

Abstract: Machiavelli's life, times, and writings converge on the topic of conspiracy. Yet Machiavelli's treatment of this topic is both more expansive and more complex than scholars have recognized. Attending to Discourse III.6, among other central passages, we argue that the significance of conspiracy for Machiavelli's political thought lies in its connection to founding. In his analyses of historical conspiracies, Machiavelli shows what founding requires in practice; at the same time, the ubiquitous occurrence of conspiracies across historical and political contexts reveals the contested and contingent status of political order. Ultimately, Machiavelli depicts and analyzes conspiracies because he aims not only to investigate but also to produce new beginnings. Toward this end, Machiavelli deploys a novel rhetoric that challenges the reader to adopt a conspiratorial outlook, if not to become a conspirator himself.

Thomas Hobbes wrote in his verse autobiography that he and fear were born twins.¹ Had Niccolò Machiavelli used the same figure, his twin would have been conspiracy. After all, his life, times, and political writings converge on the topic of conspiracy—“that delicate, dangerous topic which so fascinated Machiavelli that he gave it the longest chapters in each of his two primary political works.”² Yet his treatment of conspiracy is both more expansive and more complex than scholars have recognized.³ In their interpretations of Machiavelli’s political thought, in contradistinction to his political career, many influential commentators present conspiracy as a minor issue—a temptation

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, with selected variants from the Latin edition of 1668*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), liv.

² Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 98. See also Charles D. Tarlton, *Fortune’s Circle: A Biographical Interpretation of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 117–27; and Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2015), 83.

³ A recent exception is Marco Geuna, “Machiavelli e le Congiure: la Prospettiva dei Discorsi,” in *Machiavelli Cinquecento: Mezzo millennio del Principe*, ed. Gian Mario Anselmi, Riccardo Caporali, and Carlo Galli (Milan: Mimesis, 2015). See also Claude Lefort, *Le travail de l’œuvre: Machiavel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); and J. Patrick Coby, *Machiavelli’s Romans: Liberty and Greatness in the Discourses on Livy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), 162–168.

for private individuals, against which Machiavelli warns, and a danger for princes and republics, for which he proposes institutional remedies.⁴ For example, Erica Benner contends that Machiavelli frowns on conspiratorial action because “conspiracies use private rather than public channels, and violent methods unregulated by laws.”⁵ Likewise, for Maurizio Viroli, the rule of law in republics can control outbursts of private ambition and thereby stamp out conspiracies before they begin.⁶

On the other hand, commentators such as Hans Baron, Mary Dietz, and Mark Hulliung have suggested that Machiavelli endorses, albeit cautiously, republican conspiracies against tyrannical elites.⁷ More recently, John McCormick has portrayed

⁴ Roberto Ridolfi, *Vita di Niccolò Machiavelli* (Florence: Sansoni, 1969), 483; Gisela Bock, “Civil discord in Machiavelli’s *Istorie Fiorentine*,” in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Erica Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 373–79; Filippo Del Lucchese, *Conflict, power, and multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza: Tumult and indignation* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 50–51; Mark Jurdjevic, “Machiavelli’s Hybrid Republicanism,” *The English Historical Review* 122, no. 499 (2007): 1250.

⁵ Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, 377. See also Markus Fischer, *Well-Ordered License: On the Unity of Machiavelli’s Thought* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), 124.

⁶ Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 127.

⁷ Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: civic humanism and republican liberty in an Age of classicism and tyranny* (Princeton: Princeton University

Machiavelli as a “ferocious” or “agonistic” democrat, whose political thought supports demotic conspiracies that deliver political power to the *popolo*.⁸ Examining the original texts, however, reveals that Machiavelli lauds tyrannical as well as republican conspirators. As Harvey Mansfield has remarked, conspiracies are in fact “the central events of Machiavellian politics”; for that reason, the topic should not be shoehorned into standing interpretations of Machiavelli’s thought.⁹

Elaborating Mansfield’s claim, this article offers an integral account of conspiracy’s place in Machiavelli’s political understanding. In the process, we show that the topic of conspiracy runs through Machiavelli’s writings like a red skein, even receiving a stand-alone treatment in Book III, Chapter 6 of the *Discourses on Livy*—the longest chapter of that masterwork and the touchstone of our inquiry.¹⁰ Through a careful

Press, 1966); Mary G. Dietz, “Trapping the Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception,” *The American Political Science Review* 80, no. 3 (1986): 777–799; Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli*.

⁸ John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), esp. 80, 115.

⁹ Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 40. See also Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 169–70. Neither thinker, however, provides us with a systematic account of conspiracy for Machiavelli.

¹⁰ We cite *The Prince*, the *Discourses on Livy*, and the *Florentine Histories* according to the standard fashion—by work, book, chapter, and paragraph—with general references

examination of *Discourse* III.6, among other passages, this article aims to illuminate Machiavelli's "conspiracy theory." In the first place, we attend to the panoply of historical conspiracies depicted and analyzed by Machiavelli in *Discourse* III.6, thereby revealing both the ubiquity and the complexity of conspiracies. In Machiavelli's account, conspiracies are everywhere, and they encompass a surprising range of human activity.

Next, and even more importantly, we argue that the significance of conspiracy for Machiavelli's political thought lies in the striking connection that he draws between conspiracy and founding.¹¹ Machiavelli recasts founders as conspirators, while he likens the virtue of the successful conspirator to that of the founder. In his analyses of historical conspiracies, Machiavelli shows what founding requires in practice; at the same time, the ubiquitous occurrence of conspiracies across historical and political contexts reveals the contested and contingent status of political order. In Machiavelli's account, the ideas,

inlaid in the text. We generally follow the Mansfield translation for *The Prince* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and the Mansfield-Tarcov translation for the *Discourses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Where we use our own translations, references are to *Opere*, ed. Corrado Vivanti (3 vols., Turin: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1997).

¹¹ Others who have evoked this link include Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*; Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman*; Lefort, *Le travail de l'œuvre*; and Pierre Manent, *Naissances de la Politique Moderne: Machiavel, Hobbes, Rousseau* (Paris: Payot, 1977); and most recently, Catherine H. Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 216–221.

institutions, and practices that structure the political world are both set and overturned though conspiratorial action.

