Machiavelli’s *The Prince* as a Satire: An Exploratory Look at Machiavelli’s Works to Determine His True Political Inclinations

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Abstract:

For centuries, scholars have viewed The Prince as a work representative of Machiavelli’s shift in political ideology; however, this work does not accurately reflect Machiavelli’s true opinions. In The Prince, Machiavelli expressed his views about how a ruler should act. For many years, scholars took Machiavelli at his word: malice, nastiness, insincerity, and a lack of gratitude are characteristics of princes. Later scholars reexamined the work and started to doubt the seriousness of Machiavelli’s message. In fact, several authors have suggested that Machiavelli wrote The Prince as a résumé to the Medici family in hopes of securing a government position.

Another point greatly debated, and supportive of The Prince as a satire, is the idea that Machiavelli wrote The Prince after he drafted the first part of The Discourses on Livy. His thinking and the theme of his works shift from republicanism in The Discourses to pragmatism and recognition of the need for a prince’s control in The Prince. Scholars believe that Machiavelli may have written The Prince before The Discourses on Livy and therefore always believed that a republic is the ideal government. The Prince challenges all of Machiavelli’s other works and what we know of his life. This inconsistency and the knowledge of Machiavelli’s opinions give evidence that perhaps The Prince is a satire.
Introduction

Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a pamphlet explaining how a ruler of nations should act. This classic work has been the center of a debate lasting for several centuries. Traditionally, scholars have taken Machiavelli at his word, that “hypocrisy and ingratitude, meanness, cruelty, and treachery [are] the traits proper to princes.”¹ However, Hans Baron, one of the twentieth century’s leading experts on Machiavelli, first believed that Machiavelli and his contemporaries began to doubt the “‗ethical purity of political aims‘” that distinguished Leonardo Bruni and his contemporaries.² The debate heated up when Baron began to assert that *The Prince* was written before *The Discourses on Livy* and that Machiavelli thought a republic based on Florence’s experiences and the Roman model was the ideal government.³ According to Garrett Mattingly, *The Prince* “contradicts everything else Machiavelli ever wrote and everything we know about his life.”⁴ This contradiction and the knowledge of Machiavelli’s opinions provide evidence that perhaps Machiavelli did not really suggest everything he wrote in *The Prince*.

With all of this in mind, we must reexamine Machiavelli’s life, *The Prince, The Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli’s other works, and the historical foundations of his works. This will uncover clues as to his true political ideals and the true meaning of his handbook.

Biography

Niccolo Machiavelli was born in Florence, Italy, on May 3, 1469, to Bernardo and Bartolomea Machiavelli. The Machiavelli family was part of a high house in Florence, but his father’s branch was not very wealthy. Bernardo had many humanist associates and used his connections to give his son a humanist’s education. Niccolo began speaking Latin at the age of seven, and by the age of twelve, he was under the tutelage of Paolo da Ronciglione, a well-known teacher of many important humanists of that era.⁵ Machiavelli later attended the
University of Florence where he studied with Marcello Adriani, who later became the first chancellor during Machiavelli’s time as second chancellor. Although there is no direct evidence, Adriani probably awarded Machiavelli the second chancellorship because of their connection at the university. In June 1498, Machiavelli replaced Alessandro Braccesias as the head of the second chancery. This was Machiavelli’s first administrative position and possibly a result of his family’s connection with humanist scholars.

As second chancellor, Machiavelli was a secretary to the first chancellor and corresponded with ambassadors about the administration of the Florentine territories. As a secretary to the first chancellor, Machiavelli served the Ten of War and traveled abroad to report on foreign affairs that affected Florence. He also formed a citizen militia that fought horribly, but managed to regain Pisa. It was in the course of these duties that Machiavelli observed some of the greatest leaders of his age at their courts and witnessed their successes and failures on the battlefield. Machiavelli incorporated much of what he learned during this time into his later writings of *The Prince, The Art of War, and The Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca*.

