

## Revisiting Agathocles

*Victoria Kahn*

**Abstract:** This article traces Machiavelli's indebtedness to Sallust in his discussion of Agathocles the Sicilian in chapter 9 of *The Prince*. In distinguishing between virtù and glory, Machiavelli was influenced by Sallust's discussion of Catiline and Caesar, and of true and false glory, in the *Bellum Catilinae*. Writing to Caesar at the height of his power, Sallust needed to negotiate a delicate political situation that was in some ways analogous to Machiavelli's own difficult position vis-à-vis the Medici. Just as, in addressing Caesar, Sallust points up the difference between Caesar as he was and as he might have been, so in the example of Agathocles Machiavelli presents the Medici with a choice between mere virtù and the glory achieved by the really excellent men. It was the prospect of this glory that Machiavelli held out to the Medici in the concluding chapter of *The Prince*.

Agathocles the Sicilian, who ruled from 316 to 289 BCE, occupies an unusual and symptomatic position in Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Sandwiched between Cesare Borgia in chapter 7 and the discussion of civil principalities in chapter 9, his career illustrates the transition from the exercise of spectacular violence to something verging on republican rule. Born "the son of a potter," Agathocles rose to prominence in Syracuse by betraying his fellow citizens and massacring the nobility. But he lived a long and prosperous life because he understood that cruelties should be done all at once and not prolonged and that a prince who seeks to maintain his power must eventually moderate his violence and attend to the interests of his subjects. In this way, the example of Agathocles implicitly engages the relationship between *The Prince* and the *Discourses*: what is the difference, if any, between the tactics used by the new prince to gain power and those at work in a republic? What is the basis, if any, for Machiavelli's avowed preference for republics? How Machiavellian is Machiavelli anyway?

Agathocles holds an unusual position as well because he is the occasion of Machiavelli's reflection on his own discourse, the occasion, that is, of a metadiscourse about Machiavellianism. In a striking paragraph that follows the description of Agathocles's brutal deeds, Machiavelli tells us that Agathocles rose to power by his own virtù, and yet cautions us that it cannot be called virtù to massacre one's fellow citizens: "a man can get power like this, but not glory." The repetition of *virtù* is clearly designed to

Victoria Kahn is Professor and Katharine Bixby Hotchkis Chair in English, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720-2510 ([vkahn@berkeley.edu](mailto:vkahn@berkeley.edu)).

prompt the reader to reflect on the meaning of this shifting term, which at times designates the amoral skill of the prince and at other times—as in this passage—seems to designate something more than the skillful acquisition of power. The example of Agathocles thus poses the problem of Machiavellianism in little, asking us to consider not only the relationship between virtù and virtue, but also between virtù and success, and success and glory.

Agathocles appears in at least three ancient sources, all of which worry to a greater or lesser extent about how to interpret his career. Polybius (200–118 BCE) briefly discusses Agathocles in book 9 of *The Histories*; Diodorus Siculus (fl. 30–60 CE) recounts Agathocles's adventures in his *History*; and the Roman historian Justin (second century CE?) describes Agathocles in his *Epitome of Trogus*.<sup>1</sup> In his magisterial edition of *The Prince*, L. Arthur Burd argues that it is unlikely Machiavelli is drawing on Polybius or Diodorus. He claims that Machiavelli's source is Justin, and it's easy to see why. The verbal echoes are striking and at times Machiavelli quotes Justin's account verbatim. One can add that Machiavelli knew Polybius only in a Latin translation of book 6, and that Machiavelli could not have read Diodorus's account of Agathocles. The *editio princeps* of Diodorus was a Latin translation by Poggio Bracciolini of the first five books alone, in 1472, but the discussion of Agathocles appears in books 19 and 21. Still, it's worth discussing these earlier sources both for their possible influence on Justin and for the kinds of questions they raise about the example of Agathocles.

Polybius is interesting for our purposes because, like Machiavelli, he sees Agathocles as the occasion for metahistorical or historiographical reflection. He condemns the earlier historian Timaeus for the "excess of rancor" he displays toward Agathocles: "for that Agathocles had great natural advantages is evident from Timaeus's own account of him." "Regarding all this a historian should lay before posterity not only such matters as tend to confirm slanderous accusations, but also what redounds to the credit of this prince; for such is the proper function of history."<sup>2</sup> He goes on to note (in contrast to other sources) that "Agathocles not only made an attempt to conquer Africa but maintained his exalted position until his death."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Livy also briefly mentions Agathocles in book 28 of his history of Rome. See Livy, *The War with Hannibal*, Books 21–30 of *The History of Rome from Its Foundation*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt, ed. Betty Radice (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), 558. In the following pages, I cite *The Prince* from the bilingual edition of Mark Musa (New York: St. Martin's, 1964), and the *Discourses* from the edition of Bernard Crick, trans. Leslie J. Walker, SJ, with revisions by Brian Richardson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979). References to *The Prince* and *Discourses* in Italian are to *Il Principe e Discorsi*, ed. Sergio Bertelli (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1977).

<sup>2</sup>Polybius, *The Histories*, trans. W. R. Paton (London: William Heinemann, 1975), 4:347 (12.15).

