

et'lers of yours reached me in scaps and snuffles, but by the tone & to head the words I knew it was from you. I believe the frequency of and he knows me in for and of what you are doing). Of your diff. restless about Filippo's I am certain, for one of you is suffering from too little light and the other from too much. (That the negotiations you refer to come to nothing I can readily understand, since one of you agrees one on ions and the other on the other). Tombray does not worry me so long as Germany stands erect in my hands. (The failure of negotiations last month does not seem to me important, in view of our prospects of success in those now at hand.) I am pleased at Filippo's suspicious and holding off, awaiting the outcome. I am surprised that Filippo does not trust so and so. I will move carefully and see what comes of it all. Your letter was short but I lengthened it considerably by many re-readings. I was glad to get it because it prompted me to take a step which I had been hesitating to take and from you, in fact dissuade me. Only this part of your letter do I find not quite to the point. (I had been hesitating to see so and so, but acting on the hint in your letter, I made up my mind to call on him. I find your fears of him quite unjustified that he may have said or done what you say is possible.) Where at I should be surprised were it not that my long experience has shown me so many and such strange things that I have taught me myself to be surprised at nothing and to realize that neither through my dealings with men nor from my readings about them have I come to understand anything about their conduct or their manners of procedure. I know you and the conduct of your nation. I know what you want and just how you are going about it. Even if your course could be criticized, as it cannot, I would not condemn it, considering the hardships to which it has guided you (considering the success you have so far had) and the hopes it still offers. Judging not by your standards, which are the standards of virtue and wisdom, but by the standards of the many, I have come to the conclusion that in judging policies we could consider the results that have been achieved through them rather than the

THE LETTERS OF

MACHIAVELLI

newly edited and translated

BY ALLAN GILBERT

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The Letters of
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MACHIAVELLI

A SELECTION OF HIS LETTERS



Translated and Edited
with an Introduction by
ALLAN GILBERT

CAPRICORN BOOKS
New York

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sociations was his acquaintance with the humanist Bartolommeo Scala, first chancellor of Florence for years, who in his *De regibus et judiciis* represents Bernardo as visiting him at his house in the Borgo Pinti and engaging in dialogue with him.

At ten years of age, Niccolò went to a teacher of arithmetic, and at twelve he studied Latin under still another master. Though Bernardo's notes go some years further, nothing more is said on his son's schooling. In a letter of April 1527 [no. 222] Niccolò mentions his studies in letters and music when exhorting his son Guido to pursue those subjects. Presumably he has in mind his own schooling, however much supplemented by his personal efforts.

In Bernardo's library or among the volumes he borrowed up to Niccolò's eighteenth year, when the entries cease, are some books that did excellent service to the author of the *Discourses* and *The History of Florence*. In 1475 Bernardo agreed to prepare for Niccolò Tedesco, "priest and astrologer," a geographical index of Livy; in return he received a printed copy of Livy's *Histories*. Eleven years later he took to the binder what appears to have been another edition of Livy. The young Niccolò, then, had opportunity to become familiar with the historian on whom he founded his *Discourses*. In 1485 Bernardo bought the *Decades* of Blondius, from which Niccolò drew material for his *History of Florence*. He owned also the same author's *Italia Illustrata*. Many of his purchases were law books. There is no indication that he owned any poetry.

Whatever Niccolò's schooling, however assiduous his private reading, a great part of his education came from the city of Florence. So small was the area within her mediaeval walls that her centers could be reached on foot in a few minutes from the house on Via Guicciardini. Life, for men at least, was to a large extent lived in the public square, or loggia. Here resorted Florentines who were not

held to their workshops by the nature of their employment. The mass of inhabitants were occupied in the silk business or the manufacture of wool, or in similar occupations. They seldom appeared in public. But the relatively few who had command of their time spent part of it in public places, often transacting business there. Men of similar interests formed the habit of coming to some such place as the Loggia of the Tornabuoni almost every day. There, according to their interests, they discussed commerce, politics, Latin poetry, modern literature, the sermons preached at the Duomo or at Santa Croce, and an eager young man might stand on the outskirts of a circle of important men to hear their opinions. What went on in the wide world interested these Florentines, and they had a long tradition of speaking their minds. Pungent wit often made their remarks worth hearing; a good talker had an audience. Niccolò would often have been part of such groups, to listen and to speak—not too often or at too great length, certainly. Even when the talk at such places descended to mere gossip, he would still have profited as one who by nature loved to draw general concepts from the individual sayings and doings of men, and thus even from folly could draw wisdom. In these continual public gatherings it rapidly became apparent who was interested in various topics and could speak well—or listen well—when they were discussed. Hence, more restricted meetings were easily formed, at which the common interests and the ability of those present had fuller scope. Such assemblies would not always have had an intellectual purpose; they may sometimes have had an opposite purpose, but at least they winnowed out the misfits, and they furnished those present with what they expected. In this informal university Machiavelli, interested more in wisdom and in human nature than in erudition for its own sake, would have learned many lessons.

Niccolò last appears in the *Ricordi* when he was eighteen. After that we know nothing of him until ten years later, in 1497, if that is the date of two letters about family property, one of them in Latin. During these years he probably wrote some of his Carnival Songs and perhaps other poems. Through some sort of activity, employment or achievement, he made his abilities known, probably to various men of position and influence.

In 1498 he was a candidate for the position of Second Chancellor or Secretary. This was the second most important paid position in the government of Florence. In his first attempt at the post he was unsuccessful; then later in the year he was elected, at an annual salary of two hundred sealed florins. That he was elected at the age of twenty-nine to such an important post has led to speculation that he had earlier held some lesser government office, but there is no evidence for this. Clearly he had been in no position that he considered political, for on 10 December 1513 he wrote to Vettori that he had been studying the art of government for fifteen years, evidently counting from the time of his election. Had he earlier held a government post, he would hardly have failed to count its years among those devoted to learning statecraft. So we can only feel sure that during his early manhood he was becoming known as one on whose ability and devotion Florence could rely.