Just as Machiavelli's writings on conspiracy—especially *Discourse* III.6—shed light on the theoretical core of his political thought, so do they prove to have practical implications. In this essay's final movement, we argue that Machiavelli presents himself as a non-partisan teacher or advisor to conspirators; as we will see, many of his young friends and earliest readers viewed him in precisely this way. Machiavelli challenges the reader to adopt a conspiratorial outlook through a novel rhetoric designed to cultivate the reader's prudence and spirit (*animo*).¹² By theorizing and inculcating a conspiratorial outlook, Machiavelli's account of conspiracy both investigates and aims to produce new beginnings—and not simply republican or democratic beginnings.

The Ubiquity and Complexity of Conspiracy

That conspiracy was a ubiquitous political phenomenon in Renaissance Italy is widely acknowledged.¹³ One prominent historian refers to the period of Machiavelli's youth as

¹² See Eugene Garver, *Machiavelli and the History of Prudence* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987); and Victoria Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric: From the Counter-Reformation to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹³ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (London: Phaidon Press, 1965), 35–39; Manfredi Piccolomini, *The Brutus revival: parricide and tyrannicide during the Renaissance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 63–79; Elena Fasano Guarini, “Congiure ‘contro alla patria’ e

the “age of conspiracies.”¹⁴ In addition, scholars have emphasized the fact that Machiavelli himself had a personal connection to at least three different (anti-Medicean) conspiracies.¹⁵ Girolamo Machiavelli, his first cousin once removed, was first a political opponent of Cosimo de’ Medici, then a conspirator in exile against him in 1460.¹⁶ In perhaps the most famous single event in his own life, Machiavelli was imprisoned and

conquire ‘contro ad uno principe’ nell’opera di Niccolò Machiavelli,” in *Complots et Conjurations dans l’Europe Moderne*, ed. Yves-Marie Bercé and Elena Fasano Guarini (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1996), 9–53.

¹⁴ Ricardo Fubini, Riccardo, “L’età delle congiure: i rapporti tra Firenze e Milano dal tempo di Piero a quello di Lorenzo de’ Medici (1464-78),” in *Florence and Milan: Comparisons and Relations, Vol. II*, ed. Craig Hugh Smyth and Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1989), 189–216. Similarly, Corrado Vivanti, in his notes on *Discourse III.6* (Machiavelli, *Opere I*, 1074), remarks that “conspiracies were a characteristic phenomenon of Italian life between the 15th and 16th centuries, recurring in almost all the states of the peninsula” (translation ours).

¹⁵ Humphrey Butters, “Machiavelli and the Medici,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 64–79.

¹⁶ Machiavelli, *Opere III*, 632; Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434 to 1494)*, rev. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 103, 109, 121.

tortured due to his association with the Boscoli conspiracy.¹⁷ Finally, the 1522 conspiracy arose among frequenters of the Orti Oricellari, where Machiavelli read chapters from the *Discourses*.¹⁸ Two of the leading conspirators were Zanobi Buondelmonti and Luigi Alamanni: Machiavelli dedicated his *Discourses on Livy* to the former (along with Cosimo Rucellai), while both are named as the dedicatees of Machiavelli's *Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca*.

¹⁷ We lack a complete autobiographical account of these events, though see Ridolfi, *Vita*, 211–27; Marina Marietti, “Machiavel historiographe des Médicis,” in *Les écrivains et le pouvoir en Italie à l'époque de la Renaissance*, ed. André Rochon (Paris: Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1974), 84–85; and J. N. Stephens and H. C. Butters, “New Light on Machiavelli,” *The English Historical Review* 97 no. 382 (1982): 58–59. Machiavelli addresses them obliquely in his letters to Francesco Vettori, dated March 13 and 18, 1513 (1997 II, 235–38), and in his two poems addressed to Giuliano de' Medici (1997 III, 8–9).

¹⁸ Felix Gilbert, “Bernardo Rucellai and the Orti Oricellari: A Study on the Origin of Modern Political Thought,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 12 (1949): 101–131; Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman*, 64; Dietz, “Trapping the Prince,” 791. The Orti Oricellari also serve as the setting for Machiavelli's dialogue, *The Art of War*. Jérémie Barthas views the Orti Oricellari as the base for *two* conspiracies: the first an aristocratic one against Piero Soderini driven by Bernardo Rucellai and reaching fruition in 1512; the second a republican one in 1522. See “Un giardino, due congiure: gli Orti Oricellari,” in *Atlante della letteratura italiana I: Dalle origini al Rinascimento*, ed. Sergio Luzzatto and Gabriele Pedullà (Turin: Einaudi, 2010), 694–701.

It was in those years “set between two conspiracies” that Machiavelli composed all of his major works.¹⁹ It should come as little surprise that conspiracy pervades them. The dramatization of a historical conspiracy is the subject of the minor work, *Il Modo che Tenne il Duca Valentino per Ammazar Vitellozo, Oliverotto da Fermo, il Signor Pagolo et il Duca di Gravina Orsini in Senigaglia*.²⁰ The eponymous Castruccio Castracani is both deviser and target of murderous conspiracies in Machiavelli’s account of his life and sayings.²¹ As a number of scholars have observed, the plot of Machiavelli’s comedy, *The Mandragola*, centers on what is in effect a successful conspiracy.²²

Conspiracies are even more rife in Machiavelli’s major works. The *Florentine Histories* is a veritable compendium of conspiracies,²³ culminating in the final two books

¹⁹ Ridolfi, *Vita*, 320.

²⁰ Machiavelli, *Opere* I, 16–22; see also *P* 7–8.

²¹ Machiavelli, *Opere* III, 291–292.

²² *Ibid.*, 139–189. See also Theodore A. Sumberg, “*La Mandragola*: An Interpretation,” *The Journal of Politics* 23, no. 2 (1961): 320–340; Carnes Lord, “On Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*,” *The Journal of Politics* 41, no. 3 (1979): 806–827; Michael Palmer and James F. Pontuso, “The Master Fool: The Conspiracy of Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 25, no. 3 (1996): 124–32.

²³ See *FH* I.25 for an account of the conspiracy by Philip IV of France against Pope Boniface VIII; *FH* II.18–20 for rival conspiracies between White and Black Guelfs; and *FH* II.33–37 for conspiracy of nobles against the Duke of Athens. For similar passages, see *FH* I.29, III.14, III.28, IV.25, V.31, and VI.9–10.

devoted, respectively, to narrating the conspiracy against Galeazzo Maria Sforza of Milan (*FH VII*) and the Pazzi conspiracy against Lorenzo de' Medici and his brother Giuliano (*FH VIII*). In that same work, Machiavelli explicitly calls our attention to the significance of these conspiracies, inviting the reader to compare them to his authoritative treatment of conspiracy in *Discourse III.6*.²⁴ The implication is that a unified view of conspiracy runs through Machiavelli's political thought.

