Imperfect Good and Evil: Savonarola, Soderini, and Machiavelli's Excusing of Failure

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Abstract

In his Discourses on the First Decade of Livy, Machiavelli relies upon the example of his Tuscan contemporaries to tease out an understanding of the role of evil intentions in the founding of a political state. Through the examples of the Perugino Giovampagolo Baglioni and the Florentines Girolamo Savonarola and Piero Soderini, Machiavelli implicitly defines good and evil intentions for founding a state, as well as the corresponding 'good' and 'bad' means through which such a state is founded. When Machiavelli examines the failings of these men considering their respective motivations and means, he advocates in favor of excusing the failures of those who failed to be 'perfectly evil' through willingness to act over those of one who failed to be 'wholly good' through passive acceptance. This advocacy, in turn, reveals Machiavelli's belief in the expedient nature of deception in the foundation of a durable political order.

Keywords

Deception; Excusing Failure; Livy; Machiavelli; Political Philosophy; Political Theory

Introduction

Despite the purportedly ancient focus of *Discourses on the First Decade of Livy*, Niccolò Machiavelli devotes disproportionate attention to two men whose lives overlapped and closely intertwined with his own: Fra Girolamo Savonarola, the Dominican friar whose religious and political movement led to the expulsion of the Medici from Florenceand Piero Soderini, Gonfaloniere of the Florentine Republic. These men – one whose expulsion led directly to Machiavelli's entry into political life, the other whose expulsion led to Machiavelli's eventual disgrace and exile – both served as leaders of the nascent Florentine Republic. They also succumbed to failure stemming from personal weaknesses, each time bringing their political orders to ruin through scandal. Machiavelli expresses some respect for each manand admits that each intended to create a lasting, stable government; their failings are somewhat mitigated by their intentions. This paper seeks to understand how Machiavelli rationalized his apparent respect for both men despite their failuresand to examine why Machiavelli judges one more harshly than the other. Hence, the cases of Savonarola and Soderini imply to Machiavelli's audience that to come to ruin from a willingness to act decisively is more excusable than to fail to attain perfect republican virtue through passive acceptance.

Past Treatment of Machiavelli

Past scholars have not overlooked Machiavelli's keen observations on both Savonarola and Soderini's elevation to power and their subsequent falls from grace. Two schools of thought have grown through the intervening centuries since Machiavelli's works were first set down on paper: One sees Machiavelli as a progenitor of evil – the archytypal 'Machiavellian' politician – and the other views him as a political reformer. Indeed, Rousseau wrote that "Machiavelli's *Prince* is the book of republicans" (Rousseau 2012: 95). These viewpoints are relevant to the thesis that Machiavelli was more concerned with the *results* of the founder of a political state, and with that founder's willingness to do whatever necessary to properly found a state, than with the *means* through which this result was accomplished.

Machiavelli, Defender of Evil

The prevailing view of Machiavelli in the centuries after his death has been as a defender of evil or as an areligious manipulator. Machiavelli's unsavory image is now largely seen as a simplistic depiction; his discussion of Savonarola and the use of religion throughout the *Discourses* has nevertheless been held up to support this view. Examining his treatment of Savonarola and religion, Benner notes that "Machiavelli's analyses of various unreasonable uses of religion in politics [appears to] encourage ordinary citizens to take responsibility for scrutinizing public appeals to God" (Benner 2009: 393). Others read a similar message into these passages. "while Savonarola's example shows

that Christian beliefs can be exploited for political ends, it also teaches that religious manipulation, if not supported by more tangible and forceful means, is bound to prove ineffective in the long run" (Hörnqvist 2008: 85-6). The readers find in Machiavelli's hatred towards Savonarola an anti-populist and anti-religious sympathy, as "Savonarola's republican theory combined…the appeal to the Venetian Great Council as a model, the wish to purge Florence of her sins so that she could serve as the New Jerusalem in the coming apocalypse, and the notion that *governo largo* was a means to these religious ends" (Colish 1999: 611). Isiah Berlin underscores the practical realism that Machiavelli's 'defender of evil' image encourages by observing that Machiavelli condemned Soderini and Savonarola's failures "because they substituted what should be for what is" (Berlin 1972: 166). Clearly, Machiavelli's image as defender of evil permeates scholarship on his works.