Three types of business came under the view of important Florentine officials. First, there was the internal government of an independent city, whose laws were determined only from within. Second, Florence ruled a Tuscan empire, made up of large rural areas and of other cities, as Pistoia, Prato, Arezzo and, at times, Pisa. These cities enjoyed some local privileges but were under constant Florentine supervision; they were subjects, with no voice in the control of the empire. Third, Florence was

one of the independent states of Italy, owing allegiance to no one, and dealing directly with the most powerful monarchs, such as the King of France. So Machiavelli as Secretary had his part in international negotiations as well as in the domestic business of the city. In the summer of 1499, he went on a mission to the formidable Countess of Forlì, by whom he was quietly amused. The next year he was sent to France; to that country he returned three times in the course of his fifteen years in office. He went twice to the papal court. The first six months of 1508 he spent on a mission to the Emperor Maximilian, and was again at his court the next year. For nearly four months, beginning in October 1502, he was with Cesare Borgia. Then there were various missions within the Florentine dominion, especially his service with the army operating against Pisa in 1509. From 1506 to 1512 he was often in rural Tuscany on the business of enrolling and supplying the countrymen trained as soldiers according to his plan. (This army was a sort of provincial militia.) Apart from this service, his recorded absences from the city on business total some three and a half years. When his travels in the Florentine dominion are added, it appears that he spent a quarter or a third of his period of service in the field rather than at his desk in the City Hall.

The government under which Machiavelli spent the actively political part of his life differed in two ways from the usual Florentine organization. First, the Medici family was in exile. After the triumph of Cosimo de' Medici's party in 1434, it had exercised effective control in city affairs until the expulsion of Piero, the great-grandson of Cosimo, in 1494. Its direct power was most evident during the period after the Pazzi conspiracy (1478) in which Giuliano de' Medici was murdered, that is, during the career of Lorenzo the Magnificent, who died in 1492.

Second, about four years after Machiavelli received his secretarial position, Piero Soderini was made Gonfalonier for life. Florence then had a permanent head for her government. Before, even during the Medici control, the loose official organization was similar to that satirized by Dante two centuries earlier, when he addressed the city:

Athens and Lacedemonia, which made their ancient laws and were so well organized, made but a slight gesture toward good government compared with you, who make such clever provisions that what you spin in October does not last until the middle of November. (*Purgatorio* 6, 139-144).

Astonishing as it seems, the governing officials of Florence were chosen for only two months, so that the city experienced a change of administration six times a year. This—though less often than one might suppose—could cause rapid changes of policy in important matters. However, during more than half of Machiavelli's chancellorship, Florence had continuity in her chief official. At other times he worked under the system of continually shifting authority, though the membership of a board of Eight or Ten in charge of important matters—war, for example—could be kept with slight changes for long periods. It is possible to find some justification for the two-months system, however. During the two months for which the Signoria served, its duties required the entire time of its members, who lived in the City Hall, the building now called the Palazzo Vecchio. To "go home" openly was to resign office. The members were not professional politicians but business men; while they served the city, they neglected their private affairs. More than two months of such complete neglect could not reasonably be required of them. In the course of Machiavelli's service, the direct demands on the Signoria were perhaps reduced; at any rate, when on an early diplomatic mission, he addressed his official letters to the Signoria until 21

November 1500; then he began to address the Ten of Liberty and Peace. To some such group his reports are addressed during the succeeding years wherever he was serving.

Though such missions had been performed by earlier secretaries, influential men in the city evidently felt that this young official had capacity for more than record-keeping and letter-writing in a bureau. He was able to handle matters of importance. Moreover, the Secretary, being a full-time employee, had no business that he was neglecting; he could be kept in the field as long as was necessary. His situation may have been quite what the cautious Florentine administrators wished. They had a competent, hard-working, trustworthy man looking after their affairs, a man whom even Cesare Borgia or the King of France must take seriously, yet not of such high position in the city that any unfortunate action on his part was likely to embarrass them. They could even indulge in procrastination (one of the vices Machiavelli attributed to their governing officials—*Discourses* 2.15) by withholding ambassador's rank from their representative. Such an honor could go only to a man whose family had more rank and influence than did Machiavelli's. The Secretary might complain that the Ten did not allow him expense money enough; he might—under a thin disguise not intended to deceive any shrewd member of the board—advise his superiors on the wisest policy. Yet he could get on with foreigners of rank and authority, and he sent back to Florence frequent and informative reports.

Important among these diplomatic journeys were those to the Lady of Forlì (Caterina Sforza), to Cesare Borgia at the time when he out-tricked and executed his treacherous mercenary captains, to the Court of France (where Niccolò was sent three times), to the Pope, Julius II, at Rome, and to the Emperor Maximilian I. For four months

he was Florentine agent at Cesare Borgia's court at Imola and at other places; some six months were required for the mission to Emperor Maximilian. Clearly, Piero Soderini felt that the Secretary had great ability in the practical management of affairs.

Reflecting upon his experience abroad, Niccolò developed it into a body of practical advice for an ambassador, as appears in a letter to Raffaello Girolami, the Florentine ambassador to Spain. In part Machiavelli reveals what he himself actually did, in part what he would have done if holding higher rank and provided with more money. He explains that he speaks out of his experience, "not in presumption but in affection."

An ambassador needs such a reputation that he can get the ear of the monarch with whom he deals; accomplishing this, he makes hard things easy. To this end he must by his conduct show that he is able, liberal and, above all, trustworthy, not tricky. There are men who though prudent yet, being two-faced, have so alarmed a prince that they have not been able to deal with him. Alessandro Neri gained great honor in France because he was believed honest and straightforward; others have been disgraced because believed the reverse of that. While on his mission to Cesare Borgia, Niccolò wrote that he was trying in every way to get Cesare to trust him and to talk intimately with him.

An ambassador must gather information on matters that the ruler and his advisers are considering. Hence he must cultivate men likely to know about official discussions who will repeat what they learn. Very grave men have made use of banquets and entertainments in their houses to gain easy opportunity to talk with such persons. Since men do not give out information without some return, the ambassador must get officials at home to send him information of every sort, even seemingly trivial,

about events discussed widely in the country he is visiting. From the men to whom he listens the ambassador will get a mass of truth and falsehood. From this he must select what is valuable, discarding the rest; then he will form his conclusions. These the envoy will be careful not to put abruptly before authorities at home, as though he were trying to dictate policy. He should hide behind some flimsy barricade such as declaring that "the prudent men he meets believe the outcome will be of a certain sort," and so on. Machiavelli himself used this method on his mission to Cesare Borgia, giving in detail the arguments of a "friend" to show that Florence would profit if she gave up attempting to deal with Cesare with vague general talk and secured his favor and assistance through a specific alliance. Machiavelli never could carry out his suggestion about invitations that would bring information, since he was limited by his slender funds; a wealthy ambassador would not restrict himself to the public funds provided, but would dip into his own purse.