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 553.

Diodorus Siculus is even more precise about Agathocles's "natural advantages." In particular, he dispassionately notes Agathocles's crafty changes in behavior: after slaughtering his enemies, he refrained from violence and "showed himself affable to the common people and won no slight popularity by aiding many."<sup>4</sup> He also calls attention to the ironies of Agathocles's career: "For although in Sicily he had been defeated and lost the largest part of his army, in Libya with a small portion of his forces he defeated those who had previously been victorious" (19.70). But he concludes that Agathocles was, in the end, punished by divine power. His sons were murdered, he was defeated in Libya, and he eventually decided to "withdraw from his position as tyrant and restore Syracuse to its citizens" (19.77). (But, lest we conclude that divine justice always prevails, Diodorus notes "while these events were taking place, Dionysius, the tyrant of Heraclea Pontica, died after having ruled for thirty-two years, and his sons ..., succeeding to the tyranny, ruled for seventeen years" [19.77].) Later, in book 21, however, Diodorus gives us a different account, according to which Agathocles was poisoned by a servant, and he declares that, because "Agathocles had committed numerous and most varied acts of slaughter during his reign, and since to his cruelty to his own people he added impiety to the gods, the manner of his death was appropriate to his lawless life" (21.16). Despite this judgment, Diodorus follows Polybius in condemning the Greek historian Timaeus who misrepresented Agathocles's career out of "personal enmity," stripping "him of his successes, [and] leaving him his failures"; "Yet who does not know that of all men who ever came to power, none acquired a greater kingdom with fewer resources?"—though one can also overdo the praise of Agathocles's virtues, as Callias of Syracuse did (21.17). Here, too, Agathocles is a test of the historian's reliability.

The Roman historian Justin (second century CE?) seems to have followed Polybius's historiographical recommendations, but not his account of Agathocles's death. Justin, too, recounts Agathocles's rise from humble beginnings as "the son of a potter" to his position as tyrant of Syracuse. He describes his cunning murder of the most powerful members of the Syracusan nobility (he invited them to a meeting in a theater and had them massacred) and his skillful handling of the Carthaginian siege of Syracuse by attacking the Carthaginians on their own soil. But, in the end, Agathocles succumbed to "a virulent disease." (In this detail, he seems to anticipate Machiavelli's description of Cesare Borgia.) While he was wasting away, "war broke out between his son and his grandson, who were already claiming his kingdom as though he were dead. The son was killed and the grandson seized the throne."<sup>5</sup> Justin

<sup>4</sup>Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1947), 19.64. Further references to this work are given in the text.

<sup>5</sup>Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus*, trans. J. C. Yardley (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 181.

conspicuously refrains from judging Agathocles's end moralistically; instead, he simply reports the facts. But Agathocles's fall from power and painful death do seem just punishment for a figure whom Justin had earlier described as "a superlative illustration of unprincipled behavior: a king deserting his own army, and a father betraying his sons."<sup>6</sup>

Machiavelli conspicuously omits these details about Agathocles's death. Instead, he describes him as one of those who "live for a long time secure in their country and defend themselves from outside enemies without being conspired against by their own citizens" (73). He was able to do so, Machiavelli tells us, because he performed his violent actions all at once to secure his position and later used such violence only to the advantage of his subjects (73). In this way, Agathocles becomes an example of the skillful adjusting of one's behavior to changing circumstances and helps to explain how a tyranny could in time mutate into something closer to a civil principality. Nevertheless, Justin's remark about Agathocles's "unprincipled" behavior finds an echo in Machiavelli's pronouncement that Agathocles did not rise to the ranks of the really excellent men. In making this judgment, Machiavelli illustrates his own skill as a reader of history, his own ability—crucial not only to the reader but also the writer of history—to acknowledge Agathocles's achievements without confusing his military success and even his military virtù with glory.

In an earlier essay on Agathocles, I argued that the distinctions in this passage between virtù and virtù were facetious, especially in light of the immediately preceding chapter 7.<sup>7</sup> There Machiavelli described the actions of Cesare Borgia, who also rose to power with the help of bloody massacres and theatrical deception. Borgia famously lured the Orsini family to a pretended peace negotiation and, once they were in his power, slaughtered them. Even more striking was Borgia's murder of his own subordinate Remirro de Orco, who had carried out Borgia's brutal designs to unify the Romagna:

Since [Borgia] knew that the severities of the past had brought about a certain amount of hate, in order to purge the minds of those people and win them over completely, he planned to demonstrate that if cruelty of any kind had come about, it did not stem from him but rather from the bitter nature of the minister. And having found the occasion to do this, he had him placed one morning in Cesena on the piazza in two pieces with a piece of wood and a bloodstained knife alongside him. The atrocity of such a spectacle left those people at one and the same time satisfied and stupefied. (57)

After these examples, I argued, the claim that one could not attribute virtù to Agathocles couldn't be taken seriously. It must instead be ironic—a kind of

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 179.

