Machiavelli's *L'Asino:* Troubled Centaur into Conscious Ass

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> But when their roots are dry, and the Heavens show themselves gracious, times happier than ever before will return; and so pleasant and delightful they will be that you will get joy from the memory of both past and future affliction.
>
> (*L'Asino* III: 106–13)

In order to properly contextualize Machiavelli's state of mind for insights into his political pronouncements *post res perditas*, we must look not only to the letters and prose works but also to the poetry he wrote. If we can accept the poetry to be as authoritative as the prose works, as they certainly would have been in Machiavelli's own lifetime, (Ascoli, 1999; Najemy, 1994: 18–57) then startling new perspectives begin to emerge. This paper will offer allegorical evidence drawn mainly from the unfinished *L'Asino* or *The Ass* (1517) in order to advance two theses. The foundational claim is that the poem should be understood as a psychologically cathartic exercise that allowed the author to admit to a variety of past offenses, such as his vanity, arrogance, profligacy and overweening hubris, and, through literary confession, cleanse himself of them. Eventually, despite suffering bouts of suicidal despair during his exile from Florence, his natural self-confidence began to reassert itself, confirming his conviction that his destiny lay in serving his *patria*. That the poem remained unfinished at his death may actually reflect more the success of the exercise than any failure of execution, for, if my interpretation is correct, Machiavelli had fully regained his confidence by the fifth canto and was ready to enter the political lists once again. This interpretation supports controversial claims that Machiavelli understood his service to involve a return to a much older commitment to Florence's first family

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of politics than his short-lived service to the nominal republic (Martelli, 1988; Masters, 1998).

An additional and perhaps equally controversial claim is that far from being a lifelong enemy of Christianity, the young Machiavelli struggled between a religious and a political vocation. The opening scenes of the poem illustrate how, apparently under his father's influence, he was initially destined for a life of religious contemplation only to reject it in favour of the more direct opportunities for power offered by the Medici family.

To accept *L'Asino* as a poetic confessional requires a re-evaluation of at least two theoretical presumptions that have dominated contemporary critiques of Machiavelli's political thought. The first mistake we can expose is the presumption that there is an unrepentantly irreligious core to Machiavelli's politics (Butterfield, 1956: 14–33, 78–81; Skinner, 1978: 130–38, 145–48, 183–86; Strauss, 1958: 12).[1] It is uncontroversial to suggest that the mature Machiavelli opposed the temporal claims of the Catholic Church and that an instrumental recognition of some form of religious imperative for the majority of the *patria* runs throughout all Machiavelli's work, as it does for *L'Asino*, (Machiavelli, 1996: I.12; II.2 and 1998: 68–71). "There is assuredly need for prayers; and altogether mad is he who forbids people their ceremonies and devotions; because in fact it seems that from them may be reaped union and good order; and on them in turn rests good and happy fortune" (*L'Asino* V: 124–27).[2] However, a close reading of *L'Asino* suggests that such an instrumental attitude may not always have been true of Machiavelli's approach to religion, which opens up interpretive possibilities hitherto overlooked.

The second mistake is to presume that Machiavelli attempts a universally applicable political epistemology, while actually promoting the fluidity of a goal-oriented approach based on the principles of an amorally applied political psychology (Pocock, 1975: 167; Strauss, 1958: 23, 55, 62). His critics presume that without a universal epistemology there can be no ethical core to his thinking, which is a presumption I challenge in this paper by expanding upon Anthony Parel's claim for the centrality of *patria* to the renaissance Italian mind (Parel, 1986). I will suggest that Machiavelli offers the *patria* as a parochial substitute for the ethical attentions of the prince. Far from "failing" to provide epistemologically universal or ethically rooted solutions to political problems Machiavelli abhorred the impact of such philosophers on the body politic, preferring to draw his metaphors and his exemplars from literary and historical models.[3] He never referred to himself as a philosopher, yet he was sufficiently invested in the idea of himself as a poet to be outraged when Ariosto, the author of *Orlando Furioso*, left the Florentine author out of his list of Tuscan poets "like a prick" (Atkinson and Sices, 1996: 318). Ariosto's exclusion of Machiavelli was more that simply a slight to his

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Abstract. In this paper I examine some of the allegorical connections Machiavelli made in his unfinished poem *L'Asino* (The Ass) and make the case that they shed new light on the historical embeddedness of the more overtly political works, especially *The Prince*. When read alongside *The Prince*, *L'Asino* indicates what led Machiavelli to involve himself in politics in the first place, what he hoped to gain by his role as advisor and, afterwards, what his reaction was to his apparent failure to make his case effectively. It also offers us clues as to how Machiavelli conceived of his role as advisor to the Medici and highlights the anger he felt at having allowed himself to believe that his suggestions would be accepted without question and acted upon in the spirit in which they were intended. Some of the most important aspects of the poem I deal with focus on political metamorphoses, especially the prince's apotheosis into a successful Icarus and Machiavelli's less successful transition into Chiron the centaur. I also examine the allegorical significance of Diana and Circe, the message of the Abbot of Gaeta, and the implications of the Dantean allusions in the poem and perhaps most importantly the historical implications of the opening passage for Machiavelli's early entry into the political life of his *patria*.

Résumé. Dans cet essai, je montre J'indique comment certains liens allégoriques, établis par Machiavel etablit dans son poème inachevé, *l'asino L'Âne* (l'ane), font la lumière sur l'imbriquement historique des oeuvres machiavéliques de nature plus explicitement politique, surtout *L e Prince*. La lecture de *l'asino L'Âne* en parallèl avec *Le Prince*, indique indique à la fois ce qui d'abord porta Machiavel à se mêler de politique, ce qu'il espérait gagner en tant que conseiller et, par suite, ce que fut sa réaction face devant son incapacité dea son inabilite a soutenir sa cause. Une telle lecture offre également des indices sur sa façon de concevoir son rôle de conseiller aux Médicis et met en relief la rage qu'il éprouva pour s'être permis de croire que ses conseils seraient accueiqueillis sans questions et qu'on leur donnerait suite dans l'esprit même dans lequel ils furent avaient ét proférés. D'importants aspects aspects du poème traitent de métamorphoses politiques, telles l'apothéose du prince en Icare vainqueur et la moins heureuse transition de Machiavel en Chiron le centaure. J'examine également la légende de Ninus et Sardanapalus, le sens allégorique de Diane et de Circé, le message de l'abbé de Gaëte, le sens des allusions dantesques et boéthiennes et, ce qui est peut-être le plus important,, peut etre plus important, les implications historiques de la première partie du poème pour l'entré de Machiavel dans la vie politique de sa *patrie*.

poetic pride. Since the list consisted of poet/courtiers, Ariosto was also denying Machiavelli the status of favoured courtier, a position he had been trying to win with the Medici since the fall of the republic. Nevertheless, in the same letter he described Ariosto's allegorical epic as "really fine" noting that "many passages are marvelous" (Atkinson and Sices, 1996: 317), which raises the question: what was it in allegorical literature that appealed to the mind of such a singular political thinker such that he would choose to express himself in that format?