Machiavelli the Modernist

Machiavelli's negative reputation, this school of thought claims, is undeserved. As Viroli and other scholars argued, Machiavelli was a proto-modernist, who favored conflict between factions as leading to moderation (Viroli 1989: 405-20). Viroli acknowledges the necessary role of virtue in Machiavelli's republicanism, but it does not present as the opposite of evilrather "Machiavelli's virtue makes room for goodness as its necessary and useful opponent" (Viroli 1993: 169). Early scholars argued that Machiavelli's most infamous passages are a conceit through which his own antithetical personal beliefs must be inferred (Gentili 1924: 156). Others observe that Machiavelli considered "the tight and vital relationship between the *buone armi* and the *buoni ordini*" to be "a cornerstone in the life of a healthy republic" (Silvano 1993: 58). Scholars disagree whether Machiavelli viewed internal conflict and factionalism as a key to the development of a strong republic or a factional city is contrary to idealized early Roman virtue; Gennaro Sasso and Giorgio Inglese, among others, support the latter argument (Sasso 1993, Inglese 2006). Some favor the positive aspects of factionalism in Machiavelli's analysis, noting the negative consequences that arise when "Christianity destroys the nonpartisanship of the people by making it difficult or impossible for the political princes to appeal to them" (Mansfield 1996: 98). Thus, Machiavelli's republican intentions, while contrary to his recommendations in *The Prince*, do not necessarily oppose his recognition of evil's utility.

Framework and Methodology

In *Explaining Technical Change*, Jon Elster states an "intentional explanation" that examines "not only goals and desires but also beliefs" to determine an actor's motives through the "triadic relation between action, desire and belief" is appropriate to examine a work of historico-political philosophy like Machiavelli's *Discourses*, as individual actors often influence the development of political states (Elster 1983: 70, 84). His writing should be examined in hermeneutic and interpretive

methods, to examine the meaning behind the statements about his contemporaries and their ancient Roman counterparts, and to contextualize this meaning within his opus. The resulting interpretation, less applicable in well-established democracies, is nevertheless prescriptive for authoritarian and autocratic regimes where arbitrary power dominates.

Re-Ordering the State: Baglioni's Mistake

Machiavelli articulates the conception of a successful re-ordering of a state early in the first book of the *Discourses*. He begins by noting that "a prudent orderer of a republic, who has the intent to wish to help not himself but the common good…should contrive to have authority alone" (Machiavelli 1998: 29). Distinguishing oneself from one's compatriots creates a sense of authority that allows for society to willingly bend to one's vision. How one becomes sole ruler is not as important; with Romulus, for example, Machiavelli excuses fratricide and the (supposed) sanctioning of his co-regent's death. While extreme, such deeds can be understood as necessary. Machiavelli says that "it is very suitable that when the deed accuses him, the effect excuses him; and when the effect is good…it will always excuse the deed; for he who is violent to spoil, not he who is violent to mend, should be reproved" (Machiavelli 1998: 29). The end of sole rule, and of being capable of creating new modes and orders within a state, justifies how one accomplishes it.

