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Machiavelli and Antichrist

Prophetic typology in Reginald Pole's *De Unitate* and *Apologia ad Carolum Quintum*

In the *Apologia ad Carolum Quintum* (1539)¹ Reginald Pole claimed to know, on the basis of a conversation with Thomas Cromwell some ten years earlier and subsequent inquiry into Cromwell's views, that Machiavelli's *Il Principe* had been the inspiration behind Henry VIII's decision to break with Rome, declare himself head of the church, and seize the property of the English monasteries. The *Apologia* remained unpublished until A. M. Quirini's edition of Pole's letters appeared (1744–57). After that, Pole's views were influential in fixing the image of the Henrician polity as Machiavellian in character. To A. F. Pollard, for example, Henry VIII was "Machiavelli's *Prince* in action." Since 1905, however, when Paul Van Dyke devoted an appendix to his *Renaissance Portraits* to an examination of the *Apologia*, it has been more common for historians to dismiss Pole's claim that Cromwell knew Machiavelli so early and made *Il Principe* the basis of his advice to Henry VIII. Many of Van Dyke's arguments were accepted by G. R. Elton in *Tudor Revolution in Government* (1953) and "The political creed of Thomas Cromwell" (1956).²

Pole's views on Machiavelli appear in a work that, like the closely related *De Unitate* (1536, published 1539), is permeated by a typological vision of history. The events and persons of Pole's own time are seen as fulfillments or partial fulfillments of biblical models. Pole's typology is quite complex and, though it derives from time-honored medieval traditions of biblical exegesis, somewhat original in its method and in the particular place it finds for current events in the biblical sequence of the Last Days. Pole's works have a place in the history of sixteenth-

¹ The *Apologia* is printed in Angelo M. Quirini, ed., *Epistolarum Reginaldi Poli S. R. E. Cardinalis et aliorum ad ipsum collectio* (Brescia, 1744–57), I, pp. 66–171.

² Albert F. Pollard, *Henry VIII* (London, 1905; repr. 1951), p. 353; Paul Van Dyke, *Renaissance Portraits* (New York, 1905), pp. 377–418; Geoffrey R. Elton, *Tudor Revolution in Government* (Cambridge, 1953), pp. 71–6; Elton, "The political creed of Thomas Cromwell," *Royal Historical Society Transactions*, ser. 5, VI (1956), 69–92. See also T. M. Parker, "Was Thomas Cromwell a Machiavellian?" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* I (1950), 63–75.

century apocalyptic thought now being written, and, as Pole's apocalyptic vision shaped his report of the facts, it is helpful to examine his view of sacred history, and particularly the role he assigned to himself in the unfolding of scriptural prophecy, to assess how his bias might affect his telling of a story like that of his meeting with Cromwell.

This chapter is concerned with Pole's use of prophecy and with the question of Machiavelli's availability in England in the late 1520s. But our primary interest here is in the relationship between Machiavellian and biblical discourse: in the ways in which old doctrines of the sacredness of kings and their office were reformulated in order to meet the challenge posed by Machiavelli, and in how that reformulation created new roles in the writing of political texts and the speaking of political counsel. Pole opposed Machiavelli and regarded his doctrines as an essentially secret teaching whose poison was spreading through Christendom. Yet, in opposing Machiavelli, Pole himself became in a sense an author of political arcana and tried to find a biblical precedent for such a role. The texts discussed in this chapter belong to a tradition of political prophecy whose explicit origins are biblical; they represent a special form of prophetic discourse, shaped by opposition to Machiavelli and by the belief that Machiavelli had written a secret text. Pole's themes, his conception of the chronology of sacred history, and indeed his own view of his prophetic or quasiprophetic mission were all deeply influenced by the complex interplay of occultation and revelation he thought he had discovered in Machiavelli's *Il Principe* and in the contemporary events it inspired.