The Political Advantage of Allegory

Allegorical literature, the form in which both *Orlando Furioso* and *L'Asino* are cast, worked on two levels for its political impact: the *emotional* effect, created by the narratively elevated deeds of the characters,

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and the *intellectual* engagement created by the metaphorical puzzles embedded in the text. Allegorical poetry created these intellectual puzzles through the poetic interaction of abstract concepts with human characters. Concepts such as *fortune*, *envy*, *fame* or *justice* were given animal or human forms which then interacted with the characters in the poem, thereby allowing political questions to be explored narratively rather than philosophically. Allegorical literature also encouraged a reading practice that demanded several different interpretive activities be applied to the same piece of text to provide a series of different, yet equally valid interpretations. When confronting an allegorical text, a Florentine reader, raised on Dante, would expect to read it not only at the literal level but also at the typological (allegorical), tropological (morally instructive) and perhaps, if the text permitted, at the anagogical levels (which is the moment of insight that recognizes the presence of God).[4] Political allegory was not primarily about finding universally valid answers to politically contingent problems; rather, it was concerned to illustrate broad aspects of the human drama in order to allow an investigator to examine an issue from a multitude of different perspectives.[5] Instead of infallible answers, allegory offers a variety of problems for the reader to contemplate and, as such, it presages many of the perspectival and positional insights offered by advocates of postmodern epistemology. It provides no finality of thought, end position or conclusion; instead it facilitates an ongoing process of contemplation, which, for the student of politics, allows new and uncertain outcomes to be continuously evaluated and best case scenarios worked out in advance of an actual crisis.

The Literal Level of Canto One

L'Asino is remarkable in that the poem is primarily intended to justify the author to himself, giving us a tantalizing autobiographical glimpse into a series of fateful decisions that would mark the author for the rest of his life. Niccolò begins by denying the most common motivation ascribed to his decision to write *The Prince*, both contemporaneously and historically: "I am not seeking to get from my singing any pay, reward or recompense" (*L'Asino* I: 10–15). Immediately after this disclaimer he appears to digress again in order to tell a story about a young man from a good but poor family who was so unusually active that he appeared sick in comparison to his peers. Even though he is never named, the presumption that Machiavelli is himself the heedless runner after a political life is hinted at by the fact that his own zodiacal sign is referenced in canto II (De Grazia, 1989: 21). The identification appears to be confirmed by the first-person grammatical slips that occur later in the same

passage: "So *I*, having early turned my thought to nipping this and that, at one time stood quite still, kind and patient, no more observing others' defects, but seeking in some other way to get ahead, so that *I* believed that *I* was cured" (*L'Asino* I: 91–102 my italics).

The young Niccolò apparently "suffered from an ailment that kept increasing, namely that in every place he went running through the street, and at every time, without heed" (*L'Asino* I: 35–36). This activity so disturbed his father that after securing "many opinions from many wise men" and "applying a thousand remedies of a thousand sorts," including the making of religious vows on his behalf,[6] he finally resorted to a charlatan who promised to heal his son. The "doctor" imposed some strict conditions on the young activist, instructing his father "that for four months never should he let him go outdoors by himself, but that someone should be with him who, if perchance he should set to flying, in some good way or other would hold him back" (*L'Asino* I: 64–67). For a month he seemed cured, walking throughout Florence "decorous and sensible, between two of his brothers, full of respect and of regard; but coming one day into the Via de' Martelli, from which he could see the Via Larga, his hair began to stand on end" (*L'Asino* I: 73–75). Seeing that straight and spacious street laid out ahead, he let his cloak drop to the ground and said, "'Here not [even] Christ will hold me,' and ran off" (*L'Asino* 82–84).

De Grazia echoes most commentators who feel that this nested story within a story is of "no advantage to the narrative" (De Grazia, 1989: 20). However, far from being irrelevant, I believe that this struggle between the stultifying quietude of religious contemplation and the exciting, if potentially corrosive, demands of political action marks the epiphanic moment which would eventually lead to Machiavelli's metamorphosis into a "truly" political animal. However, as with so much in allegorical poetry, puzzling references at the beginning of a canto are only clarified later, enjoining the reader to shift chiastically backwards and forwards through the poem, seeking out future answers by referencing clues buried in the past (Garin, 1952: 25–28, 47–54).

"No Pay, Reward or Recompense"

The first *mea culpa* Machiavelli engages with is almost past the reader before she realizes it. The central irony of his "not seeking to get from my singing any pay, reward or recompense" is that everything Machiavelli ever did for the *patria* was undertaken with an eye to payment or advancement. As the editors of the collected letters note: "Machiavelli's need for money has been an underlying theme throughout these letters, beginning with the very first one" (Atkinson and Sices, 1996: 498). That he was incorruptible seems to have been generally accepted, as he was

later able to use his poverty to prove his innocence to the charges of corruption leveled at him during his tenure (Atkinson and Sices, 1996: 265). However the fact remains that Machiavelli demanded an astonishing level of remuneration for over a decade's service to the commune; the problem was that he was simply unable to hang onto it (Ridolfi, 1963: 39). It has often been said, not least by Machiavelli himself, that his enforced exile to the family estate caused him financial embarrassment but in actual fact, in terms of land and property, the farm was more than capable of sustaining him and his family (Atkinson and Sices, 1996: 265). The Machiavelli estate included horses, woods, tenants, an inn, a city palazzo and a country villa (Atkinson, 2002: 133). This *palazzo* had been in the family's hands since the mid-fourteenth century and, although it was not as splendid as the palaces recently built in Florence by the mercantile elite, it hardly constituted grounds for his claim to poverty. Indeed Niccolò's father seems to have led a reasonably comfortable life based entirely on the proceeds of the estate supplemented by occasional projects (Atkinson, 2002: 43).[7]

