. The success in commanding the lands it occupied is attributed to claiming the possessions of the less powerful and weakening the power of the powerful, "... entertained the less powerful without increasing their power, lowered the powerful" (*The Prince*, Ch. 3; Kindle, Codevilla 557). Machiavelli argues that the reason for such high efficacy is owing to the fact that only the poor and the weak are offended, but being "... dispersed and poor, can never harm [him]" (*The Prince*, Ch. 3; Kindle, Codevilla 540). On the other hand, the rich and powerful avoid becoming involved out of fear of suffering the same fate as the poor, such as being relocated to house the new inhabitants. However, we are informed in the following chapter, that the occupied countries in which Rome exercised this tactic, in fact constantly rebelled, "... frequent rebellions of Spain, of France, and

of Greece against the Romans, because of the thick principalities that were in those states” (*The Prince*, Ch. 4; Kindle, Codevilla 635-636). This contradicts the theory that submissive countries would not rebel out of fear or lack of power. In order to mask this piece of advice, which when followed would only lead to conquered states rebelling, the role of using Rome comes to light. The Roman Empire was the longest lasting empire and is considered to be one of the most successful. In this way, the target readers, being princes, are misguided into following a crafted analysis that seeks to demonstrate that owing to its overall success, all of the Roman Empire’s strategies were leading examples for the effective ruling of states.

Moreover, by ruling through fear and oppression, princes would actually instill citizens with opposition and hatred, both of which contrast with Machiavelli’s advice that a prince is best served “... to have the people as a friend: otherwise he has no remedy in adversity” (*The Prince*, Ch. 9; Kindle, Codevilla 865-866). For during such adverse times, the governing prince has no citizens that will support him since, at a time when they were in need, the prince was not there to aid them. This concept is further enforced in Chapter 9 with the author’s elaboration of this point where it is concluded that, “... therefore a wise prince must think of a means by which his citizens have need of the state and of him, always and in every kind of time, and then they will be faithful always” (*The Prince*, Ch. 9; Kindle, Codevilla 878-880). This loyalty that the people could have to the prince is emphasized through repetition and by way of a reminder to the reader at the closing of the chapter.

In addition to the method of ruling, another aspect of Machiavelli’s supposed advice to princes is built around the recommended character of a prince. To achieve this end, Cesare Borgia is Machiavelli’s embodiment of an ideal character for a prince, despite being one of the most ruthless rulers during the Renaissance period. He is described in the greatest of detail as possessing the Machiavellian virtù and employing all “devices” (*The Prince*, Ch. 7; Kindle,

Codevilla 714) prerequisite to success. In Machiavelli's own words on Borgia, "... I would not know better precepts to give to a new prince than the example of his actions..." (*The Prince*, Ch. 7; Kindle, Codevilla 717-718). Despite following Machiavelli's recipe for success, Borgia's rule quickly came to an end for reasons categorized as 'bad fortune'; however, his appointment of Pope Julius II was an error in judgment and not an event of misfortune, and was a decision that would be, "the cause of his final ruin" (*The Prince*, Ch. 7; Kindle, Codevilla 787-788). Borgia's error was in trusting San Pietro ad Vincula and believing he would be an ally. As Borgia had mistreated San Pietro and "harmed him" (*The Prince*, Ch 7; Kindle, Codevilla 784) prior to the papal appointment, there was rivalry and ill feeling on the part of San Pietro. This explains why, once pope, he did not uphold his end of their agreement in return for his promotion and instead arrested Borgia.

By being ruthless and bloodthirsty, Borgia had no allies in his time of weakness. Despite the ease of ruling a hereditary principality which Machiavelli describes in Chapter 2, the people hated him, which complicated the presumed ease of ruling an inherited state. With Borgia possessing the ideal character for an efficacious leader, it signals to the reader that gaining power at all cost and being dependent on others will only bring short-lived power, regardless the level of virtù possessed. This concept distracts the reader from the opposing theory that Borgia's downfall can be attributed to the lack of support from his subjects, and instead puts across the argument that a greater degree of ruthlessness, vigilance and wariness will best uphold a principedom. To further emphasize this distraction, there is no mention of the importance of good relations, but rather a neutral recount of Borgia's attempts at improving them. Hence, potential princes are misled into continuing to believe that dependence on others and inattentiveness to social dynamics were the factors that led to Borgia's downfall, rather than poor relations. As a result, new and prospective princes are deceived into upholding Borgia as a role model and are

unwittingly led to their demise, not having understood the true reasons behind Borgia's short-lived rule and so committing the same mistakes.

Borgia's character and the manner by which the Roman Empire ruled its states through fear are put forward in *The Prince* as ideals for princes to follow. However, what if this were not the case? As explored herein, countries that were subjected to an oppressive rule did rebel, and Borgia's time at the helm was cut short. Thus, it may be that Machiavelli is being ironic when advising princes to be ruthless, cruel and dominant if they wish to retain power and ensure enduring rule, and that he is purposefully proffering fallacious advice guaranteed to bring their downfall.

Work Cited

Codevilla, Angelo M., trans. *The Prince*. Niccolò Machiavelli. Yale University Press, Kindle ed. 1997.