

## The Prince and I: Some Musings on Machiavelli

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TONY: "Now most of the guys that I know read that Prince Matchabelli [sic]. And I had Carmela get the Cliff [sic] Notes once, and it was okay. But this book [*The Art of War* by Sun Tzu] is much better about strategy." ("He Is Risen")

"That Prince . . ." is more correctly Niccolò Machiavelli (1469—1527), and it his classic work of political philosophy, *The Prince*, that Tony is referring to in the above quotation.

Machiavelli not only authored works of political theory but also penned history, biography, plays, and translations. In addition, as Florentine Secretary he moved in the highest circles of Italian politics. Today, however, he is known to most through the adjective "Machiavellian," which is defined as "suggestive of or characterized by expediency, deceit, and cunning."<sup>1</sup> The degree to which this definition accurately represents Machiavelli's own views, while a matter of some debate, is something I will not consider in this chapter. Instead, I will focus on the relevance of his masterpiece, *The Prince*, for the main character of *The Sopranos*. By examining Tony Soprano's interactions with three of his major antagonists in the show, I hope to demonstrate that Tony is at times, whether knowingly or unknowingly, a practi-

<sup>1</sup> *American Heritage Dictionary*, third edition. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), p. 1076.

tioner of Machiavellian wisdom and, as we will see, ignores Machiavelli at his own peril.

### Florence, New Jersey

The Italy of Machiavelli was not the united country Tony knows from his recent trip to Naples. Instead, it was a fragmented peninsula, described accurately by the historian Jacques Barzun as being "divided into numerous towns and city-states, all but one subject to death-dealing factions, *coups d'état*, assassinations, aggression and defeat in war."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Machiavelli saw the government of his native city overturned three times during his life, and he himself was imprisoned, tortured, and exiled. For all of its distance in time and place, Machiavelli's Italy would not be that unfamiliar to Tony Soprano. Take away the culture, the beautiful scenery, the artistic giants, and the whole Renaissance thing from sixteenth-century Florence, and you begin to get something approximating modern-day Jersey. Florence was threatened by numerous external enemies—the French, the Spanish, and Papal Rome, to name just a few—and constantly in danger of being undermined from within by political divisions; Tony confronts the FBI, the New York mob, the Russians, and has his own internal problems with traitors and malcontents. Machiavelli's advice about how a single prince can maintain a hold on power and unite divided factions has an obvious appeal to a group of men who realize that, unlike the Dave Clark Five, they require a single, strong leader. This might help explain why "most of the guys" Tony knows take time away from their *goom-ahs* to study *The Prince*. Tony, as we will see, would be well advised to do likewise.

### Of New Principalities (Acquired when the Boss Dies)

Tony's first major challenge comes from his uncle, Corrado "Junior" Soprano. Junior wishes to stage a hit at Tony's friend Artie's restaurant, Vesuvio, and Tony, afraid that the possibility of being involved in crossfire might not exactly draw customers

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 256.

to the business, asks Junior to do the job elsewhere. When Junior refuses, Tony torches the restaurant in order to stop the killing from taking place there. Better his friend rebuild with insurance money than be driven into bankruptcy. The situation disintegrates when Junior responds to a couple of Tony's underlings hijacking trucks under his protection by killing one of the hijackers and ordering a mock execution of the other, Tony's nephew Christopher.

With the death of boss Jackie Aprile, things threaten to deteriorate into chaos. As Tony says, "Lack of control at the top is fuckin' up this whole family" ("Meadowlands"). It is a book on coping with elder family members, and not Machiavelli's *The Prince*, that in fact saves the day for Tony and prevents the guys from going to the mattresses. Believing she is assisting in dealing with his mother, Dr. Melfi recommends the book and advises Tony that he might try letting his mother think she is in charge. Almost immediately Tony begins to apply this advice—to Junior. He gets the captains to agree to make it appear as if Junior is the boss when in fact he, Tony, will be running things. The situation seems ideal. Junior is content, the family has someone in control, and, as Silvio says, "We got a brand-new lightning rod on top to take the hits" ("Meadowlands").

While the advice does not derive from Machiavelli, it is certainly consistent with his writing. Machiavelli asserts that the prince must know how to be wily like a fox because "those who have known best how to imitate the fox have come off the best."<sup>3</sup> In particular, sometimes a prince must appear to be "faithful to his word, guileless and devout," but "his disposition should be such that, should he need to be the opposite, he knows how."<sup>4</sup> Tony, accordingly, pretends to follow Junior's orders and heed his commands all the while holding clandestine meetings with Junior's capos at Livia's nursing home.