Before proceeding to the texts, a brief account of the spiritual and political crisis Pole experienced at the time of their composition is in order.³ Pole had from early childhood a complex and potentially explosive relationship to the king. Pole's mother was the daughter of George, Duke of Clarence, and the niece of Edward IV. Her brother Edward was executed in 1499 because of the potential danger he represented to the Tudor claim to the throne. Pole was born in 1500, and his father, Sir Richard Pole, died in 1505. Henry VIII came to the throne when Reginald Pole was nine; he favored the Poles, and especially young Reginald, whom he generously supported at Oxford, where he was king's scholar at Magdalen from 1513, and then at Padua, where he went for an extended period of study in 1521. Pole was

³ In what follows I am partly following Wilhelm Schenck, *Reginald Pole: Cardinal of England* (London, 1950), pp. 1–86, and Dermot Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Cardinal Pole and the Counter Reformation* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 24–44, but I develop the theme of prophecy somewhat differently than Fenlon, and the attempt to explore the psychological dimension of Pole's spiritual crisis is my own.

very, perhaps excessively, grateful: In the hope of serving his benefactor with the fruits of his study, he devoted himself to his books to the point of injuring his health (*De Unitate*, Sig. Bir).⁴ In this zeal we may perhaps see an attempt to resolve ambivalent feelings: Pole was a boy without a father, and the man who, as kinsman and benefactor, in some measure supplied his place sat on a throne that might have passed to his grandfather, to his uncle (whom Henry VII had killed), or to his brother. Beneath his childhood loyalty lay great bitterness that comes to the surface in later references to his uncle, as in this passage from the *De unitate*, in which he points up the irony of his own defense of Mary Tudor's right to the succession:

If your father came back to earth now and saw me, the nephew of that man whom, though utterly innocent as everyone knows, he took pains to have killed because he was too close to the throne and capable of later becoming an impediment to his descendants; if he saw me, offspring of that house he considered dangerous, defend the right of inheritance [i.e., Mary's] against which you, his son, are taking action! What an extraordinary thing it would seem to him. He would then clearly see how weak human reason is when it tries to remove all obstacles to the perpetuity of a dynasty. For what moved him to the murder of my uncle, who was unanimously judged to have been completely innocent all his life (like a one year's child, as Scripture says), was only that he saw in him the nephew of King Edward, the sole living male in the line that could one day be the source of fresh revolts to establish that man's right to the throne against that of his own family. . . . And it is I, who come of the same family, son of the sister of the man whom he had killed because he feared he could become an obstacle to his children, it is I who take up the defense of his granddaughter against his son's opposition when he himself had thought that that murder would assure the protection of his line. (Sig. Oiiiv-Oiiir)⁵

Here an ironic loyalty to the Tudor succession mixes with bitter anger at the loss of his uncle.

The turning point in Pole's attitude to the king came in 1535, when Thomas More and John Fisher were executed (Sig. Sv). This was only one of a number of acts by which Henry moved away from obedience to Rome (the king's divorce, his assumption of supremacy over the English church, the desecration of the shrine of Thomas Becket,

⁴ References to the *De Unitate* are to the Blado edition (Rome, 1539), *Reginaldi Poli Cardinalis Britannii, ad Henricum octavum Britanniae regem, pro ecclesiasticae unitatis defensione, libri quatuor*. For the date of this edition, an account of its differences from the P.R.O. MS sent to Henry, and arguments concerning the need for a critical edition, see Thomas F. Dunn, "The development of the text of Pole's *De unitate ecclesiae*," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* LXX (1976), 455–68.

⁵ Translations, unless otherwise attributed, are my own throughout.

and the dissolution of the monasteries were others). But for Pole it was perhaps the most personally painful, and it precipitated his own crisis of obedience. This was the major crisis of Pole's life, transforming not just his attitude toward Henry but his whole religious life, his conception of history, and his Latin prose style.⁶