Last but not least, Machiavelli devotes the longest chapters of both *The Prince* (19) and the *Discourses* (III.6) to the matter of conspiracy. *Discourse III.6* is anomalous in more than one respect. The very title of this chapter, "Of Conspiracies," gives the impression that it can be read as an independent treatise. According to Elena Fasano Guarini, moreover, "no other chapter in the *Discourses* features such an expansive and varied range of classical sources."²⁵ Yet, the themes of *Discourse III.6* are not themselves unique; rather, this text concentrates discussions that are otherwise seeded throughout Machiavelli's major works.²⁶

Discourse III.6 begins by echoing many of Machiavelli's classic recommendations for princely rule put forth in *The Prince*. As in Chapter 19 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli advises the prince to eschew "being hated by the collectivity" (*D III.6.2*). As in Chapter 3 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli advises the prince to "caress or

²⁴ Machiavelli, *Opere III*, 678.

²⁵ Fasano Guarini, "Congiure," 11; translation ours.

²⁶ Herbert Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd., 1960), 93.

crush” (*D* III.6.2, 6.11). As in Chapter 17 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli advises the prince to refrain from seizing his subjects’ property or their women (*D* III.6.2). The repetition of these particular nostrums suggests that the prince can fortify his rule by learning how to prevent against conspiracy.

Indeed, *Discourse* III.6 at first strikes a cautionary tone. Machiavelli treats conspiracy “so that princes may learn to guard themselves from these dangers and private individuals may put themselves into them more timidly” (*D* III.6.1; see also *FH* VII.34). No wonder readers of Machiavelli have concluded, in the words of Marco Geuna, that “Machiavelli must be considered a severe critic of conspiracies.”²⁷ Yet many of the historical conspiracies dramatized and analyzed in *Discourse* III.6 show that it is possible for private individuals to succeed as conspirators. “Everyone can do” as did the successful conspirators Nelematus of Epirus and Darius of Persia (*D* III.6.8). By threatening to betray their discontented fellows to the prince, Nelematus and Darius were able to demand that these men join them in killing the prince at that very moment. Machiavelli concludes: “by these modes these men escaped the dangers that are borne in managing conspiracies; and whoever imitates them will always escape them” (*D* III.6.7). Machiavelli details the approach of these successful conspirators and invites his readers to imitate their actions. Clearly, Machiavelli endorses some, albeit not all, conspiracies.²⁸

²⁷ Geuna, “Machiavelli e le congiure,” 199 (our translation); see also *ibid.*, 201–202.

²⁸ On this point, see also Zuckert, *Machiavelli’s Politics*, 218; and Coby, *Machiavelli’s Romans*, 165–166.

Is Machiavelli's endorsement limited to conspiracies undertaken by citizens who seek to overthrow a prince for the sake of establishing or restoring a republic? On one hand, Machiavelli announces near the beginning of the discourse that "a very great [cause]" of conspiracy is the desire to free the fatherland" from the rule of a prince (*D* III.6.2.). Conspiracies undertaken by patriotic republicans crop up at every turn in *Discourse* III.6—for example, the conspiracies of the Pazzi (*D* III.6.2, 6.5, 6.13, 6.16), Pelopidas (III.6.16), and Marcus Junius Brutus (*D* III.6.2, 6.16, 6.18).

On the other hand, since Machiavelli invites his readers to imitate the successful conspiracy of Darius, whose conspiracy delivered to him the kingdom of Persia, the pro-republican interpretation seems to be incomplete. *A fortiori*, Machiavelli offers impartial analyses of conspiracies "made against the fatherland" by would-be princes (*D* III.6.19). Whereas Machiavelli had begun *Discourse* III.6 by emphasizing "the dangers" posed by conspiracy for both conspirators and princes alike in the context of a principality, he goes on to argue that "conspiracies that are made against the fatherland are less dangerous for the ones who make them than are those against princes" (*D* III.6.19). For the republican citizen who is at the same time "prince of an army, as was Caesar, or Agathocles, or Cleomenes . . . the way is very easy and very secure" (*D* III.6.19). So far is Machiavelli from condemning tyrannical conspiracies undertaken within republics that he declines to indict such conspiracies and instead trumpets their feasibility.

Conspiracy, then, is a permanent feature of political life, not least in republics. Consider that Machiavelli recounts myriad conspiratorial threats to the integrity of the Roman republic (e.g., *D* I.5, I.16, I.17, I.33, I.46, I.52, II.28, III.8, III.28, III.30, and III.49). According to Machiavelli, Rome needed to secure itself against its own

conspiratorial citizens not only in the beginning, as in the case of the sons of Brutus (*D* I.16.4, III.2–3), but “every day” (*D* III.49.1). In fact, Machiavelli locates the “greatness” of Rome in its “executions” of conspirators (*D* III.8.1)—whether the conspirators were elites such as Manlius Capitolinus (*D* III.1.3, III.8.1, III.28) or “multitudes of the erring,” as in the massive conspiracies of the Roman women and of the Bacchanals (*D* III.49.1).

Nor did the Romans simply take a dim view of conspiracies. Strikingly, Machiavelli suggests that the Romans themselves conspired against other states. In *Discourse* II.32, he says that the Romans tried every approach to conquest, including “conspiracy” (*D* II.32.1). While Machiavelli grants that the Romans did not rely on conspiracies in order “to seize towns” because conspiracies are too “uncertain,” he nevertheless gives an example of a Roman conspiracy that issued in the conquest of Palaepolis, which the Romans took through a combination of “furtive violence” and “a treaty with those inside” (*D* II.32.1). How does the conspiracy at Palaepolis differ at all from the characteristic Roman approach to expansionist warfare—which consisted of making “partners” or “accords” through “deception,” which Machiavelli applauds (*D* II.4, II.13)?