Tony reaches even more deeply into Machiavelli's play book when he tries to resolve growing discontent arising from Junior's tight-fisted way of running things. As one of the capos puts it, not only does Junior eat alone, "He doesn't even pass the salt." To rectify the situation, Tony tells Junior the story of

<sup>3</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated by George Bull (New York: Penguin, 1961), sec. 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Augustus Caesar: "Everybody loved him because he never ate alone. . . . It was the longest time of peace in Rome's history" ("Pax Soprano"). Although Tony may well be repeating something he heard on his favorite television station, *The History Channel*, Machiavelli could have helped him out here as well: "[T]he prince gives away what is his own or his subjects', or else what belongs to others. In the first case he should be frugal; in the second, he should indulge in generosity to the full. The prince who campaigns with his armies, who lives by pillaging, sacking, and extortion, disposes of what belongs to aliens; and he must be open-handed, otherwise his soldiers would refuse to follow him."<sup>5</sup> Machiavelli, it seems, didn't recommend eating alone either.

Machiavellian principles might have stabilized the situation had Livia been more content with her living arrangements. But her anger with Tony drives her to manipulate Junior into ordering a hit on her own son. Tony's survival of this assassination attempt is a matter of pure luck. As we'll see later, Machiavelli has a bit to say about luck. In response, Tony takes out most of Junior's crew in one swift, violent act of retribution, pulling a page from Machiavelli (although he could have received the same instruction from the end of *The Godfather*): "In seizing a state, the usurper ought to examine closely into all those injuries which it is necessary for him to inflict and to do them all at one stroke so as not to have to repeat them daily."<sup>6</sup>

### Of Cruelty and Mercy (When Asshole Brothers of Your Dead Best Friend Get out of Jail)

Season two opens with Tony in charge and Junior behind bars. But it is not long before another nemesis appears on the scene: Jackie Aprile's brother Richie, who has just been released after ten years in prison. The relationship between Tony and Richie begins badly and quickly disintegrates. Richie is not only unappreciative at being given his loan sharking business back, but he openly disobeys Tony's request not to shake down Beansie, the owner of a pizza parlor, opting instead to use Beansie as his personal speed bump. Richie then disrespects the executive card

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 8.

game that Tony runs by assaulting one of its players (a friend of Tony who owes Richie money). Ordered to build the paralyzed Beansie a ramp, Richie tears down the steps to Beansie's house but forgets to finish the project. When Richie refuses Tony's order to cease selling cocaine on the garbage routes, he is cut out of a garbage bid, and attempts to organize an overthrow of Tony.

Would a close reading of Machiavelli have resulted in Tony handling the situation differently? And might actions grounded in the principles of *The Prince* have resulted in a different outcome? I believe so. In a chapter entitled "Cruelty and Compassion," Machiavelli considers whether it is better to be loved or feared. Not surprisingly, he comes down on the side of the latter. "Men worry less about doing an injury to one who makes himself loved than to one who makes himself feared."<sup>7</sup> This is especially so in the case of someone who has recently assumed power. "A new prince, of all rulers, finds it impossible to avoid a reputation for cruelty because of the abundant dangers inherent in a newly won state."<sup>8</sup>

But from the start Tony's handling of the Richie situation runs counter to this general rule, since he seems much more interested in gaining Richie's love and approval than his respect. He sets a bad tone at their first encounter when he tells Richie that he is "like a big brother" and that he is going to be taken care of. The request to leave Beansie alone is worded, "Jesus Christ I'm asking you to do me a favor" ("Toodle-Fucking-Oo"). Tony is almost apologetic in telling Richie that the tax for breaking up the poker game will be that Tony will get paid first: "If I don't do something how's that gonna look?" ("The Happy Wanderer"). Almost nothing in Tony's encounters with Richie seems designed to generate fear. Indeed, we see Tony several times almost pleading with Richie to show him respect.

To be sure, there are a number of reasons for Tony's relatively gentle approach to Richie. For one, Richie's ten years in jail buys him a lot of leniency. There is also the fact that Richie's brother was perhaps Tony's closest friend. Finally, let's not forget Richie's unholy liaison with the Buddhist turned mob queen, Janice. Tony's desire for his sister's happiness doubtless also

affects Tony's behavior towards Richie. And though Tony ultimately cuts Richie out of a big garbage bid, not only is the action a long time coming, but it is hardly designed to generate fear. Obviously, then, Tony has his reasons for the way he handles Richie. But it is just these sorts of emotional traps that an in-depth reading of *The Prince* might have helped Tony to avoid.

