Introduction

The protagonist of this book is a Roman political theory which helped to define the intellectual and ideological contours of the European early-modern state by performing an important historical and conceptual role in the formation of the Renaissance prince. This role has gradually become obscured over recent centuries, and the main purpose of the following chapters is to try to illuminate it. My explanation of the theory's contribution to the history of the sovereign state consists in two basic parts. The first is in terms of its conceptual character: it is a theory about the sovereign *princeps*, and an argument which is explicitly concerned to delineate a series of relations between the *princeps* and the *status* of various entities. So, for example, the prince is said to have the 'state' of those persons whom he governs in his hand; he is described as a tutor of 'the public state'; and his *principatus* is supposed to reflect the 'state of the world'. These claims are connected to a distinctive way of thinking about persons which considers their status from the point of view of the universal law of reason, rather than from a purely local legal perspective. The theory holds that persons should be governed according to the same rationality which governs the cosmos. One consequence of this approach was that it introduced to Roman political discourse a novel way of looking at the question of what a free or unfree person was. These manoeuvres and their revolutionary character are at the heart of my investigation of the theory and its classical setting in the first part of the book.

The second part of the explanation of how this conceptual apparatus came to structure the early-modern state is the history of its use as a powerful ideological tool to a succession of Renaissance monarchical regimes across the Italian peninsula between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries. Accounting for the centrality of the Roman theory of the *princeps* to the development of Renaissance monarchical thinking is, on the one hand, a matter of seeing how some fundamental characteristics of the theory itself made it valuable to those political agents wishing to

identify themselves as princes. But it is also necessary to describe its historical role in some detail in order to observe the specificity of its deployment in a set of determinate and different contexts from the *Duecento* onwards. Its doctrines are picked up in piecemeal fashion, adapted and occasionally transformed according to local ideological needs across a series of social, political and military conflicts and legitimation crises; and it is through its initial involvement in these polemical contexts that discursive regularities are stabilised and coherent ideologies developed at a local level. The structure of my argument is designed to negotiate a path through these considerations. The classical section in which I examine the construction and content of the Roman theory is followed by five Renaissance chapters which trace out the story of how, why and to what effect, subsequent to its recovery by the medieval West, its language came to inform the articulation of the person of the Renaissance *princeps* in all three types of secular monarchical settings – imperial, royal and signorial – which characterised the political geography of the Italian peninsula between the *Duecento* and the High Renaissance.

Ancient Rome might seem the obvious place to start any genealogy of the *princeps*, that most Roman of persons, but my insistence on returning to the Roman theory of monarchy – to point out its existence, to say who wrote it and when, what it says and why – is related to two specific concerns. The first of these is to try to reverse some of the effects of its gradual, and perhaps even systematic, occlusion from the historiography of the Renaissance's ideological and intellectual debt to classical antiquity. The history of that occlusion is another story. But one explanation for why the theory remains obscured may be that we have become accustomed to thinking about the various languages which the Renaissance recovered from Roman antiquity in terms which have the effect of eclipsing a defining political and ideological event in the history of ancient Roman political life and literature. There is a massive caesura running down the centre of that history caused by the Roman revolution and the establishment of the Roman Principate under Augustus. The figure of the *princeps* is a product of that revolution. But the Roman revolution rather disappears – and with it the theory of the *princeps* – in the analytical categories currently deployed to talk about the body of concepts which were drawn from Roman literature into the various social, political, moral, literary, rhetorical, pedagogical and philosophical languages of the Renaissance, particularly those articulated in a humanist idiom. By excavating the classical theory of monarchy, I aim to prise open the general categories of 'Roman historians', 'Roman rhetorical models', 'Roman moralists', 'Roman moral

philosophy', 'the Roman authors', 'the Roman tradition' and 'Romanism' which are now in use within Renaissance historiography.[1] These descriptions have proved extremely important in emphasising the *Romanitas* of the Renaissance. But they are also deceptively flat and can hide as much as they reveal when they are used to imply an homogeneity or stability of political, moral and rhetorical outlook where none exists either in Roman or in Renaissance discourse. My specific aim in searching to break into this compound terminology is to recuperate some precise instances of the reordering which occurs at a conceptual level in the legal, political, visual and ethical apparatus elaborated after the Roman revolution. This process produces some of the monarchical and monological elements of Roman political theory which make a distinctive contribution to the historical formation of a post-classical European subjectivity and to the construction of a sovereign order within early-modern states.