More cautiously, since Machiavelli repeatedly remarks that the Roman republic grew stronger by overpowering its neighbors when they “conspired” against the empire (*D* I.33.1, II.2.3, II.4.1, III.11.1; *FH* I.29), he admits the possibility of conspiracies not only within but among states (see *D* III.6.7, 6.16). A central lesson of *Discourse* III.6 is the ubiquity and complexity of conspiracies: plots are hatched and executed in principalities and republics, on the battlefield, and even in various venues that might

seem sub- or trans-political—from the bedroom of Commodus (*D* III.6.10) to the gardens of Piso (*D* III.6.8) to the Duomo of Florence (*D* III.6.13; *FH* VIII.5).

Yet to say that Machiavelli views conspiracy as a ubiquitous and complex political phenomenon raises many questions. What are the distinguishing features of a conspiracy? More importantly, can we explain why Machiavelli lingers on the topic of conspiracy in *Discourse* III.6, not to mention other central passages? What is the significance of conspiracy for Machiavelli?

Conspiracy and Founding

Conspiracy is not just a wider phenomenon in Machiavelli's writings than scholars have allowed, but also a deeper one—indeed, it goes right to the foundations of political life. A striking feature of *Discourse* III.6 is Machiavelli's claim that the most exemplary conspirators work alone (*D* III.6.6-7). Pitkin observes that on Machiavelli's presentation of "successful conspiracy . . . the number of participants should be kept to a minimum; best of all is the solitary plotter who involves others only at the last moment."²⁹ Claude Lefort is even more emphatic: the Machiavellian conspirator "must be alone and assume his solitude" (*il lui faut être seul et assumer sa solitude*).³⁰ According to a conventional understanding of conspiracy, however, conspiracy defines a secret plot among multiple conspirators to use violence for the sake of changing the regime or seizing political power. The very term *congiura* derives from the verb *congiurare*, which literally means,

²⁹ Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman*, 20.

³⁰ Lefort, *Le travail de l'œuvre*, 617-618.

“to swear together”; intrigue seems to be essential to conspiracy.³¹ Machiavelli himself writes early in *Discourse* III.6: “With one individual, it cannot be said that it is a conspiracy, but a firm disposition arisen in one man to kill the prince” (*D* III.6.2). Yet in the same chapter Machiavelli goes on to say that, at least in the republican context, “a citizen can order himself for power without making his mind and his plan manifest to anyone” (*D* III.6.19). Is it not paradoxical, or at least unusual, to describe conspiracy as the action of a solitary individual?

How a conspirator can proceed by himself, and why Machiavelli emphasizes this fact, becomes clear in his portraits of successful conspirators. In Machiavelli’s presentation, both Nelematus and Darius forced their confederates to accede to their plans by threatening to betray them to their would-be victims—effectively making them an offer they could not refuse. Lefort explains: “the conspirator may be forced to seek support: he must under no circumstances depend on others.”³² The decisive, independent, and threatening actions of Nelematus and Darius transformed their accomplices into subjects compelled to carry out their commands, rather than independent actors capable of ruining the scheme (*D* III.6.11).³³ Alternatively put, successful conspirators must

³¹ Similarly, “to conspire” arises out of the Latin, *conspirare*—literally, “to breathe together.” See Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 2.1.100.

³² Lefort, *Le travail de l’œuvre*, 617: “le conspirateur peut être contraint de chercher des appuis, il ne doit en aucun cas dépendre d’autrui.”

³³ Machiavelli even claims that this design could have brought success to the Pisonian conspiracy against Emperor Nero (*D* III.6.8).

conspire against their coconspirators in order truly to stand alone. Since the solitariness of the conspirator reflects his self-reliance, the conspirator evokes the greatest founders, the “armed prophets” of *The Prince*, whom Machiavelli also characterizes as solitary because self-sufficient (*P* 6).³⁴

We suggest that the conspirator may be seen as a non-mythical link to the founder. Machiavelli’s founders are all figures out of legendary pasts.³⁵ But when Machiavelli turns to analogous historical figures, such as Cleomenes (*D* I.9.4, I.18.5, III.6.19), Hiero (*P* 6), Agathocles (*P* 8; *D* II.13.1, III.6.19), and Septimius Severus (*P* 19), they come to light not only as “tyrants who enrich and arm the people,” as McCormick has shown, but also, and especially, as conspirators.³⁶ If, in the words of Louis Althusser, Machiavelli is the “theorist of beginnings,” then it is through his dramatizations of and reflections on conspiracy that we come to understand what beginnings really entail.³⁷

³⁴ Cf. Machiavelli’s argument in *P* 17 that the self-sufficient prince should first and foremost cultivate his subjects’ fear of him rather than their love because the former emotion is more easily controlled and manipulated.

³⁵ Isaiah Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 77.

³⁶ John P. McCormick, “Machiavelli’s inglorious tyrants: On Agathocles, Scipio, and unmerited glory,” *History of Political Thought* 36, no. 1 (2015): 51.

³⁷ Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us* (London: Verso, 1999), 6; see also Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 38.

For example, Machiavelli draws a direct connection between the Spartan conspirator Cleomenes and Rome's first founder, Romulus. In *Discourse* I.9, Machiavelli writes "that it never or rarely happens that any republic or kingdom is ordered well from the beginning or reformed altogether anew outside its old orders unless it is ordered by one individual" (*D* I.9.2). While Romulus is Machiavelli's exemplar in this passage, later in the chapter he focuses on Cleomenes, whose conspiracy aimed to re-found Sparta: "he took a convenient opportunity, had all the ephors and anyone else who might be able to stand against him killed, and then renewed altogether the laws of Lycurgus" (*D* I.9.4). Nine chapters later, Machiavelli returns to Romulus and Cleomenes, extolling both individuals, without distinction, for their use of "extraordinary modes" and "violence and arms" in order to (re-)found their states (*D* I.18.5; see also I.17 and I.55). A similar identification of the founder with the conspirator occurs in Chapter 6 of *The Prince*. To the pantheon of armed prophets—Romulus, Moses, Cyrus, and Theseus—Machiavelli adds the "lesser example" of Hiero, tyrant of Syracuse (*P* 6). While Machiavelli's main point is that Hiero used his own arms and virtue to acquire and reorder Syracuse, Machiavelli subsequently reveals that Hiero came to power through a conspiracy—employing mercenaries to seize control of Syracuse and then brutally cutting them to pieces while claiming political power for himself (*P* 13).

