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Machiavellian Foundlings: Castruccio Castracani and the Aphorism

by JEFFREY T. SCHNAPP

Life is short, art is long; opportunity is elusive, experiment is dangerous, judgment is difficult.

Aphorism 1, Hippocrates

In book one, chapter two of his *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* Machiavelli's rehearsal of the commonplace that every city must undergo a natural cycle of political permutations is interrupted by the specter of inexorable decline: "This is the cycle [*cerchio*] within which all states that have governed themselves and now govern themselves revolve; but only rarely do they revert to the same form of government because almost no state can repeatedly undergo these mutations and remain afoot."¹ The circle—figure of sameness, continuity, and conservation in Plato's ontology and Aristotle's politics—will nearly always be broken and spun out into a descending line—figure of difference, discontinuity, and loss. And this near certainty, as is revealed by the anthropomorphism of the closing metaphor ("rimanere in piede"), is in turn rooted in the deeper human reality of death and intergenerational flux.

¹"E questo è il cerchio nel quale girando tutte le repubbliche si sono governate e si governano: ma rade volte ritornano ne' governi medesimi, perchè quasi nessuna repubblica può essere di tanta vita che possa passare molte volte per queste mutazioni e rimanere in piede" (1: 2: 24). All English translations here and elsewhere are my own.

From *The Prince* to the plays to the *Florentine Histories*, this negative emphasis is ubiquitous. *Time is malignant*: the thought pounds like a funereal drumbeat throughout Machiavelli's writings.² *The Discourses* are thus necessarily limited to "those books of Titus Livy that have not been snatched away from us by the malevolence of the times" ("ho giudicato necessario scrivere, sopra tutti quelli libri di Tito Livio che da la malignità de' tempi non ci sono stati intercetti" [1:Proem: A: 9]). Contemporary heroes are regularly struck down by an "extreme malignity" of time or fortune (in the case of Cesare Borgia by "una straordinaria ed estrema malignità di fortuna" [*Il principe*, 7: 3]). Such negative characterizations are integral to Machiavelli's advocacy of anti-aristocratic, republican values. Generational succession always equals degeneration, at least within the confines of a single royal house, and only the defensive measures of republican rule can undo the damage wrought by this iron-clad law. So even if, like the Spartan Lycurgus, one were to found the perfect city, there would arise the near certainty of decline in the very instant at which the founder's power is transmitted to his first born: "As soon as the prince was chosen by succession and not by election, the heirs immediately began to degenerate from their ancestors" ("dipoi si cominciò a fare il principe per successione e non per elezione, subito cominciarono li eredi a degenerare dai loro antichi," 1: 2: 17).

In such a context it is proper to wonder about the status of modernity in Machiavelli's discourse. Whence and how, that is, do new beginnings, new authors, cities, empires, and principates, ever arise with respect to their ancient predecessors? Are ancient beginnings inimitable and forever cut off from the present, or are they part of a continuum that renders them imitable and repeatable? Is there a circular principle—a consistent principle of recurrence and return—in history, or is history simply defined by its radical discontinuities? The surface answer which Machiavelli provides to these questions involves a doctrine of imitation derived from the early humanists. According to this doctrine great new beginnings arise through the imitation of and reflection upon ancient models (like those put forth in an exemplary text such as Livy's *History of Rome*). While fortune may work its unsettling tricks on the city of Florence and the present may seem deeply tarnished when com-

²On Machiavelli's pessimism, see Ferrucci.

pared with ancient glory, there is hope precisely because history forms a coherent and legible book with recurrent patterns, principles, and laws which are readily translatable to the present.

But the very insistence with which Machiavelli proclaims his faith in this humanist doctrine is symptomatic of deeper problems and uncertainties. On the one hand, ancient examples often seem less than exemplary, in the sense that they appear inappropriate or simply inapplicable.³ On the other hand, the imitation of past examples never turns out to be sufficient in and of itself. The intractable forces of fortune, individual nature, and historical circumstance always require the protagonist of history to deflect and creatively alter ancient precedent, thereby leaving one less certain about the value of the past than of the need for the (probably unteachable) powers of discrimination Machiavelli associates with *prudenza* and *virtù*. (The latter term, of course, is an enigma; it describes what is at once an objective science with its own supramoral rationality, a vital force lodged in the darkest recesses of the subject, and a sophistic system.)

So if imitation can provide only a partial response to the question of modern decline, this essay will argue that Machiavelli's ultimate answer assumes the form of a generative countermyth that appropriates and transforms ancient prototypes. This countermyth consists in a virtual theory of spontaneous generation wherein modernity comes to be identified with the figure of the foundling: as that whose origin is so dispersed that it may be said to belong to anyone and everyone. The emblematic Machiavellian narrative in this regard is *La vita di Castruccio Castracani*, which retells the story of founding fathers such as Moses, Theseus, and Romulus in fourteenth-century garb. In Machiavelli's version the great Luchese commander rises from anonymity to power less through apprenticeship and imitation than through the prodigious energy of his individual *virtù*. Castruccio's ascent, moreover, is identified with the triumph of aphoristic wit and wisdom, polemically connected here with the worlds of experience and vernacular thought, with Machiavelli's own counterproposal, that is, to the idealism of western political theory. Like Castruccio himself, the aphorism or maxim is an outsider. It inhabits an unstable middle zone between art and science, between individual virtues and universal principles.

³On unexemplary examples in Machiavelli, see Lyons, 35–71, and Greene.

It circulates without a precise source or context although it can claim an ancient pedigree. (Most of Castruccio's sayings are "borrowed" from Diogenes Laertius.) Like Castruccio its entry on the scene of history is swift and sudden; it breaks away from the disembodied realm of theory to address the present moment in its most incisively practical (but, for Machiavelli, universal) terms. And like Castruccio the precise legacy it leaves remains uncertain.

In this essay I examine *La vita di Castruccio Castracani* in terms both of Machiavelli's fanciful rewriting of the standard Latin biography of Castruccio and the typological stories of Romulus, Theseus, Oedipus, Cyrus, Moses, and others. But by focussing also on the link between Machiavelli's hero and aphoristic language, I try to show just what Machiavelli invests in his exemplary narrative. Castruccio's biography, that is, furnishes Machiavelli with a (distorting) mirror in which to reflect upon his own modernity as the founding father of a new science of politics.