During Machiavelli’s life, the Florentine government faced many changes. The Medici family ruled Florence with a republican facade from around 1434 until 1494 when Pietro de Medici was expelled from Florence after capitulating to Charles VIII of France. After the Medici family left Florence, a Dominican monk named Girolamo Savonarola won the Florentines’ favor and took command of the government. Savonarola had preached terrifying sermons about reform when the Medici were still in power and he wanted politics in Florence wedded with religion so that the city would be holier and better able to communicate with God. Savonarola welcomed Charles VIII as the protector of Florence, but the French did not stay for long; Savonarola became the political leader of the new Florentine republic. He ruled by his spiritual beliefs,
making the republic a Christian commonwealth in which the Bible was law. Savonarola established the Great Council and a communal lending agency, reformed the tax system, and created a *parlimento* that approved radical changes to the government. He was best known for his bonfires into which the citizens of Florence had to throw their luxury goods and vanities. Savonarola preached against the pope, spurring Pope Alexander XI to excommunicate him and threaten a trade interdict on Florence. The Florentines eventually decided that Savonarola was no longer a good ruler of their city, so he was tried for heresy. Savonarola was convicted and executed in May 1498.

After Savonarola’s execution, Piero Soderini took control of the government and created a modified republic in which he was *gonfalonier a vita*. Soderini never abused his position and created a militia comprised of Florentine citizens instead of mercenary troops. Machiavelli served in Soderini’s government until 1512, when the Medici, with the help of the Spanish army, overthrew Soderini. Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino, and Cardinal Giulio de Medici ruled Florence until 1527 when they were expelled from Florence again and the republic adopted a new constitution. This new republic existed for six years before the Medici returned to power for the longest and final time.

When the Medici deposed Soderini in 1512, they suspended Machiavelli from the chancery and condemned him to remain within Florentine territory for a year, unable to leave the city without permission. His repeated requests to resume his position within the Medici government were all denied. During the exposure of the Boscoli and Capponi conspiracy, Machiavelli’s name was found on a list of potential supporters; he was imprisoned and tortured for information. After four to six turns of the rack and his alleged co-conspirators’ confessions, he was declared innocent and released. Machiavelli likely never supported the Medici
completely after suffering through this. It was after this ordeal and during his exile to the countryside when Machiavelli began to write *The Prince*. A letter he wrote to his friend Vettori provides evidence of when he wrote *The Prince* and his desire to gain notice in the government.

During his exile, Machiavelli participated in a gathering of fellow republicans who met to discuss literary ideals and political issues. It may be that, as Najemy puts it, “after a brief infatuation, born of isolation, with the amoral power-politics of princes, Machiavelli’s growing contacts with circles of republican thought brought him back to faith in the participatory politics of free republics.”¹¹ These contacts, humanists and republican political theorists, met in Cosimo Rucellai’s gardens and called themselves the *Orti Oricellari*.¹² This was an opportunity for Machiavelli to discuss ideas for his *Discourses on Livy* while conversing about political, historical, and literary matters. Although he participated in this pro-republican group, he did not partake in anti-Medici plots, thus earning some support from the Medici. Eventually, in 1520, Cardinal Giulio Medici, the new leader of Florence and a relative of one of Machiavelli’s friends Lorenzo Strozzi, recognized Machiavelli’s literary abilities and put him to work chronicling the history of Florence. Although it was written for the same audience as *The Prince*, the *Florentine Histories* focused on the Florentine republics. Because this work did not highlight aspects of history that the Medici favored, this work prevented him from obtaining a position in the new government in 1527. This exile from government did not last long; he died later that year. His final resting place is unknown but a cenotaph is placed in his name in the church of Santa Croce in Florence.