The wise ambassador will inform himself about the country into which he is sent. For example: Does the Emperor prefer to live in Spain or in Flanders? Is he popular? Does France have friends in Spain? What does the Emperor intend to do in Italy? The foreign agent is to send such information to his government at home. Nor should he be content with sending it once, but is to repeat his information every two or three months, "dressing it up anew with such skill, and adding new events, that the repetition may seem to result from prudence and necessity and not from foolish presumption." Machiavelli practised this method also. Thus his *Picture of French Affairs*, commonly considered one of his historical works, is evidently intended for the practical purposes of his ambassadorial friend. So Machiavelli's writings on France, on Germany, and on Lucca are to be taken as notes or drafts for such

a purpose, perhaps such as skill and prudence found no opportunity to use. To one so assiduously directing himself to learn what might be of value to Florence, experience in observing men and affairs in other places was of the highest value.

Moreover, the careful reports he wrote are, to some extent, preliminary drafts for his famous works. They show him serving an apprenticeship in writing simply, informatively and interestingly enough to catch, he hoped, the eyes of Florentine rulers. Niccolò Valori wrote of the despatches he sent from Cesare Borgia's court in 1502, that they could not be more highly approved. Piero Soderini, the Gonfalonier for life, judged that the Secretary was doing so well that he should not be relieved of the duties which, sickened by insufficient money and lack of authority to settle anything with Cesare, he wished to abandon.

These golden opinions from the Gonfalonier and other influential Florentines led to Machiavelli's most spectacular service in which he broke into the field normally reserved for Florentines of richer and more influential families. He was given responsibility and authority in the conduct of the campaign against Pisa, Florence's most unwilling subject, frequently in revolt. He was actually in the field with Florentine troops in the spring of 1509 and personally directed operations. Thus he gained practical experience in some of those military matters that he had observed when on his legations to Borgia and to the Emperor. Nevertheless his duties did not require the active command of troops, but rather their maintenance and supply. Yet he did make and see to the execution of strategic decisions, especially when he advised on the assuming of military positions for cutting off supplies from Pisa. Something of the sort had earlier been done by Florentine civilian commissioners like Antonio Pucci and Bernardo del

collected by Gino Capparoni - cf. *Plinck* - 1535
and 1078
War of
Rome

neglect of the walls—with business relating to the army intended to defend Florence, and all Italy south of the Apennines from the imperial forces. This task was one at which he could labor with all his heart, knowing, as is hinted in *The Prince* 10, that a city is better defended by a proper army in the field than by walls. Such an army, however, could not be provided. The Secretary had the unhappiness of seeing all he had written (as in *The Prince* 12) on the ineffectiveness of hired soldiers borne out. The mercenary general Frederick of Urbino was unable or unwilling to accomplish anything. This Machiavelli sets forth in a letter to Cavalcanti (No. 219 B). From Forlì and Brisighella he writes to his old correspondent Vettori, full of zeal for Florence and belief that proper effort can repel the imperial army, for “if it did not encounter those who abandoned themselves, it would not capture a bake-oven” (No. 223); but self-abandonment, loss of courage, is fatal. In one of these letters the writer applies to himself what he had earlier asserted of Florentine patriots (*Hist. Flor.* 3.7): “I love my native city more than my own soul” (No. 225). Such is Machiavelli’s devotion.

When he was absent from the city on army business, there was a revolution (16 May 1527) and a second expulsion of the Medici family. He was the servant of a non-existent government. Once he had lost his place when the Medici returned; now he lost it when they fled. But he had no long time to regret that circumstances again prevented him from serving the city he loved, for on 22 June 1527 he died.

Machiavelli’s life from 1512 until his death was no period of uninterrupted leisure for study and writing. Even in his first year of supposed retirement, he was often called upon to explain matters relating to the offices he had held. Yet as the years went on, he frequently did have months permit-

❧ VIII ❧

Machiavelli the Comic Observer

(Letters no. 3, 122, 137, 138, 140, 142, 144, 182, 183)

How do men act? was Machiavelli's constant question, and one of his chief pleasures was in mingling with them. His observation of their tastes and fancies was taken into the stores of his experience and emerged in his comic writings indeed, but also in the matured consideration of his *History of Florence*. Francesco Guicciardini was amused at his friend's position as ambassador to the Franciscans, but Machiavelli accepted it, signing himself in formal Latin: "Orator pro Republica Florentina ad Fratres minores" (Letter no. 182). Even the notion that he could gain profit there for his *History of Florence* he jocosely accepted from Guicciardini, saying that he had lost nothing by coming to this republic of wooden sandals, because he had learned of many of their regulations that had good in them; these he could often use in his *History*, especially in comparisons, "because when I need to speak of silence I can say: They are quieter than the friars when they are eating" (Letter no. 183). Under the joking there is truth. Niccolò's study was mankind, and he profited from all he met. So in his exile at Sant'Andrea in Percussina he did not sink into listlessness but kept his brain from moulding by association with the villagers, "from whom he learned a variety of things, and noted the various tastes and diverse fancies of men" (Letter no. 137).

Such power to observe men's humors, without allowing any personal feeling to ruin perspective, we observe in his letter describing his visit to Savonarola's preaching

(no. 3). That letter illuminates his account of a Franciscan preaching at Santa Croce, whom he did not hear, "because I don't frequent such doings"; but his amusement at the imposter and at all Florence excited about the two million devils unchained to bring about the marvels prophesied by the half-hermit, rests on his observation of conduct (No. 138).

Trivial incidents gain larger life under Machiavelli's eyes. There is the stingy Tommaso who bought seven pounds of veal, then was alarmed at its price and looked for help in bearing the cost. Machiavelli and others joined him at dinner and we may be sure had an amusing time. When the shares were figured, the impecunious Niccolò lacked four soldi of his share. The miserly Tommaso has several times dunned him for the money, once on the Ponte Vecchio. Knowing that this is something of a joke on his own financial habits, Machiavelli remarks: "I don't know that you will think him wrong" (No. 122).

