Machiavelli’s Ambush: perspectives in an age of conspiracy

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Machiavelli’s Ambush: perspectives in an age of conspiracy

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ABSTRACT
In this essay I revisit The Prince and the Discourses and argue that across the design of these two texts on the theme of conspiracy Machiavelli constructs an ambush on Medici princes. I reconsider Mary Dietz’s (1986), and Langton’s and Dietz’s (1987) suggestion that Machiavelli’s The Prince was a deceptive political act through an exploration of the link Dietz and Sheldon Wolin (2004) draw between Machiavelli’s method and Renaissance artistry. I suggest that Machiavelli applied a one-point linear perspective – a scientific and visual method of pictorial representation and geometrical modelling that emerged for the first time in the Renaissance – to the political field. I test this hypothesis on the theme of conspiracy in Machiavelli’s work by arguing that The Prince ultimately presents one vantage point – that of the prince – while the Discourses offers another – that of the conspirators. I argue that a blind spot is created by these two texts when they are jointly considered: conspirators seduced, recruited, and trained by the Discourses eliminate a prince caught off guard for having followed the advice on conspiracy in The Prince.

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1. Introduction
In this essay I revisit a puzzle in the history of political thought – that of the relationship between The Prince and the Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy (hereafter, the Discourses) – and argue that in the design of these two texts on the topic of conspiracy Machiavelli intended to construct an ambush on the Medici prince/s with the completion of the Discourses. While it is true that a spectrum of neutral, early realist or
scientific perspectives unfolds for the reader of these two texts, it is equally true that in regard to the theme of conspiracy, Machiavelli presents two active perspectives (one in each text) – that of the prince and that of the private conspirators. Both perspectives address and seek to persuade the intended readers of the Prince and the Discourses to act outside of their covers.¹ In order to make this case I turn to the visual culture of Renaissance Florence, and most significantly, the inventions in linear perspective at the time that Machiavelli applies it to his work. I argue that on the question of conspiracy The Prince (chapter nineteen) reflects the vantage point of the prince – while the Discourses (in chapter six of book three) present another vantage point, that of the private citizens and conspiring republicans. Through Machiavelli’s manipulation of perspectives, a blind-spot is created by the two texts when read side-by-side: conspirators, seduced, recruited, and trained by Discourses eliminate a prince caught-off-guard for having followed the advice on conspiracy in The Prince.

It is not then with Machiavelli’s application to contemporary politics that I am concerned, but rather with the way that Machiavelli engaged in the politics, art and science of his time, including the art-of-killing-with-words. Whilst I apply an interdisciplinary historicist approach, I take authorial intention dead seriously and seek to add something new to Machiavelli scholarship, structuralist political theory, and art history, as well as put forth the case for how the latter could inform the former two. The approach here also makes a contribution to unlocking Machiavelli’s perspectivism and realism, as they have come to shape the political and philosophical tradition ever since, not least Nietzsche’s anti-metaphysical and moral revolution.

To go about, I first introduce the case through revisiting Mary Dietz’s (1986), and Langton’s and Dietz’s (1987) reading of Machiavelli’s The Prince and the link to Renaissance artistry. For this reading still represents ‘the current state of the debate over the interpretation of The Prince, and its insistence on the importance of historical context in determining the meaning of the text’ (Ward 2011, 5n10).² In part two, I introduce the

¹Agreeing with Filippo de Lucchese, I find in Machiavelli’s political writings ‘a tool of direct political intervention in the Italian crisis’ and that Machiavelli’s political science ‘converge[s] to produce not only neutral knowledge, but also a political education intended to move men to action’ (Del Lucchese 2015, 65). After being ‘exiled’ by the Medici in 1513, he is a ‘captain without an army’ and can only recruit ‘by means of his books’ (Strauss 1978, 154; Waite 2008, 123).

²While no study since has fundamentally altered the established interpretations of The Prince, scholars have uncovered new findings in regards to Machiavelli’s life, his use of rhetoric, science, art, and the various facets of his political alliances, relation to ecclesiastical authority, and republicanism (See for example Connell 2013; Del Lucchese 2015; Dyer and Nederman 2016; Ginzburg 2022; Jurdjevic 2007, 2014). Unsurprisingly – from a patriotic perspective – the focus for British Neo-Romans (See
context of a 16th C partisan struggle over political power in Florence and, more broadly, Italy. In part three, I suggest that when Machiavelli could no longer engage in politics as a Florentine civil servant, he re-invented himself as a political writer, in part by taking clues from the realist development in the arts at the time, specifically the application of linear perspective in pictorial art. In part four, I show that when Machiavelli put pen to paper, he pursued politics by other means.

1.1. Staging an unsettled debate

Let’s set the stage by taking our first clue from Mary Dietz’s (1986, 1987) now well known argument that Machiavelli’s *The Prince* was a deceptive political act. Dietz fits *The Prince* into a republican narrative despite the fact that *The Prince* appears to be a book in support of principalities. Dietz supports a ‘strong republican’ thesis, which holds that ‘even as Machiavelli writes *The Prince*, he remains a defender of republican liberty and an opponent of the Medici’ (Dietz 1986, 779). This claim is set against the ‘weak republican’ thesis, which charges Machiavelli with being opportunistic in writing *The Prince* in order to please the Medici and get re-appointed as a civil servant (Skinner 1981). If the strong republican thesis is to hold true ‘then something else must be moving beneath the surface of the text’ (Dietz 1986, 779), and it is the identification of this ‘subtext’, according to Dietz, that splits the strong republican camp into three parts. Dietz links the first version with Rousseau, who holds that *The Prince* is a book for republicans insofar as ‘even as Machiavelli is fashioning masks for a prince, he is unmasking him’ (Dietz 1986, 7799). The second version, proposed by Garrett Mattingly, rejects the idea that *The Prince* was ‘intended seriously’, but rather claims that it was written as a ‘diabolical burlesque’ (Dietz 1986, 779). The third version is represented by Wolin, who sees *The Prince* ‘as an advice book for a founder’ (Dietz 1986, 780). It is this last position that Dietz spars with in order to put forward her own fourth version of how *The Prince* fits into and strengthens the strong republican thesis.

for example Skinner 1998, 2002; Viroli 1998) and American Neo-Republicans (see for example Mansfield 1996; Pangle 1992; McCormick 2011, 2018) remains the form and role of republicanism, imperialism, and liberty in Machiavelli (see also Hornqvist 2004). Another thing shared by these later scholars is that they are equally if not more, concerned with the politics of their own times than with Machiavelli’s political context and intention.

3See for example James Ward (2011) for an updated version of this argument in respect to Machiavelli’s use of rhetoric, especially his use of *innuendo*. Ward reads *The Prince* as ‘neither political science nor advice for a prince, but rather a very clever and forceful condemnation of the Renaissance prince’ (2011, 6).
Before we proceed to account for Wolin’s position, Dietz’s classification of the third version should be updated by adding two more republican camps, namely, a radical Right and a Left version, which are aligned with Wolin’s reading of *The Prince* as a book for founders, but unlike Wolin, read the teaching in *The Prince* as republican at its core.⁴ Right-wing republicanism features an elitist thesis (see for example, Mansfield 1996; Pangle 1992) that sees Machiavelli’s republicanism as approximating the rule of the few (against the many) and for whom it is the *Discourses*, not *The Prince*, that is the truly deceptive text. On the Left, we find a radical democratic populist republican thesis in favour of the many against the few (Jurdjevic 2007; McCormick 2011, 2015, 2018). McCormick argues that the *Discourses* is not deceptive but openly intends to persuade young men from the *grandi* to grant more political power to the plebs through constitutional arrangements such as ‘plebian tribunates, legislative plebiscites, and popular judged political trials’ (McCormick 2018, 2). *The Prince* prepares the foundation of a populist republican democracy through different mechanisms such as the arming of the people.⁵ These two radical republican camps share in that they both lessen the difference between the teaching in *The Prince* and the *Discourses* and thus the question of a transition between the two is less of a puzzle.⁶

⁴Both these camps echo Leo Strauss’ influential reading that both ‘Machiavelli’s book on principalities and his book on republics are both republican’ (1978, 182).

⁵In regard to the prince, McCormick argues that the prince or a ‘glorious tyrant […] is always both enabled and constrained by his subject-citizens. Citizens who are armed and enjoy relatively equal socio-economic status may rather easily convert a principality into a republic – especially should their tyrant ever fail to observe the maxim of ‘cruelty well-used’ and begin resorting, instead, to cruelty, as such. In point of fact, such an individual who empowers his people both civically and militarily is, actually, no tyrant – except, of course, in the eyes of nobles and writers. Machiavelli and the people understand him to be a civil prince – a republic’s reformer, redeemer, or even re-founder. More simply, he is just *il principe*, ‘the prince’ (2015, 52). Here we have echoes of Althusser’s argument that the prince segments his power, and sides with the people against the nobles, and through decreeing laws constructs a constitution of a ‘long-lasting’ and expansive state. And if a prince turns into a tyrant, he will be contested by popular rebellion and thus the ‘transition problem’ is resolved. In both the Left and the Right camp we further find echoes of Althusser’s reading that the ‘monarchy-republic’ opposition is an ‘oversimplified typology’, and the argument, as if Machiavelli were a neo-Aristotelian, that the republican Rome that Machiavelli wants emulated in a new (and improved) form in the *Discourses* is a ‘composite government that persisted under the guise of a republic’ (1999, 48). For an Althusserian non-constitutionalist and aleatory materialist interpretation of Machiavelli as a radical democrat see Christopher Holman (2018, 2023).