Just as conspirators may become founders, so too successful founders prove to be conspirators. In one of his rare substantial treatments of a founder, Machiavelli portrays

Cyrus the Great as a master conspirator (*D* II.13).³⁸ In this chapter, Machiavelli almost imperceptibly moves from descriptions of deceptive actions undertaken by Cyrus against foreign enemies, to deceptive actions undertaken by Cyrus against his uncle the king (who, according to Xenophon, dies of natural causes without losing his formal position), to usurpative actions undertaken by Gian Galeazzo Visconti against his uncle (who loses both his position and his life in the process).³⁹ It makes sense, in fact, that a founder would need to engage in conspiracy for two reasons. As Machiavelli makes clear in his discussion of Cyrus, all new princes begin as private citizens (*D* II.13.1). Lacking arms at the beginning of his career, the founder must ascend, like Agathocles, “not only from a private fortune but from a mean and abject one” (*P* 7). Thus Machiavelli picks out fraud

³⁸ Cf. Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*, trans. Wayne Ambler (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 4.2–5. Although Machiavelli refers to Xenophon’s account of Cyrus in this discourse, he may also have Herodotus’ Cyrus in mind. For whereas according to Xenophon Cyrus is raised, lovingly, by his Median grandfather Astyages, Herodotus’ narrative pits Cyrus and Astyages against each other (Herodotus I.107–130). Herodotus reports that Astyages ordered Cyrus exposed as an infant (like the other armed prophets of *P* 6); eventually, moreover, Cyrus comes to rule the Medes through the conquest of Astyages. That Xenophon himself refers to Herodotus’ more deflationary portrait of Cyrus supports the possibility that Machiavelli was familiar with both texts.

³⁹ See *FH* I.27. This last example cannot but remind one of another Lombard named Gian Galeazzo, whose position vis-à-vis his uncle was reversed (*FH* VIII.26, VIII.36).

as the most important mode of action for conspirator and founder alike.⁴⁰ As he says in his discussion of Cyrus: “Nor do I believe that force alone is ever found to be enough, but fraud alone will be found to be quite enough” (*D* II.13.1).⁴¹

Second, once founders have acquired their states through conspiratorial action, they must then conspire against potential conspirators in order to secure their new order. As Frederick Whelan puts the point, “the problems of ruling and of conspiring are similar for Machiavelli insofar as both involve the need for secrecy and deception.”⁴² The original conspiracy that brings the conspirator to power serves as training for the challenges of maintaining his state. Interestingly, the same lesson on conspiracy as preparation for ruling applies even to a republican leader. Why, after all, does Machiavelli take up the subject of conspiracy in Book III of the *Discourses*, in which he aims “to demonstrate to anyone how much the actions of particular men made Rome great” (*D* III.1.6)? The most straightforward answer is that Machiavelli’s general inquiry into conspiracy arises out of his analysis in the preceding passages (*D* III.2–5) of two Roman conspiracies that occurred at the birth of the republic: first, the conspiracy of

⁴⁰ Manent, *Naissances de la Politique Moderne*, 19–20; Garver, *Machiavelli and the History of Prudence*, 86–91.

⁴¹ Cf. Francesco Guicciardini, *Opere inedite, volume primo*, per cura Piero e Luigi Guicciardini (Firenze: Barbèra, Bianchi, e Comp., 1857), 66–67.

⁴² Frederick G. Whelan, *Hume and Machiavelli: Political Realism and Liberal Thought* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 168.

Lucius Junius Brutus; second, the conspiracy of Brutus' sons. Machiavelli portrays Brutus as a conspirator, even as the consummate conspirator. In *Discourse* III.2, he writes of Brutus: "there was never anyone so prudent nor esteemed so wise for any eminent work of his than Junius Brutus deserves to be held in his simulation of stupidity"—a guise Brutus put on so as "to be less observed and to have more occasion for crushing the kings and freeing his own fatherland" (*D* III.2.1).⁴³ The Roman republic was founded through the conspiracy of Brutus against the Tarquin kings. And it was preserved, as the next chapter shows, by crushing those who were first to conspire against the republic, namely, the sons of Brutus (*D* III.3; see also I.16.4). Thus Machiavelli celebrates Lucius Junius Brutus not only for founding the Roman republic, but also, and especially, for discovering the conspiracy of his own sons and overseeing their execution (*D* I.16.4, III.3). From this example Machiavelli draws the lesson: "whoever takes up a tyranny and does not kill Brutus, and whoever makes a free state and does not kill the sons of Brutus, maintains himself for little time" (*D* III.3).

Even before Brutus, Machiavelli's Moses had taught himself this lesson: "since he wished his laws and his orders to go forward, Moses was forced to kill infinite men . . . who were opposed to his plans" (*D* III.30.1). Consider, in addition, Machiavelli's discussion of how the prince can secure himself against conspiracies in Chapter 19 of *The Prince*. Machiavelli holds up Septimius Severus as a "new prince," whose security rested

⁴³ This claim entails a significant alteration to Livy's text, as argued at length in Thomas L. Pangle and Timothy W. Burns, *The Key Texts of Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 193–195.

on his reputation for fraud, which was itself borne of the brilliant three-pronged conspiracy that won Severus the emperorship (*P* 19). Severus' conspiracy had the effect of "killing the sons of Brutus": no one dared conspire against an emperor who held a reputation for consummate skill in conspiracy. Agathocles also emerges as an example of a conspirator-founder who "kept to a life of crime at every rank of his career," yet was "never conspired against by his citizens" (*P* 7). Why Agathocles never faced a conspiracy Machiavelli explains with reference to Agathocles' ability to use cruelty well. In short, Agathocles eliminated potential conspirators before they could plot against him. Thus a new prince may be said to be engaged in a lifelong conspiracy to maintain his rule.⁴⁴

Viewed together, the examples of Brutus, Moses, Severus, and Agathocles show that a new prince or a new "prince of a republic" (*D* I.33.1; see also I.12.1, I.18.4) should conspire against the enemies of his fledgling regime in order to beat potential conspirators to the punch. Notice that this list of figures reveals conspiracy to be the link between republics and principalities. That is, princes need constantly fear republican conspirators, and republics need fear princely ones. But conspiracy is more than a conceptual link between principalities and republics insofar as both remain ineluctably susceptible to conspiracies. Conspiratorial action bridges the gap between the two states, when a conspirator transforms one into the other. Indeed, in Machiavelli's reworking of