Told at greater length is the story of the discomfiture of Giuliano Brancacci, a Florentine rascal (No. 144). First it is put as though he went out hunting for "birds," that is, for compliant homosexuals. Searching the nooks and crannies of central Florence, at last he found a boy who pleased him. Learning that his name was Michele, he then said: "I am Filippo da Casavecchia. If you come or send to my shop tomorrow, I shall content you." So in the morning the boy sent for his money. The astonished Filippo refused to pay, and summoned Michele. He appeared, rebuked Filippo, and threatened that if he were cheated he would bring disgrace on Filippo. The latter, however, stood his ground, saying he was not a man who meddled with such rascality, and that the boy had better attempt to find out who had tricked him rather than attack Filippo without cause; he told Michele to come again the next day. Puzzled, the boy accepted this. Filippo was then at his wit's end,

honor of God, he was going to draw back,¹ and that men should come to listen to him in San Marco, and women should go to San Lorenzo for Fra Domenico.

Our Frate being, therefore, in his own house, now to hear with what boldness he began his sermons, and with how much he continued them, would have caused you no little wonder. Because, fearing greatly for himself and believing that the new Signoria would not be hesitant about harming him, and having determined that many citizens should be crushed by his fall, he began with great terrors, with reasons that for those who did not examine them were very convincing, showing that his followers were the best of men and his adversaries the most wicked, using every expression he could to weaken the adverse party and strengthen his own. Of these things, because I was present, I shall briefly run through a number.

The text of his first sermon in San Marco was this passage from *Exodus*: "The more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew." And before he came to the explanation of these words, he showed for what reason he had drawn back, and said: "Prudence is straight thinking in practical matters." Then he said that all men have had and now have an end, but diverse. "For Christians, their end is Christ; for other men, both present and past, it has been and is something else, according to their religion. Being directed, then, we who are Christians, to this end which is Christ, we ought with the greatest prudence and observation of the times to preserve his honor; and when the time asks us to risk our lives to risk them for him; and when it is time for a man to conceal himself, to conceal oneself, as we read of Christ and of Saint Paul; and so, he added, we ought to do and we have done.² Therefore, when it was time to resist fury, we have done so, as happened on

Ascension Day, because so the honor of God and the time demanded. Now that the honor of God requires that we yield to wrath, we have yielded."

And having given this short discourse, he indicated two companies: one which serves under God, namely, himself and his followers; the other under the Devil, namely, his opponents. And having spoken of it at length, he entered upon the exposition of the words of *Exodus* already given, and said that through tribulations, good men grew in two ways, in spirit and in number; in spirit, because man unites himself more closely to God by overcoming adversity, and becomes stronger as nearer to his active cause, just as hot water brought close to the fire becomes hotter, because it is nearer its active cause. They also grow in number, because there are three sorts of men, that is, the good (and these are the ones who follow him), the perverse and obstinate (and these are his adversaries); and there is a further kind of men of free lives, given to pleasure, not stubborn in doing evil nor devoted to doing well, because they see neither of them clearly. But when between the good and the perverse there appears some practical difference, "since opposites when placed near one another stand out more clearly," they recognize the malice of the wicked and the simplicity of the good, and draw to the latter and avoid the former, because naturally everybody avoids evil and follows good gladly; and therefore in adversities the wicked grow fewer and the good multiply, "and therefore the more," etc. I present it to you briefly, because the limits of a letter do not permit a long narrative. He said next—having digressed, as his custom is, further to weaken his adversaries, and also to make a bridge to his next sermon—that our discords might cause a tyrant to rise up who would destroy our houses and lay waste our fields; and this was not at all opposed to what he had already said, that Florence was going to prosper and to master Italy,

¹ From his defiant position.

² We means Savonarola himself.

because it will come about that in a short time the tyrant will be driven out. And with this he ended his sermon.

The next morning, again still explaining *Exodus* and coming to that passage where it is said that Moses killed an Egyptian, he said that the Egyptian stood for wicked men, and Moses for the preacher who killed them by revealing their vices, and he said: "O Egyptian! I am going to give you a stab." And then he turned the leaves of your books, O priests, and made such a mess of you that a dog would have turned away from you. Then he added—and that was obviously where he was heading—that he wanted to give the Egyptian another wound and a big one; and he said that God had told him that a man in Florence was trying to make himself tyrant, and was negotiating and using ways for attaining this goal; and that his attempt to drive out the Frate, to excommunicate the Frate, to persecute the Frate, came to nothing else than that he wanted to make himself a tyrant; and that the laws should be kept. And he said so much about it that men later that day publicly guessed about a man who is as near to being a tyrant as you are to Heaven.

But after this, the Signoria having written in his behalf to the Pope, and he himself seeing that he no longer needed to fear his adversaries in Florence, whereas earlier he sought only to unite his party by speaking evil of his adversaries and to frighten them with the name of tyrant, now that he sees he no longer needs to, he has changed his cloak. So, encouraging them to share in the union that has begun, and making no further mention of the tyrant and of their wickedness, he tries to set all of them against the Supreme Pontiff, and, snapping at him, says of him what could be said of the wickedest man you can think of. Thus, according to my judgment, he keeps on working with the times and making his lies plausible.

Now what the masses are saying, what men hope or

Same as the rest of the world
in which the two excelled equally, one of them with cruelty, treachery, and lack of religion kept his armies united in Italy and made himself admired by the people, who to follow him rebelled against the Romans; the other achieved the same result in Spain with mercy, loyalty and piety; both of them won countless victories. But because it is not usual to bring up the Romans, Lorenzo de' Medici disarmed the people to hold Florence; Messer Giovanni Bentivogli in order to hold Bologna armed them; the Vitelli in Castello and the present Duke of Urbino in his territory destroyed the fortresses in order to retain those states; Count Francesco and many others built them in their territories to make themselves sure of them. [To test Fortune, who is the friend of young men, and to change according to what you find. But it is not possible to have fortresses and not to have them, to be both cruel and compassionate.] The Emperor Titus believed that he would lose his position on any day when he did not benefit somebody; some others might believe they would lose theirs on the day when they did anybody a favor. To many, weighing and measuring everything, success comes in their undertakings. [As Fortune tires, anything may be ruined. The family, the city, every man has his Fortune founded on his way of proceeding, and each Fortune tires, and when she is tired, she must be got back in another way. Comparison of the horse and the bridle about fortresses.] This Pope Julius, who hasn't a pair of scales or a yardstick in his house, gains through chance—although unarmed—what through organization and arms he scarcely could attain.

