

BOOK SUMMARY AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR THE PRINCE BY MACHIAVELLI

Historical Context

In the sixteenth century, when Niccolo Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, Italy was not a unified country. Instead, it was a collection of city-states, each with its own court and ruler, each attempting to gain power over the others. In addition to being a place of domestic intrigue, Italy was also a battleground for the power-hungry French, the Spanish, the Germans, and the forces of the Catholic Church under the Popes (who were, in essence, as powerful as secular kings at this time). One of the major Italian city-states, the republic of Florence, had long maintained an alliance with the French, and when Pope Julius II defeated the French in 1512, Florence was defeated too. Pope Julius declared that he would not agree to make peace unless Florence ceased to be a republic and accepted the Medici family as their rulers.

These political developments had a serious impact on the life and career of Machiavelli. Hardly a dyed-in-the-wool supporter of princes, Machiavelli had actually served for the past thirteen years as a councilor and diplomat for the former rulers of Florence, the anti-Medici republicans (his first book, *The Discourses*, presents a theory of republican government). When Florence fell into the hands of his princely enemies, Machiavelli narrowly escaped execution and found himself exiled instead. Formerly a man who lived in the center of political power, Machiavelli was now unemployed and disgraced (not to mention bored!) in the countryside outside Florence. He began to write a series of letters, begging the new Medici rulers in Florence to allow him to return to his beloved city. He continued this unsuccessful effort for fourteen years, until his death in 1527.

We must read *The Prince*, written in 1513, as one of the first of the documents that Machiavelli wrote in order to ingratiate himself with the new Florentine prince, Lorenzo de Medici. Is Machiavelli insincere? Is he a hypocrite? After all, his first book declared that a republic was the ideal form of government, not a state governed by the authority of a prince. And yet, we must note that Machiavelli never says anywhere in *The Prince* that he *likes* the notion of government by princes. He merely states that *if* a country is going to be governed by a prince, particularly a new prince, he has some advice as to how that prince should rule if he wishes to be great and powerful. In other words, Machiavelli's book is absolutely practical and not at all idealistic. Leaving aside what government is "best" in an ideal world, *The Prince* takes for granted the presence of an authoritarian ruler, and tries to imagine how such a ruler might achieve success. It is, of course, also entirely topical as well: Machiavelli offers Lorenzo an expert handbook that deals with precisely the situation of Florence at the time. He seems genuinely interested in using his political experience, as well as his wide reading in history and philosophy, to help Lorenzo be the best prince he can be. But he also obviously expected some personal gain from the book as well - Machiavelli clearly hoped that Lorenzo would find *The Prince* so helpful that he would immediately bring its author back to Florence where he could be a political counselor once again!

Unfortunately, Machiavelli's cunning plan didn't work. Despite the lavish praise for Medicis and Popes that continues throughout *The Prince*, Lorenzo did not seem to

like the book very much, and certainly never called Machiavelli back from exile. Ironically, shortly before Machiavelli died, Charles V of France defeated the Pope and removed the Medici from power. Florence became a republic once again, and Machiavelli surely expected his long exile to end at last. There was one slight problem, however: Machiavelli had written a short book dedicated to Prince Lorenzo de Medici, advising him on how best to acquire and maintain power - not a very republican thing to do! And so, that very book that Machiavelli had hoped would bring him back to Florence - *The Prince* - finally kept him away for good.

Important Persons - List of Persons Mentioned in or Relevant to Machiavelli's *Prince*

Lorenzo de' Medici

Machiavelli dedicated the first printing of *The Prince* to this man, duke of Urbino and ruler of Florence in 1516. He had originally dedicated the book to Lorenzo's uncle, Giuliano de' Medici, but Giuliano died before the book appeared. (Confusingly, Giuliano's father, and Lorenzo's grandfather, was also named Lorenzo de' Medici, and known popularly as Lorenzo the Magnificent.)

Pope Sixtus IV

The first of three popes who figure prominently in Machiavelli's argument. Sixtus, whose real name was Francesco della Rovere, was pope from 1471-1484. He led the papacy to unprecedented wealth and power by waging wars against the Turkish Empire, and by fomenting domestic wars within Italy. Sixtus was responsible for commissioning the famous Sistine Chapel, with ceilings decorated by Michelangelo, in the Vatican.

Pope Alexander VI

Originally named Rodrigo Borgia, this pope succeeded Sixtus and led the Catholic Church from 1492-1503. Like Sixtus, Alexander increased the power of the papacy and of the Church generally. He notoriously used his wealth and power to advance his relatives (particularly his numerous illegitimate children) into high offices in the religious and political institutions of Italy.

Cesare Borgia

One of Alexander's sons, Cesare provided Machiavelli an ideal historical example of a crafty prince. Pope Alexander's original plan was to send Cesare into the church. Cesare actually became an archbishop - at the ripe old age of 17! -- because of his father's influence. After several years of this, Cesare left the "religious" life and entered the world of politics, eventually rising to dominance by cunningly manipulating strife among the Italian city-states.