**Analysis of *The Prince***

*The Prince*, written in 1513, is Machiavelli’s most famous work. This short pamphlet was written in the “mirror of the princes” style common at the time but seems to ridicule the genre
rather fit into it. It advises Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino, to whom the work was dedicated, on how to obtain and maintain power. Machiavelli focuses on new principalities, won by arms, fortune, or virtue. He discusses the different types of principalities, the different types of armies and military leaders, the characteristics of a successful prince, and ends with advice on uniting Italy. Most of his advice within the work appears to be morally unacceptable, and thus in part led to its immense popularity. *The Prince* must be read carefully in the context of Machiavelli’s life and other works in order to correctly interpret Machiavelli’s message.

*Alternative Theories*

There are several theories as to why Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*. These reasons range from a method of gaining the Medici’s trust and obtaining a position within their government, as a warning to the Florentines to look out for tyrants like the Medici, or as a dare to the Medici to rule in such a vicious way that it would cause a rebellion. Machiavelli wanted to see a united Italy under one government or prince; according to Pasquale Villari, Machiavelli believed the Medici family would be the best candidates for uniting Italy. The current Medici leaders did not possess the same leadership qualities as their ancestors, Lorenzo the Magnificent and Cosimo the Elder, so Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a guide to Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino, on how to unify Italy and maintain power. Another theory about the purpose of *The Prince* is that it was written to gain favor with the Medici family. Machiavelli had been fired because of his association with the previous regime and had been falsely accused of conspiring against the Medici in power. All of this ill will toward Machiavelli prevented him from living in Florence and participating in government in the manner he desired. *The Prince*, therefore, was written to gain favor and as a résumé for a position within the Medici government.
There is a great deal of evidence throughout *The Prince* supporting the idea of it being a résumé. Machiavelli wanted a job and wrote *The Prince* as a means to “bring him to the notice of ‘our Medici lords.’”⁴ This was a failure because Lorenzo de Medici “barely glanced” at it.⁵ Within the dedication to “the Magnificent Lorenzo de’ Medici,” Machiavelli begins with a comment about the customary search for the “favour of a prince” and goes on to express his “readiness to serve [Lorenzo].”⁶ Machiavelli clearly wanted to work for the Medici somewhere in the government. He knew that in order to obtain a position within the government, he would have to regain the Medici’s favor because a prince can “abolish honors or create them.”⁷ Machiavelli writes that “noblemen can be seen as essentially of two sorts: either they manage their affairs in such a way as to be entirely at your disposal, or they do not.”⁸ Although Machiavelli was not of noble descent, this generalization can be applied to any person working for the Medici government and therefore to him as well. Machiavelli probably would have viewed himself as being completely under the Medici’s control.

In Book XV, Machiavelli writes that *The Prince* is intended to be “something useful to an understanding reader” and explores the “real truth of the matter [rather] than to repeat what people have imagined.”⁹ These phrases may be interpreted in a few ways. The first interpretation would be literal, that Machiavelli will analyze why some men are praised or blamed using facts, not popular beliefs, as evidence. Other interpretations might play on the word “useful.” For example, Machiavelli may have intended the handbook to be useful because he was giving the Medici advice and expects them to consider and implement the ideas. On the other hand, “useful” could be a subtle nudge at the Medici on Machiavelli’s part to convince them to give him a position within their government. Even more interpretations could center on the “real truth” that Machiavelli claims to discuss. These truths could again be literal, or they
could be a warning not to listen to rumors. Machiavelli claims not to include rumors or falsehoods in his handbook and to not downplay the truth.

This claim may not be true throughout The Prince’s entirety. To help convince the Medici of his loyalty, Machiavelli used examples of princes from ancient Rome or recent Italian history that he twisted to serve his purpose. One example that Machiavelli inserted in his chapter about building fortresses and other defensive policies is about how Pandolfo Petrucci, Prince of Siena, ruled with help more from people he did not trust than from those he did. In the footnote to this passage, translator Robert Adams comments that while Petrucci may have used men whom he did not trust to help him rule, no other historians have provided evidence for this conclusion. Machiavelli may have included this little-known fact, or even fabricated the fact, to support his argument for a position within the government. Adams also says in his note that Machiavelli knew that the Medici did not trust him because of his republican ties. Therefore, by describing someone who gave second chances and was successful, Machiavelli attempted to persuade Lorenzo that it is acceptable to do the same in the present case with Machiavelli.