We have seen and see every day those I have mentioned and countless others who could be used as instances gaining kingdoms and sovereignties, or falling, according to circumstances; and a man who was praised while he was gaining is reviled when he is losing; and frequently after

fortune - virtue
long prosperity a man who finally loses does not in any way blame himself but accuses the heavens and the action of the Fates. But the reason why different ways of working are sometimes equally effective and equally damaging I do not know, but I should much like to know. So in order to get your opinion I shall be so presumptuous as to give mine.

I believe that as Nature has given men different faces, so she has given them different dispositions and different imaginations. From this it results that each man conducts himself according to his disposition and his imagination. And on the other hand, because times vary and affairs are of varied types, one man's desires come out as he had prayed they would; and that man is fortunate who harmonizes his procedure with his time, but on the contrary he is not fortunate who in his actions is out of harmony with his time and with the type of its affairs. Hence it can well happen that two men working differently come to the same end, because each of them adapts himself to what he encounters, for affairs are of as many types as there are provinces and states. Thus, because times and affairs in general and individually change often, and men do not change their imaginings and their procedures, it happens that a man at one time has good fortune and at another time bad.

And certainly anybody wise enough to understand the times and the types of affairs and to adapt himself to them would have always good fortune, or he would protect himself always from bad, and it would come to be true that the wise man would rule the stars and the Fates. But because there never are such wise men, since men in the first place are short-sighted, and in the second cannot command their natures, it follows that Fortune varies and commands men, and holds them under her yoke. And to verify this opinion, I think the instances given above, on which I have based it, are enough, and so I expect one to support the other.

Cruelty, treachery and irreligion are enough to give reputation to a new ruler in a province where humanity, loyalty and religion have been common practice for a long time, while humanity, loyalty and religion are sufficient where cruelty, treachery and irreligion have dominated for a time, because, as bitter things disturb the taste and sweet ones cloy it, so men get bored with good and complain of ill. These causes, among others, opened Italy to Hannibal and Spain to Scipio, and so both of them found times and things suited to their way of proceeding. At that very time a man like Scipio would not have been so successful in Italy, or one like Hannibal so successful in Spain, as they both were in the provinces wherein they acted.

Niccolò Machiavelli

No. 117

13 March 1513, Florence

To the Magnificent Francesco Vettori, most Worthy Florentine Ambassador to the Supreme Pontiff at Rome.

[Vettori was ambassador to Pope Julius II, appointed by the Medici government now powerful in Florence. The Lord of the last paragraph is Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici, soon to be Pope Leo X.]

[Longing for employment by the Medici]

Magnificent Sir: As you have learned from Pagolo Vettori, I have got out of prison amid the universal rejoicing of this city, even though I hoped for it because of your doings and those of Pagolo, for which I thank you. I won't go over again the long story of my misfortune, but will merely say that Luck has done everything to cause me this

for me, this letter has been most pleasing to me. I thank you as much as I can and pray to God that to your profit and benefit he will give me power to do something that will please you, because I can say that all of life that is left me I consider I owe to the Magnificent Giuliano and your Pagolo.

And as to turning my face to resist Fortune, I want you to get this pleasure from my distresses, namely, that I have borne them so bravely that I love myself for it and feel that I am stronger than you believed. And if these masters of mine decide not to let me lie on the ground, I shall be glad of it, and believe I shall conduct myself in such a way that they too will have reason to approve. If they decide differently, I'll get on as when I came here, for I was born poor and I learned earlier to stint myself than to prosper. And if you remain there, I'll come to pass some time with you, when you advise me to. And, not to be more tedious, I send my regards to you and to Pagolo, to whom I am not writing, because I don't know what further to say to him.

I related the chapter about Filippo to some of our friends, who rejoiced that he had got there safely. They were very sorry about the small esteem and value that Giovanni Cavalcanti has for him; and when trying to discover the reason for this state of things, they discovered that little Brancaccio¹ told Messer Giovanni that Filippo had been instructed by his brother to recommend Giovanni, Ser Antonio's son, to the Pope, and for that reason Messer Giovanni was unwilling to admit him; and they greatly blame Giuliano because he should have quieted this scandal, even though it was not true; and if it was true, they blame Filippo for taking certain desperate remedies, so advise him to be more cautious next time.

¹ Brancaccio, often mentioned in the letters to Vettori, seems otherwise unknown.

And tell Filippo that Niccolò degli Agli trumpets it throughout Florence, and I do not know the reason, but without scruple and without excusing anything, he blames him in such a way that there isn't a man who doesn't wonder at it. So suggest to Filippo that if he knows the cause of this enmity, he provide against it in some way; and just yesterday he came to see me with a list in his hand giving all the gossips in Florence, and he told me that he went recruiting those who would speak ill of Filippo, to get revenge on him. I wish to let you know, so you can mention it to him, and I send him my regards.

The whole group sends regards to you, beginning with Tommaso del Bene and going as far as our Donato. And every day we are in the house of some girls to recover our strength; and only yesterday we were in the house of Sandra di Pero to see the processions pass; and so we go spending our time on these general rejoicings, getting pleasure from what is left of life, so that I feel as though I were dreaming.

Farewell. Florence, 18 March 1512.

Niccolò Machiavelli

No. 120

April 9, 1513, Florence
To Francesco Vettori, in Rome.

[I must discuss public affairs or be silent]

Magnificent Mr. Ambassador:

And I, who of his color had become aware, said: "How shall I go if you are fearful, who in my timidity are always my encouragement?"¹

¹ Dante, *Inferno* 4.16-18.