⁶Most elucidating of these ‘new’ republican readings is Mark Jurdjevic’s approach that oscillates between a historicist and a structuralist political theory position:

If we historicise our reading of his corpus, interpret the key texts less in terms of regime preferences and more in terms of an adaptive dialogue about the structure and exercise of power, we see a broad transformation in his thinking about power from an early focus on individuals [*The Prince*] to a later sociological analysis [*the Discourses*] of power rooted in frank scepticism about the limits of individual action […] For this reason, it is problematic to speak of Machiavelli’s republicanism or republican theory; we should instead recognise discrete and contrasting earlier and later republicanism. (2007, 1229)
Unlike these camps, Wolin finds little traces of republican constitutionalism in *The Prince*. *The Prince* is written, he argues, to enable a new prince to establish a strong state that over time will give way to a republican regime as outlined in the *Discourses*. A princely founder is needed when no state exists or if the laws of a state are corrupt beyond redemption. When Machiavelli compared the prince and the people ‘under the law’ the verdict was in favour of the people […] but while the people’s virtue came from submitting to the law, the virtù of the prince necessarily took the form of creative destruction of laws and institutions’ (Wolin 2004, 207). The prince is the means, the republic the end.

Dietz identifies two interrelated problems with Wolin’s two-stage interpretation: firstly, the creation of a republican regime would not be the inevitable result if a prince were to follow the advice in *The Prince*, since the concern for ‘the foundation of republican institutions’ is nowhere to be found therein (Dietz 1986, 780). Furthermore, Dietz questions how the transition from a principality to a republic would come about since ‘[e]xactly how the founder renders himself superfluous or how he gives way to the republic, Wolin does not say; the implication, roughly, is that he [the prince] creates [republican] institutions that will subsume and outlive him’ (Dietz 1986, 780).

The second objection Dietz qualifies as ‘more political in nature’, as it calls into question the method by which the ‘heroic politics’ of the prince will somehow give way to ‘mass politics’ (Dietz 1986, 780). Contra Wolin, Dietz argues that Machiavelli thinks it is necessary to ‘act boldly to change circumstances’, rather than willingly ‘wait for the prince’s retirement or death’ (Dietz 1986, 781).

Dietz reads *The Prince* in the context of the partisan struggle of the time, viewing it as an assault on the Medici prince. Central to her case are two key arguments: first, that Florentine republicanism ‘was a living reality;’ and second, that Machiavelli ‘remained a republican […] throughout his life’ (Dietz 1986, 1283). It raises the question of how Machiavelli as ‘a captain without an army’ could attack the Medici (Strauss 1978, 154). Dietz’s answer is that ‘crafty assault by deceit could serve as a substitute for brute assault by violence’ (Dietz 1986, 778). The very ‘assault by deceit’ is *The Prince*, a text which according to Dietz ‘is not simply about deception, but is itself an act of deception”’. Moreover, Machiavelli, ‘this theorist of deceit is at the same time a practitioner of that very art’ (Dietz 1986, 781). Having alluded to the performative character of *The Prince*, Dietz suggests ‘*The Prince* could be read as a political act in itself, a bold attempt to change existing conditions’ (Dietz 1986, 781).
act being subversion. Should the prince follow the advice given in *The Prince*, he will neither acquire nor maintain power, but the opposite: he will undo himself. The deceptive advice concerns three decisive matters for the endurance of a prince: ‘where to live, how to behave, and whom to arm’ (Dietz 1986, 782). In respect to all three, Machiavelli’s advice is contrary to the interest of the prince and ‘jeopardize[s] his power’ (Dietz 1986, 777). That which Skinner (1981) interprets as an opportunistic move to gain employment is for Dietz a ‘bold attempt’ to sink the Medici prince/s.

I agree with Dietz that Wolin’s account of the *transition* from the newly created state to a republic is unsatisfactory. I am not convinced, however, that *The Prince* is – in its entirety – an act of deception rather than a book in political education. What I will suggest is that Machiavelli commits at least one act of deception in *The Prince* and this lies in his advice on conspiracy. The deception is revealed when the perspective on conspiracy in the *Discourses* is taken into account. Framed in this way, my paper addresses how the transition from a principality to a republican regime is built into Machiavelli’s texts.

The age of conspiracy did not acquire its name for nothing. In the late Renaissance, conspiracies were a common feature of the political landscape. The most significant during Machiavelli’s lifetime was the Pazzi conspiracy against two Medici brothers in 1478, and made a great imprint on the young Machiavelli. He was nine years old at the time. The actual ambush in the Cathedral of Florence (*Cathedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore*) ultimately failed; only the younger brother, Giuliano, died under the knife, while Lorenzo escaped wounded. Lorenzo not only held onto power, but ruled Florence much as a despot until the end of his life. In the immediate aftermath of the conspiracy, enemies (real and imagined) of Lorenzo were killed in the streets of Florence, burnt and hanged from the windows of the government building (*Palazzo Vecchio*). Conspirators’ property was confiscated and their families exiled from Florence. Machiavelli repeatedly returns to the Pazzi conspiracy in the *Discourses*, whereas he is silent about it in *The Prince*. I will argue that the part in *The Prince* on conspiracy is designed to respond to the paranoia of the Medici prince – to reassure the prince of safety when none exists. Machiavelli not only points at, but also seeks to *create*, a princely Achilles’ heel. The advice on conspiracy is an act of camouflaging with words, concealing the conspirators’ line of attack from the prince by convincing him that there will be no attack. This trick is what makes it an ambush.
Dietz disregards the particular significance of a key part of the whole, namely, the section on conspiracy, in favour of reading The Prince as a whole, as a deceptive act. She argues that ‘[t]he political actor must be as skilled at setting traps as he is at bold, ferocious attack, for when one is foiled by “terrain” and unable to ambush easily, it may be necessary to deceive’ (Dietz 1986, 782). As a tool of deception, Dietz argues, The Prince, was sent to the Medici, digging a hole for the prince to fall into. All that Machiavelli could do after was wait. In contrast to Dietz, I argue that even though the terrain renders the conspirators ‘unable to ambush easily’, Machiavelli’s deceptive act in The Prince is not the final move. Rather, it serves to make the terrain favourable for an ambush by conspirators recruited by the Discourses. That is to say, Machiavelli skillfully sets a trap in The Prince, not because a ‘ferocious attack’ is foreclosed, but precisely to enable one.

There must also be a resort to actual force in order for the ambush to work; namely, the textual recruitment and training of appropriate conspirators to kill the prince, which becomes first apparent when the Discourses are read side-by-side with The Prince. Deceit, as employed in The Prince, is thus not just a substitute for brute force, as Dietz argues, but is to be used in tandem with force. To put it in terms of Machiavelli’s conceptual arsenal, it takes both a fox and a lion to complete the conspiratorial schema laid out between the two texts.

Machiavelli’s conspiracy thus expands across The Prince into the Discourses and includes provisions for the recruitment and instructing of co-conspirators for his ambush. But not everything is spelled out in the section on conspiracy in the Discourses. What Strauss writes on the question of blasphemy (contra theology) is true also of conspiracy (contra prin-cely tyrants) in the Discourses: ‘by concealing his blasphemy, Machiavelli compels the reader to think blasphemy by himself and thus to become Machiavelli’s accomplice […] Concealment as practiced by Machiavelli is an instrument of subtle corruption or seduction’ (Strauss 1978, 50).7

7Furthermore, Machiavelli introduced, in Strauss’ account, a new political philosophy that not only attacked theology but also moved away from ancient natural right and turned to base human nature (1978, 86). The difference between republic and tyranny is one of degree, and not kind if viewed from a philosophical viewpoint. The most important conspiracy is, from this viewpoint, Machiavelli’s philosophical attack on religion and the discovery of a new continent (‘modes and orders’) on which modern political philosophy is founded. Heinrich Meier (2017) reads Strauss’ thoughts on Machiavelli’s corpus in part as an esoteric defense of philosophy (book four) and in part as an expression of Strauss’ philosophy. The two philosophies are articulated through different esoteric layers in the texts, including the division of the education for the few with an ability to rule and the education of potential philosophers, and ultimately, concerning the possibility of modern philosophy as such contra theology/revealed Tyrannical truth. See also Catherine Zuckert (2018) for a less Socratic-Platonic, and more Gramscian praxis-oriented Machiavelli.
Strauss later notes that ‘[o]ne is tempted to describe Machiavelli’s relation to the young as a potential conspiracy’ (Strauss 1978, 168). This holds true of the sixth chapter of book three in the Discourses, in which Machiavelli seduces or corrupts, recruits, and trains his co-conspirators. The reader is compelled to think the target of a conspiracy in the face of a silent text by oneself and in so doing becomes complicit – a potential conspirator herself. It is as the adviser to the Medici on the question of conspiracy in The Prince, when read from the perspective of the Discourses, that Machiavelli sets a trap. An ambush is laid.