Nevertheless, Machiavelli does not judge all means of acquiring the sole rule as morally equivalent. Rather, "because the re-ordering of a city for a political way of life pre-supposes a good man, and becoming prince of a republic by violence presupposes a bad man, one will find that it very rarely happens that someone good wishes to become prince by bad ways, even though his end be good, and that someone wicked, having been prince, wishes to work well, and that it will ever occur to his mind to use well the authority that he acquired badly" (Machiavelli 1998: 51). Machiavelli implies that men are, in almost all instances, incapable of acquiring a state by nefarious means without also governing by bad modes and orders, or the inverse; as such, almost all men appear unable to re-order a state. Hope remains for those aspiring to do so, for Machiavelli expounds that one does not need to be wholly good to effectively rule a state. Rather, one must be decisive and take terrible actions for a worthy cause. He cites the example of Giovampagolo Baglioni, tyrant of Perugia, who was immoral, corrupt, and who failed to kill the pope when the two came to confrontation. Machiavelli explains that Baglioni's ruin "arose from men's not knowing how to be honorably wicked or perfectly good, [for] when malice has greatness in itself or is generous in some part, they do not know how to enter into it" (Machiavelli 1998: 62-3).

Baglioni was indisputably evil – Machiavelli describes him as "a villainous man, who was taking his sister for himself, who had killed his cousins and nephews so as to reign" – but his failures stem from his inaction when confronted by "the pope" and "all the cardinals with all their delights"

(Machiavelli 1998: 62). He "did not know how – or, to say better, did not dare, when he had just the opportunity for it – to engage in an enterprise in which everyone would have admired his spirit and that would have left an eternal memory of himself as being the first who had demonstrated to the prelates how little it is to be esteemed whoever lives and reigns as they do" (Machiavelli 1998: 63). Killing the pope and the cardinals would have "surpassed all infamy, every danger, that could have proceeded from it" because it would have rid the world of the corruption of the Court of Rome and left Baglioni to re-order his state without the loyalty of the people divided with their loyalty to the Church[35] (Machiavelli 1998: 63). By not being 'wicked' enough to act, Baglioni lost his opportunity to acquire a name and reputation for himself that would have endured through the ages – "the glory of the world…that makes [a ruler] live secure and after death renders [him] glorious" – as every re-orderer should desire (Machiavelli 1998: 33). His inability to align his individual rationality with the rationality of the state brought both to ruin.

Savonarola: Inability to be Wholly Wicked

Similarly to with Baglioni, Machiavelli suggests that Fra Girolamo Savonarola failed in his attempt to re-order the state of Florence due to his eventual inaction. He notes the general desire in Florence of his era for a figure who could re-order the city: Machiavelli "observes that many of his fellow citizens, unsure how to take responsibility for their own troubles or unwilling to do so, sit back and pray for God or some holy man to save them [:] 'they would like a preacher who would teach them the way to paradise,' he writes" (Benner 2009: 61). This *redentore*[36] appears to the people of Florence in the person of Savonarola; and Machiavelli writes that, by 1494, Florence "had been reordered in its state by the aid of Friar Girolamo Savonarola, whose writings show the learning, the prudence, and the virtue of his spirit" (Machiavelli 1998: 93). The ambitious priest, who spoke of fire and brimstone in the impending apocalypse and who claimed to have the ability to speak with God, advocated a total theocratic republic.

Savonarola accomplished the fundamental requirement among those who re-order a city of having an exclusive claim on prophecy. In this way, "when Savonarola claimed to speak with God, no political authority could gainsay him and the people were drawn into partisanship with his 'sect' [*setto*]" (Mansfield 1996: 98). Machiavelli recognizes the political expediency and question the veracity of such a claim: for he explains that

> Although coarse men may be more easily persuaded to a new order or opinion, this does [not] make it impossible also to persuade to it civilized men who presume they are not coarse. To the people of Florence it does not appear that they are either ignorant or coarse; nonetheless, they were persuaded by Friar Girolamo Savonarola that he spoke with

[35] In Book I.12, Machiavelli discusses the disunion of the Italian principalities, and declares that "the cause that Italy…does not also have one republic or one prince to govern it is solely the church" (Machiavelli 1998: 38).
[36] "Italy expects its *redentore*" (Gilbert 1972: 97).

> God…[though] an infinite number believed him without having seen anything extraordinary to make them believe him (Machiavelli 1998: 36).