<sup>7</sup>Victoria Kahn, "Virtù and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli's *The Prince*," *Representations* 13 (1986): 63–85.

knowing parody of the reader's own moralizing judgment of Machiavelli's examples. Machiavelli's feigned condemnation of Agathocles was, I suggested, analogous to Borgia's condemnation of the brutal actions of Remirro de Orco, and thus a test of the reader's own virtù. Instead of offering moral condemnation, the example was designed to get the reader to understand that virtù is not just equivalent to evil behavior: rather, what counts as virtù will change according to circumstances, as Agathocles himself changed in response to the dictates of his reign.

As clever as I think this interpretation was, I've always been bothered by the fact that it requires Machiavelli to treat military glory ironically. It assumes that, when Machiavelli says a man cannot get glory by acting as Agathocles does, he is only pretending to be concerned about the impossibility of glory while really dismissing such reservations. His mention of glory, according to this interpretation, would then be utterly disingenuous.<sup>8</sup> If I now wish to suggest otherwise, I don't want to imply that Machiavelli is always straightforward. To the contrary, many of the examples in *The Prince* and the *Discourses* are contradictory, and the logic of his texts forces the reader to weigh examples against each other and, often, to read between the lines. For example, the discussion of Moses's politically canny claim to speak with God in chapter 6 of *The Prince* shapes our understanding of Machiavelli's similarly strategic use of millenarian rhetoric in his address to the Medici in chapter 26. By comparing the two chapters, we are led to understand that Machiavelli is demonstrating the political usefulness of religious rhetoric rather than sincerely advocating a religious view of the Medici's mission.

In fact, it's hard to imagine a political theorist with a more acute sense of the ironies of political action. In chapter 7 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli tells us that Borgia did everything he could to consolidate his power but was in the end defeated by "the brevity of [Pope] Alexander's life and his own sickness." Ironically, Borgia failed to anticipate the one thing that was certain—his own mortality. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli praises the efforts of St. Francis and St. Dominic to reform the Catholic Church, but his praise subtly conveys the message that these efforts cannot succeed because, in recommending genuine humility, the two friars teach their followers simply to accept the evil deeds of the papacy rather than protesting against them. Turning the other cheek may be a noble religious sentiment but it cannot be a recipe for political reform. And in the conclusion to chapter 15 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli famously gives the would-be ruler an almost textbook definition of irony when he warns that "something that appears to be a

<sup>8</sup>In other words, this reading would vitiate any claim for republics being qualitatively superior. It would turn the glory of the republic into something merely quantitative: in contrast to the virtù of a single ruler, the numerically greater virtù of the people would explain the greater glory of the republic.

virtue, if pursued, will result in his ruin; while some other thing that appears to be a vice, if pursued, will bring about his security and well-being.”

In one crucial respect, the Agathocles example is like these other examples, especially the concluding remarks of chapter 15 of *The Prince*. In punning on *virtù*, Machiavelli makes explicit what is implicit throughout his work: the word forces us to think of the relation between the Latin *virtus* (plus its cognate, the Italian *virtù*) and the Italian *le virtù*, that is, between strength and cunning on the one hand and the moral virtues on the other. As we learn in chapters 15 through 18 of *The Prince*, this relationship is neither one of identity nor one of simple difference: there is a relationship between *virtù* and the virtues, just not the one the moralist wants. Instead of identity, the relationship is one of strategic usefulness: the prince will adopt the conventional virtues when it's politically useful to do so. The virtues, then, are not intrinsically good; their “goodness” depends on how they are used. And the same is true of the vices which, far from being intrinsically vicious, may often be expedient. To cite just one example, one has only to think of *Discourses* 2.13 where Machiavelli discusses Agathocles, Xenophon's Cyrus, and Philip of Macedon as examples of those who used the “vice” of deceit to rise to power.

But the example of Agathocles is also different from the other examples I have mentioned because, as we've seen, Machiavelli introduces a third term, that of glory. This term, at least when it is understood as military or political glory, is not subject to ironic critique by Machiavelli.<sup>9</sup> In the early chapters of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli praises the Roman Republic for its glorious achievements and the examples he singles out are of leaders who pursued the glory of the republic above any merely individual calculus of self-interest. Later, in book 1, chapter 58, he makes it clear that republics are capable of greater glory than principalities: “And if princes are superior to populaces in drawing up laws, codes of civic life, statutes and new institutions, the populace is so superior in sustaining what has been instituted, that it indubitably adds to the glory [*gloria*] of those who have instituted them” (1.58.256). As Bernard Crick writes about this passage, “The message is plain enough:

<sup>9</sup>Russell Price discusses Machiavelli's use of the term “gloria” in “The Theme of ‘Gloria’ in Machiavelli,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 30 (1977): 588–631. In *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), Leo Strauss argues that Machiavelli sees the Roman Empire as preparing the way for the deleterious effects of Christianity (118). Strauss thus implicitly suggests that the praise of Roman military glory is ironic. See *Discourses* 2.2.279–81, where Machiavelli describes how the Roman Empire wiped out other republics. But see Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) for the contrary argument that this violent grandezza and “ideal of glory which by its very nature was aggrandizing” (16) were precisely what Machiavelli admired; and that he devoted less attention to the destructiveness of imperialism, than to the ultimate degeneration of Roman republican *virtù* (147–48).

