

Machiavelli and Confraternities: A Sermon to the Brethren and a Parody of Their Statutes

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As his biographers indicate, Niccolò Machiavelli belonged to at least two confraternities.¹ At age 11, Machiavelli joined the youth confraternity of Sant'Antonio da Padova that met in an oratory on the Costa San Giorgio that was shared with the flagellant adult confraternity of San Girolamo Oltrarno (also called the Buca di San Girolamo or Santa Maria della Pietà).² When, in 1493, he reached the maximum age for membership in a youth confraternity (24), Machiavelli moved to the "buca" of San Girolamo, where, incidentally, his father Bernardo had also been a member. The participation of both men in Florentine confraternities is not surprising given the important benefits such organizations could offer to those laypersons seeking not only to practice their spirituality but also to establish important contacts that could serve them well in their careers. Although further archival research may bring to light more details about the exact nature of Machiavelli's role in the confraternities of his day, sincere or calculated as it may have been, his literary production alone suffices to prove that he had some interest in these institutions.

Two of Machiavelli's prose works, both very brief, are directly connected to confraternities and often appear together in editions of his work, at times in reverse chronological order. The *Exhortation to Penance* (*Esortazione alla penitenza*),³ which the author composed and must have delivered in his youth before the members of the brotherhood of Sant'Antonio, has attracted a considerable amount of critical attention. On the other hand, the *Rules for a Company of Pleasure* (*Capitoli per una Compagnia di Piacere*)⁴ has been much neglected. This may be due in part to some

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- 1 Different versions of this paper have been presented in English on several occasions: at the conference of the Renaissance Society of America, Miami, March 2007, the "Faith and Fantasy" conference sponsored by the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, Toronto, October 2007, and the Renaissance Spring Festival, organized by the same Centre in May 2008. Thanks go to Dylan Reid and Wim François for their important observations. A more detailed analysis in Italian of Machiavelli's texts, with considerations pertaining to the language of the texts, the manuscript readings, and the connections with other writings of the author, was presented in September 2008 at the conference on "Brotherhood and Boundaries", held at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa. A longer version of this paper will be published in the conference proceedings.
 - 2 White, *Machiavelli*, 11–12. For the *buca* of San Girolamo Oltrarno see Sebregondi, *Tre confraternite*, 3–23; for the youth confraternity of Sant'Antonio da Padova, and for the (at times difficult) relationship between youth confraternities and their associated "buca", see Eisenbichler, *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael*, *passim*.
 - 3 An English translation is found in Machiavelli, *The Chief Works and Others*, 170–175.
 - 4 "Articles for Pleasure Company" in Machiavelli, *The Chief Works and Others*, 865–868. A French translation also exists: "Règlement pour une société de plaisir," in Machiavelli, *Oeuvres complètes*, 155–159 with notes on p. 1486. For the present article I have trans-

confusion stemming from the word *Capitoli* in the title, which may mistakenly be thought to represent the verse form in *terza rima* often adopted for burlesque poetry and used by Machiavelli himself in his single poems on fortune, opportunity, ingratitude, and ambition.

The *Exhortation to Penance* is a rhetorical piece designed to encourage sinners to repent for their misdeeds. It presents a commentary on Psalm 129 and cites the words of the sinful David. Brimming with exclamations and containing several rhetorical questions, it also bears a binary structure that is fundamental to Machiavelli's style of writing and mode of thought, one that is evident, for example, in his classification of states in his political treatise *The Prince*. Beginning the oration with a definition of penance as a remedy for sinfulness, Machiavelli subdivides sins into two categories: those that show ingratitude towards God and those that indicate inimical tendencies toward one's neighbours. Human beings who, because of their ingratitude, fall into sinfulness, may, however, raise themselves up through penitence, the orator argues, but it is not enough to repent and weep. Rather, by imitating Saints Francis and Jerome, one must flagellate so as to counter sin. This recommendation too may be compared to the reasoning adopted in chapters 24 and 25 of *The Prince*, where the author insists on the need to rise up and build dikes against the possible floods of Fortune.