⁴⁴ Machiavelli's first example of a "new prince" in *The Prince* is Francesco Sforza, who ascended to power through a conspiracy against the Golden Ambrosian Republic of Milan; see *P* 1 and *FH* V.13.

the Polybian cycle of regimes at the beginning of the *Discourses*, “plots and conspiracies” are the cause of regime change (*D I.2.3*).⁴⁵

Thus conspiracy’s significance for Machiavelli’s political thought has to do with the way it exposes the “effectual truth” about founding and maintaining new modes and orders.⁴⁶ Political institutions and practices are not given by nature or God; they are wrought instead by the hands of conspirators, who use fraud to acquire and maintain political power. At the same time, Machiavelli suggests that the specter of conspiracy haunts every established political authority. Recognizing this fact, and anticipating future threats, the greatest founders have killed the sons of Brutus. Putting these points another way, every successful conspiracy has the potential to found a new state; conversely, to crush a conspiracy is to reinforce the existing system of rule.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See also Nathan Tarcov, “Law and Innovation in Machiavelli’s *Prince*,” in *Enlightening Revolutions: Essays in Honor of Ralph Lerner*, ed. Svetozar Minkov and Stéphane Douard (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 87; and Zuckert, *Machiavelli’s Politics*, 85.

⁴⁶ In his introductory lines to Chapter 15 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli speaks of the importance of *andare dreto alla verità effettuale della cosa*—going behind what is imagined to the effectual truth of the matter (*Opere I*, 159). Not coincidentally, perhaps, *dietrologia* (from *dietro*, the modern Italian word for “behind”) is a contemporary colloquial expression for “conspiracy theory.”

⁴⁷ See Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 195.

A Machiavellian Education in Conspiracy

In light of conspiracy's thematic importance for Machiavelli, the question arises: was Machiavelli a teacher of conspirators? That the *Discourses* are addressed to a man, Zanobi Buondelmonti, who would eventually conspire against the Medici in 1522, suggests that Machiavelli knew that his audience was interested in conspiracy as a practical possibility. What's more, in *Discourse* III.6, Machiavelli playfully invites the reader to contemplate the dangers of writing on conspiracy: "Everyone should guard himself from writing as from a reef, for there is nothing that convicts you more easily than what is written by your hand" (*D* III.6.8).⁴⁸ One of the attendees at the Orti Oricellari, Jacopo Nardi, attributes at least some blame for the Rucellai Gardens conspiracy of 1522 to Machiavelli, given the influence that Machiavelli exercised over those youths and the esteem in which they held his writings.⁴⁹ Another, Filippo de' Nerli, renders a more balanced judgment: that a proper reading of Machiavelli would have either halted a conspiracy or resulted in a more prudent attempt.⁵⁰ In addition to the judgments of Nardi and Nerli, one may recall Machiavelli's own claim in the *Florentine*

⁴⁸ This line has particular force, since the presence of Machiavelli's name on a list taken from the Boscoli conspirators led to his own arrest and subsequent torture.

⁴⁹ Jacopo Nardi, *Istorie delle Città di Firenze, volume secondo*, per cura e opera di Lelio Arbib (Firenze: Soc. Editrice delle Storie del Nardi e del Varchi, 1838–41), 77.

⁵⁰ Filippo de' Nerli, *Commentarj de' fatti civili occorsi dentro la città di Firenze dall'anno MCCXV al MDXXXVII* (Firenze: Apresso David Raimondo Mertz e Gio. Jacopo Majer, 1728), 138.

Histories that the conspiracy against the Duke of Milan was originally motivated by a humanist tutor who taught the superiority of ancient republics over modern princes (*FH* VII.33).

A number of modern scholars have argued that Machiavelli was indeed such a teacher. To hear Mark Hulliung tell it, *Discourse* III.6 outlines “the method of conducting successful conspiracy” for the benefit of Florentine republicans, who might use this method to overthrow the Medici and re-found the republic.⁵¹ Erica Benner takes the opposite view: Machiavelli delivers “a cautionary message” in *Discourse* III.6; his examples of failed conspiracies prove that the risks involved in conspiring almost always outweigh the potential gains for the conspirators themselves and the state alike.⁵²

Benner approaches the question of the practical import of *Discourse* III.6 in the appropriate way, by looking at Machiavelli’s own examples. Surveying these examples, she correctly notes the inescapable riskiness of conspiracy. The extraordinary *dramatis personae* of *Discourse* III.6 were involved, predominantly, in failed conspiracies—from the Pisonian conspiracy against Nero (*D* III.6.8) to Brutus’ conspiracy against Caesar (*D* III.6.16) to the conspiracy of Hanno the Great against the Carthaginian republic (*D* III.6.19) to the conspiracy of the Pazzi against the Medici (*D* III.6.13). Yet Benner goes too far when she writes that “the conclusion drawn at the end of every example is that it is almost impossible to succeed,” and that examples of successful conspiracies are

⁵¹ Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli*, 94-95. Cf. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 168-70.

⁵² Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, 373-377.

celebrated by writers “as a thing rare and almost without example.”⁵³ In addition to those of Nelematus and Darius (*D* III.6.7, 6.11), Machiavelli points to the successful conspiracies undertaken by Jacopo d’Appiano (*D* III.6.3), Marcia the mistress of Commodus (*D* III.6.10), Macrinus the prefect to Caracalla (*D* III.6.11), Alexamenus (*D* III.6.7, 6.15), Pelopidas, Agathocles, Cleomenes, and Caesar himself (*D* III.6.19). What’s more, he holds these up as examples to be imitated (*D* III.6.8, III.9).

At the same time, Machiavelli hardly promises success to the conspirator who understands and acts on the advice of *Discourse* III.6. True, Machiavelli notes, as rules of thumb, the modes that bring success to conspirators on balance—for example, “not to give time to the conspirators to accuse you” (*D* III.6.6), and “not to communicate the thing to anyone” (*D* III.6.9). But these guidelines do not amount to a method; for Machiavelli includes examples of successful conspiracies that flout these rules of thumb. The conspiracies of Alexamenus and the Aetolians against Nabis the Spartan tyrant, in addition to the conspiracy of Pelopidas against the tyrants of Thebes, involved whole armies and unfolded over extended periods of time (*D* III.6.7, 6.16). Even the Pisonian and Pazzi conspiracies did not fail as a result of the large number of confidants with knowledge of the plots (*D* III.6.5). No method could account for every inconvenience that threatens to expose the plot—the greatest danger for the conspirator (*D* III.6.4)—or to disrupt its execution. Machiavelli notes that conspiracies led by republican military leaders “have had various outcomes according to fortune”: even among conspiracies of this type, which are most of all likely to succeed, there is no guarantee of success (*D*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 374.