By claiming to speak directly to God, Savonarola positioned himself above any other authority in the city. Because of his lack of proof, Machiavelli implies that Savonarola's claims arose solely out of political expediency. Thus, "the plebian prince Savonarola, having persuaded the people of Florence that he spoke with God (I 11), did not have to report to the magistrates" (Mansfield 2001: 165). Nevertheless, his ability to convince as civilized a people as the Florentines to suppress their own modes and orders is remarkable. Machiavelli encourages such deception, as he opines that in observing the example of Savonarola, "no one, therefore, should be terrified that he cannot carry out what has been carried out by others, for…men are born, live, and die always in one and the same order" (Machiavelli 1998: 36). Such an act of deception, if properly perpetrated, is laudable for the re-orderer of a city.

While his apparent ability to re-order Florence does make Savonarola appear glorious, his failure demonstrates the weakness of reliance on religion alone. Savonarola, having advocated to allow appeals against death penalties, managed to have this law enacted. But when "five citizens were condemned to death" and attempted to appeal, "they were not allowed to and the law was not observed…that [decision] took away more reputation from the friar than any other accident: for if the appeal was useful, it ought to have been observed; if it was not useful, he ought not to have had it passed…this exposure of his ambitious and partisan spirit took away reputation from him and brought him very much disapproval" (Machiavelli 1998: 93-4). Once his actions were revealed to not have been directly inspired by God, Savonarola lost all credibility he was previously granted by the Florentine populace. In this instance, "we see that Savonarola was exposed in his sermons rather than his writings, perhaps because in sermons it is easier to note omissions and to trace authorship of laws" (Mansfield 2001: 137). Machiavelli emphasizes the unquestioning nature of those who did not require proof of Savonarola's divine inspiration. He is critical of these "citizens who rely too much on divine authority and mistrust their own powers of authorization undermine the foundations of free civil orders" (Benner 2009: 393).

Beyond the lesson, this example offers through the people of Florence. Machiavelli provides an illustration of the pitfalls an aspiring reformer faces. It is indisputable in this instance that Savonarola saw himself as an individual capable of re-ordering the city of Florence; indeed, on 7 December, 1494, Savonarola advocated "political reform," saying to the people of Florence: "new city, if you want to be new and have a changed new state, you must change to new modes and live anew, if you want to last, and if you want to rule" (Silvano 1993: 46) (my translation). Indisputably political in nature, this sermon prescribes "new modes and orders" for the Florentines just as Machiavelli sets out to do in the *Discourses* (Machiavelli 1998: 5). However, Savonarola failed to

achieve his political end as he lacked power to preserve his state. Thus, "Machiavelli offers the example of Savonarola, who he claims 'was ruined in his new orders as soon as the multitude began not to believe in them'"(Sullivan 1996: 143).

Machiavelli believed that Savonarola was a fraud with political intent from the beginning; for "in a letter [Machiavelli] sent on March 9, 1498…giving a résumé of Savonarola's sermon on *Exodus*, he observed: 'It is thus that he veers from point to point, to paint and color his fraud and cunning'" (Bertelli 1975: 3). In this same letter, Machiavelli keenly observed that while "at first Savonarola spoke only to unite his party…[later] he changed his tune…[and] 'thus, according to my judgment,' Machiavelli concludes, 'he keeps on working with the time and making his lies plausible'" (Colish 1999: 611). This letter evinces how "Machiavelli clearly regards Savonarola as a fraud, a hypocrite, and a demagogue" (Colish 1996). Some of this animosity, however, can be rationalized, as the very means by which Savonarola intended to re-order Florence were antithetical to Machiavelli's ideal republic, and to the government in which he took part. Nonetheless, Machiavelli concedes that "Savonarola understood the problem [of overcoming *invidia*, envy] very well, but he was unable to deal with it effectively for two reasons: first, because he was a friar and therefore lacked authority; second, because his followers did not grasp the nature of the problem as he did" (Weinstein 1972: 255). In the end, Machiavelli excuses a portion of Savonarola's failure, discounting his final inaction to the fact that he was an 'unarmed prophet' whose authority could not compel his followers to carry out his bidding – that is to say, he could not make other recognize the rationality of the state he hoped to form.