* * * * *

La vita di Castruccio Castracani da Lucca discripta da Niccolò Machiavelli was written in July 1520 during the author's sojourn in Lucca on private business and is dedicated to his close friends from the Orti Oricellari, Zanobi Buondelmonti and Luigi Alamanni.⁴ Largely based upon a Latin biography composed some twenty years earlier by Nicolao Tegrini entitled *Castrucci Antelminelli Lucensis Ducis Vita* (although informed by readings from Villani and perhaps Granchi, Petrarch, and Sacchetti), the work puts forth a brief but fanciful synopsis—a "reduction" as Machiavelli characteristically calls it⁵—of the rise and fall of the great Lucchese leader from his supposed abandonment as an infant in 1281 through his emergence as a *condottiero* to his death in 1328.⁶ While much of the

⁴"Mi è parso indirizarla a voi come quegli che, più che altri uomini che io cognosca, delle actioni virtuose vi dilectate" (5). This and all subsequent quotations from the *Vita* refer to the critical edition of Riekie Brakkee.

⁵"La quale [vita] mi è parso ridurre alla memoria delli uomini, parendomi avere trovato in essa molte cose, et quanto alla virtù et quanto alla fortuna, di grandissimo exemplo." (5; emphasis mine). On Machiavelli's use of the term "reduction," see Lyons (43) and Kahn.

⁶The most insightful study of Machiavelli's use (and abuse) of Tegrini and others is Green, 1987. As for the actual historical circumstances of Castruccio's life and era, Green, 1986, and Lucarelli, 1981, have superseded Winkler, 1897, and novelizations

narrative concerns the particulars of Castruccio's brilliant political and military stratagems, overlapping to differing extents with passages from the *Art of War* and the *Florentine Histories*, the text's opening and close are of special interest, for they cast Castruccio's life in the mythical model of such ancient founders of kingdoms as Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus. It is especially in these portions that Machiavelli rewrites the historical record and dismantles the aristocratic myth proposed in Tegrini's humanist biography.

Tegrini's goal had been to ennoble Castruccio (and, by extension, his native Lucca). This he had done by "cleaning up" his hero's pedigree and name. Whereas Castruccio's true surname was Castracani, Tegrini's title emphasized instead his ties to one of Lucca's noblest families: the Antelminelli.⁷ The name Castracani presented Tegrini with a double stumbling-block. On the one hand, its literal meaning, referring as it did to the humble profession of "dog castrator," appeared unworthy of a man of Castruccio's stature.⁸ On the other, Castracani affiliated him with a minor branch of the Antelminelli, an offshoot known for the unsavory practice of money changing.⁹ Worse still, with its diminutive *-uccio*, the given name Castruccio was also lowly, containing another seeming allusion to castration. Faced with onomastic difficulties of this sort, Tegrini noted the echo between *Castruccio* and *Castra-*

such as Bacci, 1894, and Magnani, 1926, which uncritically recycle many of Machiavelli's inventions.

⁷In mystifying Castruccio's origins, Tegrini was merely following Castruccio himself who, after his arrival in Pisa, had added *degli Antelminelli* to his name so as to "possibly enhance his prestige not only within the aristocratically oriented Lucchese community in exile but also with the Italian Ghibelline faction generally" (Blomquist, 476).

⁸According to the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, the word *castracani* could also designate a small dull knife, sometimes called a *castrino*, presumably employed for the purpose of castration. The predominant meaning of the word, however, remains "castrator of dogs" (and, like *castraporci*, the term figures in the *Rime burlesche* of the Renaissance, where it is employed as a vulgar taunt). *Castracani* were usually peasants or serfs, who exercised their profession in order to enhance the abilities of female hunting dogs: "Et, pour ce que elles [les lisses] ne perdent leur temps, les fet on chastrer, fors celles que l'en vueult qui portent cheaulx. Et aussi une lisse chastree dure plus chassante et en sa bonté que ne font deux lisses qui ne le sont mie ou au moins une et demie" (Phébus, 112).

⁹"Tegrini, by emphasizing that he [Castruccio] belonged to the Antelminelli clan rather than to one of its more undistinguished branches, the Castracani, could lay great stress on the nobility of his birth" (Green, 1987, 40). The contemporary perception of the Castracani family was that they were mere "men of business and the counting house with interests remote from the aristocratic concerns and values of the noble Antelminelli." (Blomquist, 475-76).

cani, but was quick to propose two alternate explanations: the name was chosen because it was “prophetic,” hinting at Castruccio’s future as a builder and defender of castles (*castra* in Latin), and/or because it referred to a certain Castronius or Castricius, a noble Lucchese eulogized by Cicero, Suetonius, and Ammianus Marcellinus.¹⁰ The biographer’s invocation both of architecture and of ancestral ties to ancient Rome are indicative of his apologetic intent. Determined to rehabilitate the ignoble tyrant remembered in the Florentine chronicles, he transforms Castruccio into an emblem of nobility and continuity. His Castruccio is, accordingly, a builder of enduring things, a stern moralist, a man of letters, a pious father, a latter-day counterpart to ancients such as Cato and Cicero.

Machiavelli attacks this humanist edifice at its very foundations. Making of Castruccio a humble foundling, he denies him any and all ancestral ties, omits any reference to his nine daughters and sons, and forges a strictly artificial genealogical link to the later Guinigi dynasty. Moreover, he grants Castruccio a precocious and prodigious childhood, builds a complex family romance around his beginnings and end, magnifies his acts of treachery and cruelty, and assigns to him some thirty-four ancient witticisms at the narrative’s conclusion. While many of Machiavelli’s inventions are no less of classical origin than those of Tegrini, their sum effect is not a closing of the gap between the ancient founder-heroes and their modern imitator, but quite the opposite. Unlike Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus, the glorious Lucchese founder/foundling will, in the end, found little or nothing. Indeed, his empire will barely survive beyond the temporal limit of his existence. His biography will be largely coterminous with his empire and his empire with his biography. Yet Machiavelli nonetheless insists that his life is “truly exemplary as regards virtue and fortune” (“quanto alla virtù et quanto alla fortuna, di grandissimo exemplo,” 5).

¹⁰“Castrucci nomen ei pater imposuit, sive alludens Castracorum familiae, sive potius divinans, ipsum castris praefuturum; seu quod simile nomen apud Lucenses, veterisque historiarum scriptores, magnis viris sit imponi solitum” (Tegrini, 1742, 14). A lengthy discussion of the “noble, virtuous, and valorous” Lucius Castronius Petus and Castricius follows. Tegrini overlooks the other possible Classical derivation of the name Castruccio: “sust. m. sincop. da *Castoruccio*, dimin. di *Cástore*, nome proprio” (Gherardini, 2: 136). See also Manuzio: “gli posero nome CASTRUCCIO; sì perchè era nome di grande, come ancora per rinnovare i passati della sua famiglia” (16–17).