While it may have been enough for lesser men, it could not satisfy Machiavelli's need for status, and his father's calm acceptance of its social limitations probably caused a rift between them (Gilbert II: 1012). In one of his letters written during his "wilderness years" Machiavelli declared himself stoically steadfast in the face of poverty: "If they [the Medici] decide differently, I'll get on as I did when I came here, for I was born in poverty and I learned at an early age to stint myself than to thrive"(Atkinson and Sices, 1996: 222). This implicit criticism of his father's inability to provide for his "needs" as a child and the resultant ignominy of his family's *specchio* status is echoed in *L'Asino* when the poet criticizes his father's gullibility for believing those "who promise benefits ... and often, by believing them a man deprives himself of his property" (*L'Asino* II: 49–53). While he did have a legitimate complaint at the tardiness of the commune's payment of his outstanding expenses, the truth was that the profligacy that was such a burden to his family was no one's fault but his own, since he was "used to spending and unable to get on without spending" (Atkinson and Sices, 1996: 290).[8] Indeed, it is easy to doubt the sincerity of his actions after the collapse of the Republic, given that he may have felt pressed by financial need to compromise his integrity. His financial difficulties are openly admitted in a letter to Vettori in which he discusses his urgent need to present *The Prince* to the Medici in Rome. "The giving of it is forced on me by the necessity that drives me, because I am using up my money, and I cannot remain as I am a long time without becoming despised through poverty" (Atkinson and Sices, 1996: 265). If *The Prince* was tainted by the need to revive his financial health *L'Asino* seems to have been dedicated to reviving his psychological well-being and that appears to have been priceless.

Which Medici, Which Cure?

The acknowledgment of a major character flaw in the opening lines is only the first of a series of guilty secrets. The disposition of this overly active young man to "race through the streets" of Florence, for example, seems innocent enough on the surface, its dangerous political character only revealing itself under the reader's careful scrutiny. That his actions were political in nature is implied by the fact that the Via Larga, as anyone in Florence would immediately recognize, was the street on which the Medici palace was located and he ran to it as soon as he saw it (De Grazia, 1989: 21). This early evidence of Machiavelli's impulse towards an active political career is hardly controversial. What *is* intriguing is the care with which Machiavelli draws our attention to the importance of the junction of the Via de' Martelli and the Via Larga. A renaissance map of Florence shows us that the Via de' Martelli from which "one can see the length of Via Larga" (since renamed the Via Cavour) is a connective thoroughfare that uniquely links Florence's religious heart to its political centre of gravity (Capretti, 2006). The southern extremity of the Via de' Martelli ends in the Piazza San Giovanni, which contains the baptistery and the eastern façade of the Duomo. At the northern end of this short street sits the Medici palace, from which the de facto rulers of Florence had guided the city's fortunes since 1434 (Cherubini and Fanelli, 1990: 40). Niccolò's father was clearly worried about his son's well-being although he "sorrowed over his condition as the causes of his affliction were not well understood" (*L'Asino* I: 37–38 my trans.). However, Bernardo understood enough to have every right to express anxiety over his son's desire to become politically involved with the Medici, on account of the outrage the Machiavelli family had suffered at their hands less than a decade before Niccolò's birth.

Machiavelli's great-granduncle, Girolamo d'Angelo Machiavelli (1415–1460), incurred Cosimo de Medici's displeasure by calling for a reinstitution of freedom of speech in political debate and later took the central role in the anti-Medici protests of 1458. Girolamo taught law at the University of Florence (where Niccolò would eventually complete the *Florentine Histories*), and he was probably teaching there when Bartolomeo Scala and Niccolò's father were completing their legal studies at the *studio* (Martines, 1968: 485). Notwithstanding his social prominence he was arrested, tortured and then exiled to Avignon for 10 years with his brother Piero (Rubenstein, 1997: 116). Another brother, Francesco d'Agnolo, was arrested and beheaded the following year. In 1460 Girolamo was taken prisoner on charges of being a rebel in Lunigiana and returned to Florence, where shortly afterwards he died in prison. Although the cause of death is unknown, the Medici humanist Giuliano de' Ricci was sure he was "deservedly" strangled (Atkinson, 2002: 51).

This perhaps explains why, after numerous failed attempts to curb Niccolò's urge to active political engagement, his father was willing to accept the advice of a "certain quack doctor" who promised a cure (Atkinson and Sices, 1996: 267). Throughout the opening stanza of *L'Asino* Machiavelli enjoys punning on the word *medici*, which could be understood to mean either a physician or a member of the Medici clan; however, the faith of the father in his bogus remedies makes a doctor of theology the most obvious interpretation in this case.[9] A suggestive detail is that Machiavelli's father borrowed books from the convent library of Santa Croce where he maintained a close relationship with a certain Antonio di Papi de' Medici, who, in addition to being librarian, was also a professor (or doctor) of theology (Atkinson, 2002: 64).[10]

As provocative as the religious elements of this interpretation are, they only hint at the larger story. In 1994 John Henderson confirmed Niccolò's father's membership in a lay brotherhood of flagellants, the Compagnia di S. Jeronimo, where his name appeared in the registers for over a decade. Bernardo's Compagnia was officially known as the Fraternitas Sanctae Maria Pietatis, although it was referred to by most Florentines as simply the Pietà (Henderson, 1994: 437). It was one of a number of religious groups that performed social functions by ostensibly advocating social peace and harmony through prayer (Atkinson, 2002: 65–66). They also served as a convenient cover for groups engaged in political intrigue, since they were exempted from the general curfew on the city. The Pietà was remarkable for being the oldest of the five *buche* or "companies of the night" and was known for maintaining much stronger devotional discipline than regular fraternities (Atkinson, 2002: 65). Despite Machiavelli's own suggestion in the *Florentine Histories* (Machiavelli, 1988: Bk. VII Ch. 13) that the Pietà was prominent in an earlier conspiracy against Cosimo's son Piero, Henderson concludes that there is little evidence to support earlier biographer's contentions that membership in such confraternities necessarily connoted anti-Medicean sympathies The Pietà's registers included prominent members of Florentine society and, most intriguingly, the name of Niccolò Machiavelli himself (Henderson, 1994: 437).