To build my case from context to text, I will contextualize Machiavelli’s Florence before discussing Machiavelli’s method. Clues taken from the arts will direct the composition of the paper. There are four main reasons for this: Firstly, the partisan conflict in Florence is played out ideologically in and over the arts and architecture at the time. Secondly, Machiavelli’s political writing is influenced by the invention in the mathematical design of perspectival vision in the pictorial field. Thirdly, the design of a one-point linear perspective, as Dietz argues, situates and captures the viewer in a way similar to that deployed by Machiavelli to capture his dedicated readers. Fourthly, it’s through the manipulation and employment of perspectives in The Prince and the Discourses that Machiavelli attempts to construct an ambush.

1.2. Machiavelli’s Florence contextualized

Pilgrims leaving Florence for Rome passed by Machiavelli’s family farm in Sant’Andrea in Percussina, where he wrote The Prince. Once inside the largest dome of Christendom, the St. Peter Cathedral in the Vatican, the pilgrims’ eyes were captivated by the many altarpieces. A golden background signified the eternal metaphysical realm beyond earthly time.

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8I am largely in agreement with Zuckert’s (2014) general reading of book three of the Discourses: ‘In contrast to Books 1 and 2, Machiavelli does not begin Book 3 with a preface in which he explains what he proposes to do and why. The reason he does not introduce Book 3 with such a statement becomes apparent, however, if we consider the logic of the argument he has been presenting. Having explained what sorts of domestic orders should be instituted in a republic that would last longer than Rome and the kind of defensive policies that would protect the liberty of that republic without destroying it everywhere, the way Rome had, Machiavelli could be expected to show his readers what they as private individuals could and should do to bring such a republic into existence and preserve it. If Machiavelli had offered such advice directly and unambiguously to his young Florentine readers, however, both he and they could easily have been accused and convicted of conspiring to overthrow the Medici. In Book 3 Machiavelli thus proceeds much more indirectly and ambiguously to show his young readers what they need to do’ (282). I examine here one case of how Machiavelli exactly ‘proceeds much more indirectly and ambiguously to show his young readers what they need to do’ and argue that he does more than merely train them, but also seeks to seduce and recruit them.
and space. The Eternal City with its Papacy was however contested by the pilgrims’ hometown and its patriots, by the Florentine Renaissance’s ‘joyous break with eternity’ (Debord 1994, 103). Engaging in warfare over the future of Florence and Italy, Strauss has argued, Machiavelli mobilized a political philosophy against the political theology of Christianity, which he considered not only politically ineffective, but also ruinous for the possible unification of Italy (1978). At home, inside the city walls of Florence, the main enemy of republican rule was the Medici family. It is to the internal affairs and arts of Florence, and Machiavelli’s role within it, that we now turn our attention.

The Medici family, which had become the wealthiest family in Florence at the time of Machiavelli’s birth, obtained its wealth through commerce and banking and had acquired a degree of noble blood through marriage. Economic power was increasingly reflected in the political power structure, and the Medici’s grip over Florence had tightened under the rule of Cosimo and his grandson, Lorenzo. Lorenzo became the head of the clan in the same year that his father, Piero, died and Machiavelli was born. Under the influence of the Medici, Florence was governed de facto as a principality rather than a republic. The executive power of Florence was in the hands of the Lord of Prior, which consisted of nine members: six elected from the major guilds, two from the minor, and one elected from the major guilds to become its chair (gonfaloniere). The members of the Lord of Prior rotated by lot at frequent intervals. Medici rule was exercised between the lines of the republican constitution, as the election process gradually came under the control of the Medici, who decided who could be nominated. Supporters of the Medici benefitted financially. The Medici’s grip on state power was met with opposition within the ruling estate; its most significant manifestation was the Pazzi conspiracy against Lorenzo and his brother on April 26, 1478.

9 Across the Italian peninsula, however, it was primarily earthly family matters that captured the Pope’s attention and determined his actions (Martines 2003, 159).
10 Rather than simply putting his name to what others had expressed prudently through characters and between the lines, or to what others did not dare say about the workings of politics, Machiavelli, according to Strauss, revolutionized political philosophy and engaged in ‘spiritual warfare’ against not just the papacy but Christianity as a whole. It was the struggle against Christianity that marked what Strauss later came to identify as the first wave of modernity (Strauss 1989; see also Nathan Tarcov 2000, 2014; Ginzburg 2022).
11 While the elite Florentine families traded in goods such as grain and imported wool, they were predominantly bankers. The state-bank bond was exemplified by the Medici bank’s relation to the Florentine state. The credit system promised a different eternity from the Papacy – indefinite future returns on investments, which meant among other things, perpetual colonial explorations and war waged on credit from banks such as the Medici’s.
The strife between the republic and the princely ambitions of the Medici and other clans was also reflected in the visual culture of the day. Art was used, on the one hand, by the Medici and other ruling families to present their interests as being the same as the common good of Florence and by the republican government for the support of the republic, on the other (Burke 2007, 71). Popular symbols for the republic were two tyrant killers from the Old Testament, Judith and David. The inscription on Donatello’s sculpture of *David*, displayed in the Medici palace read: ‘The victor is whoever defends the fatherland. God crushes the wrath of an enormous foe. Behold! A boy overcame a great tyrant. Conquer, o citizens!’ The insult is further extended in the dedication on *Judith and Holofernes*: ‘Piero de’ Medici, son of Cosimo, dedicated this statue of a woman both to liberty and to fortitude, whereby the citizens with unvanquished and constant hearts might return to the republic’ (Burke 2007, 67).¹² David beat Goliath by means of God and Judith murdered Holofernes by means of seduction and wine. Machiavelli engaged the Medici on the theme of conspiracy by favouring the ways of Judith over those of David.

The magnitude of the investment in the arts indicates that within the city walls the people were considered the primary political force. It was imperative that the people be held in check to avoid civil unrest against the oligarchy of the *grandi*. That the people posed an eminent political threat is evident, for example, in halting the slaughter of over 100 suspects following the aftermath of the failed Pazzi conspiracy. Worried that the rage could turn away from the conspirators and collaborators – many of whom were from the *signorie* – towards the nobility in general, Lorenzo put a halt to the slaughter (Martines 2003, 129). The Pazzi conspiracy did not result in a shift of power away from the Medici to a different clan or other segment of the ruling strata, nor did it bring about a change from one regime to another; on the contrary, the failed ambush ended up strengthening Lorenzo’s power. Nonetheless, the days of the Medici grip over Florence

¹²A further inscription on *Judith and Holofernes* reads: ‘Kingdoms fall through luxury, cities rise through virtues. Behold the neck of pride severed by the hand of humility’ (Burke 2007, 67). Florence under the Medici had seen its most glorious republican days gone by, and by Machiavelli’s time, excessive conspicuous consumption not only marked its material culture but also masked its prolonged fall. Nonetheless, a degree of restraint was still to be observed so as not to offend the astute republican sentiment. For example, Cosimo de’ Medici rejected Brunell’s design for the new Medici palace at via Larga Martelli due to its extravagant design, which could offend the republic. Furthermore, constraints on private power as materially expressed had been written into the constitution of the Florentine republic: regulations from the thirteenth century dictated that no clan tower could exceed a certain height. In Florence the tower of the Palazzo della Signoria was the highest construction – importantly, higher than the bell tower (Campanile) of Santa Maria del Fiore.
were numbered and a transition of power would come into effect only after Lorenzo died a natural death in 1492. Two years after the death of Lorenzo, Piero di Lorenzo de’ Medici (Lorenzo’s son and the new head of the clan) was exiled from Florence in the wake of the French King’s, Charles VIII, invasion. A republican order with the Great Council of 1,000 was thereby restored with ‘nobody but the Medici themselves’ harmed in the process (Machiavelli 2003, 426). Judith and Holofernes was confiscated from the Medici estate and re-located to the entrance of Palazzo della Signoria. Aptly, Piero de’ Medici’s name was replaced with the word for citizen (cives).

In the first four years of the restored republic, Florence came under the spell of a Dominican Friar, Girolamo Savonarola, who accused both the departed Medici and the Church of decadence in his sermons. While the republican council, like the Medici, used art to serve political ends, Savonarola agitated against iconic art, claiming that the view of God was clouded by the material and the skilfulness of the craft. Rather than enhancing spirituality, the splendour denoted spiritual poverty. Unlike Savonarola, Machiavelli did not condemn the formal aspect of art, instead he emphasized the power of appearance over reality. In chapter eighteen of The Prince, he writes, insofar as ‘[e]veryone sees how you appear, few touch what you are’ and added that while reality can work against the prince, appearances can work to the advantage of the prince, since ‘the vulgar are taken in by the appearance and outcome of a thing’ (1998, 71). If the people are the most significant political force, their support is essential to consolidate power (1998, 71). Unlike Savonarola, Machiavelli did not look for transcendental truths behind appearance; he looked at things from the point of view of their political effects. And he looked to the artist, as I will argue shortly, not only for the power of deception, but also for the technique applied – in particular, the use of pictorial perspectives.