After some introductory paragraphs on Fortune's power to make and unmake all of the fruits of human industry, the *Vita* proper begins, just as it ends, under the shadow of death and incompleteness. Whereas his humanist predecessor had begun by celebrating Castruccio's links to the still powerful Antelminelli clan, even furnishing a genealogical tree, Machiavelli limits his attention to the Castracani.¹¹ He recounts how the Castracani family, within which the foundling Castruccio will find his first home, once figured among Lucca's noble families ("è connumerata intra le famiglie nobili della ciptà di Lucca"); but like the power and prestige of the fourteenth-century Lucchese city-state, it has supposedly vanished in contemporary times, following the law of all worldly things: "ancora ch'ella sia in questi tempi, secondo l'ordine di tutte le mondane cose, mancata" (7). In the case of the Castracani this law of earthly corruption poses more than an abstract threat, for Machiavelli would have us believe that, even as his narrative starts, the Castracani are nearing the end of the line. With characteristic devotion to poetic truth and disdain for historical fact, Machiavelli affirms that the clan's sole remaining representatives are a pseudo-couple consisting of Messer Antonio, who as priest and canon of Saint Michael's is bound by vows of chastity, and his sister Dianora, a childless widow who has come to live with her brother "with no desire to ever remarry" ("si ridusse a stare col fratello con animo di non più rimaritarsi," 8).

Within this modest household without progeny, the unexpected arrival of the foundling seems a propitious event. It promises that via the artifice of adoption the Castracani name will survive; "they determined to raise him," Machiavelli writes, "since he was a priest and she had no children" ("diberarono allevarlo, sendo epso prete et quella non avendo figliuoli," 12). The hope is underscored by the infant's dubbing with the most recent (and supposedly last) Castracani patronymic: "per il nome di Castruccio loro padre lo nominorono" (13). Yet everything in Machiavelli's version of the tale conspires to disrupt the hoped-for continuity between the past and future. Within the family there is the fact that Messer Antonio

¹¹Tegrimi's opening sentence is indicative of the spirit of his biography: "Antelminellorum familiam nobilem, multisque claram viris, et maximis functam honoribus Lucae, satis constat" (4). Manuzio, a Venetian relative of the sixteenth-century Antelminelli, re-enacts the gesture in his opening words: "Lucca, città nobilissima di Toscana, è tra le altre città d'Italia non inferiore di grido a qualunque altra" (1).

wishes to form the child in his own image, making of him a priest, a desire that conforms to the natural logic of paternal/filial imitation but whose fulfillment would ensure extinction. Outside the family circle a second obstacle arises, the fiery nature of Castruccio himself, “[a] subject *entirely unsuited* to the priestly character” (“[un] sujeto allo animo sacerdotale *al tucto disforme*,” 15; my italics). While this deformity signals a turbulence, a mimetic distortion between son and surrogate father, it also provides a way out. Should Castruccio refuse to become a priest, there looms the prospect of future progeny, but at the expense of Messer Antonio’s paternal authority.

In short, the young Castruccio is caught in a double-bind. Either he must reject his adoptive father, violating the debt that binds him to Messer Antonio, or he must become a priest, doing violence to his own nature and to the future of the family line. As it happens, Machiavelli’s Castruccio resolves this family romance via a doubly negative choice: he neither becomes a priest nor extends the Castracani line. Instead he becomes himself, a prodigious hero without predecessors or successors, a glorious fireworks display that would simply fade away into history’s night were it not preserved for posterity in Machiavelli’s text. The *Vita* thus defines itself as a sort of private museum in which Castruccio’s actions are collected and monumentalized for the amusement of the ideal company of the Orti Oricellari.

So Castruccio chooses to respect his inborn aversion to the priestly life, thereby causing Messer Antonio “immeasurable pain and displeasure” (“dolore et noia inextimabile,” 16). He opts instead to pursue a military career and this entails both his departure from the Castracani home and Messer Antonio’s replacement by Francesco de’ Guinigi, a surrogate surrogate-father. If between Messer Antonio and Castruccio there existed a certain disparity, in the Guinigi patriarch the youth finds instead an ideal role model and double. Their self-recognition proves instantaneous and mutual; just as “in riches, grace and virtue [Francesco] was far superior to all other Lucchesi” (“per richeza, per gratia et per virtù [Francesco] passava di lunga tutti gli altri Luchesi,” 17), so Castruccio is singled out by Francesco because of the “regal authority” (“autorità regia,” 18) that he already exercises over his peers. In fact, the match is so ideal that the prodigious youth quickly succeeds in rivaling Francesco, if not in eclipsing him in his renown. “It is extraordinary

to consider with what extreme rapidity he became full of all those virtues and habits that are required of a true nobleman," Machiavelli notes, adding later that by the age of eighteen "his name became great and honored not only in Pavia, but also in all of Lombardy."¹² The change is marked on the narrative level by Francesco's death and by Castruccio's appointment as both governor of his estate and guardian of his first-born son, Paolo, age thirteen (27).

If in a matter of only eight paragraphs Machiavelli's Castruccio rises from anonymity to become the adoptive patriarch of the Guinigi dynasty, the successive pages are far less economical. They furnish a detailed (but unfaithful) account of the acts of cruelty and deception, and the countless battle feats by means of which Castruccio gains an empire for the Guinigi and ever-increasing fame for the Castracani name. (Recall that he had never relinquished the family cognomen.¹³) As the *Vita* nears its climax, therefore, we find Castruccio poised on the threshold of eternal glory, ready to seize his long sought-after prey: the city of Florence. But "at the midpoint of the path to that glory" ("nel mezo del corso il cammino per andare a quella gloria," 130) he is struck down by one of fortune's unforeseeable blows. A pestilent wind wafts up from the

¹²"È cosa straordinaria a pensare in quanto brevissimo tempo ei diventò pieno di tutte quelle virtù et costumi che in uno vero gentile uomo si richieghono" (22–23); "non solo il suo nome in Pavia, ma in tutta la Lombardia diventò grande et onorato" (25). Machiavelli's invention of a second father for Castruccio—a truer, nobler father who takes the place of the ignoble, "false" adoptive father—is clearly patterned after the standard tales concerning the origin of heroes such as Oedipus (Rank, 12–94). The first "father," often a humble shepherd, finds the infant and raises him; the second father, usually a semi-divine being or king, is the lost blood father whom the hero will later displace and/or kill. Duplicating this pattern but insisting that Francesco is no less "false" a father than Messer Antonio, Machiavelli refuses to assign aristocratic origins to the founder/foundling.

¹³As regards Castruccio's cruelty and treachery, it is worth emphasizing that Machiavelli enhances the historical record at numerous junctures. Paragraphs 65–70 of the *Vita*, for example, recount the tale of the Poggio family's revolt against Castruccio's rule in a manner which at once recalls and conflicts with Tegrini. Whereas Tegrini had presented Stefano di Poggio as a violent foe and leader of the Poggio's revolt, Machiavelli presents him instead as a gentle mediator ("[un] antico et pacifico uomo, il quale nella congiura non era intervenuto" [66]) who succeeds in quelling the rebellion before Castruccio's return to Lucca. This accentuates Castruccio's cold-blooded perfidy as he promises "clementia et liberalità" (70) to the venerable patriarch and delivers instead a death sentence: "venuti . . . sotto la fede di Stephano et di Castruccio, furono insieme con Stephano imprigionati et morti" (70). For a full discussion, see Trovato's note, 118–19, in the critical edition of the *Vita*.