A great deal of evidence within The Prince suggests Machiavelli wanted the Medici to trust him. For example, Machiavelli discusses how much more faithful a previously suspected man is compared to trusted men; previously suspected men are more willing to “serve [the prince] faithfully” because they recognize that “only good service” will cause the prince to forget or forgive his previous misgivings. For another example, Machiavelli writes “in order to keep a tight grasp on the state . . . other [princes] have made a point of winning over those who were suspect at the beginning of their reign.” Machiavelli understood what he wrote and expected it to be understood in a certain way. He was suspected of conspiracy at the beginning of the Medici’s reign and he held a position for the previous regime that was hostile to the Medici
family. Machiavelli used this handbook as a way to convince the Medici that they could trust him with a position within their government.

Sarcasm

Each passage Machiavelli included to convince the Medici of his allegiance did not explicitly state his intentions but rather hinted at what he sought. He employed sarcasm and irony as a way to criticize the Medici’s leadership without insulting them outright. One critic of Machiavelli wrote that he was always “apt to push sarcasm and satire to the point of cynicism, jesting even on things and persons that were sacred to him.”

An example of this appears in Book X when Machiavelli advises the prince to destroy a newly acquired state, go live there, or let the state stay as it was before. The state Machiavelli had in mind was most likely Florence, which he would never seriously have suggested someone destroy. If he gives advice about which he is not serious, then there may be many more pieces of sarcastic advice scattered throughout The Prince.

Double Entendres

Along with his sarcastic advice, Machiavelli used words and phrases that have two meanings. At one point, Machiavelli asserts that a new prince should arm his unarmed subjects, because “their arms become yours.” This may not only be about weapons; arming them could also be giving out offices or jobs. Machiavelli suggests that he would be indebted to the Medici if employed. The double meaning of armament can be extended into a metaphor for Machiavelli’s troubles right after the Medici took control. He states that “when you disarm [your subjects], you begin to alienate them; you advertise your mistrust of them, which may come from your suspecting them of cowardice or treachery.”

The following words can be interpreted to represent Machiavelli’s troubles: “disarm” stands for his suspension from the chancery;
“alienate” refers to his exile from Florence; and conspiracy replaces “treachery.” By reading the passage again with the different meanings, Machiavelli can be seen as commenting on the way the Medici treated him, and perhaps reminding them of what they put him through.

As a Science

Part of The Prince’s appeal to readers over the years has been that it focused on facts; it did not touch on moral issues. Margaret King writes that when focusing on principalities, Machiavelli works with “what kinds there are; how they can be won, preserved, and lost; [and] what qualities the prince must have to be successful.” He does not discuss “moral issues pertaining to the existence of one-man rule, or the forceful acquisition of power.” He separates the moral issues from the other issues, creating a science out of politics. He may not have agreed with everything he wrote; in fact, he acted as a neutral third party commenting on the state of affairs without interjecting his own opinions about what was morally correct. In Book XVII, Machiavelli generalized that all men are “ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, fearful of danger and greedy for gain.” This generalization allowed Machiavelli to study politics as a science. He likely knew that there are always exceptions to the rules, but to analyze the way a ruler should act, he needed to determine the overarching behaviors of most people in certain situations. It was his ability to see politics as an art form and as a science that made The Prince and Machiavelli so famous and immortal.