princes ... create or restore states, but republics ... preserve them."<sup>10</sup> For this reason, republics are capable of greater glory, as well as greater virtù. In *Discourses* 2.2, Machiavelli singles out "the greatness which Rome attained after freeing itself from its kings. The reason is easy to understand; for it is not the well-being of individuals that makes cities great, but the well-being of the community; and it is beyond question that it is only in republics that the common good is looked to properly" (2.2.275).<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, Machiavelli makes it clear that it is not always easy to see who deserves a glorious reputation. In book 1, chapter 10, of the *Discourses*, he plays with the word "gloria" in the same way that he plays with "virtù" in chapter 8 of *The Prince*. He describes how "almost all men, deceived by the false semblance of good and the false semblance of renown [*gloria*], allow themselves either willfully or ignorantly to slip into the ranks of those who deserve blame rather than praise; and, when they might have founded a republic or a kingdom to their immortal honour, turn their thoughts to tyranny, and fail to see what fame, what glory, security, tranquility, conjoined with peace of mind, they are missing by adopting this course, and what infamy, scorn, abhorrence, danger and disquiet they are incurring" (1.10.135). This is clearly the lesson Agathocles failed to learn, at least at the outset of his reign. Machiavelli then goes on to link this lesson to the reading of history: "Nor is it possible for anybody, whether he be but a private citizen living in some republic, or has been fortunate enough or virtuous enough to have become a prince, to read history and to make use of the records of ancient deeds, without preferring, if he be a private citizen, to conduct himself in his fatherland rather as Scipio did than as Caesar did, or, if he be a prince, as did Agesilaus, Timoleon and Dion, rather than as did Nabis, Phalaris and Dionysus, for he could not but see how strongly the latter are dismissed with scorn, and how highly the former are praised" (1.10.135).

Caesar is a difficult case, but this difficulty is a key to understanding Machiavelli's interpretation of Agathocles. Machiavelli tells us that Caesar achieved great renown (*gloria*), but he is then quick to disabuse the reader regarding Caesar's glory: "those who praise him have either been corrupted by his fortune or overawed by the long continuance of the empire which, since it was ruled under that name, did not permit writers to speak freely of him" (1.10.136). An astute reader, Machiavelli tells us, will understand that Roman historians criticized Caesar indirectly by condemning Catiline or praising Brutus. Such a reader will learn further from the history of the Roman emperors how to distinguish between the way of glory and the way of infamy (*scleratezza*), as well as between military virtù and glory.

<sup>10</sup>Introduction to Machiavelli, *Discourses*, ed. Crick, 33.

<sup>11</sup>See *The Prince*, chap. 9, on how a prince should rely on the people, rather than nobility who will rival him.

(Severus, for example, had the first, but not the second; 1.10.137.) Caesar is guilty of the ultimate infamy in destroying the Roman Republic, while the person who reforms it will win the ultimate glory: “Should a good prince seek worldly renown [*gloria*], he should most certainly covet possession of a city that has become corrupt, not, with Caesar, to complete its spoliation, but, with Romulus, to reform it. Nor in very truth can the heavens afford men a better opportunity of acquiring renown [*gloria*]; nor can men desire anything better than this. And if in order to reform a city one were obliged to give up the principate, someone who did not reform it in order not to fall from that rank would have some excuse. There is, however, no excuse if one can both keep the principate and reform the city” (1.10.138). In *Discourses* 1.37, Machiavelli calls Caesar “Rome’s first tyrant,” and he reiterates this view of Caesar in *The Art of War*:

Pompey and Caesar and almost all the Roman generals after the last Carthaginian war gained fame [*fama*] as brave men but not as good ones, while those who lived before them gained fame [*gloria*] as brave and good. This came about because the latter did not take the waging of war for their profession. And while the republic continued without reproach, no great citizen [*cittadino grande*] ever presumed, by means of such an activity, to retain power in time of peace, so as to break the laws, plunder the provinces, usurp and tyrannize over his native land and in every way gain wealth for himself. Nor did anybody of low estate [*d’infima fortuna*] dream of violating his oath, forming parties with private citizens [*aderirsi agli uomini privati*], ceasing to fear the Senate, or carrying out any tyrannical injury in order to live at all times by means of warfare as a profession.<sup>12</sup>

Here Caesar and Pompey, like Agathocles, gained fame but not glory, whereas subsequent Roman generals gained glory because they did not plunder, usurp, and tyrannize over their native land. *Glory*, then, is not simply a product of public relations. It seems instead to be an intrinsic quality of great deeds, although one that can be misrecognized or falsely attributed.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.37; Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, in *The Chief Works and Others*, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 2:576–77. I have consulted the Italian of *Dell’Arte della Guerra* in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Florence: Sansoni, 1971). This passage is cited in Benedetto Fontana, “Sallust and the Politics of Machiavelli,” *History of Political Thought* 24 (2003): 104.

