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# *Machiavelli and Mystery of State*

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## For Alice

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,  
 Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org  
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521437905

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First published 1988  
 First paperback edition 1992

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Donaldson, Peter Samuel, 1942–  
 Machiavelli and mystery of state.  
 Includes bibliographical references.  
 I. Machiavelli, Niccolò, 1469-1527 – Contributions  
 in political science. 2. Political science – Italy–  
 History. I. Title.  
 JCI43.M4D65 1988 320.1'092'4 88–6136

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Donaldson, Peter S.  
 Machiavelli and mystery of state.  
 1. Politics. Theories of Machiavelli,  
 Niccolò, 1469–1527  
 I. Title  
 320.5'092'4

ISBN 978-0-521-34546-0 Hardback  
 ISBN 978-0-521-43790-5 Paperback

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## Preface

Perhaps the most notorious passage in Machiavelli's *Il Principe* comes in Chapter 18, where the duplicity of the fox and the violence of the lion are set as models for political conduct, and where the author writes that, though a prince should conduct himself in accordance with the moral virtues when he can, "if the necessity arises, he should know how to follow evil." These words have often been taken as a sign of Machiavelli's decisive break with the past, with biblical and classical traditions according to which the office of a prince was an inescapably moral one.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in making these recommendations, Machiavelli was attempting to place his own teachings in an ancient tradition of secret political instruction. The legend of Achilles and Chiron the Centaur is his text:

It must be understood that there are two ways of fighting, one with laws and the other with arms. The first is the way of men, the second is the style of beasts, but since very often the first does not suffice it is necessary to turn to the second. Therefore a prince must know how to play the beast as well as the man. This lesson was taught by the ancient writers who related that Achilles and many other princes were brought up by Chiron the Centaur, who took them under his discipline. The clear significance of this half-man and half-beast preceptorship is that a prince must know how to use either of these two natures and that one without the other has no enduring strength. Now since the prince must make use of the characteristics of beasts, he should choose those of the fox and the lion.<sup>2</sup>

Machiavelli's own principles, where they conflict most directly with conventional political morality, are thus held to have been prefigured in an ancient legend of secret instruction with a veiled or hidden meaning. What Chiron taught Achilles is not revealed, but, by telling

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Reginald Pole's *Apologia*, discussed in Chapter 1, this volume.

<sup>2</sup> *The Prince*, trans. and ed. Thomas G. Bergin (Northbrook, Ill., 1947). Citations of *The Prince* in English will be from this edition and those from *The Discourses* from the Bernard Crick edition (Harmondsworth, England, 1970).

the story of his preceptorship, ancient writers “covertly”<sup>3</sup> taught princes what could not be stated openly.

According to Pindar, what Chiron expounded was the *agraphoi nomoi*, the unwritten or unstated principles by which human society was constituted (*Pythian Odes*, VI, 21–7). However, for Pindar as for other authors, the content of these unwritten laws was respect for parents and fear of the gods.<sup>4</sup> Machiavelli has reversed the moral sign of the story, and locates its meaning not in its conventional and pious content, but in the half-bestial character of the instructor and in the covert mode of his instruction.

This book is a study of six figures – five writers of political texts and one printer of political literature – for whom, in various ways, Machiavelli was associated with ancient and secret knowledge, with mysteries of state or *arcana imperii*.<sup>5</sup> Machiavelli is so often thought of as an ancestor or precursor of contemporary modes of political thought – scientific, positivist, value free or other – that such an association may come as a surprise; yet there were passages in *Il Principe* and *I Discorsi* that could, like the story of the education of Achilles, be read as points of intersection between Machiavellian and sacral conceptions of politics. In *Principe* 18, Machiavelli does not reject ancient traditions so much as claim that his own work expresses their hidden sense.

Reginald Pole, Stephen Gardiner, John Wolfe, Arnold Clapmar, Gabriel Naudé, and Louis Machon attempt, in various ways, to assimilate Machiavelli to traditions of political mystery of ancient origin. Drawing on Greek, Latin, or biblical sources, they tend to see in Machiavelli’s works a revelation of the ancient *arcana* of kingship. Cardinal Pole regards the appearance of *Il Principe* as a manifestation of the

<sup>3</sup> “Questa parte è suta insegnata a’ principi copertamente dagli antichi scrittori.” References to Machiavelli are to *Niccolò Machiavelli: tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Casella (Florence; 1969).