Two Ends of the Spectrum

Many scholars believe that the monarchial nature of The Prince demonstrates Machiavelli’s true political ideals; other scholars feel that his other writings are a better example of his republican leaning. So, how can one author occupy both ends of the political spectrum, as Machiavelli appears to do? The answer is found within The Prince itself – “a prince will be
fortunate who adjusts his behavior to the temper of the times.” He repeats this opinion again in *The Discourses on Livy* and in a letter to Piero Soderini, and he lives by this idea on many occasions. He was an avid republican during the times of republican rule and changed his support to the Medici when they were in power. His desire for and his love of his political role in the government led him to changes sides as many times as needed to hold on to his position. With his writing, he wrote about whichever side would give him the most political attention at the time; *The Discourses on Livy* sympathizes with republics whereas *The Prince* guides principalities. Machiavelli wrote about states that are either republic or principalities, but never declared which he believed works better. He gave each side ample consideration within both *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy*, but the length of *The Discourses on Livy* suggests a greater admiration for republics.

*Which Came First?*

A large indicator of Machiavelli’s true feelings about republican and monarchial governments comes from the order of *The Prince, The Discourses on Livy*, and his other works. Hans Baron attempted to prove that Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* before *The Discourses on Livy* and that his “early enthusiasm for a monarchial solution to Italy’s woes gave way . . . to a reaffirmation of faith in republicanism grounded in both the experience of Florence and the memory of Rome.” Baron felt that if Machiavelli had written *The Prince* first and *The Discourses on Livy* later, it indicated a shift in his ideals. Machiavelli went from working with a republican government to writing a handbook for a prince back to writing about republics. This pattern does not tell us whether Machiavelli actually changed his opinion about republics or not, but it does indicate that he started out republican and ended his career as a republican. Najemy described Baron’s findings as a “more permanent hold on Machiavelli of the republican
The consensus now is that *The Prince* was finished by December 1513 and that *The Discourses on Livy* was started around 1513 but not finished until several years later.

**Relationship to *The Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livy***

During his exile, Machiavelli began to draft the first chapters of a work on republics known as *The Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livy*. This work relied partially on the conversations and discussions held at the *Orti Oricellari* meetings Machiavelli attended and partially on Livy’s history of Rome. The *Orti Oricellari* conversed about political matters and historical and literary ideals, creating a wonderful opportunity for Machiavelli to discuss ideas with his fellow *literati*. The three-book work that emerged from these discussions uses historical examples and Machiavelli’s own observations about republics to supplement the commentary on Livy’s history of Rome. The first book focuses on the “development of Rome’s constitution,” Book Two covers Roman expansion mainly through the act of war, and the third book is most similar to *The Prince* with its commentary on “Rome’s great men” and their individual leadership. It is important to keep in mind that the same author wrote both *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy*; a juxtaposition of the two works gives the reader an idea of the conflict in Machiavelli’s views and life that should be kept in mind.

Based on the evidence, Machiavelli intended to write about states of all types, but because of the wide topic, he divided it into two works. *The Prince* starts out broad, stating that there are only two types of states – republics and principalities; he goes on to divide principalities further into hereditary or newly acquired and then divides these further. In Book Three, Discourse Three of *The Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli writes that he has already discussed a tyrant “at length elsewhere,” referring to *The Prince*. He saw that politics deals with only two different types of government and discussed one in *The Prince* and the other in
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The Discourses on Livy. This two-volume work idea is not new; Pasquale Villari writes that The Discourses on Livy and The Prince would “form together a single and more complete work.” He believed that critics who view the works separately do not see the entire picture and hinder their interpretations. If the works should be considered one larger work, then studying only The Prince or just The Discourses on Livy could be likened to reading only half of a novel or watching half of a movie and then critically analyzing the media—it just does not make much sense.