This letter of yours has terrified me more than the rack, and I grieve over any notion you have that I am angry, not on my own account, because I am trained no longer to wish for anything with passion, but on yours. I beg you to imitate the others, who with persistence and craft, rather than with ability and prudence, make themselves places. And as to that story about Totto, it displeases me if it displeases you. Otherwise I am not bothering about it, and if we can't roll it, let's bowl it along.² Once and for all let me tell you that you are not to take any trouble about the things I ask of you, because if I don't have them I shall not get excited about them.

If you are sick of discussing affairs, as the result of many times seeing things turn out contrary to the notions and concepts you form, you are right, because the like has happened to me. Yet if I could speak to you, I couldn't keep from filling your head with castles in Spain, because Fortune has determined that since I don't know how to talk about the silk business or the wool business, or about profits and losses, I have to talk about the government, and I must either make a vow of silence or discuss that.

If I could get outside our territory, I should surely go, I too, to see if the Pope is at home; but among so many favors, mine through my neglect was forgotten. I shall wait for September. I learn that Cardinal Soderini has a great deal of business with the Pope. I wish you would advise me if you think it wise for me to write him a letter asking that he recommend me to His Holiness; or if it would be better that by word of mouth you attend to this affair on my behalf with the Cardinal; or if nothing should be done—on which perhaps you will give me a word in reply.

As to the horse, you make me laugh by reminding me about it; because you are to pay me when I remember it and not otherwise.

² Apparently proverbial.

he's wrong about that; but it is nothing to the other things he does.

Girolamo del Guanto's wife died, and for three or four days he was like a dazed barbel.¹ Then he came to life and wanted to get another wife, and every evening we have been on the bench of the Capponi discussing this marriage. Count Orlando is all torn up again over a fellow from Ragusa and is not able to get any kindness from him. Donato del Corno has opened another shop where doves are sold, and he goes all day from the old to the new one and is like a crazy man, and now he goes off with Vincenzo, now with Pizzo, now with one of his boys, now with another; yet I have never seen that he is angry with Riccio. I don't know the cause of this; some think anything would be more to his purpose than the lot; I for my part can't make any sense out of it. Filippo di Bastiano has returned to Florence, and complains terribly of Brancaccino, but in general, and as yet has not come to any details. If he goes to Rome, I shall let you know, so you can warn him.

So then if sometimes I laugh or sing, I do it because I have just this one way for expressing my anxious sorrow.²

If it is true that Jacopo Salviati and Matteo Strozzi have been let go, you will continue there as the public agent; and since Jacopo does not stay there, of those who are coming I see nobody who can stay there so you can be sent away; hence I suppose that you will stay as long as you wish to. His Magnificence Giuliano will come there, and you will naturally find a chance to do me good, and the same thing for the Cardinal of Volterra.³ So I cannot believe that if my affair is handled with some skill, I won't succeed in being employed at something, if not in behalf of

¹ Proverbial. Cf. Pulci, *Morgante*, 20.48.

² Petrarch, *Cesare, poi che*. Machiavelli substitutes *expressing* for the concealing of the original.

³ Cardinal Soderini, brother of Piero Soderini, ex-Gonfalonier of Florence.

Florence, at least in behalf of Rome and the Papacy, in respect to which I ought to be less suspected. And since I know you are firmly placed there, and you think I cannot make a move in any other way, and I may run into prejudices here, I ought to go there, and I cannot believe that, if the Serenity of our Lord would employ me, I should not do myself good and bring profit and honor to all my friends. I don't write this to you because I want things too much, nor because I want you to undertake for my love any burden or trouble or expense or anxiety about anything, but in order that you may know my intention, and if you can help me, you may know that what benefits me always benefits you and your family, to which I owe all that is left me.

16 April 1513

Niccolò Machiavelli in Florence.

No. 128

(out of numerical order to fit chronology)

29 April 1513, Florence

To Francesco Vettori, in Rome¹

[Julius II had recently died and Leo X (Giovanni de' Medici) had become Pope. Henry VIII of England, Maximilian I (Emperor of Germany), and Ferdinand V (King of Spain) were allied against Louis XII of France and the Venetians. In the preceding year, the Spanish and Papal forces had been defeated by the French at Ravenna. The French, however, partly because of the Swiss hostility, withdrew from Italy, though still claiming the Dukedom of Milan. Ferdinand controlled southern Italy.]

¹ The text of this letter exists in more than one form; the differences are not vital. Alvisi places it after Vettori's letter of 12 July.

[Ferdinand V of Spain, the Catholic; the new prince]

Magnificent Ambassador, Whom I Greatly Honor:

In the midst of my greatest good fortunes I never had anything that pleased me as much as your discussions, because from them I always learned something. Imagine, then, when I find myself now far from any other pleasure, how much I was pleased by your letter, to which nothing was wanting except your presence and the sound of your living voice; and as I have been reading it, for I have read it many times, I always have forgotten my unhappy situation, and I seem to have gone back in memory to my former affairs in which I have uselessly endured so many exertions and spent so much time. And even though I have vowed not to think any more on affairs of state nor to talk about them, as is proved by my coming to my farm and avoiding conversation, nevertheless, to answer your questions, I am forced to break every vow, because I believe I am more obligated to the long-standing friendship I have with you than to any other obligation I have to any person; especially when you do me so much honor as you do at the end of your letter, for, to tell you the truth, I have taken a little pride in it, since it is true "that it is not a small thing to be praised by a praised man."² I fear, though, that my notions may seem to you not to have their old flavor, for which I hope it will excuse me that I have deliberately given up such dealings altogether, and besides, that I have learned no details about what is now going on. And you know how well things can be judged in the dark, and especially these. So what I say to you will be based on either the foundation of your discourse or on my presuppositions, as to which, if they are false, I hope you will excuse me for the reason given above.

² Cicero, *Familiar Letters* 5.12.7; 15.6.1.

You would like to know, according to your letter of the 21st, what I believe has moved Spain to make this truce with France, since you cannot see anything in it for him, when everything is carefully gone over from all directions; so that on one side judging that the King is wise, and on the other being of the opinion that he has made a mistake, you are forced to believe that it hides some great thing which now neither you nor anybody understands. And truly your discourse could not be more careful or more prudent, nor do I believe that on this matter anything else could be said. Yet to act alive and to obey you, I shall say what occurs to me.