Although members of the flagellant fraternities tried to restrict membership to the patrician class it was not always possible. The fact that they expressly opposed membership to *persone scandalose* or persons of ill repute meant that, far from failing his son, Bernardo must have called upon significant support from friends, such as Bartolomeo Scala, to ensure his advancement (Henderson, 1994: 154). In fact, Bernardo had probably been planning such a career path for his son for some time, beginning with his insistence that he join the Vangelista youth confraternity or *fanciulli*, which was also noted for its degree of Medici family involvement (Masters, 1998: 18; Henderson, 1994: 57). Niccolò's membership

raises the question that if Bernardo was afraid of the influence of the Medici on his son why did he encourage him to join a religious group containing Medici partisans? The answer is that in practice it was impossible to completely avoid Medici involvement in civic affairs since the family made it their business to underwrite a broad array of social and political activities. Such close involvement was an effective way to head off anti-Medici sentiment before it could take root, and Lorenzo was known to have been a significant supporter of many of the confraternities in Florence, especially those with the harshest discipline (Henderson, 1994: 437). In addition, the *fanciulli* provided Bernardo a benefit beyond disciplining his wayward son, which was that they helped educate their members in important aspects of humanism (Henderson, 1994: 414).

In this light it seems reasonable to interpret the doctor's cure in *L'Asino* as involving four months' commitment to the care of the confraternity. Here he could be constantly chaperoned by colleagues who could point out "his error[s]" and beseech him "to have regard for his honour" (*L'Asino* I: 67–69). It is most likely then that the "two brothers" who sought to tame his impetuous need to become politically active were his confraternity brothers; they certainly could not have been members of his own family since Machiavelli had only one brother, Totto, who was six years younger than he (Ridolfi, 1963: 3). It is worth noting that Totto shared his older brother's educational path through the *fanciulli* and confraternities only to also reject the church in favour of a life in business. However, the year his father died he became a priest, perhaps in atonement for not having granted his father's wish in life (Masters, 1998: 222 n. 71, 236 n. 165). The issue for Bernardo was that by getting his hands "dirty" through direct political action his son would have to place himself socially and spiritually outside the Church. In the event, Christ proved unequal to the task of keeping Machiavelli out of the Via Larga, dashing a father's hopes for his son's health and spiritual well-being by putting him permanently out of reach of God's protection.

Machiavelli's Political Centaur of Gravity

Bernardo's worst fears were not realized in his lifetime (he died in 1500) but his concern appears to have weighed heavily on his son's shoulders after the Medici returned to dominate Florentine affairs.[11] The most damaging admission in *L'Asino* was that pressing social, financial and psychological imperatives to serve his *patria* had driven him to make a startling offer to in *The Prince*. Had it been taken up it might have changed the future direction of Florentine politics and it would have certainly altered the fortunes of the Medici as much as it would have altered his

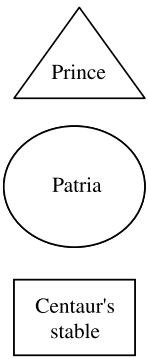
own. Indeed the offer was so disturbing that Niccolò never actually gets around to allegorizing it in the poem, since the poem ends before he makes his transition from human to ass. Because of this we need to return to *The Prince* to uncover what arrangement had so disturbed Machiavelli that he found it so hard to justify, even to himself.

The offer was that Machiavelli, without "regard for his honour," would risk his soul to assume the semi-bestial characteristics of a political "pack animal." He would serve alongside the prince, against conventional morality but for the ultimate good of the *patria*. Machiavelli would act as the prince's counselor and political accomplice in order to steer Florence through the many dangers her altered status from republic to principality would create. As every chapter of *The Prince* illustrates, this could only be done by standing outside of the constraints and protection of the laws of the *patria* they were sworn to protect, meaning that the decision carried with it a profound personal cost. This cost was informed by Aristotle's dictum that "anyone who by his nature and not simply by ill luck has no state is either too bad or too good, either subhuman or superhuman" (1992: 59). In other words, anyone who failed to act within the ethical and religious constraints of the *polis* would inevitably become either "Aristotle's beast or god" (Pocock, 1975: 167). A Florentine prince already stood outside of the tension that existed between the legislature of the *Signoria* and the law abiding citizenry because he was the final arbiter of the law. However, the costs of such political power were too great for anyone of lesser political genius than the exemplars mentioned in *The Prince* to bear alone, and a more parochially gifted prince needed an advisor for practical help in ruling the *patria* (Machiavelli, 1998: 22–25). The advantage was that free from the constraints of the moral and legal authority that obtained within the *patria*, the prince and his political tutor could rule much more efficiently than a prince could alone or within a republican system. In the proem to *The Prince* this division of responsibility is expressed in terms of clarity of vision and is illustrated spatially in the valley and the mountain metaphor.

> For just as those who sketch landscapes place themselves down in the plain to consider the nature of mountains and high places and to consider the nature of low places place themselves high atop mountains, similarly, to know well the nature of peoples one needs to be prince, and to know well the nature of princes one needs to be of the people. (Machiavelli, 1998: 4)

The prince needs the freedom to leave the confines of the vulgar world for "in the world there is nothing but the vulgar" and appear to become semi-divine. The counselor needs to move in the opposite direction and assume semi-bestial characteristics in order to better serve his *patria*.[12] When the prince accomplishes his task he will be able to see behind the veil of moral and ethical restraint imposed upon ordinary

vulgar citizens for their own good by the leaders of the Church. He will assume the powers of the divine to generate sublime terror in order to dispense justice in the best interests of the *patria*. (Machiavelli, 1998: 66). In its simplest formulation, sublime political violence imitates the savage acts of God and anyone who can be as savage and as random as a god becomes partially godlike himself.[13] If he is successful in founding a republic he will be rewarded with a chapter in the annals of civic history. If he fails he will be punished with ignominy that will be passed on to future generations of his line. Since he could not reasonably expect to be apotheosized if a cloud hung over him due to the bestial means necessary to bring the *patria* to heel, this soul-destroying task had to be assigned to his counselor.