In 1498, Savonarola went too far in his criticism of the Pope and was excommunicated, ousted, hanged and burned in the square in front of Palazzo della Signoria. The government was purged of Savonarola’s supporters. Machiavelli was elected secretary to the Second Chancery which was in charge of external affairs. Florence under Medici rule did not have

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13A parallel architectural defence of the republic occurred in the day following the Medici’s exile. A bill was passed directing the construction of the Sala del Gran Consiglio (the great council hall used for republican deliberations) to be added to the Palazzo della Signoria. The immediate stress of the new civic government on patronage is indicative of the acute awareness of the political importance of art. It was in this vein that the resurrected republic ‘saw a self-conscious resurgence in communal and guild patronage’ (Burke 2007, 75).
its own army (too risky to train and arm the people) and had to rely on allies and mercenaries in times of external aggression that cost them dearly in 1494. Rather than waiting until hostile troops emerged over the hills, diplomatic delegations were sent out pre-emptively in order to form alliances and gather intelligence. This was one of the many tasks of Machiavelli’s diplomatic dispatches. Machiavelli persuaded the Florentine government to wean itself away from dependence on paid foreign mercenaries and he was given the task of building a new citizens’ militia. He travelled around the Tuscan countryside recruiting and training this homegrown citizen army that was employed in ‘military conflicts of the republic between 1506 and 1512, including the successful siege of Pisa in 1509’ (Jurdjevic 2014, 4).

If Florence were to maintain its independence, it had to carefully balance the different powers in the spheres of interest they existed. In the absence of complete atlases or maps, politicians ‘showed an increasing interest in visualizing the scene of their diplomatic operations, relying on ambassadorial reports to eke out the still rudimentary maps of Europe’ (Hale 1977, 52; emphasis added). In The Prince, Machiavelli notes that ‘you have to keep an eye, not only on present troubles, but on those of the future’, a sound piece of advice by the Romans, who in ‘see[ing] troubles at a distance, always found remedies for them’ (Machiavelli 1992, 8). Seeing trouble at a distance means anticipating trouble ahead of time and thereby enabling a confrontation with the enemy at a safe distance. The Romans preferred to fight abroad than at home – in pictorial terms, in the background rather than in the foreground – since at a distance, things are smaller and less of a problem. Machiavelli learned this lesson the hard way.

After nearly two decades of republican rule, members of the Medici family returned under the helm of Cardinal Giovanni de’ Medici who captured Florence and overthrew the republic with the help of Spanish and Papal troops at the conclusion of the Italian wars. Piero Soderini, who had been elected gonfaloniere of the republic for life in 1502 was forced into exile. Despite his awareness of the Medici ‘scheming to undermine’ the republic and to ‘bring back a princely form of government’, Soderini, to Machiavelli’s disappointment, ‘could not bring himself to take decisive action against them’ (Machiavelli 1992, 135; emphasis added). The republican government was dismantled and the militia disbanded.

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14See Machiavelli’s critical assessment of Soderini’s political indecisiveness in chapter nine of book three of The Discourses. He also assessed Soderini’s action of the eleventh hour in a poem: ‘The night that Piero Soderini died,/ He left for Hell via the common stair./But “Not for your sort!” was what Pluto cried;“we have a Hell for little boys. Go there!”’ (Machiavelli 1992, 135).
Machiavelli was the only chancery official dismissed by the Medici (Gilbert 1984, 173; quoted in Dietz 1986, 790). Banned from living in Florence, but ordered to remain within Florentine territory, in November 1512, Machiavelli moved with his wife and children to his father’s farm in Sant’Andrea, located in the hilly countryside approximately 400 m above and 12 km south of Florence (Figure 1). His days in the hills were counted, as two conspiring ‘republican sympathizers, Pietropaolo Boscoli and Agostino Capponi, compiled a list of people, Machiavelli included, that they deemed hostile to the Medici’ (Jurdjevic 2014, 5). Machiavelli was charged with conspiracy as the ‘list of names was discovered by the Medici’, imprisoned, and tortured at the rope (strappado). While the other accused confessed and were executed, Machiavelli kept his lips sealed and lived to tell the tale with bitterness and pride (Wootton 1994, xi).

Nearly a month after his arrest Machiavelli was released along with other prisoners when Giovanni de’ Medici, was elected Pope (Leo X) in Rome on March 9, 1513, and the Medici ‘government declare[d] an amnesty as part of the general rejoicing’ (Connell 2013, 497, 506; Skinner 1981, 29; Wootton 1994, xii). Free from captivity, Machiavelli moved permanently to his family’s farm in Sant’Andrea. Divorced from
the political duties of the city, he could only participate in politics by other means – by words alone. Machiavelli started to write *The Prince*. Like a landscape painter on the hill – the equivalence with which he opens *The Prince* – Machiavelli now looked down on Florence. It is from the ‘wooded or mountainous places’ says Lord Fabrizio Colonna, the principal character in Machiavelli’s *The Art of War*, that one should expect an ‘ambush’ from a captain outnumbered, ‘so that the enemy may be assaulted, suddenly and without him expecting it’ (2006, 94).

1.3. *Machiavelli’s method visualized*

In chapter eighteen of *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes that there are two ‘kinds’ of “combat; one with laws, the other with force”. While the former is ‘proper to man’ the latter is the manner of ‘the beasts’ (Machiavelli 1992, 69). Exiled from the city, Machiavelli must either be – in accordance with Aristotle’s humour – a *god* or a *beast*, a super-human or a sub-human. In fact, he became both as a writer: An aspiring omniscient – but never incomprehensible – God to the extent that he observed a political phenomenon from a set of perspectives surpassing that of a single individual and thus constitutive of the emerging all-seeing scientific world view. A beast, I will argue, in the manner by which he applied the art of perspectives in the quest to attain a desired political outcome.15

Machiavelli’s own description of the princely beast famously combines the attributes of a lion and a fox – the former embodying strength, the latter, cunning (Machiavelli 1998, 69). The lion is strong, possessing an uncompromising will. Yet, even the strongest lion can be entrapped. The fox, on the other hand, wary of the enemy’s traps, operates through deceit. In the absence of force, or in combination with it, a fox is expected to exercise something more than precaution. In order to deceive, Machiavelli writes, one must ‘be a great pretender and dissembler’ since those who ‘have done great things are those who have […] known how to get around men’s brains with their astuteness’ (Machiavelli 1998, 70). Dietz links the use of manipulation in politics to art by pointing out that Machiavelli ‘admires a kind of Renaissance artistry – a strategic perspective – that allows for a unique conception of space or terrain,

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15 While over the next centuries, geometrical linear perspectival advancements would advance the telescope and astronomy that challenged the Church cosmology at the core, at the outset of the invention, Edgerton argues that ‘Christian theologians everywhere in Western Europe began to believe that the new geometric science of *perspectiva* not only provided the key to how God spread his divine grace to mankind, but how he conceived the universe itself in his divine mind’s eye at genesis’ (2009, 29).
and consequently makes possible the manipulation of persons or events’ (Dietz 1986, 793). Indeed, as I will argue, it was through a manipulation of perspectives, and thus the manipulation of persons, that Machiavelli constructed a conspiratorial schema across *The Prince* and the *Discourses* with the intention of ambushing the prince. In order to understand how the invention of perspectival realism in the Italian Renaissance corresponded to Machiavelli’s approach to the political field, we must shift attention away from the Apollonian art of sculpture (the most esteemed art of the time and the medium that Machiavelli refers to in the *Discourses* when he speaks of sculpting a people after a new political form) to painting. In order to introduce the method applied in *The Prince*, Machiavelli turned to the painter.

*The Prince* famously begins with an analogy between what Machiavelli sets out to do and the art of perspectives employed in painting:

> For just as those who sketch landscapes place themselves down in the plain to consider the nature of mountains and high places and to consider the nature of low places place themselves high atop mountains, similarly, to know well the nature of peoples one needs to be a prince, and to know well the nature of princes one needs to be of the people. (1998, 4)

Being one of the people was justified by Machiavelli, in his treatise on the topic of princely matters, through the analogy with the painter’s ability to assume different perspectives. But something more than justification is at stake. According to Wolin, the formulation of a new science – the science of politics – is in question: ‘In the metaphor, the valley symbolized the people, the mountains, the prince; the political theorist, as painter, was superior to both, moving with equal facility to either position, and capable of prescribing for one or the other’ (Wolin 2004, 181). Echoing Nietzsche, Wolin then claims that Machiavelli’s ‘new science showed itself capable of entering into any position’ (Wolin 2004, 182).

