

THE FRESCOBALDI AND MACHIAVELLI: DIFFERENT VISIONS OF FACTIONALISM IN RENAISSANCE FLORENCE

Margery A. Ganz
Spelman College

First, I would like to thank both presenters for their interesting and informative papers which have added to our knowledge of that quintessential Renaissance city--Florence--a city which I truly love. I have called my comment "The Frescobaldi and Machiavelli: Different Visions of Factionalism in Renaissance Florence" because I think this theme unites the two papers. I will take the papers chronologically for my comments.

Professor Shealy has done an excellent job of setting the stage on which the Frescobaldi family moved with such distinction. He is absolutely correct in showing how the Frescobaldi traveled from *novi cives* in the early 13th century to Florentine patricians--often called *ottimati*--in less than a century. One of the things I found most enlightening about this paper was that the Frescobaldi really were a diversified multinational corporation, dealing with several products in a variety of locations. One truly has to admire their resourcefulness in the face of the English disaster of 1310 as well as their reaction to the behavior of their French factor Bertolo Davanzati, who absconded with 20,000 gold florins in 1315. Professor Shealy has correctly interpreted this valuable contemporary document to prove that the Frescobaldi may have been down, but they certainly were not out.

The Frescobaldi did manage to hang on to some of their wealth and remained enough of a force to play a real role in Florentine politics through the first half of the Quattrocento. This included their participation in the ouster of the Medici in 1433 and then their own exile in 1434. As many historians have shown, among them most recently Dale Kent, factionalism was the curse of the Florentine state.¹ In this area, too, the Frescobaldi left their mark through their participation in some of the most famous coup attempts of the 14th and early 15th centuries.

Let me now turn to Professor Azariah's paper on Machiavelli. It seems to me that the paper could be more correctly entitled "The Old Machiavelli Applied to 20th Century Politics." In addition, it also seems unfair to make the CIA in Nicaragua, the Green Berets of 1968, and Ferdinand Marcos or even Ronald Reagan all heirs of Machiavelli. If we accept Professor Azariah's argument, then we have to tie every politician who had a nefarious thought or did a nasty deed to Machiavelli. Azariah claims we would actually have to blame the ideas of these people and Machiavelli himself on Kautilya, the

legendary adviser to Chandragupta, even though he was not known in the West until much later. I find this unsatisfactory. Professor Azariah's reading of *The Prince* struck me as an example of the older, more conservative reading which ignores the various levels of meaning which permeate the work. Since the day it was written, *The Prince* has been problematic not only because of its ideas but also because it does not fit with the rest of Machiavelli's works. One can examine *The Prince* on several levels: first, on the level that Professor Azariah has chosen--that this is *realpolitik*, a guide to the immorality that was necessary in order to rule in 16th century Italy. On an elemental level, it is an application for a job, and who among us believes what we read in job applications? On the next level, it is a prescription for order and stability, the end implicit in the Prince having absolute power. In his paper on the Frescobaldi, Professor Shealy has shown us how factionalism pervaded, even saturated, Florentine life from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries. Machiavelli grew up in this environment: he had lived through both the Pazzi Conspiracy of 1478 and the 1494 ouster of Piero di Lorenzo de'Medici. *The Prince* reflects a desire for order and stability which was only normal. A fourth level on which to read *The Prince*, relying substantially on the final chapter as Benedetto Croce did early in this century, is as a work of early Italian patriotism. In 1513 a very special situation existed in Italy; one family, the Medici, controlled two of the five main Italian states. Machiavelli saw this unique situation as a special chance to create a state for Italians--to free Italy for its own people and to get rid of foreign influence that was detrimental to the development of a national state. To this end, Machiavelli was willing to sanction the methods of the Prince and bring order and stability to the whole peninsula. As Machiavelli showed in *The Discourses*, written concurrently and during the following few years, there are times when a republic works best and other times when a different government is better.

In addition, the other works produced by Machiavelli during the early decades of the 16th century are important. In particular one must analyze Machiavelli's *History of Florence* when discussing his political ideas. *The Art of War* and *The Life of Castruccio Castracani* also add to the fuller picture, but are not as essential as *The History*. In these works Machiavelli is once again offering his knowledge to the Medici. Throughout the *History* Machiavelli gives a ringing indictment of factionalism, the curse of Florentine political life. There are occasional hidden jibes at the Medici throughout the *History*.

He refuses to give Cosimo de'Medici, *Pater Patriae*, a real

humanist eulogy, instead giving him an anti-eulogy, implying his example as a citizen is not really to be followed. In the *History*, *Discourses* and *The Prince*, Machiavelli wrote that Cosimo's death was lamented since he was the most renowned citizen for an unarmed man that any city has ever known. He surpassed his contemporaries in wealth, influence, liberality and prudence. His munificence was so great that only after his death did it become known that he had given large sums of money to everyone of standing in the city. Machiavelli went on to talk about Cosimo and factionalism, noting that despite political difficulties with others, his skill and prudence guaranteed splendid results for him and harmful ones to his enemies. Civil strife increased Cosimo's influence in Florence, and external wars enhanced his power and reputation. Machiavelli concluded:

If when writing of the things done by Cosimo, I have imitated those who write the lives of princes, not those who write general histories, nobody should be astonished since he was a man rare in our city, I have been obliged with an extraordinary mode to praise him.²

Machiavelli's eulogy seems more to damn with faint praise than actually to praise. Donato Acciaiuoli's elaborate and more traditional humanist eulogy of Cosimo was quite different:

Cosimo was unique not only because of his personal qualities and building programs but also because of his statesmanship. . . he was always available in our need to this fatherland with his efforts, advice and diligence. . . We saw Cosimo as the good pilot of this ship come about in the storm with great bravery and so save the city from the greatest dangers and bring the city into this present condition of tranquility. . . And his good judgment suppressed the most powerful enemies of Florence and the most serious wars were terminated. And finally the citizens themselves attained such concord and consensus of spirit in managing the republic. . .³

The vaguely hidden jibes are just not in the Acciaiuoli oration, which Machiavelli did know but seems to have ignored. What was new about Machiavelli in the *History* is his use of humanist rhetoric for different purposes. One might look at this special work of

Machiavelli's and see it as a way of telling new political truths in the 16th century--using the rhetoric of humanist historiography as a new way to examine politics--a type of new realism which today's scholar could then use to examine the events of our own day.

NOTES

¹D. Kent, *The Rise of the Medici, Faction in Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). D. and F. W. Kent, *Neighbours and Neighbourhood in Renaissance Florence* (NY: J. J. Augustin, 1982).

²This section comes mostly from Book VII of *The History of Florence*.

³Donato Acciaiuoli's oration declaring Cosimo de' Medici *Pater Patriae* can be found in the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence, Plut. LXXXX, sup. cod. 37, ff. 87r-v. An analysis of the eulogy can be found in M.A. Ganz, "Donato Acciaiuoli and the Medici: A Strategy for Survival in '400 Florence," *Rinascimento* 22 (1982): 51-53. An analysis of various orations about Cosimo is found in A. Brown, "The Humanist Portrait of Cosimo de' Medici, *Pater Patriae*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 24 (1961): 186-221.