The Roman theory of monarchy is an extended act of conceptual redefinition which has an almost embarrassingly imperial provenance. Its vision of a peaceful and happy principate extending across the entire world under the government of the virtuous *princeps* – humane, self-reflecting and thoroughly conscientious – reveals so frank a commitment to a global hegemony founded upon sovereign reason that it seems scarcely straight-faced. Its description of the *res publica* appears not to be very republican. And its idea of liberty – that a free person is one who lives according to universal reason and the law of nature – enables the Roman prince to assume a strikingly absolutist position at the head of the body politic, to rebut the accusation that the Roman Principate was a form of domination, and to suggest that, under his loving care, the body politic had been actually liberated rather than enslaved at the point of the sword by Caesarian conquest. Its latinity is not to everyone's taste, and, perhaps most awkwardly of all, its author is not Cicero. Yet none of these characteristics prevented this Roman argument about the *princeps* from becoming profoundly implicated in the constitution of monarchical political government on the Italian peninsula from the *Duecento* onwards. By the early sixteenth century, it had become so fundamental to the language which articulated the *persona* of the Renaissance prince that it attracted the unwavering hostility of Machiavelli in *Il Principe*. Surveying a peninsula which had seen the steady rise to power of monarchical regimes over the course of more than two and a half centuries, Machiavelli's argument

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[1] For examples of this terminology, see Skinner 1981: 25, 30, 34, 35 (reiterated in Skinner 2000: 28–9, 32, 34); Tuck 1993: 6, 9, 10, 12, 14; Viroli 1992: 14.

comprises a meticulously constructed attack upon a vision of the *persona* of the *princeps* and his *principatus* which had come to captivate the Renaissance imagination. The concluding chapters of the book describe this assault on the Roman argument about the prince.

Machiavelli's text furnishes the other principal reason I begin my argument with a reconsideration of the classical case for the prince. My aim is to bring more sharply into focus the shattering effect of Machiavelli's attack upon the tradition of political reflection which has in recent decades become very closely identified with a humanist literature about the prince usually designated as the *speculum principis*, or 'mirror-for-princes' genre. I reiterate the conventional wisdom that there is the closest possible relation between Machiavelli's text and the ideology of the princely mirror, a context first suggested in the pioneering work of Felix Gilbert and in the scholarship of Allan Gilbert, but subsequently elaborated, modified and refined with unrivalled precision, and to immensely powerful effect, by Quentin Skinner in his classic interpretation of *Il Principe*.[2] This context is now well-observed within Machiavellian scholarship, but it is Skinner's work which has most fully demonstrated how and why Machiavelli's text is 'a contribution to the genre of advice-books for princes which at the same time revolutionised the genre itself'. I also sustain a view of Machiavelli's argument which endorses Skinner's recent description of the great moralist as 'essentially the exponent of a neo-classical form of humanist political thought'.[3] And my interpretation is, in some ways, an extended corroboration of Skinner's insistence that the 'most original and creative aspects' of 'Machiavelli's political vision are best understood as a series of polemical – sometimes even satirical – reactions against the humanist assumptions he inherited and basically continued to endorse'.[4] However, whereas both Felix Gilbert and Skinner began a systematic reconstruction of the ideology around a series of princely mirrors produced in the second half of the fifteenth century, this account begins to trace out the monarchical language of the genre in the second half of the first century. It commences with a detailed study of *De clementia*, the political treatise of the Stoic philosopher Seneca which lays out a vision of the Roman *princeps* and his *principatus* and which declares in its opening sentence that its argument is designed to perform the role of a mirror. The Senecan text is the earliest surviving example of a Latin *speculum principis*, and the only surviving example of a