<sup>13</sup>In book 3 of the *Discourses* Machiavelli also suggests that glory is an intrinsic quality of the end pursued. At the same time, he makes it clear that glory does not preclude violence and betrayal: glory can be achieved either by humane conduct or by cruelty and violence. Scipio exemplifies the first way, Hannibal the second. “Scipio, we find, entered Spain and by his humane and kindly conduct at once made that country his friend, and won the respect and admiration of its people. We find, on



In his thinking about glory, Machiavelli was influenced in particular by the Roman historian Sallust, a favorite of an earlier generation of civic humanists, including Salutati and Bruni. As Patricia Osmond has argued, it was Sallust, “more than any other Roman historian, who contributed to the [civic humanist] themes of *libertas*, *virtus*, and *gloria*.”<sup>14</sup> In the *Bellum Catilinae* 7.1–3, Sallust had linked the establishment of republican government in ancient Rome to the achievement of glorious deeds:

Now at that time every man began to lift his head higher and to have his talents more in readiness. For kings hold the good in greater suspicion than the wicked, and to them the merit of others is always fraught with danger; still the free state [*civitas*], once liberty is won, waxed incredibly strong and great in a remarkably short time, such was the thirst for glory [*cupido gloriae*] that had filled men’s minds.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, “Sallust’s *Catilina* suggested a connection between a popular regime, territorial expansion, and imperial power” that Machiavelli would echo in the *Discourses*. Yet Sallust was also, like Machiavelli, acutely aware that republican rule could in time give way to faction, corruption, and

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the other hand, that Hannibal entered Italy and by totally different methods, i.e. by cruelty, violence, rapine and every sort of perfidy, produced there the same effect as Scipio had produced in Spain; for all the Italian cities revolted to him, and all its peoples became his followers” (3.21.403). At the end of the chapter, Machiavelli tells us that Scipio and Hannibal produced the same effect, “the one by praiseworthy and the other by reprehensible methods.” For this reason, he tells us, the next chapter will take up “two Roman citizens who acquired the same glory by different methods, both of which were praiseworthy” (3.21.465). The first is Manlius Torquatus, who maintained military discipline by his harsh commands; the second was Valerius Corvinus, who did not need to punish delinquents in the army, because there weren’t any under his gentle rule (3.22.467). The first method, Machiavelli argues, is appropriate to a republic, the second to a principality. These distinctions suggest that glory attaches to ends rather than means. Scipio and Hannibal, Manlius and Valerius all achieved worldly renown or glory, though by different means.

<sup>14</sup>Patricia Osmond, “Sallust and Machiavelli: From Civic Humanism to Political Prudence,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 23 (1993): 407–38. On Sallust’s influence on Machiavelli, see also Gennaro Sasso, *Machiavelli e gli antichi e altri saggi* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1986), 1: 441–60; Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli: Storia del suo pensiero politico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1980), 485–94; Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli*, 40, 86–87; Quentin Skinner, “Machiavelli’s *Discorsi* and the Pre-Humanist Origins of Republican Ideas,” in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 121–41; and Benedetto Fontana, “Sallust and the Politics of Machiavelli,” *History of Political Thought* 24 (2003): 86–108.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Osmond, “Sallust and Machiavelli,” 412. Further references are to *Sallust*, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

tyranny.<sup>16</sup> It was in this context that he distinguished between true and false glory in *Catilina* 11: describing the rise of the Roman Republic to greatness, Sallust commented, "Ambition drove many men to become false; to have one thought locked in the breast, another ready on the tongue. ... For the noble and the base alike long for glory [*gloriam*], honour, and power, but the former mount by the true path, whereas the latter, being destitute of noble qualities [*bonae artes*], rely on craft and deception."<sup>17</sup> Machiavelli, of course, did not share Sallust's moral scruples about the use of craft and deception in the realm of politics; but he did subscribe to the distinction between true and false glory.

This distinction between true and false glory inflects Sallust's representation of Caesar and Catiline, but not in the way one might at first think. Machiavelli famously remarks in *Discourses* 3.6 that "everyone has read Sallust's account of the conspiracy of Catiline."<sup>18</sup> His comment in *Discourses* 1.10 that criticizing Catiline might be an indirect way of criticizing Caesar suggests he read Sallust's condemnation of Catiline in this way:

Lucius Catilina, scion of a noble family, had great vigour both of mind and body, but an evil and depraved nature. From youth up he reveled in civil wars, murder, pillage, and political dissension, and amid these he spent his early manhood.<sup>19</sup>

Later, at *Catilina* 54, Sallust compares Caesar and Cato in a way that supports Machiavelli's hunch that the earlier criticism of Catiline could be read as a criticism of Caesar:

In birth then, in years and in eloquence, they were about equal; in greatness of soul, they were evenly matched, and likewise in renown [*gloria*], although the renown of each was different. Caesar was held great [*magnus habebatur*] because of his benefactions and lavish generosity, Cato for the uprightness of his life. The former became famous for his gentleness and compassion, the austerity of the latter brought him prestige. Caesar gained glory [*gloriam*] by giving, helping, and forgiving; Cato by never stooping to bribery. ... He preferred to be, rather than to seem virtuous; hence the less he sought fame [*gloriam*], the more it pursued him.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Osmond, "Sallust and Machiavelli," 414–15; cf. *Bellum Catilinae* 7–9.