Soderini: Inability to be Perfectly Good

If Savonarola is remarkable in Machiavelli's writings for his lack of 'wicked' action, then Machiavelli's former employer, Piero Soderini, is equally of note for his 'goodness' and passive acceptance. Soderini was Gonfaloniere of the Florentine Republic from 1502, shortly after the downfall of Savonarola, until his own expulsion in 1512; Machiavelli "first rose to be Piero Soderini's adviser" as second chancellor of the republic, and then as secretary to the council of the Ten of War (Guarini 1993: 22). He favored Soderini's government, under which "Florentines have 'experienced' a different, more fully republican form of government" than under Medici rule (Benner 2009: 56). His preference is underscored by the fact that while he questions the means and ends of Savonarola's government, his "observations on Soderini in the *Discorsi* are nearly all concerned with the question of how the authority of the new head of the state could be secured and checked at the same time" (Rubenstein 1972: 27). Machiavelli's bond to Soderini is, in some respects, quite personal. Nevertheless, Machiavelli does not refrain from criticizing Soderini for his failures, both personal and political, to an equal degree as his criticism of Savonarola.

Principal among Soderini's faults is his inability to prefer his political preservation, even in matters in which he had a vested interest and which would have also protected the Florentine Republic. Machiavelli observes that "Soderini had a reputation for himself in the city of Florence with this only: favoring the collectivity" and eventually, "all the rest of the republic was ruined with his ruin" (Machiavelli 1998: 104). The same problem of *invidia* that Savonarola failed to adequately address was of principal concern for Soderini. As Machiavelli recounted it, Soderini allowed his own person to bear the brunt of this envy, for the good of the republic. Nevertheless, "Piero too came to make an error by not anticipating the ways by which those adversaries of his made him fear, for which Piero merits an excuse, whether because it was difficult for him to do so or because they were not honest to him" (Machiavelli 1998: 104). Soderini's behavior appears as blameworthy as his conscious decisions: he made it easy for his enemies to harbor envy towards him personally to protect the republic, yet his actions inspired envy in others, and fear of this envy inspired his further actions.

Soderini's desire to avoid conflict when possible is chief among his political weaknesses. The fact that the ruler of a republic would like to seek consensus is not surprising in modern times. However, according to Machiavelli, it can be a disastrous choice. Machiavelli expects that "in the hope of escaping present dangers, such rulers [as Piero Soderini] can instead be expected to follow the 'neutral way' (*quella via neutral*) which most of the time leads to ruin" (Hörnqvist 2008: 102). The ruin of the middle way does not arise immediately: when time and fortune aligned with his actions, Soderini attained some degree of success. Nevertheless, Machiavelli implies that ruin was inevitable, given Soderini's fear of extremes, for while "Soderini…proceeded in all his affairs with humanity and patience… when he needed to break with patience and humility, he did not know how to do it, so that he together with his fatherland was ruined" (Machiavelli 1998: 240). Soderini could not temporize with the changes of time and fortune,[37] and therein lay his ruin.

It was "the inability of Soderini to drop his natural patience and humility [that] brought him to ruin and with him the ruin of the Florentine republic [for] according to Machiavelli, the principle of never breaking a covenant or promise was a form of weakness" (Viroli 1993: 169). Thus, Soderini was not only mistaken in how to govern a republic, but also in how to manage a crisis without bringing down the republic alongside its leader. Such 'goodness' – passive acceptance and inaction – is only a problem, however, when it is paired with an overly-trusting and naïve nature, as was the case for Soderini. In the case of Don Michele,[38] who was significantly less naïve, passivity does not

[37] Cf. Book III.9, "How One Must Vary with the Times If One Wishes Always to Have Good Fortune." (Machiavelli 1998: 239-41). See also *The Prince*, Chapter XXV, "Quantum Fortuna in Rebus Humanis Possit, et Quomodo Illi Sit Occurrendum."