An insightful analysis of the *Exhortation to Penance* is provided by Theodore A. Sumberg, who nevertheless still subscribes to the view (held by Franco Gaeta, for example) that the work was composed late in life.⁵ Others, more convincingly, classify it as an early work, produced when the future politician and author was a member of a youth confraternity.⁶ Such circumstances are indeed suggested in the text itself when the orator states at the opening that his address was commissioned and that, out of obedience, he now directs it to the honourable fathers and older brethren. More than a mere display of his rhetorical talents, the work has also been interpreted by a few readers, including Roberto Ridolfi, as a sincere expression of spirituality. Yet, in this respect it may simply resemble the ambiguous praise of the reigning Pope Leo X de' Medici found in chapter 11 of *The Prince* that was also dictated by circumstances and is consequently not to be read literally. It may even reflect Machiavelli's belief in the need, as expressed in chapter 18 of *The Prince*, simply to keep up the *appearance* of religiosity, as the scholar Giovanni Cattani argues. Interestingly, because the oration stresses the sins of the world, and reflects Machiavelli's negative vision of humankind as inherently flawed, it has been judged by some critics, such as Benedetto Croce,⁷ to be ironic. Stretching the point perhaps,

lated the passages cited myself.

5 Sumberg believes that it was written when Machiavelli wanted "to avoid social difficulties for his family, including his beloved young brother, Totto, a priest". Sumberg, *Political Literature of Europe*, 50. Gaeta in Machiavelli, *Il teatro*, xv.

6 Cattani, *La vita religiosa* gives a sampling of the criticism along with the text.

7 Croce, Book review, 137.

Cattani deems it to be a veritable mockery of the humanist celebration of the dignity of man.⁸

What is more explicitly parodic is the other confraternal tract by Machiavelli, namely, the *Rules for a Company of Pleasure*. The English translator of the text, Allan H. Gilbert, described it generically in a few words as a “satire on fashionable society,” but his evaluation reflects the fact that until recently no one seemed to have studied the text in detail and so the work has not been correctly assessed.⁹ John Henderson was the first scholar to note that the word *Company* in the title refers to confraternities and to read the *Rules* as a carnivalesque satire of these institutions. In the few paragraphs that he devotes to Machiavelli’s text,¹⁰ however, he suggests that the work was composed for one of the “pleasure companies” active in Florentine carnivals and so he takes Machiavelli’s text as documentary evidence of the activities of those hedonistic associations. I believe, instead, that the *Rules* is essentially a literary parody designed to entertain the reader through its humour. Its target is not confraternities per se, so much as their statutes, the body of rules that governed them and were known in Italian as *capitoli*. Upon close analysis, the legalistic language in which it is partly written and the preceptive formulation of its content as a list of hortatory injunctions demonstrate unequivocally that Machiavelli’s text consists of a parodic rewriting of confraternal constitutions. Indeed, in spite of its irreverent nature, the tract is highly intellectual and sophisticated since it requires the reader to have some familiarity with such documents in order to grasp the two levels of the text and appreciate its humour. In my own attempt to highlight the discrepancy between the model and its rewriting I have used as comparison or (pre)text, the 1482 constitution of the Florentine confraternity known as the Buonomini di San Martino.¹¹

The opening paragraph of Machiavelli’s *Rules* states in typical fashion that the aim of the document is to organize and regulate the operations of the company in such a manner as to provide benefit to both women and men. Immediately following the solemn introductory paragraph the rules are introduced with a legalistically worded heading that reads as follows: “therefore it is decreed that the said company is and is judged to be governed by the rules listed below, which have been decided upon and decreed by general consensus.” The failure to mention from the outset the name of the saint to whom the company is dedicated should immediately arouse some suspicion. In fact, as we soon discover, this association’s ultimate goal is not devotion, but pleasure in the most basic sensual meaning of the term.

8 Cattani, *La vita religiosa*, 19.

9 Filippo Grazzini is currently editing the volume of *Scritti letterari* for the National Edition of the Works of Machiavelli being published by Salerno. It will include this text.

10 Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence*, 436–437.

11 For the text of the Buonomini’s statutes see Trexler, “Charity and the Defense of Urban Elites in the Italian Communes,” 105–109; and Pugliese, “Lo statuto ‘riformato’ dei Buonomini di S. Martino,” 275–280.

In the list of regulations that Machiavelli provides for his Company of Pleasure, the first topics relate to the standard rules for confraternities. These include the age of the members, the qualities required in the leader, the length of the leader's mandate (which tended to be brief), and the criteria for the selection of the leader. On the question of age Machiavelli's gendered discourse differentiates between the two sexes. The male members must be at least 30 years old, whereas women of all ages are admissible. The mandate for the leader is eight days—a ridiculously brief term—if we recall that the leader of the Buonomini, for example, changed on a monthly basis. While moral integrity was the primary requirement for the leader of a confraternity, among the members of the Company for Pleasure, instead, the leaders were to be the man with the biggest nose and the woman with the tiniest feet (traditionally, nose and feet had sexual connotations).