<sup>4</sup> George Thomson provides a very full and valuable note on the *agraphoi nomoi* in his edition of *The Oresteia of Aeschylus*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam and Prague, 1966), II, pp. 200–2. For a fascinating study of how Machiavelli’s treatment of the Chiron story influenced later portrayals of him in France, see Heather Ingman, “Machiavelli and the interpretation of the Chiron myth in France,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XLV (1982), 217–27. Ingman emphasizes the change in Chiron’s moral significance but does not explore the association of Machiavelli’s advice with secret teaching.

<sup>5</sup> This expression is discussed at length by Clapmar and Naudé, and appears in Pole, Gentili, and Machon. See Chapters 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6, this volume. Its source is Tacitus, *Annals* 2:36, and is used in reference to a proposal made by Gallus that magistrates be elected five years in advance. “There was no doubt,” Tacitus comments, “that the proposal went deeper than this, and trespassed on the *arcana* of sovereignty” [“*haud dubium erat eam sententiam altius penetrare et arcana imperii temptari*”] (trans. John Jackson in *Tacitus II*, Loeb Classical Library [London and New York, 1931]).



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*mysterium iniquitatis* of Thessalonians, a signal of the approach of Antichrist before the Last Days. Bishop Gardiner uses Machiavelli to prepare a secret manual on the governance of England for Philip II, and tries to show that the apparent amorality of the techniques he recommends is justified by biblical notions of kingly license. John Wolfe's publication of surreptitious editions of Machiavelli's works was influenced, as its preface indicates, by the belief that Machiavelli was an unmasker of the arcana of tyranny. Arnold Clapmar's *De arcanis rerumpublicarum* associates the "reason of state" tradition that derived from Machiavelli with the Tacitean *arcana imperii* and with Roman legal principles according to which the sovereign was exempt from law. Gabriel Naudé's *Coups d'état* draws a portrait of the effective politician or *esprit fort* analogous to that of the ancient magus. Louis Machon composes a sustained and elaborate defense of Machiavelli according to which all of his central doctrines may be found in the Bible.

Efforts to read Machiavelli as the reviver or reviser of an ancient mystery of statecraft now seem strained; yet the facts concerning the publication of his major works, as well as their subject matter, offered a foothold for such a reading. *Il Principe* and *I Discorsi* were both published posthumously. In the dedication of *Il Principe*, Machiavelli could easily be thought to be addressing his work to the dedicatee alone, as a private manual of statecraft. In the body of the text, he often adopts a confidential tone, using the second person singular as if he had an audience of one, and he counsels his implied reader to discard certain aspects of Christian morality, when necessary, and to create and sustain several kinds of illusions and fictions for political effect. In the dedication of the *Discorsi*, he casts himself in the role of rediscoverer of ancient modes of political thought. He compares his own teaching, at its morally most problematic point, to the secret indoctrination of Achilles into the unwritten laws. These and other promptings of the text, together with the Renaissance belief in ancient secret traditions of all kinds, gave rise to a rich and varied pattern – which sometimes takes on the consistency and sequence of a tradition – in which Machiavelli's real subject was thought to be the *arcana imperii* of the ancient world, and according to which his apparent amorality might be explained as the special license of the sacred ruler.

The myth of the arcana may also help us to make sense of certain well-studied patterns in the transmission of Machiavelli's ideas. From the start, beginning even before the publication of *Il Principe* and the *Discorsi* in 1532, Machiavelli's works were plagiarized, borrowed, and quoted without attribution. Plans were made for expurgated editions to be published under a false name, and surreptitious editions were

published. Many of these patterns owe something to Renaissance casualness about literary property and something to the constraints of censorship. But they may also derive from a habit of regarding Machiavelli as the purveyor of the arcana. For the figures studied here, secrets of state lead a double and unstable existence: If they are divulged to readers, they are no longer secrets; their mystery is compromised. The publication of the arcana, whether by Machiavelli himself or by his imitators, is necessarily a double act whereby what is revealed is also somehow concealed – by ambiguity of discourse, by limitation of circulation of the text, by falsification of the facts of publication, or in other ways. Machiavelli was thus linked to the myth of the *arcana imperii* not only by identifying his work as part of an ancient tradition, but by ambiguous acts of publication. The complicated history of the transmission of Machiavellian thought studied by Gerber and many others may be partly understood as deriving from the paradox inherent in the public dissemination of mysteries of state.