Pole's life was first touched by the changes taking place in Henry's England when he returned from Padua in 1527 and had his conversation with Cromwell about Machiavelli's ideas (and their relevance to Henry's intended divorce). In 1529 he left for study in Paris, but while there was asked by the king to act as royal emissary in obtaining an opinion on the divorce from the University of Paris. He later claimed to have resisted this task and to have delegated it to Edward Fox. What Pole's actual role was remains unclear, but it is evident that bribery was involved, whether Pole knew of it or not. It seems likely that whatever role Pole played in the mission, he could not have then held such an uncompromising view of the divorce as he was later to do. In 1530 Henry VIII offered Pole the See of York on condition that he declare his opinion of the divorce. Pole tried to devise an acceptable compromise, but when the time came to explain it to the king, he became tongue-tied and then found himself, despite his plan, condemning the divorce to the king himself in the strongest of terms. He attempted to conciliate the king afterward, but as his position had not really changed, he was unsuccessful. He was allowed to leave England again in 1532 because, according to Eustace Chapuys, the imperial ambassador, he threatened to speak his mind publicly if made to stay. Abroad again, Pole retained his various benefices and royal pension, and Henry made further efforts to persuade him of the rightness of his cause. At this time the breach was not permanent, but it was soon to become so. In Italy, Pole's studies took a theological turn and, influenced by the intense piety of Gasparo Contarini and his associates in the Oratory of Divine Love, and by other currents of religious feeling in Padua and Venice, Pole experienced something of a religious conversion. In the words of one member of his circle, "Pole is studying divinity and *meteorologizei*, despising things merely human and terrestrial. He is undergoing a great change, exchanging man for God."⁷

⁶ His style loses polish and urbanity and gains in vehemence at this point. See Noëlle-Marie Egretier, ed., *Défense de l'unité de l'Église* (Paris, 1967), pp. 36–41 and refs., but see also Dunn, "The development of the text," pp. 464–7.

⁷ Fenlon, *Heresy*, p. 36, citing a letter of John Friar to Thomas Starkey; J. S. Brewer, James Gairdner, and R. H. Brodie, eds., *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII* (London, 1862–1910), IX [no. 917]. This collection will be cited hereafter as *L.P.* *Meteorologizei* [Gk.] means "he speaks of high things, spiritual matters."

Thus, when Henry VIII set Thomas Starkey the task of getting Pole to declare his views on the supremacy in 1535, it was a far more religiously committed man with whom they had to deal. Pole's answer took the form of a treatise, the *De Unitate*, which was sent to Henry in 1536. It is a scathing attack on Henry VIII and on his policies, and it led to a complete break.

Pole's family had remained in England, and in 1538 Reginald Pole's elder brother Henry was executed. His aged mother was imprisoned, and later (1541) she too lost her life as a result of her son's rebellion. Pole knew of the danger, and in fact this aspect of his allegiance to Rome – that he had to abandon his family to likely death to proclaim it – helps explain why his conversion was so thorough, his position in regard to Henry so uncompromising. The personal stakes were too high to permit halfhearted solutions: In the *De Unitate* he adopts the role of the zealot and the prophet, casting earthly attachments aside in favor of identification with biblical exemplars of selfless devotion, cutting ties not only to his king but also to his family. Having put them at risk, he rejects the claims of his human family, and the church becomes his mother:

I have seen you kill those who were dearer to me for Christ's sake than my own parents [More and Fisher]: I see your hand now make every effort to destroy the unity of the Church of Christ and to break off, so much as lies in your power, a large part of it, that unity that ought to be dearer to me than my parents and my country, dearer than the entire creation. Now I am not completely silent, but my mother the Church has taught me to speak, and in this decisive and perillous moment at which she finds herself should I not raise my voice? Should I not speak? Should I not cry out? (Sig. Svv)

Pole may have had Saint Cyprian's well-known saying in mind: One cannot have God for a father who has not the church for a mother. Henry, by rejecting one, had lost the other, whereas Pole, in his own understanding of these events, was drawing nearer to his heavenly parents by rejecting the king who had been a symbolic father to him, but at the terrible cost of abandoning his mother to Henry's revenge. Only by recourse to the transcendent, among biblical examples of martyrdom and sacrifice, could he find solace (and sanction) for the course of action his conscience thrust upon him.

Dermot Fenlon has written brilliantly of Pole's spiritual life at this time, relating Pole's experiences to those of the *spirituali* influenced by Juan de Valdes and to other traditions of piety and meditation. Pole's was an intensely personal conversion, but it also entailed the adoption of a scriptural attitude toward history and politics:

At Venice, in the Benedictine setting of S. Giorgio Maggiore, and at Padua, in that of S. Justina, Pole now came into contact with the new Biblical scholarship, and with a style of exegesis which began profoundly to influence his whole cast of mind. He attended lectures on Isaiah given by the Hebrew scholar Jan van Kempen (Iohannes Campensis) whom Contarini had summoned to S. Justina; there, too, he became familiar with the Scriptures as expounded by the Benedictine scholar Isidorus Clarius. From this time forward, we find in his writings a pervasive consciousness of God's continuous dealings with mankind in history. Pole's thought becomes from this date permeated by the Bible. The effect may be described as follows. He learnt to apply the Bible as an interpretative key to history, including the events of his own time. Time became for him the movement of providential history; he began to read events in the light of what the Scriptures yielded.⁸

In consequence of this new scriptural orientation, Pole's works in which English history is at issue, especially the *De Unitate* and the *Apologia*, place current events in the larger sequences of sacred history and relate contemporary persons to their biblical (and especially apocalyptic) counterparts. Pole's personal crisis thus came to seem part of the larger historical crisis as the tragedy of More and Fisher, the suffering of his family, and his own agonies of conscience became part of the universal anguish that marked the coming of the Last Days. Pole's resistance to Henry was like that of the prophets opposing the wicked kings of Israel, his testimony like the witness the church would be called upon to make against Antichrist.

The *De Unitate* was finished in early 1536 and sent to Henry VIII in May. In the same year, Pole was made a cardinal and shortly thereafter was appointed papal legate to England at a time when Henry faced serious domestic resistance. Pole's two legatine missions ended in failure. It was during the second of these (1538–9) that he visited Emperor Charles V and attempted to convince him to invade England. The *Apologia* was probably written as an elaboration of the verbal arguments Pole had made to Charles in person. Van Dyke dates its composition between August 1538, when Henry VIII was excommunicated, and early 1539, after Pole read Richard Morison's treatise defending the execution of Pole's brother, Henry Lord Montague, and that of Henry Courtenay, Marquis of Exeter (late January 1539).⁹ Charles did not invade England, nor did he share Pole's view of the threat Machiavelli posed to Christendom, for in 1550 he licensed the Spanish translation of the *Discorsi* and stated, in the text of the *privilegium*, that he considered the book "very useful and profitable" and had

⁸ Fenlon, *Heresy*, pp. 30–1.

⁹ Van Dyke, *Renascence Portraits*, pp. 387–8.

commended it to his son Philip.¹⁰ Pole apparently made subsequent efforts to oppose Machiavellian influence: An English traveler to Italy who met Pole reported to the Privy Council a plan of Pole's to do all he could to see that the book was banned; he set his nephew, Henry Huntington, the task of translating portions of Osorio's *De Nobilitate* (1542), which contains the first published attack on Machiavelli; another early critic of Machiavelli, Lancelotto Politi (*De libris christiano detestandis*, 1551), may have known Pole's views, for his own argument is quite similar; so it seems quite likely that Pole's anti-Machiavellian opinions had some subsequent influence, despite the *Apologia's* remaining unpublished in the sixteenth century. All of Machiavelli's works were placed on the first papal Index in 1559.¹¹

Pole's apocalyptic typology: Machiavellism as secret doctrine

In the *Apologia*, Pole's central argument is that the actions of Henry VIII – his claim to be head of the church, the desecration of shrines and monasteries, his manipulation of statute to achieve the death of his opponents – all flow from adherence to a secret doctrine, namely, that of Machiavelli's *Il Principe*, which is satanic in inspiration and whose influence in England is a sign of the coming of Antichrist. Pole's story of his meeting with Thomas Cromwell (pp. 133–6) is designed to reveal how Pole came to know about this doctrine, while at the same time demonstrating that Cromwell wanted to keep it secret.

The *Apologia* is structured so that the recital of Henry VIII's enormities builds suspense for the revelation of Machiavelli as the key to his policies:

But this will be seen much more clearly when I reveal the sources of his counsels, from which those actions derive. (p. 111)

I say only what all would have said had they the same opportunity to know that I have had. For the inmost core of their counsel or should I say their doctrine, which the king, now inclining wholly to tyranny, set up as the new pattern for his actions and upon which the rest of his plans depended, was

¹⁰Adolph Gerber, *Niccolò Machiavelli: Die Handschriften, Ausgaben und Übersetzungen seiner Werke im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Gotha, 1912–13; repr. Turin, 1962), II, p. 4.