Normal confraternal documents made it mandatory for members to attend mass, go to confession regularly, give alms, carry out rituals for the dead, recite prayers, help the family of the deceased, assist members who became impoverished and those who fell ill. The statutes of the Buonomini, for instance, typically stressed carrying out charitable activities anonymously and in secrecy, without seeking personal recognition. Membership required an untarnished reputation and the rendering of good service to eliminate discord. Those who refused to obey or were guilty of misdeeds were subject to expulsion. In Machiavelli's text, on the other hand, there is a ban on speaking favourably of one another, confession is generally prohibited and permitted only during Holy Week, silence is condemned and so is secrecy. Punishment for an infraction involves hanging up in public view the guilty woman's slippers or the man's stockings turned inside out. What is recommended in highly positive terms, instead, is speaking ill of one another and publicizing the sins of strangers who come along—presumably the misfortunate who turn to the confraternity for assistance. Assisting one another is banned and, if asked to convey a message, one must relay the contrary meaning. Furthermore, members of the Company of Pleasure are required to be envious of others and to carry out spiteful acts against those they envy. A sin of omission is committed if one fails to seize some opportunity to perform a spiteful act. The document also decrees that one must talk a lot without taking action and boast unwarrantedly; it considers it unlawful to tell the truth, and singles out simulation and lying as praiseworthy. Most of a member's time must be devoted not to pious reflection, as might have been expected, but to grooming and adorning oneself. Clearly in Machiavelli's confraternity it is the body and not the soul that counts.

To engage in idle chatter was another conventional issue discussed in confraternal statutes. While the constitution of the Buonomini had specified that, when delivering alms to the recipient's home, the brothers must not stay behind to chatter with the women or engage in idle talk when distributing alms on the association's premises, this is precisely what Machiavelli recommends. As his text states, the more one chatters and with the greater number of persons, the more deserving one is of commendation.

Some of the restrictions appear to be a parody of good manners too. While etiquette books, like *Galateo* written a few decades later by Giovanni Della Casa, follow classical notions condemning telling in daytime what one has dreamt at night, Machiavelli's text advises against dreaming at night what one has said or done during the day. The text of the constitution reverses other standard teachings too: it specifies that one must *not* allow others to speak without interrupting them; that, while one must never blow one's nose in public—a harmless action—, except in times of necessity, it is permissible to scratch parts of one's body at any time. In fact, those who fail to scratch themselves when they itch are penalized by an edict issued by the apostolic tribunal, as the Latin phrase, *in forma camerae*, indicates.

As for the rituals to be performed, members of the Company for Pleasure must attend all indulgence-granting events and other church feasts, but also—the enumeration continues with a contrasting addendum—all dinners, comedies, parties, and other frivolities. At mass one must look around and attract attention to oneself; to do otherwise is an offence of *lèse majesté*.

Not surprisingly there is considerable sexual innuendo too and not only in the nose and slipper references. According to one rule, if a man or woman is deemed to be too handsome, the woman must show her bare leg four inches above the knee and the man must declare whether he carries a handkerchief or some such object in his codpiece. Female members are obliged to go to the church of the Servi because, as we learn from references in Machiavelli's play, *The Mandrake Root* (Act III, Scene 2), they are bound to be harassed by the Servite brothers there. An anti-matrimonial theme appears in this text, as in the short story *Belfagor*, in the rule that requires members to abstain from sleeping with their spouses for two weeks each month. The penalty for noncompliance is to be *forced* to sleep with one's spouse for two full months in a row. Another punishment—this time for not attending all festivities, sacred and profane—would see the guilty women confined to a friary and the men to a convent of nuns. One particular rule has the women spend three quarters of their time at the window or doorway. Although this may appear to refer to their engaging in idle talk, the terms indicating the openings are clearly double entendres, as the author specifies that the women may position themselves either in front or behind as they prefer, echoing a phrase from Machiavelli's carnival song about snake charmers. The men, it adds, have to appear at these openings at least 12 times daily.

The comments on proper attire also have sexual implications, for the clothing recommended must not be an impediment to intercourse. Thus there is a ban on the wearing of hoop skirts or crinolines by women and laces by men, probably on their codpieces. As a punishment for fastening their clothes with pins, women are forced to wear eyeglasses and gaze at the Giant in the Piazza—a clear reference to Michelangelo's statue of the nude David whose genitals are clearly displayed.