Arno, bringing a mortal fever and a reminder that fortune (and not virtù) is the final arbiter of human affairs.

The action now shifts to Castruccio's death-bed where Machiavelli's anti-genealogical parable moves toward a close. Here the drama of Francesco's death is re-enacted with Castruccio cast in the role of surrogate father passing on to Paolo the governance of a, by now, unrecognizable paternal estate. The scene repeats the incongruities and disproportions of the *Vita's* opening family romance. Castruccio explains to his "heir" that because he was nourished and loved "*much more*" by Francesco de' Guinigi than if he had been his actual blood-son ("nudrito et *amato più assai* che se io fussi nato del suo sangue," 133), "I have never wished to marry, so that the love of my own offspring should not hinder me from showing to your father's progeny the degree of gratitude that I felt bound to show."¹⁴ Choosing never to marry, Castruccio effectively ends the Castracani line while paradoxically fulfilling a portion of Messer Antonio's wish. This he does out of gratitude to a surrogate father who, in turn, is said to have loved and nourished the adopted Castruccio unnaturally more ("più assai") than his own blood-son Paolo. To make matters even more complex, Castruccio repays Francesco's inordinate love by amassing an unmanageable empire. "I am bequeathing to you . . . a vast state," he tells Paolo, "but since I am leaving it to you in a weak and sickly condition, I suffer most greatly."¹⁵

If the latter phrase hints that Castruccio's legacy may have no future, the presentation of Paolo Guinigi—who, aside from a violent escapade or two, had remained a near cipher to this point—surely confirms it. Paolo is counseled by the dying tyrant to know and respect his own nature: "He who knows that he is unsuited for war ought to reign by means of the contrivances of the arts of peace. For which reason, my advice is that you elect this path and pursue

¹⁴"Non ho mai voluto prendere donna, acciò che lo amore de' figliuoli non mi avesse ad impedire che in alcuna parte io non mostrasse verso il sangue di tuo padre quella gratitudine, che mi pareva essere tenuto dimostrare" (135).

¹⁵In the original the passage reads "io ti lascio . . . uno grande stato, di che io sono molto contento; ma perchè io te lo lascio debole e infermo, io ne son dolentissimo" (136). The term "dolentissimo" may suggest another paradoxical tie to Messer Antonio, who, as indicated earlier, was left with "dolore e noia inextimabile" by Castruccio's turn away from the priesthood.

it.”¹⁶ Such a peaceful character marks Paolo’s disparity with respect to the paternal norm of Francesco and Castruccio. But the latter (erroneously) insists that it cannot threaten Paolo’s patrimony, for the art of peace will now be essential for the maintenance of the empire. The scene closes with Castruccio’s assertion that Paolo is now bound to him by two *obrigghi*: “first, that I have left this kingdom to you; second, that I have shown you how to maintain it” (“l’uno, che io t’ho lasciato questo regno; l’altro, che io te l’ho insegnato mantenere,” 140). With this proclamation Castruccio passes away, but both obligations are almost immediately broken. His teaching proves ineffective, and his paternal example and empire are thereby undone. The concluding sentence of the death-bed sequence is a model of concision: “But neither virtue nor fortune were as friendly to Paolo as to Castruccio because soon thereafter he lost Pistoia, and then Pisa, and only with difficulty did he maintain his dominion over Lucca, which remained in his family until the time of Paolo his great-grandson.”¹⁷

So if in Machiavelli’s version Castruccio’s death rather emphatically coincides with yet another episode of incompleteness and generational rupture, yet another definition of modernity as an era of decline away from glorious precedents, what then is the reader left with? What precisely is “truly exemplary” in *La vita de Castruccio Castracani da Lucca* if Castruccio has neither a past nor a future? Taking their cue from the text’s preface, scholars like Chabod, Whitfield, and Sasso have argued that Castruccio’s life functions mostly as a negative exemplum: it puts on display a new pessimism concerning the human ability to resist the blows of fortune.¹⁸ Others

¹⁶“Chi si cognosce non acto alla guerra, si debbe ingegnare con le arti della pace di regnare. A che è bene, per il consiglio mio, che tu ti volga et t’ingegni per questa via” (139–40).

¹⁷“Ma non forno già la virtù et la fortuna tanto amiche a Pagolo Guinigi quanto a Castruccio; perchè non molto dipoi perdè Pistoia, et apresso Pisa, et con fatica si mantenne il dominio di Lucca, il quale perseverò nella sua casa infino a Pagolo suo propinote” (143). Characteristically enough, Machiavelli’s emphasis on the discontinuity between Castruccio’s closing words and the fate of his empire contrasts with Tegrini’s emphasis on continuity. According to Tegrini, Castruccio’s last words were “moriar, et vario rerum turbine orbem confundi, mutarique omnia videbitis.” Tegrini adds: “quod eventum (ut sunt morientium extreme verba saepissime futurorum preanuntia) comprobatum est” (160).

¹⁸Sasso makes the point concisely: “la breve operetta è una sorta di amaro *de fortuna* . . . non si era mai incontrata, a proposito della fortuna, in una pagina di Machiavelli, nemmeno nei luoghi in cui più forte era stata la sua inclinazione a riconoscerne il potere.

before and after them, notably Leo Strauss, have placed the *Vita* in a more affirmative light by linking it to *The Prince*, and the texts were usually paired in Renaissance editions. According to this common view Castruccio is but another Duca Valentino; he is “the greatest man of post-classical times,” a model prince and military tactician.¹⁹ Others still, including Barberi Squarotti and most recently Louis Green (1987), have sought something of a middle way, exploring the literary aspects of the text and its deft deployment of mythic and tragic commonplaces. While the complexity of the *Vita* is such that it can easily sustain all of the above readings, surely one further answer to the question of the work’s purpose may be found in the pithy and already cited phrase, “Only with difficulty did he maintain his dominion over Lucca, which remained in his family until the time of Paolo his great-grandson” (143).

The phrase may be crucial because it builds a temporal bridge between Machiavelli’s mission to Lucca and the historical time of the narrative. Unlike the Machiavellian Castruccio, Paolo Guinigi would perpetuate his family line down through his great-grandson and beyond. Although the merchant dynasty would lose its hold on Lucca in the early fifteenth century, one of its eventual heirs, Michele Guinigi, was the very reason for Machiavelli’s 1520 sojourn. Having gone into bankruptcy with many outstanding loans, Michele’s company was of considerable interest to his Florentine creditors and their representative, Niccolò Machiavelli. In this context Castruccio’s closing speech on Lucca’s need to appease and befriend the city of Florence takes on new meaning, as does the entire fiction of Castruccio’s affiliation with the later Guinigi despotism.