Pope Julius II

This pope succeeded Alexander VI (after the hiccup of an eight-week reign by another man), and ruled the Church from 1503-1513. Julius led the papacy in a number of intimidation campaigns against Italian city-states, such as Venice and Florence, trying to get them to join him in his war on the French. His policies were bold, but ultimately unsuccessful. Eventually Julius' ongoing feud with the Borgias contributed to the utter collapse of most Italian alliances.

Agathocles of Syracuse

Machiavelli took the story of the cruel ruler Agathocles from the ancient historians Justin and Diodorus Siculus. Agathocles was ruler of Sicily from 361-289 BC, and his evil rise to power provided Machiavelli with an example of a man who achieves political domination through unvirtuous action.

Points to Ponder

Machiavelli's political allegiances were a matter of some dispute in his own time. After working for the Florentine republic, he attempted to gain a political position at the court of the men who destroyed that system. He wrote a treatise on republics, *The Discourses*, as well as his handbook for single rulers, *The Prince*. Are there suggestions, even within *The Prince* itself, that Machiavelli doesn't actually like princes very much? If not, should we consider Machiavelli a hypocrite? If so, then should the entire book be taken ironically?

From his time up until the present day, Machiavelli has often been considered an immoral theorist, one who was prepared to suggest that the ends always justify the means. But readers who wish to spare Machiavelli from accusations of "immorality" cite his example of Agathocles the Syracusan as an instance when the ends do not seem to justify the means. Since Machiavelli presents Agathocles in such a negative light, does this suggest that there is some political behavior that is simply unacceptable on any terms? Does Machiavelli object to the cruelty of Agathocles on ethical grounds? If so, does this destroy his notion, expressed elsewhere, that there is no absolute standard for judging political action?

The word *virtu*, so prevalent in *The Prince*, never seems to mean the same thing twice. How many definitions for this term can you find implied in Machiavelli's argument? Do any of these definitions contradict each other? Why do you think that Machiavelli placed so much emphasis on a word which resists stable definition? What implications does the slipperiness of this term have for his larger argument? What is the point of writing a "how-to" that avoids making concrete recommendations?

Did You Know?

After leaving Florence, the banished Machiavelli wrote a letter to a friend in which he described his evening activities alone in the countryside: every night, apparently, he would take off his work clothes (remember, he was living on a farm), and would put on the "royal and curial robes" he used to wear at court. Only when he was so splendidly attired, Machiavelli told his friend, did he feel ready to join in the company of ancient kings and princes - in other words, to sit down and write about them in *The Prince*!

Renaissance dramatists frequently used a stock character in their plays when they needed a villain. This character, meant to exemplify the extreme of irreligious wickedness and immorality, was called the "machiavel." Shakespeare's cunning Iago in *Othello* is one of his most famous machiavels; the evil Richard III goes even further, declaring onstage that his villainy will "set the murderous Machiavel to school."

Machiavelli devotes a great deal of *The Prince* to praising powerful popes. Rather than appreciating such flattery, however, the Catholic Church considered Machiavelli's book an enemy to religion - from 1557 onwards, *The Prince* has been on the Catholic Church's *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, or list of forbidden books!

Summary of the Argument

Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in an attempt to ingratiate himself with the Medici princes who had recently taken over the government of his native city, Florence, in the early sixteenth century (see the rather overstated flattery in the prefatory letter to Lorenzo de' Medici). He intended this book to be a kind of "how-to:" a short, pithy handbook for princes who have gained power and wish to keep it. Accordingly, it begins by dividing all governments into two kinds: republics and "principalities" (those ruled by a "prince," or single ruler). Machiavelli swiftly dismisses the first kind of government as being outside the scope of his argument. He then goes on to subdivide the latter kind. Principalities, he writes, are of two kinds: there are those which have been ruled by a family for a long time, and those which are newly conquered. It is this last kind, obviously, that concerns Machiavelli most, and he spends the rest of *The Prince* sketching ways in which the "new prince" can acquire and maintain the greatest amount of power.

Machiavelli first considers "mixed principalities," or new territories annexed to older ones. The new prince of such a state, he writes, should wipe out the family of his predecessors in the, and should take care not to change the old laws -if need be, he should live there himself, and learn the customs of his new subjects, so they won't consider him a "stranger." He should also set up colonies of his own men in the new lands, and should weaken any strong neighboring enemies so that he will have no rival conquerors. In all things, Machiavelli writes (as he does many times in the book), the new prince should not only keep an eye on present dangers, but on possible future dangers - a good example of this is the Roman rule of new provinces.