¹¹Letter of John Legh to Privy Council, *L.P.* XV, 337 [no. 721]; Hieronymus Osorius, *De nobilitate civili, libri duo* (Lisbon, 1542), fols. 98ff.; letter of Pole to Catherine Pole, Bodleian MSS Carte 78, fol. 251r; Ambrosius Catharinus [Lancelotto Politi], *De libris christiano detestandis, et a christianismo penitus eliminandis* [printed as coll. 339–44 of the *Disputationes* appended to the author's *Enarationes in quinque priora capita libri Geneseos*] (Rome, 1551–2). Friedrich Heinrich Reusch, *Die Indices librorum prohibitorum des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Tubingen, 1886; repr. Nieuwkoop, 1970), p. 198.

easy to judge from the slaughter of those nobles that eventuated. And because I happened to discover this doctrine, I was able to predict what has actually happened. This is not because I was led by any special prescience, but because I knew the counsels of these men. (p. 114)

And now I shall reveal, as I promised, the inmost counsel of the man who (along with his subordinates) alone was grieved that the king was returning to better thoughts. (p. 117)

When Henry wavered about seeking a divorce, Satan sent “one of his own privy councillors” with “more ample orders” in order to strengthen the king’s intention to gratify his lust. Pole knows “what those orders were, who brought them, and by whom he was sent” (p. 118), but he delays many pages before revealing that the *nuntius Satanae* was Cromwell (p. 126) and that it was Machiavelli who wrote the text that he used to corrupt the king (p. 137). Even in the actual story of the meeting between Pole and Cromwell, the title of *Il Principe* and the identity of its author remain concealed, as we shall see.

The meeting took place at a time when Henry was seeking advice about his divorce. Pole had just returned from Italy, and Cromwell, welcoming him home, drew him into a conversation about the duties of royal counselors, hoping to find out which way Pole inclined on the divorce question. Pole thought one should tell kings what was honorable, honest, and useful. Cromwell thought this naive: Such ideas were very well in school debates but useless and even dangerous at court, for what princes wanted was not always honorable or honest. This fact could not be taught in schools, and so scholars newly come to court were in some danger of bringing trouble upon themselves and those closest to them through their lack of experience. Cromwell’s own opinion was that the counselor should try to find out what the prince really wanted (“quo tendat voluntas principis”) and help ensure that the prince got his way without appearing to be irreligious or immoral. Cromwell recommended that Pole read a book (if he read at all; experience was a better teacher) by a perceptive modern writer who based his views on experience rather than on dreams like those to be found in Plato’s *Republic*. Pole did promise to read it, but it was never sent because, Pole thought, Cromwell could judge his real reaction from his face. However, when Pole discovered from those familiar with Cromwell’s “secret studies” what book was meant, he took no less pains to get a copy than one might to intercept the secret orders of an enemy in the hope of discovering his plans.

For Pole *Il Principe* was written by Satan in the same sense in which Scripture was written by God (p. 137). It was a new doctrine, a *nova*

ars regnandi (p. 151), rejecting entirely the traditional basis of statecraft in the kingly virtues and the common good. Machiavelli's doctrine transferred the *arcana imperii* to the custody of the lion and the fox (p. 140), that is to say, based the security of the state on the use of force and fraud.¹² Pole considered the doctrines of *Il Principe* literally satanic in origin: The book bore the name of the man on its title page but was "written by the finger of Satan" (p. 137).

Pole also saw Satan's hand in the transmission of the text, for Cromwell, who was to corrupt Henry with Machiavelli's ideas, had first to be corrupted by demons. Indeed, Pole speaks of him as having become wholly inhabited by them, with little of his human identity left, before he could become the conveyer of Machiavellian influence to England (p. 126). This influence was the turning point in Henry's reign. Basing his advice on Machiavelli's supposed rejection of absolute standards of morality and advocacy of the use of religion as an instrument of policy, Cromwell convinced Henry (pp. 118–23) to declare himself head of the church and seize the property of the monasteries. In taking these steps, therefore, Henry was in fact yielding to Machiavellian (and thus demonic) influence. But in Pole's account, Henry did not know the source of these ideas, for Cromwell mentioned no source. Without naming Machiavelli, Cromwell nevertheless transmitted the essential core of Machiavellian doctrine to Henry, who thenceforth embodied that doctrine "to the letter" (p. 146) in his policies. The king became a "disciple" (pp. 144, 151) who manifested the teachings of his master more exactly than the Disciples embodied those of Christ. Thus Machiavelli's ideas are the doctrines or dogmas of Satan (pp. 114–15 and *passim*), and *Il Principe* is treated as the apocryphon, or secret book, that embodies them and is kept concealed not only from Pole but even from the king, who became an adherent of Machiavellism without knowing it.