The Discourses on Livy describes the historical events that the Roman historian Livy wrote about and commented on in his history of Rome (Ab Urbe Condita); Machiavelli’s work is an “extended meditation on maintaining republican rule,” quite the opposite of The Prince. With The Discourses on Livy, Machiavelli discussed specific examples found in Livy’s works and applied them to Renaissance politics and history. The nineteenth-century historian Jacob Burckhardt expressed how many “wonderful insight[s]” about “principles, observations, comparisons, political forecasts, and the like” can be found in The Discourses on Livy. These ideas meld the characteristics of a true republic with some traits to make the government more successful. For example, Machiavelli recommends ways to keep the republican constitution while maintaining its ability to change with the times. According to Garrett Mattingly, the main theme of the discourses is that “popular rule is always better than the rule of princes.” This contradiction to The Prince seems to be the theme of most of Machiavelli’s other works as well. It is also an ideal that Machiavelli believed in and recommended to others. The most interesting and useful part of his political career occurred when the government was a republic, encouraging the people to participate. He also suggested to the Pope that Florence should be given back to its
people, allowing Florence to become a republic again after the death of the ruling Medici leaders. This suggestion comprises Machiavelli’s *Discourse on the Florentine Government*.

**Importance of *Discourse on the Florentine Government***

After Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino, died in 1519, the stewardship of Florence fell to another Medici leader, Cardinal Giulio, later Pope Clement VII. Pope Leo X and Cardinal Giulio requested several personages in Florence to advise them on how to rule Florence. Machiavelli responded to this request with his *Discourse on the Florentine Government*, suggesting a republic with specific changes. Machiavelli begins by describing the previous governments of Florence, highlighting all of the faults and benefits of each. After describing how other leaders were erroneous, Machiavelli laid out his own plan. He recommended that Cardinal Giulio “set up the Republic in the form of a moderate democracy, as heiress to the Medici.”

Machiavelli liked the idea of creating a republic in Florence, but knew that the Medici would not be keen on giving up their power. He wanted to guarantee that Florence would have the best form of government for its people; he made sacrifices to make Florence better and hoped the Medici could as well.

The *Discourse on the Florentine Government* commences with Machiavelli’s interpretations of the governments over the last couple hundred years. He found each state was a mixed government, always mixing parts of a republic with features of a principedom. These combination governments were weak because they had two different directions toward which they could tumble and collapse. Machiavelli believed that strong governments were either a republic or a principality—a republic could collapse and become a principality and vice versa. A hybrid government could go either way—more toward a republic or more toward a principality—making it weak and unstable. For these reasons, Machiavelli was always willing to support a monarchy when a republic was not available; he supported whichever form of
government was best for Florence. Throughout his discussion of previous governments, Machiavelli found a common reason for instability—each was “organized in [favor] of a party rather than for the general welfare.” When a party or individual in power made decisions to benefit themselves, there were always people left out or people who did not benefit at all. If it was a common occurrence, these people would not be satisfied and begin to rebel against the government. Therefore, a stable government is one in which everyone has a voice and a senate approves decisions.

Machiavelli’s proposition for a new government consisted of “abolish[ing] the Signoria, the Eight of Pratica, and the Twelve Good Men.” In the place of these offices, sixty-five men over the age of forty-five would have positions for life in the new Signoria; from these men, a “Gonfalonier of Justice” would be chosen for two years who would rule along with half of the remaining sixty-four men. Machiavelli continues with his scheme of dividing the rest of the Signoria into smaller and smaller groups. Each group of thirty-two is divided into four more groups, each of which resides with the gonfalonier for three months. Along with this new Signoria, Machiavelli suggested a Council of the Selected to be made up of two hundred citizens of major and minor guilds who were at least forty years old and serve for life. This council was a part of Machiavelli’s three-ranked government designed to represent the three sorts of people in Florence: the most important people, the middle class, and the people of lowest importance. The people of lowest importance would receive a voice through the Council of One Thousand men; these men would fill all of the offices not filled by the more important councils. This form of government provided ample checks and balances to prevent one person from seizing power.