If he seems oblivious to Machiavelli's advice on the relative merits of cruelty, Tony serves as a stellar example of another Machiavellian point. For Machiavelli, the personal character of the ruler—his *virtù*—was an essential component of his success. It would be a mistake to translate the term as virtuous, for there is nothing inherently moral about the characteristics that Machiavelli believes the prince should embody. Indeed, there are times when the prince will have to behave immorally in order to secure or maintain his power. Not for nothing do we have the adjective "Machiavellian." However, it is precisely by acting at the right moment in a manner deemed to be "bad" by conventional standards that the prince will demonstrate his excellence (a decidedly better translation of *virtù*) as a ruler. The excellent ruler—like the perfect storm—can be terrible, violent, and awe inspiring. More conventionally, Machiavelli declares that "a prince should . . . strive to demonstrate in his actions grandeur, courage, sobriety, strength. When settling disputes, he should ensure that his judgment is irrevocable; and he should be so regarded that no one ever dreams of trying to deceive or trick him."<sup>9</sup> These are also components of his excellence. The importance of exemplifying these traits cannot be overestimated, for "the prince who succeeds in having himself thus regarded is highly esteemed, and against a man who is highly esteemed, conspiracy is difficult."<sup>10</sup>

It is precisely because Tony is recognized as possessing Machiavellian leadership qualities by his peers that Richie's coup fails. Consider how the events unfolded. Richie enlists a disgruntled Junior to his side for another move against Tony. But when he is unable to get anyone to go along, Junior backs out and decides to side with his nephew. "He [Richie] couldn't sell it," Junior laments to Bobby Bacala. "He's not respected" ("The

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

ight in White Satin Armor"). Although Junior would prefer to plain things in terms of Richie's shortcomings, it is more accurately the case that Tony's leadership qualities—his *virtù*—insulated him from this aborted overthrow.

### Of Avoiding Contempt and Hatred (The Bad Endings of Psychopathic, Sadistic Capos)

Ralph Cifaretto may not have been the direct threat to Tony's power that Junior and Richie were, though he may yet prove to be his downfall. But of course Ralph was trouble from the moment that Tony passed him over for captain. Tony's "bitch slapping" of Ralph outside of the Bada Bing! after he brutally murdered his own girlfriend only increased an already existing tension. From the perspective of mob values, of course, Tony was in the wrong. Not only was Ralph a "made guy," but, as Silvio pointed out, Tracee was not related to Tony by blood, nor was she his *goomab*. Worse, Ralph now had mob-sanctioned justification for his resentment. The situation may well have spun out of control had it not been for Gigi's unseemly death on the pishtoon, which allowed Tony to utilize the face-saving measure of offering Ralph Gigi's capo position.

Rather than considering the situation resolved, however, Tony should perhaps have listened to Machiavelli: "He who believes that new benefits will cause great personages to forget old injuries is deceived."<sup>11</sup> Ralph may not have been great (although he was a good earner), but he certainly thought he was. Remembering this might have made Tony a little more cautious in interacting with Ralph in the future. Instead, what does he do? He slowly begins to take control of Ralph's race horse, Pie-O-My, and starts to sleep with his *goomab*—against Machiavelli's explicit advice: "The prince can always avoid hatred if he abstains from the property of his subjects and citizens and from their women . . . because men sooner forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony."<sup>12</sup> Ralph's torching of the stable, although ostensibly carried out for insurance money, is more probably intended as revenge, an act of hatred as predictable as it was cruel.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 17.

And of course it was the death of Pie-O-My in the fire that incited Tony to his most rash act. Although a backhoe and some bleach erased all evidence of Ralph's murder, it is clear that the questions about Ralph's "disappearance" will not be so easily put to rest. As Silvio cautiously stated, "If it can happen to Ralph, it can happen to any of us" ("The Strong, Silent Type"). By the end of Season Four, it is unclear what the consequences of Tony's impulsiveness will be. Indeed, he may yet be able to pin Ralph's demise on the New York mob. But sadly, the whole mess might have been avoided with some close attention to *The Prince*.

### The Prince and Fortune (Double Parked Cars and Homicidal Sisters)

Machiavelli devotes an entire chapter of the notably brief *The Prince*—the penultimate chapter—to the topic of Fortune. While not ruling out a role for human activity, Machiavelli asserts, "Fortune is the arbiter of one-half of our actions."<sup>13</sup> Certainly, Tony has benefitted from fortune. Chris's double parked car prevents a first assassination attempt while a second one misses its mark by inches. And as much as it may have put a damper in Janice's plan to be first lady of the New Jersey underworld, her assassination of Richie is certainly a piece of good luck for her brother. Gigi's ignominious demise prevents Tony from having to deal with a sticky situation with Ralph. You can't say he hasn't had his share of luck.

Machiavelli famously compares Fortune to a river which, when flooded, destroys everything in its path. In such a dire situation, human action is powerless. However, when the river is flowing quietly there are precautions that can be taken. One can, for example, construct dykes and embankments to ensure safety should the waters rise again. Tony has certainly benefitted from fortune's unpredictability. But has he taken precautions against her inevitable unruliness?