III.6.19). At the conclusion of *Discourse* III.6, Machiavelli himself acknowledges that a reader looking for a method of conspiracy will have been disappointed, since many practical questions facing the conspirator—whether to use steel or poison, for example—Machiavelli has declined to answer (*D* III.6.20).

That Machiavelli offers no method of successful conspiracy in *Discourse* III.6 is consistent with his overall approach to considering conspiracy, since he had offered no method of preventing conspiracies in Chapter 19 of *The Prince*. True, in the latter text, Machiavelli initially identifies the people's love of the prince as the great bulwark against conspiracy. But that advice is immediately qualified by Machiavelli's example of a prince who was both loved by the people and killed by conspirators—namely, Annibale Bentivoglio of Bologna. Equally important, by the conclusion of the chapter, Machiavelli has shown that the Roman emperor Septimius Severus guarded against conspiracies by satisfying the Roman soldiers, not the people. Yet, lest one take Severus' example as a general illustration of avoiding conspiracy, Machiavelli has already drawn our attention (in *P* 19) to the case of Severus' son, Antoninus Caracalla, murdered by one of his own soldiers.

Why, then, does Machiavelli eschew a methodical account of successful conspiracy in *Discourse* III.6? “To present a series of precepts to be followed and examples to be imitated would be to encourage a passive sort of learning, perhaps adequate for acting in a world ruled by timeless custom, but ill-adapted to the world of

changing particulars Machiavelli describes.”⁵⁴ Machiavelli does not draw hard-and-fast conclusions about why, how, or when it makes sense to conspire; the reader will have to think through these questions for himself. Rather, Machiavelli hopes to inculcate in the would-be conspirator a certain cast of character or a set of virtues—in particular, prudence and spirit. These are the characteristics that mark successful conspirators in *Discourse* III.6, and they are notable for their absence among those who fail (*D* III.6.14; see also *FH* III.13).

Prudence is the keynote of *Discourse* III.6. As Claude Lefort has noted, “Machiavelli . . . trains the young to stand against the *impeto* of the adversary and to study his features, to prepare their response, and to commit a slow and prudent conspiracy.”⁵⁵ Its importance is highlighted by Machiavelli’s claim that if certain conspirators only “knew how to do this wickedness with prudence, it would be impossible that they not succeed” (*D* III.6.3). What constitutes Machiavellian prudence? Recall that Machiavelli emphasizes the prudence of Nelematus and Darius and invites “any prudent individual” to imitate their approach to conspiracy (*D* III.6.6). In so doing, Machiavelli signals one important aspect of prudence—intellectual self-reliance. Prudence demands self-possession of the kind that allowed Nelematus, Darius, Brutus, and others to prepare their conspiracies by themselves, and to manage the emotions of their fellow conspirators. Failure awaits conspirators who fail to control their emotions,

⁵⁴ Eugene Garver, “Machiavelli’s *The Prince*: A Neglected Rhetorical Classic,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 13, no. 2 (1980): 101.

⁵⁵ Lefort, *Le travail de l’œuvre*, 678.

such as Quintianus, who conspired against Emperor Commodus, and Antonio da Volterra, who conspired against Lorenzo de' Medici (*D* III.6.15). Like the multitude that Machiavelli criticizes in *Discourse* I.44, these conspirators announced their intentions at the crucial moment, when it was the successful execution of their conspiracies that would have “satisfied their appetite.”

Machiavellian prudence encompasses, in addition, timely and flexible deliberation unencumbered by ethical constraints.⁵⁶ As Machiavelli writes in the twenty-first chapter of *The Prince*: “prudence consists in knowing how to recognize the qualities of the inconveniences, and picking the least bad as good” (*P* 21). Above all, prudence involves knowing, at all times, whether to temporize or to strike—the same quality necessary for princes or republics who wish to escape conspiracies (*D* I.33.5, III.6.20). For conspirators cannot let their intentions be known, and their targets cannot let it be known that they know, until they are prepared to act. Prudence is also required for managing this precarious condition, during which one must dissemble one’s intentions lest the enterprise be ruined (*D* III.6.19–20; *P* 18). Not for the first time, Lucius Junius Brutus is the example *par excellence*; it was, after all, the long act of dissembling that allowed him to overthrow the Tarquins (cf. *D* III.2 with Livy I.56).

But prudence alone is not enough: one cannot strike at the right time and without hesitation unless one possesses spirit. In his account of the failed Pazzi conspiracy in *Florentine Histories* VIII.5, Machiavelli declares: “if ever in any matter one looks for a great and firm spirit made resolute in both life and death through many experiences, it is

⁵⁶ Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric*, 31.

necessary to have it in this, where it is seen very many times that men skilled in arms and soaked in blood are lacking in spirit.”⁵⁷ The word *animo* occurs with unique frequency and concentration in *Discourse* III.6.⁵⁸ According to Mansfield, “*animo* is indispensable in conspiracies...in which it is required for overcoming inhibitions, for steeling oneself to the performance of actions one can see are necessary but may not have the nerve for.”⁵⁹ Conspiracy is where even formidable men and women prove inadequate in the breach.⁶⁰ In *The Prince*, Machiavelli goes so far as to say that it is impossible for a prince to prevent assassination by a spirited enemy; the prince’s only consolation is that such men are “most rare” (*P* 19).

Machiavelli initially attributes a lack of spirit, per convention, to cowardice (*D* III.6.14), but then drops any mention of this. The greater problem is reverence: those not otherwise possessed of physical fear are nonetheless overawed, either by the majesty of their would-be victims or by the moral magnitude of their deeds (*D* III.6.12–15). It is a hard thing for most to kill a man, at least initially, as evidenced by the failure of his brothers to kill Alfonso, duke of Ferrara (*D* III.6.14). And it appears even harder in a religious setting: Machiavelli attributes part of the failure of the Pazzi conspiracy to

⁵⁷ Machiavelli, *Opere* III, 685.

⁵⁸ Michelle Tolman Clarke, “On the Woman Question in Machiavelli,” *The Review of Politics* 67, no. 2 (2005): 240-41.