The new science set out to see or represent the ‘way we really live’ (Machiavelli 1992, 42; Strauss 1978, 254), just as Renaissance artists and architects employed geometrical rules in order to represent things as they appeared to the human eye. Fellow Florentine, Leonardo da Vinci – with whom Machiavelli spent time together at Cesare Borgia’s court

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16Miguel Vatter reads the shifting perspective in *The Prince* as opening ‘the communication between those in power and those without power’ like a Hobbesian contract between the prince (sovereign) and the people over ‘security’ (2013, 36). Jurdjevic agrees in part, and adds the thesis that in the *Discourses* Machiavelli ‘no longer viewed the desires of the people primarily in terms of security, but began to re-conceptualize the majority as displaying that same sense of positive liberty that he had initially connected only to the nobility’ (2007, 1256).
when Leonardo was working as Borgia’s chief military engineer – noted that ‘the most praiseworthy form of painting is the one that most resembles what it imitates’, and despite having improved aerial perspective, Leonardo held the view that linear perspective (*perspectiva articialis*) was the most effective technique to that end (Zhang et al. 2022). The invention of the pictorial one-point linear perspective allowed the three-dimensional illusion on a two-dimensional surface. Projected lines from the depicted geometrical figure converge at a vanishing point (or possibly points) on the centric line (corresponding to the eye level of the observer/painter) and thus appears foreshortened, which has the effect of simultaneously distancing the viewer from that which is depicted and situating the viewer corporeally.\(^{17}\)

The application of linear perspective to images undoubtedly added a new dimension of vision, or ‘realism’ to the Renaissance eye – one structured by geometrical rules of representation. In 1425, architect and artist, Filippo Brunelleschi is reported to have used two paintings in the first ever recorded illustration/experiment of the use of linear perspective in paintings – the word ‘perspective’ comes from the Latin *perspicere*, meaning ‘to see through’. The smaller of the two paintings depicted the Florentine Baptistery, the larger one depicted the government building, Palazzo Signoria – the dual powers of ‘moral *spiritualitas*’ and ‘republican *corporalitas*’ (Edgerton 2009, 5, 77; Richardson 2007, 67). The viewpoint from where the Baptistry was portrayed (and ‘must be viewed’) and also the place of the experiment (the painting being shown to the public) was the doorstep of the Florence Cathedral (Edgerton 2009, 60–61). This is where the Pazzi ambush took place just over a half a century later. Brunelleschi had drilled a small hole (creating a mechanical optic nerve qua blind spot) through the painting of the Baptistery (likely at the place of the vanishing point) through which the viewer looked through from the back of the painting at a mirror that reflected the painted image of the Baptistery (Edgerton 2009, 6, 48; Richardson 2007, 67).

The smaller of the first two paintings that applied the realism that the linear perspective afforded to pictures was thus presented through an actual mirror reflection, whereas the political realism of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* was presented in the form/genre of *mirror-for-princes*

\(^{17}\)Vatter suggests that linear perspective, due to its geometrical ordering of distances broke down that ‘unbridgeable distance’ to political power, and as a consequence, Machiavelli’s use of perspectives resulted in ‘power [being] no longer shrouded by mystery, by miracle, by wisdom with which priest and kings shrouded it and made it inaccessible to everyone else’ (2013, 36). The undressing of power certainly applies to Machiavelli’s most celebrated play, *The Mandrake*, which is about the tactics of conspiracy applied to love and sexual desire.
The princely reflection of chapter nineteen of Machiavelli’s mirror-for-princes, I will argue in the next section, is also a blind-spot (at least when read in relation to the *Discourses*). It is also worth noting for now that Brunelleschi’s perspectival painting of the Palazzo Signoria - the projected site of a new kinds of republican rule as outlined in the *Discourses* in the guise of the Roman republic - was not presented to the viewers through a mirror reflection but through a frontal view. The missing (cut out) part from that painting was not at its centre but the sky above the outline of the building.

Why linear perspective appears (or ‘reappears’) first in Renaissance Italy is debated (Belting 2011; Edgerton 2009). Proposed causes are the invention of the mirror and the Franciscans’ advancement in optics (study of light rays and their reflections in mirrors), as well as Euclidian geometry (Edgerton 1975), the church demand for a more realistic and hence affective representation of things divine (Edgerton 2009), Bologna being the cosmopolitan centre of research in Europe (Dominique 2014), Brunelleschi’s practical experience in architecture and surveying (Krautheimer, Richard, and Trude Krautheimer-Hess 1970), and the changing material social relations in the Renaissance, considered at least as a necessary, if not a sufficient, cause:

The free craft substructure of the Renaissance cities, where manual labour in the guilds was never tainted with servile social degradation, produced a civilization in which the plastic and visual arts of painting, sculpture and architecture occupied an absolutely predominant position. Sculptors and painters were themselves organized in artisan guilds, and initially enjoyed the median social position accorded to analogous trades: eventually they were to attain an honour and prestige immeasurably greater than that of their Greek or Roman predecessors. (Anderson 1979, 153)

It’s safe to say that the new order allowed artists and architects to belong to the educated class (as in the case of Brunelleschi) and thus enabled a contact between optics, geometry, art and architecture. Like Machiavelli, many artists received a humanist education in the seven liberal arts (Trivium: grammar, logic and rhetoric, and Quadrivium: geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music), and as a result a painter by profession could be as proficient with calculations as with the brush, and a civil servant like Machiavelli, could know as much about geometry and linear perspective as Roman law and rhetoric.19

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18 Mirror for Princes was part of a larger literature of mirrors (*speculum*) that included treatises on such topics as nature and religious ethics.

19 By the fifteenth century […] Renaissance humanists had successfully marketed a humanist model of education to Italy’s ruling elites’ (Jurdjevic 2014, 23). While Brunelleschi’s two paintings have not
Architects, painters and sculptors came to apply a technique of representing the visual field born out of their knowledge of both art, geometry and optics. In the words of Panofsky, linear perspective was the transition of ‘mathematic theory of sight into a mathematic method of design’ and thus was a ‘child of optical theory and artistic practice’ (Panofsky 1972, xii, 139). The one-point linear perspective engaged a field of science – the mathematical theory of sight/optics – that had previously been divorced from the visual arts. Consequently, the practice of representation became scientific: precise, predictable and applicable to practices such as architecture and cartography. A two-dimensional sketch drawn according to the rules of the one-point linear perspective not only foreshortens the objects depicted, the coordinates also correspond to an actual three-dimensional ratio and thus precise replicas could be constructed. Wolin (2004), following Strauss (1978, 54–55), argues that Machiavelli looked at history and current political affairs in order to deduce precise general laws that transcend a transient history; and, we might add, to prescribe applicable political actions that would lead to predictable political ends.

To see the ambush that Machiavelli set for the Medici, however, it is sufficient at first to draw on a much narrower definition of the one-point linear perspective: ‘a method of representing a building or any scene as it would be seen from a particular vantage point’ (Gombrich 1967, 80; quoted in Richardson 2007, 63). A painter applying an accurate geometrical one-point linear perspective could only present a single point of view at a time. In accordance with the linear perspective, each vantage point determines how a political situation is seen. On the question of conspiracy, The Prince was one such canvas, presenting one vantage point – that of the prince – while the Discourses offered another vantage point, that of the conspirators or the private individuals. When both perspectives are taken into account, I will argue that a blind-spot is created in the vision of the prince from which the republican conspirators (as recruited and trained by the Discourses) can enter out of sight.

Exiled in Sant’Andrea, Machiavelli was not just a technician or a realist describing the rules and order of the political game. And even if one survived, by the mid 15th C most artists had begun to apply linear perspective with varied success. The technique had by then been described by Leon Battista Alberti in On Painting (published in the 1430s) and was also improved on – the pictorial field was now captured/ framed by a window view as overlaid by a grid (Edgerton 2009). In Machiavelli’s immediate professional circles, Da Vinci for example illustrated Luca Pacioli’s, who taught in Florence at the turn of the 16th C, Divine Proportion (published in 1509) – a book that explained linear perspective in great detail. Machiavelli likely worked with Da Vinci on the military engineering project of diverting the river Arno from Pisa, and with Michelangelo on improving the fortifications of Florence (Roger D. Masters 1996).

20 See also Dyer and Nederman (2016) for a more recent take on Machiavelli’s science.
accepts Cassirer’s (1992, 158) assertion that the last chapter of *The Prince* is a passionate exception to the objective scientific realism of all preceding chapters, the perspectival science conceals a means to attain the desired political end.  

Behind one of the ‘objective’ chapters (nineteen) in *The Prince* – that which addresses conspiracy – is a subjective political intention (Machiavelli’s), revealed when seen from the vantage point of the *Discourses*. When Machiavelli seeks to actualize his intention, however, he does not betray his perspectival science; rather, as we shall now see, he precisely employs his *omniscient* perspectival method (two different one-point perspectives) across *The Prince* and the *Discourses* for the realization of his *bestial* calculations.