Machiavelli obviously believed this scheme of government would benefit the Medici and the citizens of Florence best. The city would no longer be in the hands of one ruler and would
remain stable for many years to come. The Pope and Cardinal did not implement Machiavelli’s ideas for the government although they were told that they would receive immense glory from the Florentines themselves. It is a little strange that Machiavelli would suggest a republican scheme for the Florentine government after advising Lorenzo how to seize and maintain power in *The Prince*. This work, combined with *The Discourses on Livy*, provides further evidence that Machiavelli may not have been serious when he suggested that Florence become a principality. The dates for each work also place *The Prince* at the beginning of the three works, allowing time for Machiavelli to change his mind about how Florence should be ruled.

**Criticism**

As with most writers, Machiavelli has been studied, interpreted, and critiqued for centuries. His works, especially *The Prince*, became immensely popular shortly after publication, probably because of its subject matter. In the nineteenth century, Jacob Burckhardt based much of his *History of the Italian Renaissance* on *The Prince*, describing the politics of the time as one of Machiavelli’s princes would have seen it. Machiavellianism is used to describe the political aims found within *The Prince* (e.g., the end justifies the means). William Shakespeare used themes found in *The Prince* within many of his plays, especially *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Almost everyone who has heard of Machiavelli associates his name with *The Prince* and the ideals he espouses within the work; very few people consider him a republican. However, as more information becomes available, scholars have had the opportunity to look at the entire corpus of his work and have come to regard Machiavelli as “totally misinterpreted.”

Scholars have most recently focused on this idea.

Hans Baron did not spend his career studying Machiavelli but did write an article to prove that the beginning of *The Discourses on Livy* precedes *The Prince*. His first interpretations
argued against conventional thought—*The Prince* is a work to be taken seriously and that Machiavelli suggests “hypocrisy and ingratitude” are traits for a prince. Later, Baron believed that the dates of the works proved that Machiavelli’s ideas shifted from an “early enthusiasm for a monarchical solution” for uniting Italy to a renewed faith in republicanism. Baron presented two possible motives for writing *The Prince*: to reveal the need for an absolute prince’s cruelty as a way of warning the Florentines about tyrants, or to entice Lorenzo de Medici to commit the suggested crimes so as to reap the Florentines’ harsh judgment sooner. Baron heartily believed that Machiavelli was a republican, and it was this belief that motivated him to provide evidence to the scholarly community.

Other scholars have followed in the same line of thinking as well. Margaret King wrote that Machiavelli was a republican “by principle, and, at first, by party allegiance.” She goes on to mention how difficult it must have been for Machiavelli when in 1527 the Florentine government refused to grant him a post because his Medici connections did not demonstrate his true loyalties. Jacob Burckhardt may not have recognized that Machiavelli’s true political beliefs are contradicted in *The Prince*, but Burckhardt did call Machiavelli “a patriot in the fullest meaning of the word.” Bernard Crick stated in his introduction to *The Discourses on Livy* that Machiavelli believed the republic is the most favorable form of government because it is permissive of inner strife and disagreement. The idea of Machiavelli as a republican has become more and more popular and helps explain parts of *The Prince*.

Garrett Mattingly believed that Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a satire because to read it as such clarifies the difficult and confusing passages and gives different meaning to passages that were indistinct before. In Book Four of *The Prince*, Machiavelli uses an ancient example of Spain, France, and Greece frequently rebelling against Rome, but in the footnote, Adams
comments that only Spain rebelled and that France was very submissive. Machiavelli misled
the reader either because he did not know or because it helped further his point. It seems unlikely
that Machiavelli did not know because he was well studied in the political history of ancient
Rome. Throughout *The Prince*, Machiavelli champions Cesare Borgia as an ideal prince who did
everything right. Machiavelli uses him as a model many times and seems to admire him, but in
previous and later works, Machiavelli describes Borgia’s follies and mentions his distaste for
Borgia. Something must have changed Machiavelli’s opinions.