Yet beyond such narrow motivations, the question of the *Vita*’s value as an exemplum can ultimately be answered only by turning to its concluding portion. Machiavelli follows the description of Castruccio’s death with a brief paean to his hero, “a man not only rare in his own era, but also in many that preceded it” (“uno uomo non solamente raro ne’ tempi sua, ma in molti di quegli che innanzi erano passati,” 144).²⁰ And this portrait of Castruccio’s untimeli-

Anche in questi, infatti, una possibilità di riscatto, e di speranza, era stata riconosciuta” (658–59). But see also Chabod and Whitfield, 111–39.

¹⁹Strauss, 223–27.

²⁰The phrase is a calque on the description of Scipio in *Il Principe*, yet with some of the hyperbole stripped away: “Si può considerare Scipione, rarissimo non solamente ne’ tempi sua, ma in tutta la memoria delle cose che si sanno” (17: 5).

ness, of his monumental stature within the sorry modern context, is permeated by Machiavelli's wit. Castruccio is said to have been an admirable practitioner of urbane wit ("mirabile nel rispondere o mordere, o acutamente o urbanamente," 148), as well as a gracious victim and accomplice ("et come non perdonava in questo modo di parlare ad alcuno, così non si adirava quando non era perdonato a lui," 148). These biting maxims often bear a distinctively Machiavellian stamp: "gracious to friends, terrible to enemies, just with subjects, deceitful to outsiders" ("grato agli amici, agli inimici terribile, giusto con i subditi, infedele con gli esterni," 146); "he said that victory, not the means by which victory is achieved, brings you glory" ("diceva che la victoria, non el modo della victoria, ti arrecava gloria," 147); and "God loves strong men, which is why he punishes the powerless by means of the powerful" ("Dio è amatore degli uomini forti, perchè si vede che sempre gastiga gli impotenti con i potenti," 147). If these initial phrases confirm that there exists a powerful tie between the myth of Castruccio and Machiavelli's own preference for the mobile wisdom of the aphorism and rejection of the stable constructions of humanist idealism, then the thirty-four or so unattributed aphorisms which follow extend the link out into a general celebration of aphoristic wit as the highest manifestation of human "ingegno et gravità" (183).²¹

Like the individual *tesserae* of the mosaic of ancient commonplaces that is Castruccio's life itself, these sayings are themselves foundlings. The vast majority are excerpted from Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, though one derives from Dante's *Inferno* and another from Tegrimi. References to philosophy in Machiavelli's writings are rare enough, but the very copiousness of this catalogue invites comment.²² First, it must be noted

²¹As Luiso, Trovato, and Green, 1987, have pointed out, Tegrimi provided the lead. The Lucchese humanist had already attributed four aphorisms to Castruccio, one of which Machiavelli even retains (see Tegrimi, 64–66).

²²Machiavelli's friends in the Orti Oricellari found the catalogue excessively copious: "Notossi bene certi luoghi i quali, se bene stanno, bene si potrebbero non di meno migliorare; come è quella parte ultima dei ditterii et de' tratti ingegnosi et acuti detti del detto Castrucci, la quale non tornerebbe se non meglio più breve, perché, oltre all'essere troppi queglii suoi detti o sali, ve ne è una parte che furono ad altri et antichi et moderni savi attribuiti; un'altra non ha quella vivacità né quella grandezza che si richiederebbe a un tanto huomo. Ma ve ne restano tanti buoni che si possono di lui adurre, che la sua vita ne resta richa assai" (Letter 107, from Zanobi Buondelmonti, Florence, Sept. 6, 1520). Luiso finds them not only overly abundant, but also incoherent: "Quella

that Diogenes' *Lives* is at once a "historical" compilation and a "reduction" of ancient thought to a tissue of biographical topoi, legends, and gossip. Hence the *Lives* can serve Machiavelli both as a source and as a model for his contemporary biography. Secondly, most of the philosophers whose aphoristic wit Castruccio repeats are not the canonical fathers of ancient philosophy but rather atheist philosopher-rascals such as Bion, Diogenes, and Aristippus. (One of the aphorisms even belongs to the tyrant Dionysius.) This explains in part why fully six of the thirty-four aphorisms express views disruptive of the institution of marriage, celebrating either sexual conquest outside of marriage or subverting the link between marriage and reproduction.²³ Thirdly, instead of appearing in their original form, these witticisms are translated from the Latin edition of Ambrogio Traversari and modernized.²⁴ As Leo Strauss puts it, "When the ancient philosopher speaks of 'the festivals of the gods,' Castruccio is made to speak of 'the festivals of our saints'; whereas the ancient philosopher said he would wish to die like Socrates, Castruccio is made to say that he would wish to die like Caesar; the ancient philosopher, noticing a certain inscription at the door of a

filastrocca di aneddoti, invece di ingrandire o illuminare, offusca e rimpicciolisce la figura dell'eroe" (243); "Quegli aneddoti rispondono a mentalità, posizioni, atteggiamenti spirituali incoerenti, e rimangono nella maggior parte materia opaca o ingombrante o repugnante alla figura del condottiero lucchese. Repugnante anche alla stessa dottrina del Machiavelli e al suo ideale di principe e condottiero" (ibid.). Winkler finds them Boccaccian in tone: "Der Anhang enthält eine begeisterte Schilderung Castruccios und eine Sammlung von Anekdoten im Geschmack des Dekamerone" (2).

²³¶¶ 152, 159, 163, 168, 172, and 173 in the critical edition. Telling cases in point are 172 and 173: "Lodava Castruccio assai gli uomini che toglievano moglie et poi non la menavano, et così quegli che dicevano di volere navigare et poi non navigavano. Diceva maravigliarsi degli uomini che, quando ei comperano uno vaso di terra o di vetro, lo suonano prima per vedere se è buono, et poi nel torre moglie erano solo contenti di vederla." Castruccio's "wisdom," whether promoting post-nuptial abstinence or premarital intercourse, whether defining sexuality as something shameful (152) or instead joyous (159, 163), is held together by its negative representation of marriage. The contrast with Tegrini could hardly be stronger: "Utque maximum ad conciliandas, firmandasque amicitias matrimonii vinculum est, ita maximarum discordiam principium, et malorum omnium initium, ab alienii thori violatione exortum esse dicebat" (106).

