I remember a Second City routine from many years ago in which Severn Darden frames the issue of free will and necessity as, “What would have happened if Oedipus had read the book before setting out on his journey?” The entire re-enactment of *Oedipus*, and especially the punch line, are relevant here, but I’m not going to give them away. Instead I want to ask a similar question about Machiavelli. What happens if the prince’s subjects or republican citizens read *The Prince* and the *Discourses*? If Machiavelli offers esoteric knowledge to a limited audience of leaders, then he will empower them to deceive and manipulate ignorant, unsuspecting subjects. On the other hand, if Machiavellian leaders can be more successful once their subjects are sophisticated enough for complicity with their leaders, then the relation between ruler and ruled will be quite different. I want to argue that leaders become more powerful as their subjects become Machiavellian readers, as Machiavelli lets princely subjects overhear his advice to the prince. The new prince has to look like a prince, be perceived as acting like a king and not like a thug.

Machiavelli tells the prince—and the republican audience of *The Discourses on Livy* for that matter—that they are entering a new world in which trust no longer automatically binds rulers and subjects. Maybe the hereditary monarch can depend on unreflective trust and the bonds of affection that bind prince and people, but neither the usurping prince nor the republican leader can. It is frightening to leave the world of trust because if people can’t be trusted, then they might do anything, and if the people don’t trust the leader, they won’t obey and follow him. Stability is gone. Reliability disappears. Machiavelli’s innovation, which justly leads to him being called realistic and even scientific, is to substitute prediction for trust. Foresight and detachment become central aspects of prudence.

If people act predictably—and *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy* show how people are and can be made to be predictable—then one
can safely abandon the world of trust. In fact, the prince will do better by insuring that people are predictable than by trying to get the people to trust him. If you bring good results, the people will forget the past, whose traditions and legitimacy can only work against the new prince.

The things written above, carried out prudently, make a new prince seem an old one, and make him quickly safer and firmer in his position than if he were in it by right of descent. Because the actions of a new prince are more closely watched than those of a hereditary prince; and when these reveal strength and wisdom, they lay hold on men and bind them to him more firmly than does ancient blood.¹

Because “men love of their own free will, but are inspired with fear by the will of the prince, a wise prince should always rely upon himself, and not upon the will of others.” It is better to be feared than loved.

This strategy has heavy consequences though. Making oneself secure by giving the people present benefits, substituting prediction for trust, transforms stability into a policy of constant acquisition. It will always be open to the people to ask, “what have you done for me lately?” The new prince succeeds by getting the people to look to present and future benefits rather than past triumphs. But when they do, the people will have expectations too heavy for the prince to meet. Prediction is much more expensive than trust. It would be better, even if not safer, to get the people to trust the leader. Psychologically, it is plausible that we trust those who trust us. Like friendship, trust is normally reciprocal. The prince cannot afford to trust the people, and the people know it.

Yet the prince needs the people to trust him. The new prince has no choice but to live in a world of prediction rather than trust. When Machiavelli asks whether it is better to be feared or loved, he presents a false choice: anyone in a position to ask such a question is already committed to relying on fear, relying on actions that make his subjects predictable by being dependent on him. Love as a tactic is love transformed. Machiavelli advertises this as the real world, as opposed to the ideals of philosophers and priests.² The

² “Only those who hold the view that friendship is neither better nor worse than money, but is simply not compatible to money or other commodities are capable of having friends. Similarly only those who would not even consider exchanges of money for friendship are capable of having friends.” Joseph Raz, The Morality of Freedom (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 352.