[38] Head of the Florentine militia under the Soderini regime (Mansfield 1996: 28).

appear to be a cause for personal ruin; and "for [Michele], if not for Piero Soderini, goodness when corrected and no longer too trusting is enough" (Mansfield 1996: 28). Thus, Soderini's naïveté led to his ruin and to the ruin of the republic; his individual rationality and desire to avoid conflict directly went against the ationality of the state.

Beyond his naïveté, Machiavelli implies that Soderini's patience resulted in his missing a crucial opportunity to save the republic from an eventual backslide into Medici dominion. Florentine history is often paired with Roman history in direct comparison throughout the *Discourses*, and in book three, these comparisons continue. Just as "the 'change Rome made from kings to consuls' was the founding of the Roman republic, made secure by the killing of Brutus' sons […] the ruin of the Medici in 1494 preceded the coming to power of the inadequate Piero Soderini and of Machiavelli" (Mansfield 2001: 344). Soderini is positioned as the Brutus-figure in the foundation of the new Florentine Republic; accordingly, allowing his enemies to predict his action, and target him personally, was a form of simulated madness on Soderini's part. Brutus did more than just appear mad to the Tarquinii: he acted when the time was ripe for boldness. On the other hand, "Piero, for not knowing how to 'resemble' (*somigliare*) Brutus, lost his office and his reputation together with his fatherland…[for] to resemble Brutus one must imitate his simulated stupidity and…his political concern; and thus in politics, one must also imitate his severity in memorable executions" (Mansfield 2001: 312). Soderini, convinced that his goodness alone would allow him to maintain power, chose not to act against his enemies. For he "understood the grave threat posed by usurpers but not how to deal with it appropriately…[and he] believed that time, goodness, good fortune, and favors would minimize the threat of usurpers" (McCormick 2011: 133). Soderini fundamentally misunderstood the decisive role of a ruler within a new republic; the ruin of the state followed as a result.

One reason why Soderini failed to properly execute his enemies is that to do so, he would have needed to take extrajudicial actions. Machiavelli observes that the inability to assure such executions in a legal manner was a problem prior to Soderini's rule; under Valori, the Gonfalonier under Savonarola, the republic faced a similar dilemma. Machiavelli explains that rather than destroying the state to depose Valori, "if one had been able to oppose [Valori] ordinarily, his authority would have been eliminated with harm to him alone" (Machiavelli 1998: 25). He continues that "one could also cite in support of the conclusion written above the incident that also occurred in Florence regarding Piero Soderini, which occurred entirely because in that republic there was no mode of accusation against the ambition of powerful citizens" (Machiavelli 1998: 25). Ordinary modes of accusation, such as existed in Ancient Rome, appear vital to the well-being of the republic; Machiavelli demonstrates their integral nature in the preservation of a republic free from partisans through the example of Camillus's accusation and acquittal. In the case of Florence, Soderini failed

to take up such modes; he believed "he would have needed to take up extraordinary authority and break up civil equality together with the laws" (Machiavelli 1998: 214-5). This fear of acting extrajudicially prevented Soderini's actions. Machiavelli concludes that "if such modes [of accusing citizens publicly] had been there, either the citizens would have accused [Soderini]…or, if he were not living badly, they would not have dared to work against him for fear of being accused themselves" (Machiavelli 1998: 25). Soderini's failure to execute his enemies stems from his nervousness to execute them through extrajudicial modes; nevertheless, this reticence prevented him from maintaining his state, as patience and goodness could not counter his enemies' animus.