Nothing, I think, makes you hesitate more than the presupposition you lay down of the King of Spain's prudence. I answer that I have always thought Spain³ more crafty and fortunate than wise and prudent. I do not intend to go over his affairs at length, but will deal with this expedition against France in Italy, made before England could move or Spain could be sure that he was going to move. I earlier thought and still think that in that expedition, notwithstanding its contrary end, without necessity, he put into danger all his territories—which is a very rash thing in a prince. I say *without necessity*, because he had seen through signs of the year before, after so much harm that the Pope had done France (attacking his friends, and trying to make Genoa rebel) and also after many provocations that he himself had given to France (by sending his soldiers with those of the Church to injure France's tributaries) that nevertheless France, when victorious (having driven away the Pope and deprived him of all his armies) and able to drive him from Rome and Spain from Naples, did not wish to do so, but turned his mind to a treaty. So Spain could not fear France. Nor is there wisdom in the

³ The King of Spain, as often in the *Letters*. Similarly the King of England is England, and the King of France is France.

make him safe, and restore to him his lost reputation, as came about.

So if you will consider that whole action and the handling of those things, you will see in the King of Spain craft and good fortune rather than wisdom or prudence. And when I see a man making a mistake, I suppose he will make a thousand of them; and I do not believe that under this decision he has now made there is anything else than what is seen, because I don't drink the label on a bottle,⁵ and in these matters I do not intend that any authority should move me without reason. Hence I hold to the conclusion that Spain may have made a mistake and understood badly and concluded worse.

But let us abandon my opinion and consider him prudent, and let us discuss this decision as that of a wise man. I say, then, making such a presupposition, that in trying properly to find the truth of this matter, I should need to know whether this truce was made after the news of the Pontiff's death and the installation of the new one, or before, because perhaps it would make some difference. But since I do not know, I shall assume it made before the Pope's death. If then—I ask you what you think Spain should have done, being in the condition he is, you would answer what you have written to me, namely, that he could have made peace with France, restoring Lombardy, in order to put him under obligation and to remove all reason for bringing French armies into Italy.

To this I answer that to discuss this affair properly one must note that Spain made that expedition against France with the hope of defeating him, relying perhaps on the Pope, on England, and on the Emperor as foundations more than he should have done, as he learned when finally the test came, because he expected to get money enough

⁵ Literally, I do not drink districts, that is, I am not so impressed by the name of the region where a wine is produced that I forget to observe its quality.

fish,⁸ not of the flavor you expected. My excuse is that my mind is estranged from all these matters, as is shown by my going to my farm, far from every human face. Not knowing what is going on, I am forced to discuss in the dark, and have based everything on the information you have given me. Therefore I pray you to hold me excused. Give my regards to everybody there, especially to your Paolo, if he hasn't left.

Florence, 29 April 1513

Your friend⁹

N. M.

No. 124

20 June 1513, Florence

To . . . Francesco Vettori.

[See the head-note of the preceding letter.]

[France, England, Spain, the Swiss, and the Pope]

Magnificent Ambassador:

I wrote some weeks ago in reply to a discussion of yours about the truce made between France and Spain. Since then I have had no letters from you, nor have I written, because, understanding that you were about to come home, I waited to speak to you directly. But since I now understand that your return has been put off and that you perhaps are going to stay there some days, I have decided to pay you a visit with this letter and to talk with you about all those things we would talk about if you were here. And though I can only talk wildly, because I am far away from secrets and from events, all the same I do not believe my opinions on affairs can do any harm,

⁸ Having neither head nor tail.

⁹ Apparently this letter was written when Machiavelli was briefly in Florence; within it he speaks of living at his farm.

because I am of the opinion—and I don't believe I am deceiving myself—that when the king of France is dead, [the next king] will think about a campaign in Lombardy, and this will always be a reason for keeping his sword drawn. Otherwise I believe that in any case Spain will strike a blow at the others; and if the first victory of the Swiss made him make a truce, this second one will make him make peace; and I do not value negotiations he carries on, things that he says, or promises he makes. Such a peace, if it should be made, would be very dangerous, if made without the participation of the others.

Farewell.

Florence, 20 June 1513
Niccolò Machiavelli.

No. 125

26 June 1513, Florence

To Master Giovanni di Francesco Vernacci¹ in Pera.

[Niccolò's misfortunes; God's help; business]

Dearest Giovanni:

I have received several of your letters, and finally one of last April, in which and in the others you complain that you have not received mine. I answer that after your departure I had so many worries that it is no wonder I didn't write; it is rather a miracle that I am alive, because my office has been taken from me and I have been on the point of losing my life, which God and my innocence have saved for me. I have endured all sorts of evils, both of prison and other things. Yet by

¹ A sister's son.

be made which will stir up a war greater and more dangerous. But on making such a peace as I have written about, in which the malcontents are England, the Emperor, and the Swiss, these malcontents cannot, united or singly, easily injure an alliance of the other three (the Pope, France, Spain), because France, on this side and on the other side of the mountains, will continue to be an obstacle and, with the aid of the other two, will make such opposition that the allies will be safe, and England and the others will not undertake any enterprise, seeing its difficulty. And there will be nothing through which the allies need to fear each other, since, as I have told you many times, each of them will have carried out his intention, and their enemies will be so powerful and dangerous as to keep them chained together.

There is in your peace another very serious danger to Italy, which is that every time there is a weak duke in Milan, Lombardy will belong not to that duke but to the Swiss. And though a thousand times those three (England, France, the Emperor) who are discontented at your peace fail to stir, I believe the nearness of the Swiss is very important and deserves to be more thoroughly considered than it is. You say that the Swiss will not stir because they have regard for France, because they will have the rest of Italy against them, and because it will satisfy them to give the country a raking⁴ and go away. I cannot believe that you are right.

First, as I said above, France will desire to avenge himself, and having received harm from all Italy, will delight in seeing her ruined. Therefore he will secretly give the Swiss money, and feed this fire rather than otherwise.

As to union of the Italians, you make me laugh, first, because there never will be union here to do anything good. Even though the leaders should unite, they are not

⁴ Rapid plundering, as distinguished from serious occupation.

of putting the present duke back there, but in fact they themselves are the duke. On the first opportunity they will become complete masters of Milan, destroying the ducal family and all the nobility of that state; on the second, they will overrun all Italy, producing the same effect. Therefore I conclude that it will not be enough for them to give a raking and go away; instead one needs to be exceedingly afraid of them.