There is some evidence that he has not. In particular, the economic downturn that constitutes the backdrop of Season Four seems to have caught Tony off guard. In Season Three, Junior had speculated that Tony's success was more a matter of

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 25.

fortune than skill, since in the booming economy “even Chinks and housewives” were betting. But economic conditions rise and fall. Even Carmela knows that everything comes to an end. Perhaps Tony should have listened to Machiavelli (or even to the Boy Scouts) and been a little more prepared. (Although, to be fair, he does seem somewhat better positioned than Johnny Sack to weather Carmine’s shutting down of the Esplanade.)

Machiavelli closes with a final piece of advice on Fortune. “It is better to be impetuous than circumspect; because fortune is a woman and if she is to be submissive it is necessary to beat and coerce her. Experience shows that she is more often subdued by men who do this than by those who act coldly.”<sup>14</sup> Leaving aside the misogyny, it is clear that Machiavelli is urging bold action at the proper time (which need not be inconsistent with the notion of planning for Fortune’s inevitable reversals). The question, of course, is when is the proper time? As a young up and coming mobster, Tony scored his first success when Jackie and he robbed a protected card game. Certainly, an opportunity for bold action presents itself at the end of season four when Johnny Sack urges Tony to undertake a hit on Carmine. Tony at first accepts—and then demurs. Will Tony regret his unwillingness to follow Machiavelli’s logic on this point? Only time and Season Five will tell.<sup>15</sup>

## Secondo Piatto

### Ethics: Soprano Family Values

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> A special thanks to Richard Greene, Carolyn Munich, Ryan Perry, Paul Goggi, Thom Kuehls, and Dr. Stephen Kershner for reading earlier drafts of this chapter. I would also like to thank the third-shift wait staff at a diner in Toledo for their coffee and the patience to let me type until four in the morning.

# Never has the phrase 'the ends justify the means' been more appropriate

Reference 1

**F**lorentine-born philosopher of the Italian Renaissance, Machiavelli was a diplomat and dramatist, but is best remembered for his hugely influential and notorious work of political theory,

~~The Prince, which has made his name synonymous with political machinations.~~

Providing a detailed analysis of successful, if on occasion immoral, political techniques, Machiavelli's text is still used today by students of both philosophy and politics. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli concentrates on those techniques a successful politician must use if he is to achieve his political ends, without regard to the moral justification of the means thereby employed. Often criticised by detractors for its lack of moral sensibility, it is nevertheless a work of great intellectual integrity and consistency.

~~In *The Prince*, Machiavelli considers how best a leader can achieve his ends once he has determined that the ends he has identified are worthwhile.~~ Never has the phrase 'the ends justify the means' been more appropriately applied than it is to Machiavellian technique. The book is almost entirely practical, rarely speculating on the rightness or wrongness of the methods adumbrated therein.

Nonetheless, *The Prince* does contain certain theses about which political ends are good. Machiavelli thinks there are three primary political 'goods': national security, national independence, and a strong constitution. Beyond this, he is almost entirely concerned with practical questions of how to go about securing political success. It is vain to pursue a good political end with inadequate means, for it will surely fail. One must pursue one's convictions with strength and courage if one is to be successful, employing whatever means necessary.

The heart of Machiavelli's teachings consists in the manipulation of others, including the populace, for power. To this end, although Machiavelli does not teach that virtue is good in itself, it can often serve one's political ends to appear to be virtuous. This is perhaps the doctrine that has caused most outrage against Machiavellian thought. But Machiavelli himself is unconcerned with such weak and even hypocritical sensibility. If, as we have said, one's ends are good in themselves, all that matters is that one brings them about; in order to do this, Machiavelli tells us, one must have more power than one's opponents. Without doubt, *The Prince* is a work meant only for those that have the fibre to take this fact, surely true, if unpleasant, seriously.

Although *The Prince* is unflinching in its teachings, it must be read alongside Machiavelli's longer and more balanced work, the *Discourses*, if his own views are to be fairly understood. In the *Discourses*, he provides more detailed background as to what he thinks makes a good and successful constitution. His political ideal is the republic run by the Princes, leaders of the principalities, but held in check by both the noblemen and ordinary citizens, all of whom share a part in the constitution. As Russell rightly says in his commentary on Machiavelli, the *Discourses* might easily be read by an eighteenth century liberal without occasioning much surprise or disagreement. Machiavelli has no time for tyrannies, not because people have an inalienable right to freedom, but because tyrannies are less stable, more cruel and inconstant than governments held in esteem by a reasonably content population. It is the achievement of this that is Machiavelli's prime political concern.