Machiavelli could be thought of as the purveyor of a secret doctrine partly because, at the time of his purported influence on Henry VIII, *Il Principe* existed only in manuscript. It was published in 1532, but even after it was widely known it was often thought of as a book that dealt with the *arcana imperii* or secrets of rule.¹³ This view was partly

¹² "Et ideo arcanum illud imperii tuendi cum omni securitate, atque felicitate, ad leonis violentiam, et vulpis dolos transfert" (p. 140). Pole's use of the term *arcanum* in this context reflects Machiavelli's own comparison of his teaching concerning the lion and the fox to the secrets of state taught to Achilles by Chiron and allegorically hinted at by ancient writers (*Prin.* 18).

¹³ This association between Machiavelli and the *arcana imperii* will be touched on frequently in the following pages, especially in Chapter 4. See also Anna Maria Battista, "Direzioni di ricerca per una storia di Machiavelli in Francia," *Atti del convegno inter-*

a consequence of Machiavelli's self-presentation in his works. He characterizes himself as an innovator, a discoverer or rediscoverer of "new modes and orders" (see *Disc.*, preface; *Prin.* 15); he addresses his reader with an almost conspiratorial intimacy; he compares his own doctrine to the secret instruction of Achilles by the Centaur (*Prin.* 18). That doctrine itself, with its emphasis on secrecy, deception, and dissimulation, also lent credence to the notion that he was revealing the "secrets of rule" hinted at by Aristotle, Tacitus,¹⁴ and other ancient writers: Surely if the Tacitean phrase *arcana imperii* meant anything, it must refer to these teachings of Machiavelli, which seemed, by making ordinary readers privy to the moral license by which princes achieved their ends, to disclose the trade secrets of statecraft. In addition, there was a built-in paradox in the publication of such secrets, for if these really were the techniques by which clever men gained power over others, then publishing them for all to read could only weaken their effectiveness. From this paradox grew a tradition of interpretation that saw Machiavelli as the revealer of princely secrets to the masses. For those who followed this line of interpretation, Machiavelli was secretly democratic in his sympathies and published the *arcana* in order to alert the populace to the deceptions of their rulers.

Cardinal Pole held no such views of Machiavelli's intentions, but his *Apologia* nevertheless provides the first evidence of such an interpretive tradition, for Pole says that on a trip to Florence he was told by Machiavelli's fellow citizens that the author himself claimed that he had written *Il Principe* only in order to hasten the downfall of the Medici (p. 151).¹⁵ Pole rejects this story as excuse making. But if he rejects the idea of an antityrannical Machiavelli, he nevertheless seizes upon the paradox that lies at the heart of this story and makes it an essential part of his own analysis of Machiavellism. There is an inherent contradiction in the publication of political techniques that would work better if they remained secret. For Pole, this contradiction reflected the opposition between satanic concealment and divine revelation in the workings of the historical process. Machiavellism was a doctrine of secrecy and deception that contained the seeds of its own destruction, for the more widely it was known, the more its secrets would

nazionale su il pensiero politico di Machiavelli e la sua fortuna nel mondo (Florence: Istituto nazionale di studi sul Rinascimento, 1972), p. 63n; Hermann Hegels, *Arnold Clapmarius und die Publizistik über die arcana imperii im 17. Jahrhundert* (Bonn, 1918), p. 49.

¹⁴ See, for example, Tacitus, *Annals* 2:36; Aristotle, *Politics*, 4:13, 5:8.

¹⁵ The notion of Machiavelli as a hater of tyranny who wrote with the secret intention of ruining the Medici is also found in Giovanni Matteo Toscano, *Peplus Italiae* (Paris, 1578), p. 52, and in Alberico Gentili, *De legationibus libri tres* (London, 1585). See Chapter 3, this volume.