I know that to this opinion of mine is opposed a natural defect of man: first, wishing to live from day to day; second, not believing that anything can happen that has not happened; last, always reckoning about a person in the same way. Therefore there will be no one who will advise us to consider getting the Swiss out of Lombardy in order to put the French back there, because they are not willing to run the present risks that must be run in attempting it, nor will they believe in future ills, nor will they dream of being able to trust France. My friend, this German river is so large that it has need of a great dyke to hold it. If France had never been in Italy, and you were not newly aware of the arrogance, satiety,⁵ and extortion of the French, which are the things that upset this consideration for us, you would already have run to France to ask him to come into Lombardy, because the precautions against this flood need to be taken now, before the Swiss put down roots in this land, and commence to taste the sweetness of ruling. And if they settle themselves here, all Italy is ruined, because all the discontented will aid them, and make them a ladder for their own greatness and the ruin of others. And I fear them alone, and not them and the Emperor, as Casa has written to us, though it would be easy for them to unite, because, just as the Emperor has been pleased that they should overrun Lombardy and become lords of Milan, which would not

⁵ Probably a textual error.

seem reasonable in any way for the very reasons that you wrote to me, so, notwithstanding those, they might be content that he should make some progress in Italy.

Mr. Ambassador, I write more to satisfy you than because I know what I ought to say, and therefore I beg you that by your next letter you will advise me how this world stands, and what is being done, and what is hoped, and what is feared, if you wish that in these weighty matters I am to support my opinions. Otherwise you will get hold of an ass's will and testament, or some of those things, like Brancaccino. With my regards.

10 August 1513.

Niccolò Machiavelli, on his farm.

No. 133

25 August 1513, Florence

To Francesco Vettori

[Donato del Corno needs influence with the Medici]

Magnificent Ambassador:

Because I know how much you love our Donato del Corno,¹ and also he knows it, we have decided together with certainty to give you a bit of trouble, in order to see if by means of Signor Giuliano² we can satisfy him in this putting of his name in the bags that has to be done for the choice of officers.³ You know with how much help Donato was assisted by the said Signor Giuliano in what he needed

¹ A Florentine of low rank but some wealth, often mentioned in the letters to Vettori.

² Giuliano de' Medici, Duke of Nemours, then residing in Florence.

³ The bags contained the names of men considered eligible to hold office in Florence. When the offices were to be filled names were drawn out. The Medici government saw to it that only names acceptable to it were put in the bags.

ner, where with my family I eat such food as this poor farm of mine and my tiny property allow. Having eaten, I go back to the inn; there is the host, usually a butcher, a miller, two furnace tenders. With these I sink into vulgarity for the whole day, playing at *cricca* and at trich-trach, and then these games bring on a thousand disputes and countless insults with offensive words, and usually we are fighting over a penny, and nevertheless we are heard shouting as far as San Casciano. So, involved in these trifles, I keep my brain from growing mouldy, and satisfy the malice of this fate of mine, being glad to have her drive me along this road, to see if she will be ashamed of it.

On the coming of evening, I return to my house and enter my study; and at the door I take off the day's clothing, covered with mud and dust, and put on garments regal and courtly; and re clothed appropriately, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them with affection, I feed on that food which only is mine and which I was born for, where I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their kindness answer me; and for four hours of time I do not feel boredom, I forget every trouble, I do not dread poverty, I am not frightened by death; entirely I give myself over to them.

And because Dante says it does not produce knowledge when we hear but do not remember, I have noted everything in their conversation which has profited me,⁶ and have composed a little work *On Princedoms*, where I go as deeply as I can into considerations on this subject, debating what a princedom is, of what kinds they are, how they are gained, how they are kept, why they are lost. And if ever you can find any of my fantasies pleasing, this one should not displease you; and by a prince, and especially by a

⁶ This seems to be Machiavelli making notes on Livy's *History* for his own *Discourses*, out of which rose *The Prince*.

As for me, I have become useless to myself, to my relatives, and to my friends, because such has been the decision of my sad fate. And I can say nothing better than that there has been left me no other good than health for myself and all my family. I continue to wait in order to be in time to take Good Fortune when she comes, and if she does not come, to have patience. And whatever may happen to me, I shall always keep you in that place where I have had you up to now. I am yours. Christ watch over you!

15 February 1515.

Niccolò Machiavelli, in Florence.

No. 163

10 October 1516, Livorno²

To the Magnificent Paolo Vettori, Most Worthy Captain of the Papal Triremes

[Fever and bleeding]

Magnificent Sir:

We arrived here in Livorno today at four o'clock. This we inform you of by Antonio your servant, that you may know of our situation, and if before your¹ arrival here anything occurs to you that we can do, you can let us know about it. Of the galleys of the Bashaw nothing is heard. We have brought your Vincenzio here, with a double tertian ague; and though he has lost a pound of blood from the nose, nonetheless the fevers do not stop. If they grow a little lighter, I believe it would be well to put him in a basket carriage while the nights are less severe, and bring

¹ The texts require *our*.

without any hesitation, because now we cannot hobble any more but must go like mad; and often desperation finds remedies that choice cannot find.

They are coming without artillery, into a difficult region. Hence if we, with what little life remains to us, unite with the forces of the League that are ready, either they will leave this province with shame or they will come down to reasonable terms.

I love Messer Francesco Guicciardini; I love my native city more than my own soul; and I tell you this through that experience given me by sixty years, namely, that I do not believe that ever more difficult articles than these were struggled with, where peace is necessary and war cannot be abandoned; and to have on our hands a prince who scarcely is able to deal with peace alone or with war alone.

I send you my regards.

Niccolò Machiavelli, in Forlì.

No. 227

18 April 1527, Brisighella
To Francesco Vettori, in Florence

[See the head-note for Letter no. 202.]

[Those who gain from war will not praise peace]

Honored Francesco:

These French soldiers have been miraculously brought here to Brisighella; and likewise it will be a miracle if the Duke of Urbino comes to Pianoro tomorrow (as it seems that the Legate of Bologna writes from there); and here we shall wait, as I believe, to learn what he does. And for