### 1.4. Machiavelli’s ambush textualized

The first key to the textual ambush is to read *The Prince* and the *Discourses* next to one another. The texts were not intended to be read in this way by everyone at the time they were written, as they were ‘offered separately by intent and not by accident’ (Mansfield and Tarcov 1996, xliii). Machiavelli started to write *The Prince* a few months after his release from prison in the spring of 1513 and finished it (or at least the main parts) by the time he wrote his famous letter to his friend Francesco Vettori about his *Of Principalities* on December 10, 1513. The *Discourses* were composed sometime between 1513 and completed in 1517 or 1519 (Mansfield and Tarcov 1996, xlii-xliii). Exactly when chapter six of book three on conspiracy was written is not established with exactitude in the scholarship. Whereas there is scholarly contention over exactly when the two treatise where composed, it is agreed that neither of the texts was published until a few years after Machiavelli’s death in the summer of 1527:

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21Strauss argues that Machiavelli ‘deliberately’ lowers the goal of politics ‘in order to increase the probability of its attainment’ in light of a realistic view of human nature, and along with that, as seen in *The Prince*’s last chapter, Machiavelli replaces ‘morality’ with ‘patriotism’ (1965, 178).

22Linear perspective, as the principle of the organization of the picture plane, marked a formal break with the religious hierarchical organization of the picture plane. It was not, however, that the new technique did away with a hierarchical organization in images altogether, but that order and rank would now often abide by the rules of the one-point linear perspective.

23Recently, it has been suggested that only the main parts of the *The Prince* were written in 1513 and completed in full in 1514, the spring of 1515, or even early 1516 (Connell 2013). None of the scholarship on Machiavelli specifically dates chapter nineteen that contains the entry on conspiracy so the best estimation is that ‘On how one should avoid hatred and contempt’, was composed in the fall of 1513.

24In *The Prince* Machiavelli notes that he will speak strictly about principalities as he has discussed republics elsewhere. Some argue that this is a reference to the *Discourses*, and it has thus been suggested that Machiavelli had already begun to compose the *Discourses* in 1513 or this was added to *The Prince* later (Wootton 1994, xxiv).
The Prince in 1532 and the Discourses in 1531. Copies of both, however, were in circulation much earlier to restricted readers: The Prince as early as 1513, and by all certainty by 1516 (Connell 2013, 508) and the Discourses circulated among a few selected friends as late as 1519.

The Prince is dedicated to the Medici, at first intended for Giuliano de’ Medici, but gifted to his nephew (a ‘new prince’), Lorenzo de’ Medici the Younger, to whom he presented his treatise on principalities with little fanfare at an audience in 1516. The Discourses were dedicated and gifted to two friends of Machiavelli – that also appear as characters in The Art of War that was published in 1521 with a general audience in mind – Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai (Connell 2013, 512, 514; Del Lucchese 2015, 66–67; Jurdjevic 2014, 19). In 1522, the former plotted with another friend of Machiavelli, Luigi Alamanni to assassinate Cardinal Giulio de Medici.25 Machiavelli was named by Buondelmonti as ‘one of several citizens who should be invited to join the plot’ (Ridolfi 1963, 203; quoted in Dietz 1986, 791). As discussed previously, Machiavelli had already been accused of conspiracy in 1513. I argue below that Machiavelli did indeed conspire against the Medici. However, my case does not depend on proving or disproving that Machiavelli was involved in any actual historical plot (like that of Pietropaolo Boscoli and Agostino Capponi’s or Buondelmonti and Alamanni’s) outside of the pages of his books. The evidence put forth here is of a different kind – what today would be categorized as forensic linguistics – and pertains to what Machiavelli did and did not write on the theme of conspiracy in The Prince and the Discourses.

In chapter nineteen of The Prince, ‘On how one should avoid hatred and contempt’, Machiavelli advises the prince on the subject of conspiracy for the first and only time, which I will quote at length, as it is the primary piece of textual evidence from this treatise. The vantage point moves from that of the prince to the restricted view of the conspirators, emphasizing the comparative advantage of the former over the latter:

As for one’s own subjects; even when no outside disturbance occurs, there is danger they may form a secret conspiracy; from such a plot the prince’s best protection lies in not being hated or despised, and keeping himself in popular favour […] One of the strongest counters that a prince has against conspiracies is not to be hated by the mass of the people, because every man who conspires always thinks that by killing the prince he will be pleasing the people. But when he thinks his act will enrage them, he no longer has any stomach for

the work, because the problems of a conspirator are enormous at best. Experience teaches us that of many conspiracies attempted few turn out successfully; because a man who conspires can hardly do so alone, and can take as co-conspirators only those whom he judges to be discontented. Yet as soon as you explain your plot to a malcontent, you have furnished him with a means to be very content indeed. For he has everything to gain by giving you away; and when he has everything to gain one way, and so much danger and loss the other way, he must be either a very special friend of yours or a bitter enemy of the prince, if he is to keep faith with you. In a word, there is nothing in the conspirator’s life but fear, jealousy, and the awful prospect of punishment; while the prince is defended by the majesty of his office, by the laws, by the help of his allies, and by the state itself. And if to this you add the good will of the people, it is impossible that any man will be rash enough to conspire against you. Every conspirator is bound to live in fear before he executes his plot; but the man who conspires against a popular prince must also be fearful after his crime is committed – since then he will have the whole people against him, and from their hate he can hope for no refuge whatever. (Machiavelli 1992, 50–51; emphasis added)

Machiavelli then gives a recent example of a conspiracy against a ruler of Bologna – a case in point that includes the killing of the conspirator by the people due to their goodwill toward the prince – and ‘conclude[s] that a prince should not worry too much about conspiracies, as long as his people are devoted to him; but when they are hostile, and feel hatred towards him, he should fear everything and everybody’ (Machiavelli 1992, 51). Before the chapter closes, conspiracies against a series of Roman emperors are listed, and the two formed against Commodus and Maximian are discussed in some detail. The added emphasis in these cases is on the army, the other main power faction aside from the prince and the people. ‘At that time, it was necessary to gratify the soldiers rather than the people because the soldiers represented the greater power; nowadays, it is necessary to gratify the people rather than the soldiers’ (Machiavelli 1992, 56). But the main lesson remains the same then as now: ‘hatred or contempt was the ruin of the Roman emperors’ (Machiavelli 1992, 56; emphasis added). We have thus ended up with a complete and singular perspective on conspiracy from the view-point of the prince/reflection: win the good will of the people and there will be nothing to worry about.

Dietz notes that there is an element of deceit in the advice that the prince should fear the people rather than the grandi – the real threat – but detects no significant discrepancy between the take on conspiracy in The Prince and in ‘On conspiracy’ in book three of the Discourses. The latter, she writes, ‘though filled with advice on how to conspire, is
replete with warnings about the slim chances conspirators have for success’, and then closes the matter with a quote from the History of Florence, a work the Medici commissioned Machiavelli to write in 1520, which reflects the Pazzi conspiracy: ‘Because conspiracies rarely succeed, they most often bring about the ruin of those who plan them and bring greatness to those against whom they are directed’ (Machiavelli 1950, 263; quoted in Dietz 1986, 791). Strauss with appreciation of the deed and the performative character of the text, saw things differently. He observed that in The Prince, Machiavelli ‘emphatically limits himself to mentioning a single example which of course is not a Florentine example; the example follows the assertion that no one would dare to conspire against a popular prince; but the example silently disproves the assertion’ (Strauss 1978, 26). Robert Adams observes that ‘Machiavelli who dismisses conspiracies rather lightly here, is more impressed by them elsewhere’ (Machiavelli 1992, 51). ‘Elsewhere’ is the discourse ‘On conspiracy’, in which the example par excellence of a successful conspiracy is Florentine. The discourse appears in the third and final book of the Discourses which concerns matters of private counsel inside and outside of cities.

The importance of a topic is sometimes measured by its comparative length. The discourse on conspiracy is by far the longest of the 142 numbered chapters of the Discourses: three times longer than the second longest, eight times the length of the average discourse, and seventy-two times longer than the shortest (Crick 2003, 540). Be that as it may, the chapter begins in much the same way as the passage on conspiracy in The Prince, with the princely reassurance that, ‘though many conspiracies have been attempted, very few have attained the desired end’ (Machiavelli 2003, 398). Machiavelli first discusses conspiracy formed against princes qua tyrants, and ends with a discussion of conspiracies formed against the fatherland (Machiavelli 2003, 399). The stated purpose of the discourse is that ‘princes may learn how to guard against these dangers’, but also ‘that private persons may think twice before undertaking them and may learn, instead, to be content with life under the regime which fate has placed over them’ (Machiavelli 2003, 398). The new perspective emerging in the discourses is precisely the perspective of the private person: ‘I shall speak of conspiracies at length, omitting nothing of importance that is relevant either to a prince or to a private person’ (Machiavelli 2003, 398). However, as I shall show, the deed of the discourse turns out to be quite the opposite: far from learning how to be content with the princely regime, the reader – the ‘private man’ – is solicited to conspire against it.
Just as in *The Prince*, Machiavelli begins by addressing conspiracy formed against a prince from the latter’s vantage point. The most important cause underlying a conspiracy is the same as in *The Prince*: the ‘universal hatred the prince may evoke’ (Machiavelli 2003, 399). Most dangerous are those individuals that are threatened and forced to conspire or those seeking vengeance for injuries afflicting against their ‘property’, ‘life’ or ‘honour’ (Machiavelli 2003, 400). Of the three examples given, the third is Florentine: the ‘chief cause which led the Pazzi to conspire against the Medici was the inheritance of Giovanni Bonromei of which they had been deprived by the Medici’s orders’ (Machiavelli 2003, 400). With the exception of this example, little else beyond what is included in *The Prince* has been added.

