

MARCELLO SIMONETTA
ALL MACHIAVELLI'S MEN
FRIENDS, FOES AND A MISTRESS



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Machiavelli: Devilish manipulator, or national hero? «Everyone sees what you seem to be, few feel what you are», he wrote in the Prince, and to this day he remains elusive and undecipherable.

A portrait made of portraits, a new look at the life and work of the most controversial political thinker from 1500 to today.

"Simonetta is one of the rare historians capable of deciphering and explaining the original documentation, because even during the Renaissance, what was said in public was one thing, what was reserved for those who had the keys was quite another" — La Stampa

"A restless, refined and original scholar, Simonetta displays his usual and well-known style – a narrative rigorously faithful to historical events, along with an entertaining and lively style" — Avvenire

Who was Niccolò Machiavelli, the Florentine Secretary, the author of *The Prince* and *The Mandrake Root*? Everything has been said about him: was he a genius? A friend of tyrants? A courageous man who denounced the vices of the powerful? Or all of these at once? Here is a portrait of the man through the people who knew him: his closest friends, such as Filippo Strozzi and Francesco Vettori, more formal friends such as Francesco Guicciardini, the powerful figures of the Italian and European political world, colleagues, enemies, cardinals, fellow historians, and one woman only, his mistress, courtesan Barbara Salutati. Twenty three characters in all, through whose words and eyes Machiavelli returns to life, at once close-up and at a distance. This Machiavelli is a real person: sharp but not always coherent, likeable but sometimes pathetic, at once irreverent, mocking and passionate.

This book fills a gap in the vast Machiavelli bibliography, which abounds in commonplaces passed on through the generations. This portrait is alive. On each page there are stories that will surprise all readers, whether or not they are already familiar with the man and his work.

All Machiavelli's Men ends with the portrait of a woman. Machiavelli lived in a man's world where women were reduced to mere sexual objects or to the subject of literary whims. But the last laugh belongs, in fact, to Barbara.

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Prologue

«I wholly transfer myself into them»
Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori,
Florence, 10 December 1513

It might seem that everything has been said about Machiavelli. For centuries he has been a man of the Right, of the Left, and back again. He is an evil genius and a friend to tyrants. No, he is an astute whistleblower who denounces abuses of power in order to help the people overthrow the abusive leader. He is an inhuman monster, a devilish manipulator. No, he is a national hero and a democratic saint.

«Everyone sees what you seem to be, few feel what you are», he wrote in the *Prince*, and to this day he too remains elusive and undecipherable. Even his physical appearance is shrouded in mystery. The portrait painted of him after his death by Santi di Tito, probably from his death mask, merely captures the deformed smirk of a pessimist, the eternal smile of the misanthrope – or is it just the hollowed-out face of a dead man. It certainly does not show the complex, living, breathing person.

There have been numerous reconstructions of the man based on his work, and in particular on the letters, all useful in helping to sketch a portrait of him. Yet none of these sketches is complete, or definitive. His multifaceted identity remains troubling, for his admirers as well as his detractors. He is akin to the Sphinx, or to the Delphic Oracle. He is praised for his moral realism and condemned for his amorality. Who he really was remains blurry, and one of history's well-kept secrets.

Machiavelli was not a monad, an isolated and misunderstood genius, but he is often studied as if he were. In fact, no one exists in isolation, and he is no exception. The everyday Machiavelli emerges in all his multifacetedness in the eyes of his contemporaries – close friends, less close and even false friends, acquaintances, foes, colleagues, courtiers and employers. There is a mistress, too – the only woman. Machiavelli comes to life in this book through the web of relations he wove around himself. We hear voices which allow us to reassemble a kaleidoscopic character. It is a sort of Pirandellian mirror in which Mister Niccolò, always seen by others, is indeed like Pirandello's title: one, no one and one hundred thousand. Such is personal identity. The twenty three characters in search of Machiavelli recreate a profile that is much more human than anything we have been given so far: there emerges a man who is sharp but not always coherent, likeable but sometimes pathetic, at once irreverent, mocking and passionate. This is Machiavelli as seen by his contemporaries, from his most intimate friends to his most implacable enemies.

The exchanges between the characters selected here bring to light the social dynamics of an entire generation - their illusions and ambitions, virtues and vices. I have described the economic and political bankruptcy of the Medici pontificates in another book (*Foxes and Lions*), but here I focus on the smaller satellites gravitating around those large planets. This is a centripetal and centrifugal book at the same time. It is a kind of puzzle, whose pieces slowly but surely fall into place, converging towards the black hole called Machiavelli. The characters each appear in separate chapters, but from different viewpoints. The book includes many unpublished materials that illustrate the intersections of thought and action, through literary works, and through accounts of events in the courts or on the battlefields. In the end emerges a collective portrait rich in nuance.

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If Niccolò had been on Facebook, he probably wouldn't have had many friends or likes. One section of the book is devoted to "Frenemies" (*friends & enemies*). Riffing on the language of social media helps evoke a network of always evolving, mutating relations. The book's sources are mostly diplomatic dispatches and archival fragments, many of them decrypted here for the first time since they were written, five hundred years ago. They reveal twists and turns in the known biography, and it emerges from these countless details left in the historical record that there is little to justify the devilish reputation of Machiavelli. This historical record, so much of it ignored until now, consists of hundreds of documents have allowed me to re-contextualize the work, character and thought of Machiavelli. I used the mirror of those people around him who were often more Machiavellian than Machiavelli himself, to bring to light the phenomenal originality of Machiavelli. He was no desert flower, but a tall tree in a thick jungle, with deep roots intertwined and a few burned branches.

My time-travel in this heady world of humanists and politicians made me realize that Italy, politics, and indeed the world, have not changed all that much. This alone justifies an in-depth return to the courts and intrigues of the Renaissance. But beyond this, we must turn our gaze towards the past all the more that memories are shortening and a history forgotten is history repeated. The Italian cultural and artistic patrimony is also threatened by a thousand dangers, internal and external, local and global. Machiavelli saw Lady Fortuna as a metaphor of catastrophic Flooding (*Prince 25*), an image that is coming back to haunt us as a literal reality. He infamously suggested we "beat" Fortuna as one should beat a woman, if we don't want to be beaten instead. This allegory is intolerable today. But it is very much of its time. Machiavelli lived in a man's world where women were reduced to mere sexual objects or to the subject of literary whims. Yet there is an irony to it that has been lost to us, and *All Machiavelli's Men* ends with the portrait of a woman. The last laugh belongs, in fact, to Barbara.



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