<sup>17</sup>*Bellum Catilinae* 11.1, in Sallust, 19. Osmond, "Sallust and Machiavelli," notes the connection between Machiavelli's view of Caesar and his view of Agathocles, and notes that Machiavelli adopts the republican view that Caesar was like Catiline, but doesn't see the connection between Sallust's view of Caesar and Machiavelli's of the Medici; see 428n50.

<sup>18</sup>*Discourses* 3.6.

<sup>19</sup>*Bellum Catilinae* 5.1. Fontana, "Sallust and the Politics of Machiavelli," also thinks Sallust was criticizing Caesar in this way (101).

<sup>20</sup>*Bellum Catilinae* 54.1–6.

Here Sallust indirectly suggests a criticism of Caesar in the guise of praising him. The ironic and asymmetrical contrast between Caesar who gained glory by giving and Cato by never stooping to bribery supports a distinction between true and false glory: Caesar was held great, but Cato achieved true glory. We can understand the importance of this distinction when we recall Sallust's conviction that true glory was a product of the Roman Republic, a view that Machiavelli shared.

Sallust's condemnation of Catiline for fomenting faction, his indirect representation of Caesar as corrupt and corrupting, and his distinction between the true and false glory all find echoes in Machiavelli. As Benedetto Fontana has observed, in the *Florentine Histories* Machiavelli analyzed the role of faction and the pursuit of private interest in Florence in much the same way that Sallust did in *Catilina*. In doing so, he implicitly suggested that the Medici were dangerously similar to Catiline. Similarly, Machiavelli's "critique of late republican politics" in the *Discorsi* was "at the same time a critique of Florentine politics and history. The methods used by 'private men' in Rome [were] the very same methods used by the Medici to acquire and maintain their dominion over the Florentine state."<sup>21</sup> And, in the passage I cited earlier from *The Art of War*, Machiavelli's claim that, during the good republican period in Rome, "no great citizen [*cittadino grande*] ever presumed ... to retain power in time of peace, so as to break the laws, plunder the provinces, usurp and tyrannize over his native land and in every way gain wealth for himself" could be read as an indirect attack on the *grandi* of the Medici family.

In addition to noting these historical parallels, Machiavelli must also have perceived the similarities between his own rhetorical task and Sallust's. Writing to Caesar at the height of his power, Sallust needed to negotiate a delicate political situation that was in some ways analogous to Machiavelli's own difficult position vis-à-vis the Medici. (The *Bellum Catilinae* and *Bellum Jurgurthinum* could be more critical, written as they were after Caesar's death and Sallust's retirement from politics.) Although Sallust clearly favored republican rule, he also sought as a client of Caesar to advise his "prince." His tack was to argue that Caesar should seek the glory associated with service to the fatherland, above and beyond the mere acquisition of power. In the "Letter to Caesar," Sallust implicitly cautions Caesar against following the example of the consul Lucius Domitius. In language that echoes his description of Catiline and seems to anticipate Machiavelli's description of Agathocles, he writes, "Has Lucius Domitius great strength? A man whose every member is stained with disgrace or crime, of lying tongue, blood-stained hands, fleeing feet, most dishonourable in those parts which cannot be honourably

<sup>21</sup>Fontana, "Sallust and the Politics of Machiavelli," 106n71.

named."<sup>22</sup> Later, Sallust imagines Caesar being urged by his "patria" and forefathers to pursue a greater glory than mere military conquest:

What we had won at the cost of great hardship and peril we transmitted to you at your birth along with the breath of life: a fatherland the mightiest in the world, a house and family the most distinguished in that fatherland, and in addition, eminent talents, honourable riches, in short, all the rewards of peace and all the prizes of war. In return for these splendid gifts we ask of you, not disgrace or crime, but the restoration of our prostrate freedom. This accomplished, the fame of your prowess will surely wing its way to all nations. At present, although your exploits are brilliant at home and abroad, yet your glory is but on a par with that of many a hero. But if you rescue almost from the brink of ruin the most famous and powerful of cities, who upon the face of this earth will be more famous than you, who will be greater?<sup>23</sup>

If Caesar restores Roman freedom, Sallust predicts, he will "tower above all men in glory as the savior of [his] country" (re publica restituta super omnis mortalis gloria agitabis). And he adds tactfully, "It remains to implore the immortal gods that whatever you decide, the result may be propitious to you and to your country."<sup>24</sup> Although Machiavelli's view of Caesar was more critical than Sallust's, the relevance of this passage to Florentine politics was not lost on Machiavelli, who sought to persuade the Medici to serve their *patria* just as Sallust had sought to persuade Caesar.<sup>25</sup>

For all these reasons, when Machiavelli says that Agathocles did not achieve glory, I am now inclined to accept what he says at face value. Machiavelli wants us to understand that there is a difference between power, which Agathocles incontrovertibly did achieve, and the reputation for glorious deeds, which he did not. And this is important because it helps us understand that Machiavelli sometimes uses "virtù" to refer to political success, while at other times he distinguishes between them. Virtù helps achieve success but does not guarantee success and so is not identical with it. And success in turn is not equivalent to the kind of virtù Machiavelli associates with glory. Agathocles had the virtù to achieve power, understood as success; he did not have the virtù attributed to the really great men, those who achieve glory. Not all kinds of virtù are the same, and some are better than others, not because they preclude "criminal" acts but because they rise

<sup>22</sup>"Ad Caesarem Senem de re publica epistula," in *Sallust*, 479. The authorship of the letter is contested, but it is included in the Loeb edition of Sallust, and was thought to be by Sallust in the Renaissance.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 489.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 489–91.