[2] Gilbert 1977a: 91–114; Gilbert 1938; Skinner 1978, I: 116–38; Skinner 1981: 21–47; Skinner 1981: 423–34; Skinner 2000: 23–53; Skinner 2002, II: 134–47.
[3] Skinner 2000: Preface.   [4] Skinner 2000: Preface.

systematic attempt to theorise the Roman monarchy. The theory is articulated in the demonstrative mode, that most princely of rhetorical genres; it is envisaged as an image of a person; and, as its central conceit reveals, its fortunes were tied to a view of the world in which both a text and a person could be said and be seen to reflect things as they really were. The central chapters of this book indicate how those fortunes were gradually but firmly secured across nearly three centuries of Renaissance political experience. In so doing, they provide an explanation as to why the Senecan argument of *De clementia* should have become the object of Machiavelli's theoretical concerns in *Il Principe*.

In laying out this more extensive thesis, I hold fast to some of the unassailable elements of the Skinnerian interpretation of *Il Principe* and its ideological context, while at the same time introducing two main modifications to it. The first consists in underlining that this humanist ideological tradition is considerably longer in the making than is currently envisaged. Skinner himself has recently provided a more detailed view of the development of the mirror-for-princes literature during the *Trecento*, but commentators on Renaissance political thought tend to follow the earlier view proposed by Gilbert and sustained by Skinner in *Foundations* that 'the heyday' of humanist princely writing is largely a development of the second half of the *Quattrocento*, a phenomenon then contrasted with an earlier 'civic' phase of humanist political thought.[5] By contrast, I analyse its formation within a much more extensively structured political context which stretches well back into the *Duecento* in order to embrace the reign of Frederick II in the Kingdom of Sicily and the crisis of government within the northern Italian communes which precipitates the rise to power of the *signori*. I do so in order to indicate a very long 'pre-humanist' history of the princely ideology of the mirror prior to its emergence in Petrarchan humanist discourse in the 1340s.

But the fundamental change which I introduce to the Skinnerian perspective on Machiavelli's text concerns the theoretical structure of the humanist ideology of the *princeps* and its classical provenance. My basic point is that we may have been tracking the wrong Roman theory in our study of Machiavelli's *Il Principe* and its ideological context. I argue that we need to turn away from Cicero's *De officiis* and concentrate on Seneca's *De clementia* and its formative place in Renaissance political thought in order to see more closely what Machiavelli's text is doing. The importance of

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[5] For the *Trecento* material, see Skinner 1988: 414–16; Skinner 2002, II: 120–6. For emphasis on the later *Quattrocento*, see Gilbert 1977a: 93–109; Skinner 1978, I: 115–17; Skinner 1988: 423–5; Skinner 2002, II: 134–5. For similar views, see Rubinstein 1991: 30–5; Viroli 1998: 52.