Machiavelli levels the additional charge that beyond his fear of extraordinary modes, Soderini knew the importance of eliminating his enemies – the 'sons of Brutus' who conspired against the republic – and yet chose not to act. Machiavelli explicitly states that Soderini "believed he would overcome with his patience and goodness the appetite that was in the sons of Brutus [here, Medici supporters] for returning to another government…[and] nonetheless he never turned his mind to doing it" (Machiavelli 1998: .,214). No total revolution of the laws was required for Soderini to achieve his end; rather, he needed merely temporize to protect the republic against an enemy of liberty. "Soderini, Machiavelli suggests, needed only to preside over a single case, such as the trial where Brutus participated in the prosecution of his pro-Tarquin sons and then witnessed their execution, to save the republic" (McCormick 2011: 134). Soderini's good nature served him well in his rise to power, but Machiavelli nevertheless condemns his judgment. While some of Soderini's failings can be attributed to a mistaken desire to protect the state, his downfall appears to have come from a fear of perverting the laws or institutions of the state through bad example, and Machiavelli does not excuse Soderini's lack of sense of urgency in protecting the state.

Inability and Timidity

Machiavelli rarely compares the examples of Savonarola and Soderini, but – under the formulation provided in Book I.27 of the "honorably wicked or perfectly good" man who re-orders a republic – their juxtaposition fulfills this dichotomy (Machiavelli 1998: 63). Towards the end of the first book of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli notes a parallel between the two men: the various signs that foretold their demises. He explains that "everyone knows how much had been foretold by Friar Girolamo Savonarola before the coming of King Charles VIII…[and] everyone knows too that soon before Piero Soderini, who had been made gonfalonier for life by the Florentine people, was expelled and deprived of his rank, the very [Palazzo della Signoria] itself was struck by a thunderbolt" (Machiavelli 1998: 113-4).[39] While Savonarola was aware of the impending danger the signs of his

[39] In Machiavelli's writings, lightning strikes are significant: in the *Florentine Histories*, he notes that following the death in April 1492 of Lorenzo il Magnifico, "the highest tip of the church of Santa Reparata was struck by lightning with such

times indicated, and thus attempted to purge Florence of sin, Soderini did not heed the warnings heaven revealed to his government. However, "it is hard to see how a sign would have helped Piero to defend himself, since we are told in I 52 that he lacked the prudence or ruthlessness to do what he should have foreseen himself" (Mansfield 2001: 166). Machiavelli contrasts the signs of impending doom these two men faced, examining if either heeded fortune: Savonarola attempted to conquer it, while Soderini paid it no attention.

Savonarola was a man who could have re-ordered the Florentine state, had he been a partisan fraud; for Soderini, Machiavelli's judgment is harsher. Overall "in the comparison with Piero Soderini[,] Savonarola comes off decidedly the better of the two…for Soderini had failed to see that no amount of good will on his part would protect him against his enemies" (Weinstein 1972: 256). Soderini is unwilling to recognize the necessity of the times; in not killing the sons of Brutus, he denied that in re-ordering a state, some exceptional acts of harshness are necessary. In this manner "honest reformers…like the worthy [Gonfalonier] of the Florentine republic, Piero Soderini…or the far more gifted Savonarola…foundered and caused the ruin of others" (Berlin 1972: 166). "Savonarola had a strong will, whereas Soderini was, in Machiavelli's view, small minded and indecisive…[both had] an inadequate grasp of how to use power" (Berlin 1972: 166).