<sup>25</sup>As Osmond has written in "Sallust and Machiavelli," "Contemplating the moral degeneracy of the people and the breakdown of law, [Machiavelli] also turned far more decisively than Sallust to the individual leader, whether reforming statesman or prince" (429–30).

to a Roman standard of greatness, the greatness of Roman founders and military commanders.<sup>26</sup>

What then do we make of the distinction, which I earlier argued was ironic, between Cesare Borgia and Agathocles? Machiavelli explicitly tells us that Cesare Borgia is an example of a prince who rose to power with the help of others, while Agathocles is an example of a prince who rose to power by crime (*per scelera*). One way to construe this distinction is that Agathocles was not as skillful as Borgia in managing his reputation. As we've seen, Borgia had his lieutenant Remirro de Orco murdered in the public square for his excessive cruelty to the people of the Romagna, even though (or precisely because) Remirro was only following the directions of Borgia. By contrast, while Agathocles was certainly capable of deception, he erred in not displacing responsibility for his violent acts onto his subordinates. As a result, he was himself blamed for his violent deeds, which others saw as criminal. This might suggest that the "glory" Agathocles failed to achieve is a manufactured glory, brought about by the public management of reputation. Contrary to what I just argued in the preceding paragraph, Machiavelli would then be treating glory ironically, as the mere appearance of glory or as the fame that obscures responsibility for criminal acts. And yet I think that this still doesn't quite capture Machiavelli's judgment of Agathocles or, for that matter, Borgia. For Machiavelli also describes Borgia's achievements without attributing glory to them. In this sense, it remains true that the distinction between Borgia and Agathocles is a distinction without a difference. The crucial political difference between Borgia and Agathocles, one might then think, is not that Agathocles was criminal and Borgia was not. The difference is that Borgia came to power with the help of "the arms of others," while Agathocles seized power by himself. But even this difference is less crucial than it seems since, despite relying on the arms of others, Borgia's actions are exemplary for the new prince while Agathocles's manner of rising to power, although without the help of others, is subject to some censure.

Not surprisingly, critics have struggled to understand the example of Agathocles. Claude Lefort and Russell Price have both tried to make sense of Machiavelli's refusal to attribute glory to Agathocles by taking Machiavelli at his word. According to Lefort, Machiavelli first condemns Agathocles's extreme actions. Ultimately, however, Lefort argues, the example of Agathocles is designed to show the prince's reputation is dependent on the people: when Machiavelli writes "it cannot be called virtue to murder one's fellow citizens," he is signaling that *virtù* requires glory, that is, that one can't define political action without giving a role to representation, understood as the way subjects and citizens construe such

<sup>26</sup>Claude Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre: Machiavel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 380, notes of this passage that *virtù* is not incompatible with crime but one also can't cover over crime with *virtù*.

action.<sup>27</sup> Even though Agathocles does in the end take such considerations into account, Lefort argues that this shift can't erase the initial condemnation of his violent deeds because those deeds were committed without justification and, moreover, by someone of a lowly social position. Russell Price makes a similar argument. According to Price, Agathocles achieves military glory but, judging from Machiavelli's comments in the *Discourses*, he does not achieve political glory.<sup>28</sup>

I now think Lefort and Price are right to take Machiavelli's reservations about Agathocles seriously, but not for the reasons they propose. Contrary to Lefort, Machiavelli nowhere indicates that Agathocles—or any other new prince—needed justification to commit his violent actions. To put this another way, Agathocles's justification is simply his ambition. To crib from chapter 26 of *The Prince*, violence is “justified” when it is necessary and it's necessary to use violence if you want to gain power. Nor is there any evidence that Machiavelli is especially concerned with Agathocles's lowly social position. To the contrary, if anything, Machiavelli appears to be even more impressed that someone who was the “son of a potter” could rise to such a high political and military position (see *Prince*, chap. 14 and *Discourses* 2.13). Similarly, Price's characterization of Agathocles as one who achieved military glory is refuted by the fact that Machiavelli attributes virtù but not glory to Agathocles. The distinction Machiavelli is making is not between military and political glory, but between military virtù and glory. This is important because it signals that virtù is not the same as glory: the skills one needs to achieve military *or* political success have an asymptotic relation to the greatness that is Machiavelli's chief concern in the *Discourses*, and that he holds out as a his lure to the Medici in chapter 26 of *The Prince*.