For further evidence of *The Prince* as a satire, Mattingly compares it to Jonathan Swift’s
*A Modest Proposal* because of the “matter-of-fact tone” Machiavelli uses to describe his
prince. *A Modest Proposal* is a satirical essay written in 1729. In it, Swift recommends that
the Irish eat their children to prevent their nation from starving to death. This work was taken
seriously at the time and therefore was misunderstood. Both *The Prince* and *A Modest Proposal*
concern sensitive topics and give advice that few people would be bold enough to follow. Given
this and other parallels, it is possible that *The Prince* is a satire because Machiavelli was not
serious about his intentions for using *The Prince*. Mattingly provides a great deal of evidence in
support of *The Prince* as a satire, as do the other aforementioned scholars in supporting their
assertions that Machiavelli was republican. The evidence mentioned in this essay, when
combined with the evidence found by other scholars, provides sufficient justification that
Machiavelli did not intend *The Prince* to be taken seriously because he favored republics rather
than monarchies.

**Conclusion**

For such a short work, *The Prince* has received the greatest amount of attention of all
Machiavelli’s writings. A true political scientist, Machiavelli took what he learned throughout
his time in the government and transformed this knowledge into advice for the benefit of others. *The Prince* contradicts everything we know about his life and his other discourses and works.

Based on his positions in government and his lasting friendships, Machiavelli was whole-heartedly a republican. He did show signs that he wanted a political career regardless of who was in control of the city at the time. It did not bother him that the Medici were totalitarian leaders who overthrew the republican government of Soderini; Machiavelli just wanted to be able to make a difference by using his expertise to help Florence. Even his arrest, torture, and exile did not dissuade him from helping the Medici. His determination to obtain a position can help explain why he wrote *The Prince*.

If compared to his other works, *The Prince* does not fit in with his political inclinations. Machiavelli wrote more about republics than he did about principalities, and he suggested to the Pope that he institute a republic in Florence. However, Machiavelli was a practical man; he preferred republics but realized when a monarchy was necessary or inevitable.

When *The Prince* is examined as a satire, it clears up a few vague passages and does not seem to be opposed to the rest of Machiavelli’s works. Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a satire, but unfortunately it has been misunderstood for centuries. Now that more of his works are available, scholars can reexamine his message and set the record straight.
Endnotes


4 Mattingly, “Political Science or Political Satire?,” 180.


6 The Ten of War was the committee of war in Soderini’s government. It dealt with foreign courts and controlled the Florentine militia and mercenary armies.

7 Margaret King, The Renaissance in Europe (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2005), 226. The gonfalonier a vita, or standard-bearer for life, was the permanent president of the state. The gonfalonier was usually an elected official who ruled for a short, predetermined amount of time. Occasionally, someone would gain favor with the citizens or declare himself gonfalonier a vita.


9 Villari, Life and Times, 31–33. Pietro Paolo Boscoli and his good friend Agostino di Luca Capponi had compiled a list of about two dozen possible supporters for their plan to restore Florence to a republic and drive out the Medici. They had not yet formed a conspiracy or recruited associates, but the people whose names were on the list were arrested and tortured. Machiavelli’s name was on this list as being possibly sympathetic to their cause, but he had never been asked to join the conspiracy. Boscoli and Capponi were executed and Machiavelli was released and exiled.

10 Villari, Life and Times, 32–33.


19 Machiavelli, *Prince*, 42.


24 Villari, *Life and Times*, 34.


30 Machiavelli, *Prince*, 68.


33 Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and His Friends*. 

35 Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 3.3, 393.

36 Villari, *Life and Times*, 89.


39 Mattingly, “Political Science or Political Satire?,” 180

40 Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 59.


45 Mattingly, “Political Science or Political Satire?” 179.


49 Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 59.


51 Mattingly, “Political Science or Political Satire?,” 183.

53 Mattingly, “*Political Science or Political Satire?*,” 183.

54 Mattingly, “*Political Science or Political Satire?*,” 180.