Represented schematically the relationship takes on the following form. The triangle represents the very peak of the mountain top. The prince, replete with silver armour, a crested helmet, and heraldic insignia bestowed on the family by Charlemagne, sits ready to be apotheosized atop the mountain surveying his lands below.[14] Not only can he survey his parochial domain from those heights he can also see everything that transpires on other mountaintops where the other princes sit. He is still part of the *patria* but only just, since he is necessarily above all its laws and customs (even though he cannot be *seen* to be so). As Machiavelli states in the *Pastoral* he is a "youth celestial and not earthly, of habits exalted, of godlike qualities" (Gilbert I: 98, 13–15).[15]

New princes are almost always installed by associates who seek their own advancement on the back of the sublime violence that "their" prince appears to wield. (Machiavelli, 1998: 39). In a passage central to this thesis, Machiavelli makes a point of highlighting the prince's need to dismiss those "great" people and suggests how it might be accomplished.

> Therefore is it necessary for a prince to know well how to use the beast and the man. This role was taught covertly to princes by ancient writers, who wrote that Achilles, and many other ancient princes, were given to Chiron the centaur to be raised, so that he would look after them with his discipline. To have as teacher a half-beast, half-man, means nothing other than that a prince needs to know how to use both natures; and the one without the other is not lasting. (Machiavelli, 1998: 69)

The most common interpretation of this passage is that the prince should assume both roles himself, but that is a) not what Machiavelli wrote, and b) not credible in the case of Lorenzo di Piero, the dedicatee of the work. Machiavelli is careful to suggest that it is "necessary for a prince to *know well* how to *use* the beast and the man, not to actually become them himself.[16] The problem lay in the fact that a prince's freedom of political action was constrained unless he was accepted as a legitimate ruler, and publicly setting aside the moral constraints established by the Catholic Church would rob him of that legitimacy. He needed an associate willing to "dirty his hands" on the prince's behalf yet not so powerful as to constitute a threat to him. This associate would have to be wise enough to advise the prince on political matters while recognizing that his only security lay in the security of his patron. Dangerous underworld elements unimpressed with the prince's public persona still need to be removed in order to secure his control over the state. This is why, bracketing the *patria* and positioned to watch out for the prince's interests from among the lowliest of citizens, we find Chiron in the centaur's stable.

It is not only confirmed enemies of the state that can present problems for the prince. Problems can occur when ordinary citizens, who have an ethical code based on Catholic principles, judge him to have failed in his socio-religious duties (Machiavelli, 1998: Bk.7 Ch. 33–34). The prince therefore tries to maintain the appearance of moral rectitude although, if he slips, the judgment of the citizens will only cause political problems if he abandons the care of the *patria* as his personal moral and political goal. Hence the centrality of the third element of the schema, the circle, which represents the *patria* within which everyone but the prince and his counselor live their entire physical and spiritual existence. It is for their sake that the prince must appear to share the narratives that legitimize their existence while his own nature remains largely hidden from them.

The prince, then, is half man, half god, appearing to reach up from the top of the *patria* to the heavens but with his feet firmly planted on the mountain top; the counselor is half man, half beast, living in an underworld of political intrigue and expediency, both *in* the city but not quite *of* the city, while the *patria* forms the emotional and aesthetic anchor that exists between them, its citizens blithely unaware of the sacrifice

that its ruler and his counselor have made to keep them safe and secure. In the valley surveyed by the prince, alert to every change in the political manoeuvrings of the citizenry, the centaur waits with bow drawn to protect both the prince and the people from the angry souls emerging from the river of boiling blood that was soon to run throughout Florence and Italy (King, 2005: 257–98).

Horseman and Birdman: The Impossibility of Individual Apotheosis[17]

A centaur was an allegorical construct, half man half horse that at its worst represented an ungovernable creature whose bestial nature overwhelmed its reason. At its best, however, as in the case of Chiron where the rational mind was able to govern the animalistic passions, what resulted was a creature gifted with a knowledge of politics and a desire to pass that wisdom along to princes who most needed it (Hammond Schwartz, 1988: 659). Consequently, Chiron became famous for training the heroes of the ancient world in their political duties and obligations to the citizens they led.[18] In the Achilles legend Chiron moves in the political realm that exists between beast and man and Achilles moves in the metaphysical realm between man and the gods but the figures are never shown as paired in the pursuit of political power. In Machiavelli's narrative he would accept nothing less than shared political rule between the centaur and the prince. It was never explicitly stated but the careful reader demanded by the proem would eventually realize that the implication was unavoidable (Machiavelli, 1998: 92). Notwithstanding the political benefits such joint rule might have offered, it was a demand that could never have been accepted by Lorenzo and Machiavelli should have known better. In the *Pastoral* Machiavelli wisely clarified their respective roles: "If I see that my song will delight you, these valleys and these little hills will echo in your praise verses splendid and measureless; for my thoughts are so strained to please you that my desire is only that I shall think of obeying, you of commanding" (Gilbert 100). However, in the *L'Asino* he revisits his justification for joint control through his use of the Icarus legend.

Single rulers were rarely successful in expanding their realms "because strength which is enough to support one body only is not sufficient to sustain a greater weight" (*L'Asino* V: 70–71). Even if Machiavelli believed that a ruler *could* soar like Icarus without losing his grip on his wings, neither Chiron nor the prince had sufficient *virtù* to rule the hills and the valleys alone. "He who tries to touch both poles falls in ruin on the earth, as long ago did Icarus after his foolish flight" (*L'Asino* V: 73–74). Icarus, of course, exemplified the impossibility of the human being joining the realm of the gods through a bestial

metamorphosis. Since the metamorphosis of beast to god is a preserve of the gods alone all attempts by humans to apotheosize themselves through manipulation of the material world are doomed to fail. In the case of Icarus his mechanical attempt to turn himself into a bird-man held him aloft only long enough to ensure that his fall proved illustratively fatal.

Despite the fact that Lorenzo made no explicit recognition of Machiavelli's offer, he in fact accepted the core of his suggestion; the only caveat was that he had another counselor in mind to execute it. On October 2, 1516, Lorenzo left Florence, which he had always regarded as a backwater, for Rome and "his secretary, Goro Gheri was entrusted with the management of the regime in Florence. Gheri remained Lorenzo's most trusted advisor until Lorenzo's death in 1519" (Butters, 1985: 278). Machiavelli had risked his soul by offering to bestialize himself just to see Lorenzo give the prize to a political mediocrity from Pistoia.