Seneca to Machiavelli in *Il Principe* has certainly been suggested before. In the late 1960s, an insightful article by Neal Wood explored what he saw as the 'parallels in their thought'.[6] And in *Philosophy and Government* in the early 1990s, Richard Tuck observed that *Il Principe* was 'largely an indirect criticism of Seneca rather than Cicero', recalling that 'Cicero, after all, had not provided a defence of princely government comparable to Seneca's *De clementia*'.[7] This assertion was, I think, fundamentally correct, although it made it harder to make sense of Tuck's elaboration of a great distinction between an 'old' humanism which was said, somewhat contradictorily, to have been 'dominated by the ideas and the style of Cicero', and a 'new' early-modern humanism.[8] It also incidentally raised the question of the degree of intimacy with which Machiavelli engages with the Senecan theory, and it is perhaps worth confronting this issue immediately. Are there grounds for thinking that all or any part of Machiavelli's text is explicitly and self-consciously engaged in reversing the contentions of Seneca himself in *De clementia*? Or is *Il Principe* better understood as an 'indirect' intervention, an attack upon a series of prevalent ideological conventions which may well have the effect of overturning crucial doctrines of Seneca's political theory – assuming for the moment that the Senecan argument had indeed come to inform Renaissance princely discourse significantly by Machiavelli's day – but which nevertheless stops short of an engagement with the classical text itself? I veer strongly towards the former view at certain points of my analysis of the Machiavellian text for reasons which I hope to make clearer. But I cannot see any reason for supposing that such an interpretation necessarily rules out the latter view either. A strategy in which one alternates between occasionally criticising contemporary beliefs on their own terms and occasionally dragging them back to some earlier and more theoretical point of their formulation is not so arcane. On the contrary, in view of Machiavelli's famous claim in the preface that his volume is the fruit of 'una lunga esperienzia delle cose moderne et una continua lezione delle antique', it makes considerable sense to think that his text is concerned with both ancient and modern wisdom about princely government.[9] After all, Machiavelli straightforwardly names and cites ancient authorities on occasion in his text.[10] The thought that he might be shown to be engaging with a particular set of classical political opinions which has not yet been clearly identified does not seem to be a particularly controversial one. And somewhere in between the two

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[6] Wood 1968: 11.   [7] Tuck 1993: 20.   [8] Tuck 1993: 5.   [9] Machiavelli 1960: 13.
[10] Machiavelli 1960, Ch.XIII: 61 (Tacitus); Ch.XVIII: 69 (Virgil).

poles of 'direct' and 'indirect' criticism, we might also need to consider the existence of a series of literary tactics regularly used by humanists to imitate, to ironise or to mimic their classical sources without citing them explicitly. What may look like rather oblique or veiled allusion in the work of Renaissance humanist writers on princely government is often the studiously cultivated effect of Renaissance rhetorical art. Some careful decoding is sometimes necessary in order to avoid deploying the categories of direct and indirect criticism too bluntly.

However, the person who has most carefully and consistently drawn attention to the irrefutable place of *De clementia* in the ideology which Machiavelli is subverting is, in fact, Skinner himself.[11] Since each of my points of departure from his interpretation of *Il Principe* represent to a considerable degree the development of ideas indicated in various parts of his scholarship on the Machiavellian text and its Renaissance background, I want to delineate them with some care at the outset.

Skinner's work on Renaissance thought in general has effected a dramatic transformation in our understanding of how and why Roman classical concepts and arguments structured humanist political discourse. The extent of his contribution is particularly discernible in the obligation not only to recognise, in the light of his work on Machiavelli in particular, the pervasive Roman character of the classical republicanism expressed in the *Discorsi* but also to acknowledge that virtually all of the categories which *Il Principe* deploys are similarly Roman. Machiavelli is engaged in controverting a profoundly Roman story about how the prince should behave. The fact that he does so in no less profoundly Roman rhetorical mode, as a number of scholars have been illustrating for some time – Kahn, Cox, Viroli and Hörnquist most recently – only serves to underline the point further.[12] Even Althusser – not, perhaps, the closest reader of the text, but a no less creative interpreter of Machiavelli's thesis for all that – could see that the work had practically nothing to do with Aristotle.[13] In sum,

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[11] See especially Skinner 1981: 29 (for Seneca and *fortuna*); 36 (for Senecan *magnanimitas* and *liberalitas* in *De clementia* and *De beneficiis*); 45–6 (for *crudelitas* in *De clementia* and in *Il Principe*); Machiavelli 1988: xvii, xxi (for the same conceptual connection); xxii (for notions of affability and accessibility in *De clementia* with which Machiavelli disagrees).

[12] Kahn 1994; Cox 1997; Viroli 1998: 73–113; Hörnquist 2004: 4–37. For a bibliography on Machiavelli's rhetoric, see Cox 1997: 1110, n.3.