When a new prince takes over a state governed by an absolute ruler, the process of *acquiring* power is that much more difficult. However, once such a kingdom is *conquered*, it is much easier to rule, since its subjects are used to oppression. Darius, for instance, took over lands from Alexander the Great, and was able to rule them without fear of revolt, since his new subjects were accustomed to having no voice in government. Republics, by contrast, are very easy for a new prince to conquer, but almost impossible for him to rule. Once a new prince has gained control over a former republic, Machiavelli implies that he really has no choice but to destroy it entirely and rebuild it.

Machiavelli then proceeds to consider relationship between luck and skill in the gaining and keeping of power. He introduces two key terms: *fortuna*, which means "luck," "chance," "accident," or "fortune," and *virtu*, which means, literally, "manliness," and which can also be defined as "skill," "cunning," "power," "ability," or "strength." Which is more important for a prince to have on his side? Machiavelli suggests, over and over, that a prince is better off relying on *virtu* than on *fortuna*.

However, one of the key advantages of *virtu* is that it enables a prince better to exploit and master *fortuna*. He will say later that *fortuna e una donna* (“fortune is a woman”) and must be dominated. Here, though, he stresses the connections between *fortuna* and *virtu* as necessary for successful rule. A prince must be able to seize opportunities through skill in what Machiavelli calls a “lucky shrewdness.”

What kind of actions should a *virtuoso* (skillful) prince take? Well, he avoids using other princes’ troops or hiring mercenaries to do his dirty work - such a reliance on outside help makes a prince the helpless victim of fortune . He does not come into power through overt crime, nor does he allow himself to gain a reputation for cruelty - but he is able to use crime and cruelty when he needs to, carefully concealing his guilt. A *virtuoso* prince will not alienate the people he governs, but he will not let the need to be loved by them take precedence over the necessity of being feared by them. In order to maintain his power, a prince must earn the loyalty of his subjects, and he can best do this by protecting them. And any prince who shows himself to be strong enough to protect his subjects must also show himself to be strong enough to be feared by them - though, of course, never gratuitously cruel to them. Above all (and here’s where Machiavelli got a little shocking for his Renaissance readers), a *virtuoso* prince must acknowledge the fact that he does not live in an ideal world. He should therefore “learn not to be good” when a particular occasion (*fortuna* again!) renders it more advantageous to be bad. In subsequent chapters, Machiavelli describes how a prince can break promises, commit crimes, and generally behave nastily for political advantage. But he also insists that a prince should learn to avoid the hatred that would result from exposure of his bad behavior. He should instead cultivate a reputation for “goodness,” even if that reputation is false. In other words, for Machiavelli’s prince, it’s better to *look good than to be good*.

According to Machiavelli, a prince learns such *virtu* by particular kinds of study: first, and most importantly, the study of warfare. He should spend lots of time strategizing, exercising, and preparing himself for battle. Such training makes a man more likely to achieve power through conquest, and less likely to succumb to laziness once he achieves it. In addition, any prince who wishes to be powerful should also study histories of successful princes, in order to understand what has worked for men in the past and model his behavior on them. In a sense, *The Prince* itself is a kind of history book, compiling short examples of good (and bad) rulers throughout history for the edification of its princely readers.

Prefatory Letter

Prefatory Letter to Lorenzo the Magnificent

Machiavelli begins his treatise on the ideal Prince with a dedication to an actual prince, Lorenzo de’Medici. He declares that courtiers who wish to earn a prince’s favor do so by presenting the prince with items which they themselves hold particularly dear: usually gold, jewels, horses, etc. Machiavelli tells Lorenzo that, after racking his brain for an appropriately valuable gift, he decided that what he felt was most precious was his knowledge of great men, knowledge gained from history books, as well as from current events. He will present Lorenzo with this knowledge, in the form of the treatise to follow. Machiavelli claims to worry a bit about whether Lorenzo will be pleased with

such a gift, but then reminds himself that any prince would be glad to receive, in short handbook form, knowledge which the author has taken years to acquire. Machiavelli promises that his will be a “small volume,” written not in pretentious academic language, but in the common language of men. He then excuses himself for having presumed to write about princes at all, since he is simply an ordinary man; furthermore Machiavelli actually suggests that being a commoner is actually an *advantage* to one who wishes to write about princes, since that distance of rank gives the commoner a perspective that princes themselves lack. Machiavelli, then, is an outsider looking in - offering deliberately common-sense explanations for how particular men are able to become and to remain great. Lest we forget, though, that the *Prince* was intended as a gift to earn Lorenzo’s favor, this preface concludes with a specific, pointed request: if his noble recipient likes the gift of this book, Machiavelli gently suggests, then he might best show his appreciation by helping the author return to court from his current position of exile and disgrace. Rather than considering this simply a work of political theory written for its own sake, we should realize that the suffering Machiavelli had some very practical reasons for writing this book and dedicating it to Lorenzo!

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