There are political subtexts too in Machiavelli's *Rules* and this is to be expected, given that the organization of confraternities was modelled on the civic commune, with a rapid rotation of offices, similar electoral methods, and comparable office-

holding structures.¹² Machiavelli takes the opportunity, as he did in the description of the governance of hell in *Belfagor*, to parody basic principles of politics. In the Company for Pleasure, it is the minority not the majority that will have the deciding power. For several types of non compliance (such as showing modesty or putting on one's right shoe before the left), punishment is to be decided and meted out by the prince, or lord, odd figures to be appearing in the document, and ones whose roles are not clarified further. Only two functionaries are mentioned in Machiavelli's *Rules*: the confessor selected for the company, who must be blind and preferably hard of hearing; and the doctor, who must be younger than 24, so that he is able to sustain the difficulties of the post, the text declares—though we may surmise that at this young age, the doctor could be prepared for service other than of a medical nature.

The enumeration of the 34 regulations proceeds, but without following any real logical sequence. The work, which had opened with a more carefully structured proem, trails off into a general satire and ends abruptly, without ever making any conventional reference to the honour of God and the saints, or indicating the date of the company's foundation, even a fictional one for this nonexistent association. In fact, the *Rules* was left unfinished after only four and one half pages.

While not providing any detailed analysis of the *Capitoli*, editors who have included the Italian text in published volumes of Machiavelli's literary works in prose have considered its date of composition. The reference to Michelangelo's statue of David, which was erected in Piazza della Signoria in 1504, caused Gaeta to conjecture that the *Rules* was written in that year,¹³ although any time after that date would be equally possible. Indeed, the allusions found in the text to a prince, to poverty, and to the rule of the minority, would appear to be connected to Machiavelli's experience after the loss of his position as secretary to the Second Chancery. Paolo Ghiglieri proved decades ago that the linguistic features of the sole manuscript of the *Rules* held in the National Library in Florence place it clearly in the period 1519–20. Moreover, as De Sanctis stated back in the nineteenth century, Machiavelli the writer was more straightforward and formal, even stilted in his early days, witness his sermon on penance, but subsequently, as he proceeded to compose his masterpieces, he achieved more freedom of expression,¹⁴ of the type, we might add, displayed in the *Rules for a Company of Pleasure*.

That Machiavelli should have composed such a parody as this mock statute is no surprise. The tendency toward parodic bilingualism that involves the ironic rewriting of earlier pre-texts is common in his corpus of writings: his epistolary invective on the prostitute from Verona is a response to what must have been the addressee's letter now lost about an attractive woman; his famous self-deprecating letter about his life in exile is a rewriting of Vettori's description of his own

12 Weissman, "Cults and Contexts," 207.

13 Gaeta in Machiavelli, *Il teatro*, xv.

14 De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, 2: 496.

comfortable position in Rome. The play *The Mandrake Root* recasts the story of the Roman Lucretia in a new light, parodies the ritual of the purification of the Virgin, and describes comically a horned battle formation that is analyzed seriously in the treatise on the *Art of War*.

A key phrase in the text of the *Capitoli* that refers to speaking ill or not speaking favourably (*dir male* and *non dir bene*) also underscores the parodic intent. It recalls the statement found in the prologue to *The Mandrake Root* that speaking ill or maligning was the author's first art. Later, in the prologue to *La Clizia*, Machiavelli was to single out *dir male* as one of the sources of verbal humour. The many carnivalesque reversals and contrasts on which the text of the *Rules* is based, together with the recurrence of the word *contrary*, lead one to conclude that *dir male* may mean not simply maligning, but also in a more literal sense "speaking in a manner that does not conform to a norm."¹⁵ Indeed, the whole text of the *Capitoli* is based on deviation from the norm. Rejecting conventions, and perhaps with the intention of attacking the religion practised by laypersons in confraternities, but more probably simply as a pure literary game, Machiavelli refashions their rules. He thus demonstrates that, although the more common modes adopted by him in the treatment of religious themes could involve strong and direct condemnation, as in *The Discourses*, or ambiguity and seeming contradiction, as in *The Prince*, parody too was a favoured option. More formal in his youthful sermon for a confraternity and more jocular in the later parody of confraternity rules, Machiavelli shows that he had some interest in confraternities both before and after his fall.

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15 Battaglia, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, 9: 516.

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