The Pazzi example reminds Machiavelli of a different and ‘very powerful’ cause behind conspiracy, and in the next sentence, he states that what ‘makes men conspire against a prince, is the desire to liberate their fatherland of which a prince has seized possession’ (Machiavelli 2003, 400). The only way a prince can counter this cause motivating conspirators to reach for a knife is ‘by discarding his tyranny’ (Machiavelli 2003, 401). But ‘since one does not find tyrants doing this, one finds few who have not come to a miserable end’ (Machiavelli 2003, 401). At stake here is the ‘transition problem’ between the prince and the republic, unaccounted for in Wolin. A verse by Juvenal not only restates the end, but marks the shift of perspective from the end to the means of such an end, that is, from the prince to the conspirators. ‘To Pluto’s realm few kings unscathed descend/Nor tyrants oft escape a sticky end’ (Machiavelli 2003, 401).

This central part of the *Discourses* ‘may be described as a manual of tyrannicide,’ structured around what Machiavelli identifies as the three stages of a conspiracy – ‘forming the plot, in carrying it out, and as a result of its having been carried out’ (Machiavelli 2003, 401; Strauss 1978, 27).

Before discussing each stage in detail, however, Machiavelli first disqualifies a single-person conspiracy, since regardless of one’s competence or whether one is ‘great, small, noble or insignificant’ a single conspirator awaits certain death, thus cases are few (Machiavelli 2003, 401, 402). This also applied to Machiavelli, who needed co-conspirators. His part in the plot against the Medici, however, is not the deed outside of the book; rather, he recruits and trains potential conspirators among his readers.

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26Lorenzo de’ Medici had the Lord Prior pass a law that deprived women without brothers or a husband of the right of inheritance, which directly targeted the Pazzi family.
who are willing to act outside its cover. Secondly, Machiavelli disqualifies conspiracy by anyone other than the members of the *grandi*, as the less powerful are ‘devoid alike of any hope and of any opportunity of carrying out a conspiracy successfully’ (Machiavelli 2003, 402). It is from the *grandi* that Machiavelli seeks recruits for basic training, for only they possess adequate power. It is to sons of the *grandi* that he dedicates his *Discourses*.

Having identified his potential conspirators, Machiavelli instructs them in the difficulties of carrying out a successful conspiracy. The first and most important stage is the planning phase, when the danger of being exposed is greatest. Most conspiracies are discovered before the plot has been executed, due to informers, careless speech with a lover, the eavesdropping of servants or some other third party (Machiavelli 2003, 405–406). Still more essential is that your co-conspirator remains loyal to you in the face of death and that he holds grave discontentment with the prince. The Pazzi conspiracy is put forth as the example for a second time: it was ‘privy [to] more than fifty persons and yet it was not discovered till it came to the point of execution’ (Machiavelli 2003, 405). Yet, Machiavelli advises his co-conspirators that, the safest [action] … is not to allow the conspirators time to give information against you, and to tell them of your plan only when you are ready to act, and not before. Those who have so acted, at any rate escape the dangers involved in contriving the plot, and more often than not, the others also. *All* of them, in fact, have been *successful*, and any prudent man should find it possible to conduct things in this fashion. (Machiavelli 2003, 407; emphasis added)

If prudence is essential for the carrying out of a conspiracy, Machiavelli’s imprudent portrayal of the success of historical, contemporary and potential conspiracies is essential for recruiting co-conspirators. Dietz captures this tactic in the way she links Machiavelli’s seduction of his reader to the new perspectival art:

‘inside’ the painting, the artist tantalized his observers with a seductive vista and pulled them toward a point or prospect that seemed attainable. At its most powerful, perspectival art induced the viewers into actually feeling a part of the painting, as though they could step into it and secure the prospect that beckoned them. (Dietz 1986, 795)

Having painted a seductive vista of a successful strategy for conspiracy, Machiavelli moves from the general to the particular, from theory to example, with a discussion of two historical cases and concludes assertively that by adopting prudence, as advised, some ‘have avoided the dangers which attend the planning of a conspiracy’ and that ‘those
who follow their example will always avoid them’ (Machiavelli 2003, 408; emphasis added). He adds that it is safer to share your plan with one person rather than many. The ideal number for a successful conspiracy is two, the number of friends that the Discourses are dedicated to. Machiavelli brings the numeric logic to its limit through a discussion of spontaneous single person assassinations of a ruler made in self-defence. Assassinations that are not premeditated are by definition not conspiracies, and by that Machiavelli delineates the limits of conspiracy by evoking the absolute secrecy of the singular unknown and unplanned act. Machiavelli also advises against writing down anything on paper since ‘nothing is more likely to convict you than your own handwriting’ (Machiavelli 2003, 409). In the second stage, ‘the carrying out of a plot’, a conspiracy will fail ‘due either to a change of plan, or to lack of courage on the part of the person who is to carry it out, or to the operative’s making some mistake owing to carelessness, or to failure to complete the job in that there remain alive some of those who were to have been killed’ (Machiavelli 2003, 412). The Pazzi conspiracy is identified as the example for the third time:

According to the plan that had been given out, they were to be invited to dinner with the Cardinal of St. George, and at the dinner were to be assassinated. Those who were to kill them, those who were to seize the palace and those who were to run about the city calling on people to free themselves, had all been detailed. It happened that when the Pazzi, the Medici and the Cardinal were attending a solemn function in the cathedral church of Florence, it became known that Giuliano was not going to dine with them that day; so the conspirators got together and decided that what they had been going to do in the house of the Medici should be done in the church. This upset the whole plan, for Giovambattista da Montesecco declined to take part in the murder, since he was not going to do it in church, he said. So they had to find new operatives and to redistribute the parts assigned, and, since there was no time for them to get clear as to their parts, they made such blunders in carrying it out that they were overcome […] Antonio da Volterra was duped, as we have already said, to kill Lorenzo de’ Medici. On coming up to him he said: ‘Ah, traitor!’ an exclamation which saved Lorenzo’s life and ruined the conspiracy. (Machiavelli 2003, 413, 415)

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27The risk exists that your co-conspirator can either ‘accuse you of his own accord’ or ‘accuse you’ if arrested and tortured (Machiavelli 2003, 410). Yet, one can successfully deny the charges, as one person’s word will stand against another person’s word.

28It follows one of the maxims listed in the last chapter of Art of War: ‘No policy is better than that which remains hidden from the enemy until you have executed it’ (2006, 158).
While being successful in the first stage, the Pazzi conspiracy failed in the second, less risky stage. Machiavelli warns the conspirators against becoming overwhelmed by the appearance of the ruler (Machiavelli 2003, 413–414). The ‘[i]nconveniences in the carrying out of a conspiracy are due to mistakes caused either by lack of prudence [as in the first stage] or by lack of courage [as in the second stage]’ (Machiavelli 2003, 414). For the person assigned to carry out the assassination, experience is essential, as inexperience might lead to confusion and ‘cause you to let the weapon fall from your hand, or to let slip some word which would have precisely the same effect’ (Machiavelli 2003, 415).

The Pazzi conspiracy leads Machiavelli to discuss the danger of a conspiracy against two rulers:

The Pazzi, whom we have mentioned more than once [three times], only succeeded in killing Giuliano. Hence, no one should engage in conspiracies against more than one ruler since he will do no good either to himself or to his country or to anybody at all. (Machiavelli 2003, 416)

Nevertheless, Machiavelli gives historical examples of successful conspiracies against more than one ruler, as in the case of Pelopidas which he describes as ‘an impossible undertaking and a marvellous thing that it succeeded’ (Machiavelli 2003, 416–417). On this, Strauss observes:

Machiavelli discusses the failure of conspiracies in order to show how they might have succeeded. Accordingly, he shows that conspiracies against two or even more tyrants are by no means doomed to failure: a conspiracy in Thebes against ten tyrants had a most happy issue because the adviser of the tyrants was in his heart their enemy. (Strauss 1978, 27)

In The Prince, Machiavelli is the adviser of the Medici prince and possibly future tyrants.

As if everything has gone according to plan, Machiavelli turns next to the third and final phase: the ‘dangers that may occur after a conspiracy has been successfully carried out’ (Machiavelli 2003, 418). ‘There is but one’ danger; namely,

that someone may be left alive who will avenge the death of the prince […] But of all the dangers that may ensue after a successful conspiracy there is none more inevitable or more to be dreaded than when the people are well disposed to the prince you have killed; for in such a case, since there is no remedy to which the conspirators can have recourse, there is no chance of their ever obtaining security. (Machiavelli 2003, 418, 419)
If the prince is popular, the conspirators might therefore think twice before they undertake a conspiracy, which would accord with the main advice in *The Prince*: avoid hatred and you will be safe. But the intended republican co-conspirators might think and feel more of the fatherland than of their own security. The Pazzi conspiracy against the Medici is not among the examples listed, since it had failed in the second phase. It was left for Machiavelli’s reader to make a new example.