An Allegorical Puzzle of Prudence and Political Suicide

Machiavelli had been abandoned by his city, his friends and his self-confidence, and now he needed the power of allegorical poetry to think through how he might save his dignity. The process begins when he discovers himself imprisoned in a binding but ambiguously desolate location that appears to echo his psychological state.

> I found myself in as rough a place as ever I saw. I cannot tell you at all how I got there nor do I know at all the cause why I fell in that place where I wholly lost my liberty. I could not continue my steps by reason of my great fear and the darkness of night, for I could not see in the least where I was going. But much more was my fear increased by a blast on a horn so savage and strong that still my mind feels no assurance about it. (*L'Asino* II: 22–29)

He is led out of the political wilderness by one of Circe's handmaidens, "a woman of the utmost beauty" whose attributes identify her as Diana the Roman goddess of hunting (*L'Asino* II: 49–53). Youthful and strictly virginal, Diana is a comforting allegory for Machiavelli since the huntress was traditionally a protector of wildlife rather than its destroyer. She first soothes him, then, employing the central hills and valleys metaphor that was still weighing on his mind, she asks what made him seek out the uncharted and hitherto unmastered world of political action. "And how, do tell me, did you fall into these valleys which not one inhabitant tills or masters?" (*L'Asino* II: 79–81). He had once offered himself as a uniquely gifted master of the political lowlands but since his rejection by the Medici he lacked the confidence to do more than shrug his shoulders.

Stag or Bear: The Cost-Benefit Analysis of Political Change

The poem now allegorically mines the *selva oscura*, or Dante's dark wood, from his introduction to the *Divine Comedy*. Most significant for the dark mood at this point of the story is the reminder that no one had yet entered this dark wood of political inaction and lived to tell of their experience (*L'Asino* II: 112–14). In fact, since this dark wood is also allegorically linked to Dante's wood of the suicides found in *Inferno* XIII, it is reasonable to conclude that both Dante and Machiavelli open their stories allegorically contemplating suicide after being politically marginalized. Dante's exemplar, Pier della Vigna, was a poet and a senior civil servant who committed suicide in 1247 after being falsely accused of conspiracy against his master the Emperor (Alighieri, 1989: 209–10). Dante was himself led out of the wood only by writing the *Commedia* and abandoning politics to begin the arduous but continually ascending path to (literary) immortality.

In a crucial difference, Machiavelli elected to remain and make his way in the primordial forest that lay outside of God's laws (*L'Asino* II: 100–07). Rather than fleeing the threatening beasts, as Dante did, Machiavelli's pre-Christian guide places him at the centre of a bestial trio and marches him deeper into the woods: "Then she moved on with a pleasant face; and I, not seeing there any way of escape, went on all fours with the animals behind her, side by side with a stag and with a bear" (*L'Asino* II: 148–51). These creatures could refer to the chivalric motifs that identify a particular family, such as the Orsini family of Rome, who sported a bear as their heraldic device. However, given the failure of scholars to substantiate any such link, they seem most likely to be allegorical metaphors that refer to the personal crisis Machiavelli faced in the world of Florentine politics. The stag is often an attribute of prudence, especially prudence employed in eluding one's enemies (Hall, 1996: 289). This attribution comes directly from the difficulty presented to Renaissance hunters by this cautious and elusive animal although its significance will not become apparent for several more cantos. The bear, on the other hand, had a much more immediate allegorical significance, suggestive of a figure charged with a high ideal that she could not live up to.

Callisto, along with all of Diana's retinue, was expected to remain as chaste as her divine mistress. Jupiter seduced her by pretending to be Diana in order to gain her confidence and made her pregnant. When Diana noticed her nymph's pregnancy she immediately turned her into a bear (Hall, 1996: 102). A plausible interpretation therefore is that the canto ends with prudence, Machiavelli's most prized political attribute, on one side of him, suggesting the potential for a happy outcome to his dilemma, while the shame of Callisto's pregnancy on the other illustrated a much less appealing outcome.

The Abbot of Gaeta: Hannibal or Hanno?

The third canto suggests that Callisto's fate is not his own, notwithstanding the expressions of self-pity that must have consumed him in the years between the fall of the republic and his commission to write the *Florentine Histories*. "Among modern peoples and among ancient," Diana notes, "never has anyone borne more ingratitude or greater toil. Through your own fault this did not overtake you, as it happens to some, [namely, Callisto] but because Chance was opposed to your good conduct" (*L'Asino* III: 76–82). While Machiavelli appears quick to accept this absolution from the divine, if pagan goddess, the truth was that it was more than ingratitude or ill-fortune that caused his fall from grace.

The signature emblem of the enclosure that Diana leads him into was carved in marble over the gateway leading to the animals' compound. Machiavelli's allegorical association with the subject of this emblem is illustrative of his belated recognition that, while he might have avoided being lulled into an indiscrete consummation with the enemies of Florence, at least as far as *The Prince* was concerned he had finally overstepped the bounds of rhetorical prudence and humility.

> A figure that seemed alive stood sculptured in marble above the great arch that sheltered the entrance, and like Hannibal seemed to ride on an elephant in triumph; his clothing was that of a dignified man, renowned and eminent. A garland of laurel he had on his head; his face was very pleasant and happy; around him were people who showed him honour. "He is the famous Abbot of Gaeta," said the lady, "as I am sure you know, who was once crowned as a poet." By the gods of Heaven, as you see, his image was put in this place along with the others now at his feet, in order that each one who comes near him, without knowing further, can judge what sort of people are shut up in there. (*L'Asino* VI: 109–25)

The abbot of Gaeta, an elderly and increasingly deranged priest known as Baraballo, had been the subject of an infamous practical joke instigated by Pope Leo X in September 1514. Baraballo, a long-time courtier to Leo, was vain enough to be persuaded that his pathetic doggerel was on a par with the poetry of Petrarch, and he therefore believed himself entitled to claim a public coronation with the laurels, similar to that granted the more famous civic poet on the Roman Capitol (Bedini, 1998: 90–101; Hibbert, 1974: 226–27). Leo assured the abbot that his verse was undeniably worthy of such honour and even offered to transport Baraballo to the Capitol on the back of his pet elephant Hanno, a recent gift from the Portuguese king, Manuel I, to receive it (Bedini, 1998: 52). Baraballo was dressed in a scarlet toga trimmed with gold but the "dignity" of the occasion was disturbed by the overenthusiastic cheers of the spectators, which prompted Hanno's refusal to cross the bridge at