[13] Althusser 1999: 36. For Althusser's reliance on the French Barincou edition of the text, see note at ix. For a restatement of the fact that neither the basic Aristotelian category of 'politics' nor any of its cognate forms is used by Machiavelli in his text, see Viroli 1992: 129, esp. n. 8; for Machiavelli's Aristotelian concerns in *Il Principe*, see Pocock 1975: 156–82; Mansfield 1996; Hörnquist 2004: 211–27.

Machiavelli's argument is about the government of persons and states, its precepts are self-consciously articulated according to the principles of Roman classical rhetoric, and the central concepts which structure Machiavelli's theory – *principe* and *principato*, *imperio* and *stato*, *virtù* and *ragione*, *fortuna*, *necessità* and *occasione*, *libertà* and *servitù*, *onore* and *gloria*, *fama* and *reputazione* – are translations of a terminology which had been almost entirely imported into Renaissance thinking about the figure of the prince from Roman literature.

Furthermore, Skinner's analysis of Machiavelli's 'humanist allegiances' and 'the unbridgeable gulf between himself and the whole tradition of humanist political thought' has taken us to the core of the Machiavellian revolution by indicating with unparalleled perspicacity a crucial conceptual rupture which occurs at the heart of *Il Principe*.[14] As Skinner explains, the central theoretical contention over which Machiavelli parts company with his humanist predecessors and their classical authorities is the fundamental belief that the rational course of action in every conceivable situation will never involve a properly discerning moral agent in a conflict between considerations of what is right and honourable on the one hand, and calculations of what is beneficial on the other.[15] Machiavelli's self-proclaimed departure 'very greatly' from the line of thinking 'of the others' is thus said to consist in his identification of just such a clash between what is deemed, in the Latin terminology in which this ethical doctrine was discussed by classical and humanist authors, to be *dignum* or *honestum* – that is, honourable – and thus in accordance with what is virtuous, and what is, in fact, *utile* in view of the primary princely task of *mantenere lo stato* which Machiavelli posits.[16]

The point at which these profound insights into the Machiavellian revolution begin to lose some of their clarity occurs when the event is located within an ideological field constituted by a *speculum principis* literature which is simultaneously held to be primarily structured by the contentions of Cicero's *De officiis*. According to Skinner, Machiavelli is engaged in subverting 'above all Cicero's general treatise on moral duties, *De officiis*', and this view is now widely shared.[17] In *Foundations*, the conceptual core of the writings of the 'mirror-for-princes theorists' of the

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[14] Skinner 2000: 39, 44.   [15] Skinner 2000: 41–3.

[16] Machiavelli 1960, Ch.XV: 65: 'partendomi, massime nel disputare questa materia, dalli ordini delli altri'.

[17] For this argument (which runs throughout his writings on the text), see Skinner's introduction to Machiavelli 1988: xv. For the consensus, see Colish 1978; Viroli 1992: 131; Viroli 1998: 52–4; Jackson Barlow 1999.

later fifteenth century was said to be derived from an earlier, somewhat collapsed Ciceronian civic tradition.[18] In a more recent exploration of *Trecento* material on the prince, Skinner has described the argument of Petrarch in his famous letter to Francesco da Carrara in the 1370s in terms of the 'overwhelming extent of his debt to Cicero, especially the doctrines of the *De officiis*'.[19] The same is said to hold for his 'humanist successors'.[20] Viroli has similarly asserted that 'Petrarch's main source is Cicero' in the letter.[21] Both princely and civic humanist ideologies thus come to be primarily informed by Cicero and the precepts of Cicero's *De officiis*.