In certain ways, the work presented here may be thought of as a modest revision of that of Ernst Kantorowicz, from whom I draw my title. In his seminal article “Mysteries of state: an absolutist concept and its late medieval origins,”<sup>6</sup> Kantorowicz attempted to trace the origins of seventeenth-century notions of the sacredness of royal power to the jurists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who adapted and revised claims that had previously been made for the pope so that they would apply to Frederick II. But these claims, in their turn, derived from the divine pretensions of the ancient Roman emperors, and the roots of these pretensions were earlier still. In its tracing of origins, Kantorowicz’s influential work displays its own continuity with the early modern texts he sought to locate in a tradition of “mystery of state,” for the search of origins and ancient sanction is a pervasive concern of much political writing of the period.

The present study is less concerned with origins and more concerned with how the revival of “mystery of state,” which Kantorowicz has so well described, coincided and combined with the Machiavellian strand of Renaissance political discussion. Kantorowicz does not mention Machiavelli in his accounts of late Renaissance claims concerning the sacredness of kings, but Machiavelli was a pervasive presence in Renaissance political discourse, and several of the chapters in the present volume argue for the central importance of his texts in the Renaissance recasting of the old idea that kingship was a mystery. In fact, so in-

<sup>6</sup> *Harvard Theological Review* XLVII (1955), 65–91.

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terconnected were “Machiavellism” and the ideology of sacred kingship in the period that one can regard them as variants of the same discursive system. In a way that might be compared to Freud’s position in twentieth-century psychological theory, Machiavelli’s innovations established new terms and new modes in political writing and political life. He was so important a figure that nearly all political discussions had to take account of his work and orient themselves in relation to it, whether by absorbing him, condemning him, or defending him, or by some more complex placement in relation to him. The “mystery of state” we find in James I (a favorite source for Kantorowicz) or in the French absolutist authors of the seventeenth century is a concept framed in relation to Machiavellian assumptions and Machiavellian themes, especially in relation to Machiavelli’s central insights into the role of illusion and fiction in politics.

Some of the figures studied here attempt to define political mysteries, or *arcana imperii*, as alternatives to what they think of as the dangerous or evil influence of Machiavelli; others defend Machiavelli as if he himself were the purveyor of sacred and ancient doctrines. The divergences in moral valuation are great – from Cardinal Pole, who thought *Il Principe* was directly inspired by Satan, to Louis Machon, for whom Machiavelli “spoke like a saint” – but they ought not to obscure those convergences of theme and terminology that make the authors, statesmen, and publishers studied here users of and contributors to a discernible variety of political discourse, whose terms and questions were set – not unchallengeably or unalterably, but nevertheless decisively – by Machiavelli’s major works.

In using the term political discourse for the subject matter of this book – rather than political theory or history of political ideas – I have in mind several but by no means all of the meanings this term has recently acquired. “Discourse,” as used here, refers not only to the content of texts and the history of that content, but to patterns in the production and use of texts. Attention is paid to publishing history and to other particulars of the transmission of the text, not as “background” or to supply evidence for the stabilization of meanings, but because the way in which political texts were produced and circulated is an essential piece of the story of “mystery of state”: By analogy with other supposed ancient arts, the occultation or secret transmission of the text is itself a significant aspect of the mystery. Attention is also paid to how political texts determine and are determined by the discursive roles they specify or suggest: The role of counselor, especially “secret counselor,” becomes something very different from what it

had been in the Middle Ages when the medium of counsel is a secret or private treatise. What biographical narrative there is in this book has the description of such discursive roles as its aim.

In keeping with this emphasis, the following chapters not only point out ways in which Machiavelli's texts were described as if they were a kind of secret manual or breviarium, but also show how that very view of Machiavelli was both manifested in the mode of publication (or circulation) of the texts produced by the authors studied here and embodied in the writer–reader relation the texts imply. If Machiavelli had revived or revealed an ancient and secret art of politics, to imitate his work of innovation or recovery might mean to produce one's own arcana – that is, to withhold one's work from publication and transmit it secretly to kings, to publish in a limited edition, or to publish surreptitiously. Such texts deal with arcana; they are themselves in some sense arcana; and their authors or publishers present themselves as the purveyors of a secret wisdom.