Sant' Angelo. This forced the "poet" to dismount, bringing the sorry spectacle to a premature end. The abbot's prominent place in the poem suggests Machiavelli's recognition that it was his vanity, and the self-deception that accompanied it, that led to his alienation from the Medici. That the practical joke was instigated by a Medici pope on a former courtier typologically reinforced this insight. A contemporary woodcut satirizing the event features an ass mounted upon an elephant being shielded from the sun by an umbrella-wielding monkey and led by two armed lions and a drumming goat (Bedini, 1998: 93). Baraballo's public humiliation for writing doggerel might seem a harsh comparison to make with Machiavelli's own rhetorical failure at the hands of the Medici but Niccolò's emotional reaction was probably intense enough at the time for him to see it as comparable.

Naked Hands on the Body Politic

At the time of writing in 1517 Machiavelli was well aware that the Medici had not yet overcome their distrust or dislike of him. "Not yet has Heaven altered its opinion, nor will alter it, while the fates keep toward you their hard purpose and those feelings which you have found so hostile and so adverse not yet, not yet are purged" (*L'Asino* III: 100–04). The fact that the poem was begun at about the same time that Machiavelli began his meetings in the Orti Oricellari suggests that it initially coincided with his decision to close the door to direct tutelage of young princes. That he left it unfinished suggests that his outrage was relatively short-lived. Despite the harshness of the Medici's condemnation of him, Diana's doubling of the phrase "not yet" suggests a confidence that traditional interpretations of Machiavelli's minimal relationship to the Medici cannot explain. He must have assumed that as soon as the Medici felt secure in their position their anger would thaw and he would be allowed to return to their service. "But when their roots are dry, and the Heavens show themselves gracious, times happier than ever before will return; and so pleasant and delightful they will be that you will get joy from the memory of both past and future affliction" (*L'Asino* III: 106–13). The confidence that Machiavelli expresses in these lines is almost unbelievable given his most recent experiences. Although Diana does not force a metamorphosis on him, she convinces him that it eventually would prove to be in his best interest to temporarily assume the attributes of a beast.

> But before these stars show themselves propitious toward you, you will have to travel to explore the world, covered with a different skin, because that Providence which supports the human species intends you to bear this affliction for your greater good. Hence you must altogether lose your human semblance, and without it come with me to feed among the other beasts. There can be no

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> change in this harsh star; by putting you in this place, the ill is deferred, not cancelled. (*L'Asino* III: 115–25)

Diana confirms the necessity of the metamorphosis, if only to toughen him up for the political challenges that lay ahead (*L'Asino* III: 127–33). His eventual reward would be the same prize he would later offer the Medici popes. namely immortality in the literary and historical annals of the *patria* (*L'Asino* IV: 16–17; Gilbert I: 115). Diana's political insight, unfiltered as it was by the ideological constraints of Christian morality, suggests that in order to master the politics of his day Machiavelli's "human semblance" needed to shed its Christian qualities (Atkinson and Sices, 1996: 265). However, this direct embrace of paganism was not without its dangers and it came with an allegorical warning, buried in the story of the hunter Actaeon, suggesting a more disturbing significance than prudence for the stag that accompanied Callisto's bear.

Actaeon accidentally stumbled upon Diana while she was bathing and he despoiled her chastity with his gaze. To punish him, Diana turned him into a stag and he was torn to pieces by his own hounds (Hall, 1996: 102). In *L'Asino* this possibility arises when Diana, the chastest of goddesses, invites Machiavelli into her bed. If Actaeon was torn to pieces for simply glimpsing Diana's nakedness, is there any wonder that Machiavelli expressed reticence about unveiling the naked truth about politics, allegorized as the immanent sexual encounter with the goddess? She restores his confidence by suggesting that he is uniquely constituted for the task and, while she acknowledges that many others have died trying, that will not be his fate (*L'Asino* IV: 104–08). Machiavelli finally confirms his superior knowledge of political matters by gaining the effectual truth of Diana's body "through his hands." It is this judgment of the hands, as opposed to that of the eyes that distinguishes a good student of the art of *lo stato* from those more easily fooled (Walzer, 1973: 62–82). "Men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands... Everyone sees how you appear, few touch what you are" (Machiavelli, 1998: 71). Indeed, after the shame experienced by Callisto, the only way to fully trust Diana's form would have been to judge it with one's hands rather than repeat the virgin's mistake of judging by the eyes alone. Through his sexual union with Diana, Machiavelli not only allegorizes his almost symbiotic relationship with less-than-seemly earthly matters, especially politics, he confidently reasserts his privileged position since "seeing is given to everyone, touching to a few" (Machiavelli, 1998: 71).

The epiphanic moment that confirms the accuracy of his understanding of the ways of the world is eroticized in terms that, while inappropriate for us, would have seemed entirely normal for the Renaissance

reader (Harvey, 2000: 120–37). Intense and profound experiences, especially those of a transformative religious nature, were routinely sexualized; Machiavelli's innovation was to use allegory to sexualize a secular political experience in terms previously reserved for metaphysical insights: "I moved near her, extending my cold hands beneath the sheets. And when I touched her body, a sweetness came to my heart so pleasing that I do not believe I shall ever taste greater" (*L'Asino* IV: 121–25). Machiavelli's joy at regaining the confidence he once felt in his 'knowledge' of pagan political truths is strikingly at odds with Ridolfi's presentation of the fired civil servant's extended post-republican depression that continues to unduly influence almost all the critics who have followed him (Ridolfi, 1963: 145–48). It is true that as soon as Machiavelli was separated from his physical involvement with the allegory of politics, he immediately began to doubt his spirit (*L'Asino* V: 22–27). However, he tells us that those doubts were removed by re-engaging with his pagan goddess, and it was during his enforced absence from political activity that Machiavelli, as we know from the corroborative comments in the letters, began the study of ancient exemplars in earnest (Atkinson and Sices, 1996: 264; Najemy, 1994: 215–30).