⁵⁹ Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s Virtue*, 40.

⁶⁰ See Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 285.

Giovambattista da Montesecco's unwillingness to commit a murder in church (*D* III.6.13).⁶¹ The ultimate reverence that interferes with conspiracy is not just for man and man's laws but God and His laws (cf. *D* I.27). But lest one view Christianity as the chief obstacle to a successful conspiracy, it is necessary to acknowledge the many pre-Christian conspiracies that failed.⁶² In the same passage as his discussion of the Pazzi conspiracy, Machiavelli ascribes to reverence the failure of a slave to murder Gaius Marius (*D* III.6.14). Throughout the centuries, reverence is a fundamental pitfall for the Machiavellian conspirator. Unwavering *animo* therefore requires *prudenzia*—namely, the kind of intellectual self-reliance that replaces conventional piety.⁶³

But the surest means of stiffening one's spirit is to have experience in conspiracy. "For of spirit in great things there is no one who may promise himself a sure thing without having had experience" (*D* III.6.15; see also III.38). This is what separates Lucius Junius Brutus from his descendant,⁶⁴ as well as from such figures as Cicero (*D*

⁶¹ Note that the word in Italian for pity and piety is the same (*pietà*).

⁶² Cf. Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders: A Study of the Discourses on Livy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979).

⁶³ Whether this form of intellectual autonomy amounts to a philosophic stance is much-debated in the scholarship on Machiavelli; though cf. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 295-299.

⁶⁴ Lefort, *Le travail de l'œuvre*, 641-42.

I.52.3) and Machiavelli's unfortunate fellow Florentine Piero Soderini (*D* I.52.2, III.3).⁶⁵ The earlier Brutus had in effect prepared himself to conspire by conspiring—specifically, by dissembling. And his conspiracy against the Tarquins prepared him to defend the nascent republic against conspiracies in turn (*D* III.2-3, 39). Paradoxically, one prepares for or against conspiracies by having already conspired oneself. The difficulty lies in preparing oneself to conspire without already having done so.

In lieu of concrete, practical experience, one may have mental experience. It is possible to think and see the world as a conspirator and thereby to prepare for action (cf. *P* 14). Machiavelli's texts could instruct and prepare the reader for politics as conspiracy by honing his prudence and steeling his spirit. "Correct imitation accordingly involves imitating and realizing a flexible principle of prudential judgment. . . . And this in turn gives rise to texts designed to dramatize and inculcate such judgment, whose rhetoric is, therefore, not ornamental but strategic."⁶⁶ Machiavelli's writings on conspiracy educate would-be conspirators so that they may seize their opportunity.

Conclusion: Conspiracy and Politics

⁶⁵ Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics*, 221 also notes the contrast between Brutus and Soderini. That Cicero had already responded effectively (and illegally!) to the second Catilinarian conspiracy only underscores the significance of conspiracy as a recurring danger.

⁶⁶ Victoria Kahn, "Virtù and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli's *Prince*," *Representations* 13 (1986): 64.

For all that scholars have written on the historical conspiracies that shaped Machiavelli's life and times, they have not explained the complex and highly significant account of this topic found in his political thought. Why has conspiracy's significance for Machiavelli been insufficiently recognized? Perhaps the paucity of treatments of *Discourses* III.6 is part and parcel of a larger ambivalence concerning the third book of the *Discorsi*.⁶⁷ For this book is least congenial to our approach to political matters. Whereas Book I signals its focus on "public decisions" concerning matters inside the city,⁶⁸ and Book II on "deliberations" pertaining to the enlargement of the empire,⁶⁹ the third book is nominally devoted to "demonstrating . . . how much the actions of particular men made Rome great and caused in that city many good effects."⁷⁰ Book III deals with private and even secret decisions, which as Machiavelli announces near the beginning of the *Discourses*, animate half of the city's works (*D* I.1). The importance of decisions undertaken in private, of which conspiracy represents the most dangerous expression, poses an obvious problem for proponents of civic-republican and democratic readings of Machiavelli.⁷¹ Whatever

⁶⁷ Though cf. Coby, *Machiavelli's Romans*.

⁶⁸ Machiavelli, *Opere* I, 202.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 420.

⁷¹ Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* is in some ways an exception, as it presents a qualified republican reading of Machiavelli in which the darker aspects of politics remain very much present, with conspiracy an enduring threat that republics must understand if they are to prevent it.

the differences among these interpretative approaches, they share in common certain presuppositions about the arena of political conduct. To put it idiomatically, they agree that politics happens in plain sight, within the “public sphere,” as circumscribed by laws and institutions, if not by moral expectations or rules.

However, the connection Machiavelli draws between conspiracy and founding locates many of the most consequential moments of contestation and change outside the boundaries of political life narrowly or traditionally conceived. As regards Rome, at least, what happened in the bedroom of Lucretia or on the battlefields of Gaul proved as consequential as any speech delivered by a consul or senator. These ostensibly private or foreign affairs precipitated the conspiracies of Lucius Junius Brutus and of Caesar, which shaped Rome’s history and political order in far-reaching ways. The ubiquity of conspiracy therefore blurs key conceptual distinctions between the public, the private, the domestic, and the foreign. By attending to the actions of solitary plotters like Nelematus and Darius, Machiavelli lays bare what he considers an essential truth about politics: conspiracy represents the most acute practical manifestation of the fundamental fluidity and malleability of political order. Conspiracies operate independently of any rule-governed behavior and, if successful, entail a rewriting of the rules themselves.

Learning to think and see the world like a conspirator is to recognize and internalize this truth. For one must be able to identify both the opportunity for conspiracy and the threat of it and to meet such moments with prudence and spirit. It is in this sense that Machiavelli’s pedagogy of conspiracy amounts to a preparation for facing the vicissitudes of politics. We have tried to show that Machiavelli challenges his ambitious readers to conspire, to undertake those violent and deceptive actions on the margins that

have the power to effect the greatest change. In so doing, Machiavelli indicated his own profound discontent with the status quo—not least, with the Christian “mode of life” (see *D III.31*) that encouraged reverence and hence discouraged the prudence and spirit that both conspiracy and political rule demand. It is these virtues, rather than any method, that provide the basis for success as Machiavelli defines it. As for who will manifest them, Machiavelli himself reminds us that anyone can seize the opportunity to conspire.