²⁴On the aphorisms' origin, see Luiso, 254–60. Arguing that the fit between the biography and the aphorisms is awkward, Luiso conjectures that they originated as a reader's *florilegium* composed prior to the biographical portion of the text (246–47). As proof he notes that the aphorisms are presented, almost without exception, according to the sequence of Diogenes Laertius's text (246). Moreover, 27 of the 34 derive from only two chapters of Diogenes's *Lives*: 16 from Book 2, chapter 8 ("Aristippus") and 12 from Book 6, chapter 2 ("Diogenes").

rascally eunuch, made a remark that Castruccio is said to have made when noticing a similar inscription in Latin letters.”²⁵ These surface adjustments are supplemented by outright modifications in content and tone. For instance, Diogenes Laertius had attributed to Aristippus the following rejoinder: “In response to someone who had angrily said that philosophers could always be seen loitering around rich men’s doorways, he responded: ‘So, too, physicians loiter around the doorways of the sick, but that doesn’t mean that one would prefer being sick over being a physician.’”²⁶ Machiavelli casts Castruccio in the unfavorable role of Aristippus’s interlocutor and wittily reworks the final sentence (though not necessarily to Castruccio’s advantage). “When Castruccio said to one who professed philosophy ‘You are like dogs, who always hover around those who can best give them food,’ the other responded ‘on the contrary, we are like doctors who go to the houses of those who need our services most.’”²⁷ The transformation of philosophers into dogs may rely upon the well-established link in Greek and Latin between the adjective “dog-like” (*kinikós* or *cynicus*, its Latin cognate) and the noun “Cynic” (referring to members of the Cynical philosophical sect). By so designating philosophers, Machiavelli’s Castruccio would seem to invite reflection upon his alliterative name Castracani. Such word play may already have been present in the Castracani family arms, which bore the image of a prancing greyhound without teats or genitalia.²⁸ In Machiavelli’s version of the anecdote, however, the philosopher-dogs do not play dead.

²⁵Strauss, 224.

²⁶The translation is based on Traversari’s Latin version: “Indignanti cuidam ac dicenti cur philosophos cerneret semper obsidere divitum fores: ‘Et medici, inquit, languentium ianuas frequentant; non tamen ideo quispiam infirmari mallet quam mederi’” (cit. from Luiso, 255). The original source is Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 2: 70.

²⁷“Dicendo Castruccio ad uno el quale faceva professione di filosofo: ‘Voi siete come i cani, che vanno sempre datorno a chi può meglio dare loro mangiare, gli rispuose quello: ‘Anzi, siamo come e medici, che andiamo a casa coloro che di noi hanno maggiore bisogno’” (154).

²⁸Manuzio gives the following description: “Ebbero questi [i.e. i Castracani] per insegna dell’arme della famiglia loro, e comune a tutti, il cane levriere bianco, elevato in alto, con il collare rosso, guarnito d’oro in campo azzurro, con la metà di detto cane dal mezzo a basso coperta di bianco; cioè la divisa dello scudo azzurro di sopra e di sotto bianco, come oggetto ’ con l’elmo nobile; e per cimiero una testa di aquila con il busto coronata, e il moto *Inexpugnabilis*” (7). Since contemporary representations of greyhounds do not consistently represent genitalia, it is impossible to establish whether the family arms refer to the literal meaning of the cognomen.

Hinting that Castruccio may be one of “those who needs their services most,” they bite back at their opponent in a manner that may reflect obliquely upon his given name Castruccio, the little castrated one. The chastiser is chastised, the castrator castrated; but, in a display of magnanimity, Castruccio bows down before those astute enough to outwit him. One could continue to examine such adaptations at length, yet the key point would remain the same: the corpus of aphorisms cannot be viewed as an external appendage, “tacked on” as if an afterthought. Rather, Machiavelli has carefully reshaped these ancient fragments so that they may conform to the imperatives of his anti-genealogical fable, to the psychology of his modern hero, and to the precise historical stage on which the latter makes his appearance.

The strategic use of learned and popular witticisms, proverbs and aphorisms—no rigorous distinction between the three seems possible—has long been recognized as one of Machiavelli’s ideological and stylistic trademarks.²⁹ A fascination with similar verbal artifacts, however, also permeates the larger cultural atmosphere of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Figures such as Angelo Poliziano, Leonardo da Vinci, Piovano Arlotto and many others compiled books of ancient and modern *detti*, and the role of wit in treatises like Castiglione’s *The Courtier* hardly requires any comment. Perhaps most revealing, at least as regards the deeper meaning of Renaissance aphorism-gathering is the genre’s first best-seller: Poggio Bracciolini’s *Facetiae*. In this Latin collection of 273 discontinuous tales of modern wit and trickery, Poggio defines the *facetus* as a medicine for oppressed spirits: “It is honorable if not fully necessary—certainly the wise have sung its praises—to divert our minds weighed down by various painful cares and thoughts, and by means of joyous distraction to revive them.”³⁰ The restorative power of the *facetus*—etymologically that which creates a sparklingly droll and elegant surface or face—must thus be viewed in relation to a graver, more oppressive self-knowledge which is evaded in the moment of reading or performance. That the knowledge in question entails the certainty of death, loss, or decline is

²⁹For a recent study of this subject, see Spackman.

³⁰“Honestum est enim ac ferme necessarium, certe quod sapientes laudarunt, mentem nostram variis cogitationibus ac molestiis oppressam, recreari quandoque a continuis curis, et eam aliquo iocandi genere ad hilaritatem remissionemque converti.” Quoted from the preface to the *Facezie*, 108.

confirmed in the text's final section, wherein with unconcealed nostalgia Poggio evokes the happy company of the Bugiale, the idyllic theater of lies (or *bugie*) and licentious speech in which the papal secretaries and Pope Martin would pass the time and hone their collective wit. As the text comes to a close, the theater has vanished and the actors are dead or dispersed, leaving only the fragments transcribed in Poggio's book. In parting, the book itself appears as Poggio's sole bulwark against time's corrosive power: "Today, my friends have passed on, the *Bugiale* is gone, while due to the fault of our times and of its men, the custom of verbal jesting and jousting is fading away."³¹ Here, as in Castiglione, the utopian glee and laughter barely conceal the relentless ticking of history's clock.

But if Poggio's *facezie* claim to provide a leavening remedy for modernity's grave turn of mind or some salt for overcoming the modern blahs, they are also symptoms of modern decline. Written in Latin because that language is "far richer in our era even for the treatment of lighter matters" and because "our ancient ancestors [*nostros Maiores*], men of genuine prudence and learning, delighted in drollery, jest and tales,"³² these assembled fragments put on display a modern rationality and amorality that is strictly situational and tactical, a philosophy in and of action outside the embrace of any unifying design, scheme or logos. Without past or future, Poggio's protagonists—most of whom are, like Castruccio, "of a base and obscure origin and birth"—are reduced to a momentary gesture or verbal flash in which their genius flares forth and recalls the levity of *nostros Maiores*. Such triumphs, however, stage the epiphany of a mobile, adaptable subject at a high price; contemporary society, institutions and mores are all revealed as either oppressive, contrary to nature, hypocritical or corrupt, and modern man is left only with ephemeral freedoms and consolations, with artificial paradises like Poggio's *Bugiale*, Castiglione's court or, for that matter, Machiavelli's own Orti Oricellari.