We need to clarify the relation between *De officiis* and the mirror-for-princes genre which is currently believed to be indebted to it. This belief is generating a series of claims peculiar to the pervasive logic of a Ciceronian Renaissance. It is striking, for instance, to find it said that in *Il Principe* Machiavelli is attacking 'the conventional Ciceronian precept that to attain glory and preserve his state the prince must be virtuous'.[22] Cicero himself, of course, laid down no such precept, and *De officiis* is quite transparently not a mirror for a prince. It is the most violently anti-Caesarian and profoundly anti-monarchical tract to come down to us from Roman antiquity, which is one reason it became a key text to the republican tradition, as Skinner points out.[23] It does not give us the concept of a virtuous *princeps*, and it does not extend any image of either *principe* or *principato* to which Machiavelli can be said to be referring when he famously declares his departure from 'le cose circa uno principe immaginate' or when he disagrees with a consensus of opinion in which, as he even more scathingly puts it, 'molti si sono immaginati repubbliche e principati che non si sono mai visti né conosciuti essere in vero'.[24] On the contrary, *De officiis* gives us a republican ideology which makes it virtually impossible to describe monarchy as anything other than tyranny. Of course, none of these characteristics militate against the text being put to a wholly different use in a transformed, monarchical setting. This is, in fact, exactly what happened. But a very great deal needs to happen to Cicero's account of virtue in the Roman republic in order to make it plausibly yield the idea of a *bonus princeps*. In short, the *princeps* needs to become the best, rather than the worst possible thing that can occur to a *res publica*. This process of ideological recharacterisation is not, however, the surreptitious achievement of Renaissance humanists who turn the text to their own

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[18] Skinner 1978, I: 117–19; Skinner 2002, II: 135.   [19] Skinner 1988: 415; Skinner 2002, II: 124–5.
[20] Skinner 1988: 416.   [21] Viroli 1992: 72.   [22] Viroli 1998: 52.
[23] Skinner 2002, II: 27.   [24] Machiavelli 1960, Ch.XV: 65.

advantage and silently step over its anti-monarchism. It occurs in the first century as a consequence of the Roman revolution. A great deal of the crucial redescription of the central concepts of Roman republican discourse is undertaken within *De clementia*. In performing this task, Seneca is a philosophical participant in a wider process long observed in the formation of Roman imperial ideology: the construction of the person of the *princeps* upon the identity of the *civis*, and the creative reorganisation of some central republican concepts in order to represent a degree of continuity across a revolutionary act of military conquest, after which, as Paul Veyne points out most recently in his brilliant study of Seneca, 'everything changed'.[25]

The series of reconfigurations performed in the Senecan text came to constitute the theoretical groundwork of the Renaissance ideology of the *princeps* to a remarkable extent. Take the topic debated in *De officiis* about whether it is better to be loved or feared when acting in government. Seneca is easily the most rigorous of all Roman writers on monarchical government, pagan and Christian, to tackle Cicero's allegation that Caesar had become so feared and hated by his attempts to enslave the Roman citizens and make himself their *princeps* that it had ensured his overthrow. Seneca reprises the topic and reorganises it entirely. Part of his explanation as to why a virtuous prince is not a contradiction in terms involves Seneca in a redefinition of tyranny. That redefinition produces a stark contrast between the love that exists between the perfectly rational, merciful prince and those whom he rules, and the fear and hate that his reverse image correspondingly incurs as a result of his inhumane cruelty. The antithesis between tyrannical bestiality and princely manliness which so crisply defines the *persona* of the Renaissance prince and which Machiavelli's theory confounds is not Ciceronian – Cicero had nothing to say at all about princely *virtus* in *De officiis*. However, as humanists from Petrarch to Erasmus very clearly saw, the antithesis was absolutely pivotal to the Senecan construction of the Roman monarch in *De clementia*, where the figure of the monstrously cruel tyrant is depicted at great length. There were undoubtedly considerable political, polemical, moral and rhetorical benefits to be gained from occasionally adducing Cicero's words to acclaim a loveable prince and to support his vision of *libertas*, *iustitia* and the *res publica* – a vision so markedly different from that of Cicero himself. But the ability to draft in Cicero to the prince's cause was the product of

[25] Veyne 2003: 152. For the construction of the emperor's person as a republican citizen, see especially Wallace-Hadrill 1981; Wallace-Hadrill 1982.