In studying the transmission of texts believed to be political arcana, and in studying the shifts in the counselor–ruler relationship implied by those texts, the question of the relation between printed books and manuscripts is often of special importance. In the age of the printing press, the difference between “secret” and “open” knowledge could be thought of as an opposition between what was spoken and what was written, as previously, but now it could also be thought of as the difference between what was handwritten and carried by hand in a diplomatic pouch and what appeared in a printed book offered for sale to the public. This doubling of what might be meant by the word “book” was a necessary component of Renaissance conceptions of the arcana and figures especially in Gabriel Naudé's exposition of the *coups d'état*; it was also, I suggest, a determining factor in the way Machiavelli's work was received. If Machiavelli had written at a time when there was only one kind of book, or if he had written one kind of book instead of leaving a manuscript addressed to a prince that was printed after his death, attempts to associate his teachings with the *arcana imperii* would have had to take a different form.

This book, then, is intended as a contribution to the history of Renaissance political discourse, an exploration in detail of several instances of the Machiavellian legacy that have in common some exploitation of the notion of Machiavellism as *arcana imperii*, or mystery of state. “Influence” is too limiting a term to characterize Machiavelli's place in Renaissance political culture. The present attempt to specify that place takes cognizance not only of the history of the reception of Machiavellian ideas but also of the history of their misconstruction or

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rejection. It attends to ways in which older discourses were recast in the attempt to take account of Machiavelli; to changes in the way political texts were produced and circulated; and to transformations of the roles of writers, speakers, hearers, and readers of political discourse in the wake of Machiavelli's innovations.

The specifically *literary* use of Machiavelli is not directly addressed, but the ideological and discursive patterns discerned here have some bearing on current efforts to redescribe the relation of Renaissance literature and politics. In particular, the following pages may corroborate Stephen Orgel's wise suggestions concerning the confluence of Machiavellian and sacral theories of kingship in the Jacobean theater (*The Illusion of Power*; Berkeley, 1975, pp. 42–3). The sections of Jonathan Goldberg's *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore, 1983) that deal with the *arcana imperii* also reach toward new ways of understanding Renaissance mystery of state as it relates to literature. My work here extends that of many other literary and historical scholars who have regarded the Machiavellian and sacral traditions as closely interwoven, and in future contributions I plan to apply the findings of *Machiavelli and Mystery of State* to canonical literary texts, especially those of Shakespeare.

My long-term scholarly debts include those to William F. Church's *Richelieu and Reason of State* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972); to Kantorowicz's article from which I draw my title, as well as to his book *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957); to the work of John Pocock; and to the various specialized studies acknowledged in the notes. My dissertation adviser, William Nelson, is not alive to read the second book that developed out of his suggestion for a dissertation topic, but I would like to record my appreciation for his help and his example. I wish to thank Michael Moore, Claudia von Canon, Paul Kristeller, Joseph Mazzeo, Sir Geoffrey Elton, and John Pocock for assistance while emphatically absolving them of responsibility for the use I have made of it. I have been assisted by grants from MIT, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the American Council of Learned Societies, and by the courtesy and skill of many librarians, especially at the British Library, the Bibliothèque Publique de Bordeaux, the Escorial, and the Houghton Library at Harvard. I wish to thank Alvin Kibel, Bruce Mazlish, and Richard Douglas for their collegial support at particularly crucial points in my career. As always, I am grateful to my parents and my children. My greatest debt is to my dear wife, Alice, who was a loving and patient companion as I completed a difficult project. My work is dedicated to her and to our partnership in life.

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A version of Chapter 1 appeared in *Leaders of the Reformation*, edited by Richard L. DeMolen (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1984), and Chapter 2 expands material from my introduction to *A Machiavellian Treatise by Stephen Gardiner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Early versions of these and other chapters were presented as papers at meetings of the Modern Language Association, the Anglo-American Conference of Historians, the New England Renaissance Conference, the annual meeting of the American Association of University Professors of Italian, and the Columbia University Seminar on the Renaissance.