³¹"Hodie, cum illi diem suum obierint, desiit *Bugiale*, tum temporum, tum hominum culpa, omnisque iocandi confabulandique consuetudo sublata" (*Facezie*, 408).

³²"Modo ipsi eadem ornatus politiusque describant, quod ut faciant exhortor, quo lingua Latina etiam levioribus in rebus hac nostra aetate fiat opulentior" (110; emphasis mine). "Quibus ego si respondeam, legisse me *nostros Maiores*, prudentissimos ac doctissimos viros, facetiis, iocis et fabulis delectatos, non reprehensionem, sed laudem meruisse, satis mihi factum ad illorum existimationem putabo" (108; emphasis mine). Poggio would, of course, soon find himself under attack for his defective Latin prose.

Now, returning from this perspective to the *Vita*, it becomes evident that Castruccio, too, is at once a remedy and a symptom, a living monument to ancient glory and a sign of modern fragmentation. A practitioner and accomplice of ancient aphoristic wit, Castruccio also appears as its embodiment, whether *in bono* or *in malo*. Even his name is a model of alliterative play and aphoristic compression. He rises up from nothing to become the contemporary counterpart of antiquity's hero-founders, and he dies after a biography that is little more than one extended heroic moment. Accordingly, Castruccio's rise is accomplished less by consciously reflecting upon and reinterpreting ancient models—even his apprenticeship with Francesco de' Guinigi is brief—than as a function of something inborn and incommunicable: a prodigious nature so unfamiliar in modern times, that Machiavelli defines it, from the start, as a figure of monstrosity.

From the very moment of his exposure and finding Castruccio thus provokes the reactions of marvel, terror, compassion, and awe befitting a “cosa meravigliosa” (1)—a *monstrum* that is at once an aesthetic wonder, a portent, and a disclosure of the boundary line separating the natural from the divine.³³ He is first discovered enshrouded in grape leaves (“rinvolto nelle foglie,” 10–11) like the natural but uncanny fruit of the Castracani family vines. Seeing him, Dianora is “half marveling, half frightened, filled with pity and stupor” (“parte meravigliata, parte sbigottita, ripiena di compassione et di stupore,” 11); and Messer Antonio, in turn, “no less was he filled with wonderment and pity” (“non meno si riempie di meraviglia et di pietate,” 12). As has already been observed, this monstrous beginning is matched by a no less hypertrophic development as a child and adolescent. He is soon peerless among his peers. “He demonstrated great strength of soul and of body, and far exceeded all others in his age group” (“ei mostrava virtù di animo e di corpo grandissima et di lunga tutti gli altri della sua età su-

³³It is worth emphasizing that the one purely mythical episode in Tegrini's biography is shunned by Machiavelli. The Lucchese humanist had claimed that Castruccio's mother, in the throes of labor, had dreamt of an immense flame that would be all-devouring (14). Upon awakening, she then gives birth to a son so large that all future childbearing will prove impossible. (See also Manuzio, 16.) While reworking the motif of the “infertile mother” via the figure of Dianora, Machiavelli does away with the prophetic dream in order to identify Castruccio with the unexpected and the discontinuous.

perava," 15–16). In tournaments and war games "there was no man who was his better" ("non trovava uomo che lo superasse," 24). At maturity he is "of more than ordinary height" ("più che ordinario di alteza," 145). Immensely cruel, he is, nonetheless, of such grace and humanity that no one ever leaves his company dissatisfied (145), such that, at his death, there is no concealing the immensity of the loss: "He died, leaving greater affection for him than any other prince in any other era" ("si morì, lasciando . . . tanto desiderio di lui quanto alcuno altro principe che mai in qualunque altro tempo morissi," 141).

In short, Machiavelli heaps such accolades upon Castruccio in order to mark him as a liminal being, a marvelous creature just like Romulus, whose dark and humble origins provide a link both to beasts and to the gods "because all [those who have accomplished great things in this world] were either exposed to the beasts or were of such a humble father that, out of shame, they made themselves sons of Jove or of another god."³⁴ Machiavelli's presentation here of the myth of the foundling-founder is at least as skeptical as Livy's; the myth is viewed euhemeristically, as a mere cover for the shame associated with the city's "vile" and violent origins. Nonetheless, by alluding to the foundling's pseudo-affiliation with the gods, Machiavelli points to a deeper anthropological meaning, illuminated also in a noted phrase from Aristotle's *Politics*, "Any being who lives outside the polis must be either a beast or a god." Indeed, when antiquity imagined its own uncertain beginnings it regularly invoked the symbol of the foundling, an anomalous being, both beast *and* god, of nature and out of nature, who can constitute the tribe's beginning because he appears without any beginning at all.

The pervasiveness of this myth in the ancient imagination, as documented in John Boswell's *The Kindness of Strangers*, corresponds to an actual practice.³⁵ From antiquity through the nine-

³⁴"Perchè tutti [coloro che hanno in questo mondo operato grandissime cose] o ei sono stati exposti alle fiere o egli hanno avuto sì vil padre che, vergognatisi di quello, si sono fatti figliuoli di Giove o di qualche altro Dio" (1).

³⁵"Mythology enshrined cruelty and wantonness as well as kindness and heroism, and the frequency with which it included abandonment may attest only to the latter's familiarity and associations. But the idea that the founders of most of the great dynasties known to Romans—and even Zeus and his children—had been abandoned and reared (usually quite humbly) by other people could not but affect Roman views of the practice" (Boswell, 79).

teenth century, infants were regularly exposed and abandoned by their parents in order to resolve problems of illegitimacy and succession, to dispose of unwanted daughters, and to cover up adulterous loves.³⁶ While this distinctively Western practice was widely viewed as an acceptable and even honorable option for the child's parents, it was conceived of as a catastrophe for the child. For without father or mother the foundling was literally no one; neither a foreigner nor a citizen, he or she was stripped of all family cognomens and personal property, becoming, like the slave, a mere commodity. Yet it is this position of marginality that marks the foundling as an ideal object for mythical elaboration. In the legendary histories of figures such as Romulus, Oedipus, and Cyrus the dynastic founder must be a foundling precisely because he represents the very notion of beginnings, a genetic zero-point, a new departure. As the anonymous being who spontaneously rises up to the highest glory, he alone can become the eponymous emperor, founder-hero, and genetic exemplum, whose descendants inherit an original virtue and power derived directly from the divine and bestial orders. (But, hardly surprising, given the conservative nature of foundation myths, the foundling's move from anonymity to eponymy often hinges upon his being recognized and reclaimed by a royal mother and father. Inscribed *post factum* within a royal lineage, the city's genetic starting point can thereby be defined at once as anonymous and aristocratic, vile and exalted.)³⁷

³⁶On this subject, in particular as regards Roman juridical conceptions of exposure and abandonment, see Boswell, 53–94.

