



*Renaissance
and
Reformation*

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The Dedication to the *Discorsi* and the Proemia to the first two books are extraordinarily important for a proper interpretation of that work; for in all three places Machiavelli, stepping out of his role as commentator on Livy, directly addresses his reader, pointing out the importance and novelty of what he is presenting and even urging the reader to act on this new teaching. Since these three statements are obviously so critical, they should be read very carefully; therefore I feel justified in calling attention to a passage in the Proemium to the Second Book, which has never, so far as I know, been properly explained.¹ The passage deals with the question of whether the present must remain inferior to the past. Machiavelli concludes that on the whole “the world has always been in the same condition,” and presumably always will be; but the balance of good and evil can shift according to place and time:

. . . the world’s virtue (*virtù*) first found a home in Assyria, then flourished in Media and later in Persia, and at length arrived in Italy and Rome. And, if since the Roman empire there has been no other which has lasted, and in which the world’s virtue has been centered, one none the less finds it distributed amongst many nations where men lead virtuous lives (*si viveva virtuosamente*).

As the source of this passage, Father Leslie Walker, following Alexander Krappe, draws attention to a place in *De fortuna romanorum* where Plutarch speaks of the migration of tyche (not arete) around the world.² Now there is a great similarity between the passages; and the relation between *fortuna* and *virtù* is so intimate that Plutarch’s description of the travels of the former could well have inspired Machiavelli account of the latter. Yet Plutarch’s text is worth citing to suggest that there is one important difference:

. . . even so Fortune, when she had deserted the Persians and Assyrians, had flitted lightly over Macedonia, and had quickly shaken off Alexander, made her way through Egypt and Syria, conveying kingships here and there; and turning about, she would often exalt the Carthaginians. But when she was approaching the Palatine and crossing the Tiber, it appears that she took off her wings, stepped out of her sandals, and abandoned her untrustworthy and unstable globe.³

Where Machiavelli speaks only of four habitations of *virtù*, Plutarch lists seven empires where *fortuna* has resided. The difference between four and seven would hardly seem significant except for one fact: the four empires listed by Machiavelli — Assyria, Media, Persia, and Rome — constitute an easily recognizable variation on the

The notion of the four successive world monarchies is perhaps best known from the apocalypse of Daniel (2: 31-45 and 7: 1-14), which was produced in the Maccabean struggle against Antiochus IV (165-160 B.C.). The four beasts of Daniel's vision are generally interpreted as representing the Chaldean, Median, Persian and Macedonian (specifically Seleucid) empires; the first three are already past, while the last is about to be destroyed and to be followed by the reign of the "Son of Man" coming down from "the clouds of heaven." After Daniel, the structure of the apocalyptic vision remains fixed, but the designation of the empires becomes fluid, since the fall of the Greek successor states and the rise of Rome introduced more possibilities. The prophecy had wide currency under the Roman Empire in underground or resistance circles, primarily but not exclusively among the Jews;⁴ and from that source it passed into medieval historiography through Jerome and Orosius. Along with the "world-week" preferred by Augustine, the theory of the four monarchies was one of the fixed points of medieval consciousness. There is no reason to attempt to catalogue all instances of it,⁵ for they would run into hundreds. It was simply a piece of conventional wisdom, almost as firmly rooted as the Ptolemaic theory of the universe. Furthermore, it retained its vitality until well into the sixteenth century; Bodin still thought it worthy of an elaborate refutation in his *Methodus* (1566). Thus we may take it for granted that Machiavelli was familiar with the conception.

Yet clearly Machiavelli is not using the four-monarchy theory in any traditional way in this passage from the *Discorsi*; one may doubt whether he is "using" it at all. He does not mention God or providence, to say nothing of the Son of Man and the clouds of heaven. I would speculate that his list of four monarchies may very well have been unconscious in origin; Machiavelli may have picked precisely those four simply because that enumeration was familiar to him. The eschatological context may not have been in his mind at all. Yet whether or not Machiavelli's choice was consciously significant to him, it speaks to us; often the most important features of a man's thought are precisely those of which he is not aware because they form part of a more general background. I would offer the following comments, therefore, on this passage:

- 1) Machiavelli's use of the four-monarchy theme shows how religious conceptions are not abandoned, but rather retained and sublimated, when a thinker's attention turns away from religion toward empirical questions. Machiavelli does not replace the Christian view of history with *no* view; instead he adapts a religious scheme to secular needs. *Virtù* emerges as the central principle in place of divine Providence. Machiavelli's substitution is thus paradigmatic for all the modern philosophies of history which have secularized one or another of the Christian historical interpretations.
- 2) The passage illustrates very neatly the changing attitude of the Renaissance toward the future. In the Christian

four-monarchy construction, the Roman Empire is the last great achievement of secular history. The fifth kingdom is either already present in Christianity (Orosius), or else it is to be expected as the millenium which will put an end to history. In either case, secular history has nothing more to offer; we live in the old age of the world. But Machiavelli clearly holds out the prospect that a fifth empire, as it were, may be in store. *Virtù* is scattered at present, but it does not have to remain that way. Machiavelli's own teaching, he suggests, makes it possible for the "young men" reading his work to imitate the *virtù* of the ancient Romans "whenever fortune provides them with occasion for so doing."⁶

Machiavelli has often been called the first modern political theorist. It would obviously be going too far to call him also the "first modern philosopher of history," for his historical views are implicit rather than fully worked out. But I suggest that if we compare this passage from the *Discorsi* to the traditional Christian uses of the four-monarchy theme, we can see in Machiavelli two features which later become crucial for modern consciousness: the secularization of religious views of history, and futurism within that perspective.

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Notes

- 1 I have looked through the most prominent twentieth-century authors on Machiavelli without finding any reference to the point I make below. Authorities consulted included Chabod, Russo, Sasso, Janni, Prezzolini, Ercole, Alderisio, Mossini, Olschki, Butterfield, Walker, Mazzeo, Anglo, Felix Gilbert, Baron, Cioffari, Hexter, Strauss, Whitfield, Renaudet, Meinecke, Mayer — to name only the more important.
- 2 Alexander Krappe, "Quelque sources grecques de Niccolo Machiavelli," *Études Italiennes* (1924); Leslie Walker, *The Discourses of Niccolo Machiavelli*, (2 vols.; London, 1950), II, 92.
- 3 *De fortuna romanorum*, 317 F-318 A — English by Frank Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge, Mass., 1957).
- 4 Joseph Ward Swain, "The Theory of the Four Monarchies: Opposition History under the Roman Empire," *Classical Philology*, 35 (1940) pp. 1-21.
- 5 J. H. J. van der Pot, *De Periodisering der Geschiedenis*, (den Haag, 1951), pp. 76-83, lists many occurrences from classical times even to the eighteenth century. His bibliographical footnotes refer to the earlier literature on the subject.
- 6 "... qualcunque volta la fortuna ne dessi loro occasione."