Conclusion

The fragment of *L'Asino* we have today might not possess the literary merit of a poem by Petrarch or Dante but to a historian of ideas it remains a powerful record of a canonical author's hitherto poorly documented state of mind. Properly understood it offers us support for a more historically robust interpretation of Machiavelli's intentions at a critical juncture of his life. These include his pre-republican political affiliations, his rejection of religious contemplation as a viable alternative to political action, the presumptive framework underlying his suggestions for the required metamorphosis in *The Prince*, the psychological cost involved in making such an offer, his intense disappointment when those suggestions were peremptorily dismissed by his new political masters and his eventual recovery from that disappointment. His characterization of himself as a semi-bestial figure, however, would, as Diana prophesied, remain a feature of his writing for the rest of his life, even extending into his career as a playwright. Machiavelli had already become so closely associated with Chiron by 1518 that a depiction of a centaur found its way onto the frontispiece of the first edition of *Mandragola* (Flaumenhaft, 1978: 65–66). The device had become well enough known as a personal emblem to need no other name or distinguishing mark to suggest the author of the play. However, the terrible promise implied in *The Prince* had mellowed by the time of the play's publication, allowing the centaur's

traditional bow, once suggestive of the terror of the violent sublime, to be slung over his shoulder while a second bow is employed to produce nothing more threatening than music from a violin (Flaumenhaft, 1978: 64).

Notes

1 The most complete claim (after Leo Strauss's) that Machiavelli rejected the value of all religious adherence is *Machiavelli's Three Romes* (Sullivan, 1996).
2 All references to *L'Asino* are to the standard line numbers of the poem so that the reader may refer to the original Italian. The translations, unless otherwise noted, are from volume two of the three volume edition of Machiavelli's *The Chief Works and Others* by Allan Gilbert.
3 For Cato's attempt to prevent the dangerous teachings of the Athenian philosophers, Diogenes and Carneades, from spreading to Rome, see Machiavelli *Florentine Histories* Bk. V, ch. 1.
4 See Dante's letter to Con Grande (Hollander, 1994). For an alternative interpretation, see Murrin (1980).
5 It might be useful to think of the process as similar to that which one undergoes in appreciating a cubist work of art. While there is a more or less coherent image on the canvas, only by tracing the multiplicity of perspectives and surfaces presented, and then recombining them in the imagination, does one gain a sense of the profound depth of the object studied. One may never gain the full perspective of the artist but one's efforts to reconstitute the artist's point of view allows one to engage with an otherwise ordinary object in a manner inconceivable were one confronted only with a masterful "realist" rendition of the object.
6 The text uses an old word, *botò*, for religious vow, which would be rendered as *votò* today (Blasucci, 1989: 362). Blasucci describes the vow as "*un votò a Dio per la sua guarigione"* or a vow to God for his recovery (my translation).
7 These included his fee for the arbitration of small legal matters before they got to court (as a *specchio* or public debtor he was barred from practising as a lawyer in court) and the creation of the index for Livy's *History of Rome*, which yielded him no money but did result in his owning a copy of the text (Atkinson, 2002: 53). Machiavelli's father was trained as a jurist and had achieved sufficient authority as a legal expert for Bartolomeo Scala to feature him in his dialogue *De Legibus et iudiciis dialogus*, which was dedicated to Scala's patron Lorenzo de Medici (Brown, 1979: 316).
8 Ridolfi uncritically accepts Machiavelli's excuse that he was using up his funds in the regular and necessary course of his duties on behalf of the *patria* (Ridolfi, 1963: 59).
9 Blasucci suggests that the doctor referenced here might be a member of the Medici family but he makes no attempt to explain how that might make sense in the context of the poem where the young Niccolò rejects the advice of the doctor in order to embrace the Medici palace (Blasucci, 1989: 363).
10 Bernardo had two wills drawn up at the Santa Croce monastery to which Antonio de Medici was the main witness. He also donated a barrel of wine for the enjoyment of the brothers and, if he died without heirs, the hospital of Santa Maria Novella would inherit his property. Several generations of Machiavelli were interred at the monastery, which was a coveted burial site and Niccolò was eventually buried there also.
11 The predominant view of critics is that the poem was begun sometime in 1517, the same year that produced the self-consciously negative attitude towards the Medici

that we see in proem to the *Discourses*. (De Grazia, 1989: 23; Machiavelli, 1998: xlii–xliii; Gilbert I: 186).

12 Strauss ignores the prince's apotheosis and presumes Machiavelli's point to be that all men should be considered bestial (Strauss, 1958: 296–97).

13 For a more developed explanation of the impact of the sublime on Machiavelli's thought, see King (2005: 95–102).

14 For the Medici use of ornate regalia as propaganda see Hibbert (1974:105); Godman (1998: 211); Quint (1979: vii-xxiv).

15 The *Pastoral* also appears to have been written with Lorenzo in mind at about the same time as *The Prince* was first contemplated: "Now that in the shade under this *laurel* I see my flock grazing around me" (Gilbert 97, my italics). The poem makes much of the semi-divine nature of Lorenzo (see lines 28, 74–102) although Machiavelli does not specify any metamorphosis for himself. However, his bestial nature is implied in the final lines of the poem, when he puts himself at the same level as the beasts he tends: "Because the hour has almost come when the animals go to rest ... home I shall go with my herd, hoping one day to return more famous to sing your praises" (*Pastoral* 118–24).

16 See Machiavelli's similar use of the term *usare* ("to use") in his most famous letter to Vettori: "In addition there is my wish that our present Medici lords will *make use of me*, even if they begin by making me roll a stone" (Gilbert II: 930, my italics).

17 *Apotheosis* refers the elevation of a human being into a divine being which, in the Renaissance, was most commonly used to refer to the pagan process whereby a Roman Emperor, hero or leader was recognized to be divine through a decree of the Senate or through popular consent. Two significant pagan sources for Machiavelli apotheosize their political heroes: Virgil deifies Aeneas in the *Aeneid* while Ovid describes Caesar's apotheosis in book XV of *Metamorphoses*.

18 The allegorically sensitized reader might recall that he taught other mythical figures, including Asclepius, the father of medicine, which neatly ties together the *medici* references that run throughout the poem (Gilruth, 1939: 158–76).

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