³⁷That ancient mythography should define the foundling as a "genetic zero-point" thus does not imply a celebration of the city's humble origins. On the contrary, the standard tale of abandonment ends up inscribing nobility within the order of nature in a manner entirely at odds with Machiavelli's anti-aristocratic use of the myth. Otto Rank gives the following account of the standard myth: "The hero is the child of most distinguished parents; usually the son of a king. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness, or secret intercourse of the parents, due to external prohibition or obstacles. During the pregnancy, or antedating the same, there is a prophecy, in form of a dream or oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father, or his representative. As a rule he is surrendered to the water, in a box. He is then saved by animals or by lowly people (shepherds) and is suckled by a female animal, or by a humble woman. After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents, in a highly versatile fashion; takes his revenge on his father, on the one hand, is acknowledged on the other, and finally achieves rank and honors" (Rank, 61).

La vita de Castruccio Castracani repeats and disrupts this dynastic/genealogical myth. It affirms that, in the modern era, the prodigious beast-god *can* re-arise, but with a difference: he can no longer be naturalized, descend into history, beget a clan, assign his name to a genealogical line; he can no longer father or be fathered.³⁸ For all his exemplary and mythical attitudes, the modern prodigy remains inimitable, nonreproducible, unrecognizable. He becomes a monster, a figure of excess and isolation, a *castrato* and castrator. As such, he becomes a sign of continuity and rupture. If his grandeur recalls the great founder-heroes of *nostros Maiores* and his ascent suggests that the soil of history regularly sows the seed of human glory, his lack of immediate predecessors and successors only reinforces a sense of historical distance, a sense that there yawns an insuperable gulf between ancient and modern times. The paradox is best resumed in Machiavelli's concluding lines: "And because in his life he was not inferior either to Philip of Macedon, Alexander's father, nor to Scipio of Rome, he died at the age of both; and doubtless, he would have outshone both, if instead of Lucca, his fatherland had been Macedonia or Rome."³⁹ Castruccio could have been a contender for history's highest throne, but instead he is a virtual failure, if not the "bum" of Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront*, then at least a telling emblem of modern instability, of foundering foundations in modern times. Like Philip and Scipio he lives forty-four years, a final confirmation, if one was needed, of the precise (though spurious) conformity of his biography to its ancient prototypes.⁴⁰ Yet the toponyms speak all too eloquently of a promise

³⁸Pitkin makes the point concisely: "The true Founder must not only be a founding, independent of the past and self-made in his origins, but he must also be ruthless toward the future, ready to sacrifice his nearest and dearest for the sake of his founding, ready to sacrifice the immortality of the blood promised through his offspring for that larger and more individual immortality promised through the glory of his founding" (60). For an excellent discussion of the role of founders in Machiavelli, see also 55–79.

³⁹"Et perchè vivendo, ei non fu inferiore né a Philippo di Macedonia, padre di Alessandro, né a Scipione di Roma, ei morì nella età dell'uno et dell'altro; et senza dubbio avrebbe superato l'uno e l'altro, se in cambio di Lucca egli avessi avuto per sua patria Macedonia o Roma" (185). Machiavelli had set the stage for this concluding passage from the opening paragraphs of the *Vita*, where it was declared that: "*secondo i tempi ne' quali visse et la città donde nacque, fecie cose grandissime, et come gli altri [i.e. Romulus, Moses and Cyrus] non ebbe più felice ne più noto nascimento*" (4; emphasis mine).

⁴⁰Cf. Tegrimi: "mortuus est Castrucius quadragesimo septimo aetatis anno, in medio cursu florentissimarum gloriarum, virtute, et fama senior quam annis" (153).

unfulfilled. Instead of being commemorated as the builder of imperial Rome or Athens, Castruccio will forever remain the Little Caesar of Lucca, part Caesar, part Cesare Borgia, but with substantial part also of a certain Florentine secretary “of base and mean condition,” who in the solitude of his exile from politics is reduced to building literary models because and in spite of “a great and continuing malignity of fortune.”⁴¹

* * * * *

What then is “truly exemplary” in *La vita di Castruccio Castracani*? I would suggest that it is the biography’s staging of modernity as an impasse. This impasse appears “exemplary” to the extent that it pervades Machiavelli’s later works. In the political writings, as observed earlier, it assumes the form of a clash between the call to imitate ancient models and the conviction that the discontinuities of history are such that all acts of imitation may be doomed to failure. In the plays it surfaces instead on the level of plot. The *Clizia* and *Mandragola* are thus built around crises of succession in which the unnatural pairing of an elder man with a younger woman would lead to sterility, incest, and/or the dissipation of a patrimony, were it not for restorative actions that bring about a more “natural” coupling by means of trickery and art.

The impasse’s deeper value as an exemplum, however, resides less on the thematic plane than in Machiavelli’s authorial stance. Cut off from the fruitful, transitive realm of political action, his first career having been interrupted by fortune, the ex-secretary of the Florentine republic is forced to fall back upon an alternative course of action: he overcomes his isolation via the art of writing. For Machiavelli, the turn to writing is almost always a secondary recourse. It serves as a means of self-compensation for a prior loss. Hence,

⁴¹Both quotations are from Machiavelli’s dedication of *Il principe* to Lorenzo de’ Medici and occur in a context in which the dynamic interplay between high and low, base and exalted, between the victors and victims of fortune is an explicit theme: “Nè voglio sia reputata presunzione, se uno uomo di basso ed infimo stato ardisce discorrere a regolare e’ governi de’ principi . . . E se Vostra Magnificenza dallo apice della sua altezza qualche volta volgerà gli occhi in questi luoghi bassi, conoscerà quanto io indegnamente sopporti una grande e continua malignità di fortuna” (emphasis mine). The final phrase associates Machiavelli not only with Castruccio, but also with Cesare Borgia, whose heroic actions are fruitless because of “una straordinaria ed estrema malignità di fortuna” (*Il principe*, 7.3).

in the *Mandragola*'s prologue his claim that by versifying "light-hearted things" he "renders his sad present sweeter" ("con questi van' pensieri / fare el suo tristo tempo più suave"). But the substitute mode of action provided by writing also holds forth a greater promise, the hope of salvaging for future generations "that good which the malignity of the times and fortune have kept from being put into practice" ("quel bene che per la malignità de' tempi e della fortuna tu non hai potuto operare" [*Discorsi*, 2: Proem: 25]). The hope may well prove illusory, for if actions can be "intercepted," so too can wit and writ. Nevertheless, writing's task is to redeem the times, to find and, if not to find, then to invent, a tentative link between the receding past and a future that can never be more than a hypothesis.

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