Machiavelli notes two distinct reasons for why both men failed to retain the state: a lack of opposition to the pro-Medici factions in the *Consiglio Maggiore*, and a lack of either ability (in the case of Savonarola) or willingness (in the case of Soderini) to execute their enemies as needed. On the first failing, "Machiavelli strongly intimates that if Savonarola or Soderini had mustered the temerity to try [their] aristocratic enemies…the assembled people would have readily condemned them to death" (McCormick 2011: 72). He knew the people's willingness to condemn to death those accused of conspiring against the state: he had witnessed such a fury at age seven, after the Pazzi conspiracy.[40] Machiavelli invokes the example of Moses, who "was forced to kill infinite men who, moved by nothing other than envy, were opposed to his plans" (Machiavelli 1998: 280). "Savonarola knew this necessity very well; Piero Soderini, gonfalonier of Florence, knew it too…[for] the one was not able to conquer it because he did not have the authority to enable him to do it (that was the friar) and because he was not understood well by those who followed him …[while] the other believed that with time, [or] with goodness…he would eliminate this envy (Machiavelli 1998).

fury that a great part of the pinnacle was ruined" (Machiavelli 1990: 362). Thunderbolts seem to signify impending political ruin – either through Savonarola's rule or through the Medici re-capture of the city in 1512.

[40] In the *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli writes that after Giuliano de' Medici was killed, "the whole city was in arms…Jacopo [Pazzi] was also taken while crossing the mountains, because the mountain people, having heard of the event in Florence and seeing him in flight, attacked him and led him back to Florence…[where he and] Rinato were condemned to death four days after the event had taken place" (Machiavelli 1990: 326).

Soderini and Savonarola both were unable to kill their enemies due to an inability to authorize the extraordinary means this would have taken. "[A] leader of [*virtù*] needs to know how to deal with the envious: but neither Savonarola nor Soderini was 'able to overcome envy' and in consequence 'both of them fell'" (Skinner 2001: 68). *Invidia*, envy, is therefore the humor that hobbled both men's ambitions; had Savonarola been better understood by his followers, or had Soderini been willing to kill the sons of Brutus, such envy would have been eliminated. "[W]ith Machiavelli's retrospective advice, Savonarola and Valori, and later Soderini, could have improved upon the examples of Moses and Brutus […] the would-be republican princes could have formally enlisted the people assembled in Florence's Great Council to participate in the punishment of liberty's usurpers" (McCormick 2011: 132). Had they followed Machiavelli's advice, and achieved sole rule through notable executions, these men would have overcome envy.

In his final analysis of these two men's failings, Machiavelli is more forgiving of Savonarola's faults, as they were not for his lack of effort; as for Soderini, Machiavelli offers little excuse besides his naïveté, which cautioned him against true republican virtue. While Savonarola – like Baglioni – was unable to be 'wicked' through decisiveness, Soderini was too passive and accepting to be perfectly 'good.' Savonarola failed to make others see, as he had seen, the rationality of the state, while Soderini failed to see the state's rationality himself. As a result of their inaction, both men were unable to accomplish their goals of re-ordering the Florentine state.

Conclusion

Throughout his *Discourses on the First Decade of Livy*, Machiavelli recalls the examples of his compatriots Girolamo Savonarola and Piero Soderini. Both men, Machiavelli reveals, came within reach of re-ordering the Florentine Republic; however, they both faltered in their quest to do so due to the conflict between their individual rationalities and the rationality of the state. Savonarola was a fraud who relied on religion to gain influence, and who was ultimately unable to enact his desired political reforms. His condemnation stemmed from the revelation of his ultimately partisan and ambitious nature, and from his inability to convince the people of Florence to take his sermons literally. Soderini, on the other hand, was elected to office and believed that through his luck, patience, and kindness, his enemies would have no option but to target his person rather than the state. His failure to execute these enemies was due to excess caution, which limited his actions enough to secure his downfall. Machiavelli shows some deference to each man, and excuses some of their failings; overall, however, Machiavelli pardons Savonarola more than Soderini. The lasting impression is that Soderini's failings were of a more personal nature than were Savonarola's. In drawing this personal culpability to the fore, Machiavelli illustrates how one is more easily excused

of failing to re-order a state from lacking the decisiveness to be wholly 'wicked,' like Savonarola, than from passive acceptance and caution which overcome republican virtue, like Soderini.

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