MACHIAVELLI’S BURDEN:  
THE PRINCE AS LITERARY TEXT

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_Hence, if you look for a man’s burden, you will find the principle that reveals the structure of his unburdening...._

Kenneth Burke\(^1\)

_I did it my own self to gratify._

John Bunyon\(^2\)

Some time after _The Prince_ had been composed and had circulated in manuscript among Machiavelli’s friends, he wrote the proem or dedicatory letter to Lorenzo de’ Medici. With the text before him, Machiavelli tried to capture for Lorenzo (and whoever else might read it) the sense and purpose of what he had written, intimating just what was most important about the little gift he was sending. When we examine this belated introduction carefully, three major and tightly interrelated moments are most conspicuous: 1) the problematic relation between political ability (knowledge and experience) and success, 2) the awkwardness, irony, and unfairness of social and political rank, and 3) _fortuna_’s decisive, unpredictable, and deliberate interference in human affairs.

In the months of 1513, _post res perditas_, when he was writing _The Prince_, guilt and dejection over his sudden calamity lay heavily on his mind. He had fallen, in a shockingly short time, from the heights of success (as represented by the remarks of a friend, in 1509, who had praised him excessively for his militia’s brilliant showing at Pisa and compared him to Quintus Fabius Maximus),\(^3\) to become the broken and humiliated outcast who could write, in a letter in 1513, that “it is a miracle

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1 Kenneth Burke, _The Philosophy of Literary Form_ (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), 92.


that I am alive, because my post was taken from me and I was about to lose my life... I have had to endure all sorts of other evils, both prison and other kinds." In such situations, human beings need to understand what has happened to them, to give it a name, and, nearly as often, find some means for distancing themselves from its full implications or so softening those implications that they can salvage the confidence to go on. Some might sacrifice themselves in suicidal attempts at revenge, or try to quiet the murmuring that dogs them by acts of mad daring.

Machiavelli, however, for all his familiarity with the world of violent men, was himself much gentler—a poet, a dramatist, a writer. The world of imagination promised the best way for him to seek deliverance from his agony. How better to achieve that than by writing a pithy, eccentric, and highly personal treatise on politics, at the center of which he could situate an imaginary and upstart political innovator who thrusts himself destructively into the middle of Italian politics? Such a vehicle could serve, moreover, as a setting in which he might dream a highly symbolic drama in which the ironies that plagued his days could be re-staged, assaulted, and overcome. Poetry might let him invent just the cast of surrogates (men and actions) in terms of which he might relive and improve his political life.

The Prince is an episodic text, a kind of Pilgrim’s Progress with this difference—the characters who rise up and drift away in The Prince can be viewed as recurrences of a single persona; let us call him Il principe. He is a fantasy political actor who, transmuting from chapter to chapter, adopts various roles and performs, as it were, in the shifting scenes at the center of each chapter. On the surface, Machiavelli uses the names of actual historical princes in crucial places, but he has also brought in the abstract idea of a prince—some prince, any

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4 Correspondence, Letter 214.