Here I also take issue with the interpretation of Leo Strauss, one of the most tenacious readers of Machiavelli. Strauss notes Machiavelli's play with virtù in the description of Agathocles (47), and glosses Machiavelli's message as follows: The prince “need not possess and exercise moral virtue proper, although the reputation for possessing some of the moral virtues is indispensable for him. The prince need not even possess virtue in the sense of such dedication to the common good as excludes ambition. But he must possess the virtue that consists of ‘brain,’ or ‘greatness of mind,’ and manliness combined—the kind of virtue praised by Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* and possessed by the criminals Agathocles and Severus.”<sup>29</sup> So far, so good. But Strauss then goes on to claim that the ground of such virtù “is not the common good but the natural desire of each to acquire wealth and glory.”<sup>30</sup> As we have seen, however, Machiavelli nowhere ascribes such a desire for glory to

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Price, “Theme of ‘Gloria,’” 628.

<sup>29</sup>Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 47 (play on virtue), 269.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 269.

Agathocles. And he doesn't, I suggest, precisely because he is observing that rhetorical tact for which Strauss elsewhere praises the author of *The Prince*.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, I suggest, Machiavelli's rhetorical task is not only to instruct the prince how to hold on to his power but also how to let go of it. Agathocles illustrates one argument for ceding some power to one's subjects, which we might call the argument from greater longevity: Agathocles retained his position for his entire life because he curbed his violent deeds and catered to the interests of his subjects. Machiavelli implicitly suggests the Medici might do so as well. But the more powerful argument is the one concerning glory, a term that is under erasure in chapter 8 but reappears conspicuously in chapter 26.

The choice that Machiavelli presents the Medici is not between Borgia and Agathocles but rather between the two of them and the glory achieved by the really excellent men. This is a choice between merely holding on to one's power or doing something really great for one's principality or one's country. In Sallust's terms, it is a choice between Caesar as he was and as he might have been. This message is brought home in chapter 14 of *The Prince*, where Machiavelli reflects in more general terms about how a prince should read history:

The prince should read history, and in it study the actions of distinguished men; to see how they comported themselves in war; to examine the causes for their victories and defeats in order to be able to avoid the latter and imitate the former; and above all he should do as some outstanding man before him has done, who decided to imitate someone who had been praised and honored before him [*che a preso a imitare se alcuno innanzi a lui è stato laudato e gloriato*] and always keep in mind his deeds and actions: just as it is said that Alexander the Great imitated Achilles; Caesar, Alexander; Scipio, Cyrus. And whoever reads the life of Cyrus written by Xenophon, then realizes how important in the life of Scipio that imitation was to his glory [*nella vita di Scipione, quanto quella imitazione gli fu di gloria*]. (125)

In chapter 26, Machiavelli returns to these examples and urges the Medici to follow them. "There is a great willingness at present; and where there is great willingness there cannot be great difficulty, if you hold to the methods of those I have set up as targets." Machiavelli cites recent divine portents as encouraging signs, adding: "Dio non vuole fare ogni cosa, per non ci torre el libero arbitrio e parte di quella gloria che tocca a noi" (God does not want to do everything, so as not to take from us our free will and a part of

<sup>31</sup>Strauss claims that "in the *Prince*, [Machiavelli] omits, within the limits of the possible, everything which it would not be proper to mention in the present of a prince. He dedicated the *Prince* to a prince because he desired to find honorable employment; the book therefore exhibits and is meant to exhibit its author as a perfect courtier, a man of the most delicate sense of propriety" (ibid., 26).

that glory that belongs to us). This is the glory that will come from saving Italy from recent “barbarous cruelties and outrages” (217), something that can only be done with a citizen militia (*arme proprie*) and new military methods (*ordini*) (218). Just as Sallust predicted that Caesar will “tower above all men in glory as the savior of [his] country” (*re publica restituta super omnis mortalis gloria agitabis*), adding that “it remains to implore the immortal gods that whatever you decide, the result may be propitious to you and to your country”; so Machiavelli urges the Medici not to be tyrants like Caesar and Agathocles but to achieve the greatness and glory which each, in their different ways, failed to do.

I want to return in conclusion to the question of metadiscourse in *The Prince*, to the ways in which Machiavelli reflects on what we might call his own Machiavellianism. In some ways, my revision of my earlier argument has amounted to saying there’s a limit to Machiavelli’s Machiavellianism, if by this we understand the purely pragmatic pursuit of power. As I’ve argued, Machiavelli was interested in making distinctions, not only between successful and unsuccessful princes, but between those who achieve glory and those who do not. This last distinction is not purely pragmatic, but it is also not conventionally moral, if by morality we understand either the Ciceronian ideal of *honestas* (the honorable) or a Christian idea of ethical behavior. Machiavelli had no problem with force and fraud, violence and deception, in the realm of politics. He was capable of admiring the great criminal, like Agathocles, who rose from his lowly position to demonstrate extraordinary military and political virtù. Precisely because of this, chapter 8 still constitutes a kind of test of the reader’s judgment: on one level it distinguishes between Borgia and Agathocles; on another, it invites us to see that this is a distinction without a difference, at least as far as moral distinctions are concerned. Agathocles is no more criminal than Borgia; the important point is that neither achieved glory. Like his classical antecedents, then, Machiavelli did not confuse Agathocles’s virtù or his remarkable career with the glory of the really excellent men. These are men whose glory results from founding, reestablishing, or furthering the greatness of a republic, whether in Rome or Florence. It was the prospect of this glory that Machiavelli held out to the Medici in the concluding chapter of *The Prince*.