Machiavelli then turns to conspiracies against the fatherland: on the one hand, from the perspective of a new prince against a corrupted republic as Wolin (2004) and Wootton (1994) claim *The Prince* was for, and on the other, from the perspective of a desiring tyrant (Machiavelli 2003, 420). It is easier to conspire against a republic than a principality, and it is ‘fortune [*fortuna*]’, Machiavelli notes, rather than prudence that determines the outcome of a future tyrant’s conspiracy against the ‘fatherland’ (Machiavelli 2003, 421). While goddess *fortuna* determines the outcome of the conspiracy against the fatherland, it might be worthwhile to recall that three chapters later, Machiavelli reminds the young reader of old Soderini’s lack of *virtù* that might have calmed the ‘storms at sea’ in 1512 (1992, 135); and these young conspirators might recall from *The Prince* that *fortuna* ‘is the friend of young men, because they are less cautious, more spirited, and with more boldness master her’ (92). Be that as it may, Machiavelli ends with a warning to his readers of the aftermath of a successful conspiracy:

Nor, when successful, do they entail any subsequent dangers other than those which pertain to a principality by its very nature. For, given that a man has become a tyrant, he is faced with the dangers which tyranny naturally and normally involves, and to avert them has no remedies [‘discarding his tyranny’] other than those that we have already discussed. (Machiavelli 2003, 422)

This was to serve as a warning to the successful conspirators – new princes – against becoming tyrants.29 With the closing of the regime cycle we are back to square one and the chapter is concluded.

A close textual comparison reveals how Machiavelli applied the new scientific perspectival method to the political field by portraying one perspective in *The Prince* (presented to the new Medici prince in 1516) and one perspective to the young *grandi* in the *Discourses* (read by the latest in 1519). Putting this stratagem into the means-ends logic that is often attributed to Machiavelli: if an actor wants to achieve x he must

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29 Strauss observes that Machiavelli ‘gives the best advice possible both to conspirators against princes and to conspirators against the fatherland’ (1978, 266).
do y. The portrayed end in *The Prince*, however, will *not* follow from the means outlined if the recruited co-conspirators (lions) by the *Discourses* act outside of the book’s covers as intended. Instead, the portrayed end (successful conspiracy/dead prince) of the *Discourses* will be the end also of *The Prince*. In addition, the falsely portrayed end (safety) in *The Prince* functions as a means to enable the end (conspiracy) of the *Discourses*. Like a fox in the new perspectival realist science, Machiavelli employed two different vantage points to rig an ambush. This is an instance of what Machiavelli named *virtù*.

Before I conclude, let me address some objections that may linger in the mind of the reader. The first one is captured by Fabrizio in *The Art of War* who humorously recast a Trojan lesson to the young friends to whom the *Discourses* were dedicated:

> you ought to look out not to believe readily those things that appear to be less reasonable than they should be: as would be (the case) if an enemy places some booty before you, you would believe that to be (an act of) love, but would conceal deceit inside it. (2006, 114)

Wary that in an age of conspiracy the prince will necessarily be on his guard, however, Dietz notes that ‘[a]s has been recognized for centuries, the text itself provides areas of “solid ground”, or firm advice a new prince in a new territory can rely upon to gain and maintain his power’ (Dietz 1986, 782). In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli notes that

> [t]here sometimes occur also events about which men who have had no great experience of affairs, are easily mistaken, since such happenings have plausible features which make men believe that the outcome in such a case will be what they have persuaded themselves it will be. (Machiavelli 2003, 344)

If the *new* prince is inexperienced in some matters and persuaded by the advice offered in *The Prince*, the outcome might then not be ‘what they persuaded themselves it will be’; rather, the outcome will be what Machiavelli intended it to be. What the princes have persuaded themselves to think is that they need not worry about a conspiracy if they follow the advice of *The Prince*. The prince is advised never to let down his guard, and yet, that is precisely what Machiavelli is telling the prince to do. Machiavelli meets the paranoia of the prince by the promise of safety in the line of attack. The result is the creation of an Achilles heel.

Another objection is that there is no deceit in the advice on conspiracy in *The Prince*, because the work’s primary function was to get Machiavelli back at office at the time (Skinner 1981). Even if Machiavelli did not intend the
advice on conspiracy in _The Prince_ to be a trap at the time of its conception, it retrospectively becomes part of an ambush after the completion of the _Discourses_. Machiavelli had by means of the _Discourses_, retroactively re-activated _The Prince_ to have a lethal effect on the reader who uses it as a princely mirror to set up a new state. Machiavelli’s claim that _The Prince_ contains ‘all that I know’ is from the perspective of the _Discourses_ (which makes the same claim) untrue, not least if we take into account the case that Machiavelli considered _The Prince_ completed (Connell 2013) and that the two texts are to be considered as a ‘pair of works’ (Mansfield and Tarcov 1996, xliii). What is said in the section on conspiracy in _The Prince_ is thus not ‘all I [Machiavelli] have learned’ but rather a literal half-truth, told by a ‘teacher who is half man and half beast’ (Machiavelli 1992, 48).

The exact counterargument would be that it is the _Discourses_ that deceives its readers and sends the conspirators into a death trap by portraying success where there is none. Such a reading runs counter to the forensic textual exegesis above as well the historical-political context running up to the early 1520s. The suggestion, however, acquires intrigue a few years after the completion of the _Discourses_ if one factors in that Machiavelli in the _Florentine Histories_ (commissioned by the Medici in 1520 and presented in 1525 to Giulio de’ Medici, Pope Clement VII) refers to the _Discourses_ for ‘a longer discussion of conspiracies’ (Machiavelli 1990, ix). In doing so, Machiavelli retrospectively gestures towards the blind spot for the Medici and others (the _Florentine Histories_ were published for a general readership) from yet a third perspective. The cat is then out of the bag for everyone ‘with eyes to see’ the two embodied perspectives on conspiracy in _The Prince_ and in the _Discourses_. One should keep in mind though that the circulation of _The Prince_ and the _Discourses_ has changed over the years from when they first met their intended readers. By 1525, the _Discourses_ had found a readership beyond Machiavelli’s inner circle of republican friends and had become widely known so the moment of surprise might have been lost due to attentive readers. Machiavelli moved between the city and the hills in these final years of his life and died in the summer of 1527. Employed by the Medici at the fringes of public life, he had no opportunity for advancement and generally was distrusted by the elites. A more convincing Skinnerist case then for why he decided to recruit more widely was that any real chance to resume a position from within the Florentine government would require a conspiracy.30

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30Political history had repeated itself: ‘What Machiavelli believed the 1466 Medici victory made constitutional opposition impossible. With power concentrated in one family’s faction, dissent could manifest itself only through conspiracy’ (Najemy 2022, 403).
2. Conclusion

I have forensically advanced the case that Machiavelli is retrospectively (as early as in 1516 and as late as by 1519) guilty of the crime that he had been accused of in 1513, that is, plotting a conspiracy. The prince is told not to fear conspiracy if he abides by the set of advice in *The Prince*, and he will thus be taken by surprise by the ambush enacted by the recruited and trained *grandi* conspirators who are also taught, throughout the *Discourses*, not to fear divine punishment and to love liberty in the face of death. Machiavelli’s ambush is concealed, not behind vegetation, but behind what is and what is not said. *The Prince* reflects the perspective of the prince, in which the conspirators are painted as a potential threat only to be erased from the picture if certain measures are taken. A blind spot, as in Brunelleschi’s now lost painting of the Baptistry, is created on the question of conspiracy between the texts: the conspirators recruited in the *Discourses* can move in as they are not reflected in the princely mirror, which has only one embodied vantage point on conspiracy. The prince can’t see what is reflected behind his own viewpoint in the princely mirror, and thus, as Jacques Lacan said in a different context, the painter ‘invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons’ (Lacan 1998, 176).

Dietz argues that *The Prince*, taken as a whole, was an act of deception that masked Machiavelli’s real intention – to instigate the prince’s undoing. A mask, however, could be more than an instrument of deception. As a treatise in the genre of princely mirrors it worked with the old assumption that it was necessary to take on a princely mask in order to rule and act in ways not before revealed in order to obtain and hold on to political power. Machiavelli notes in *The Prince* that the political mask is more important than what it masks; indeed, the princely mask is not unlike the Gorgon mask of ancient Greece, where power lay solely in the mask. In this respect, we do well to pay attention to the argument of Wolin and others – contra Dietz – that in *The Prince*, Machiavelli seeks to enable the foundation of a new state, not least to withstand foreign powers such as France and Spain, or corrupt elites at home. I have not, however, offered an analysis of *The Prince* or the *Discourses* in their entirety, but focused on the theme of conspiracy. Suffice it to say that both texts have many different registers (many that are forever lost on anyone but Machiavelli’s contemporaries) that are expressed...
through several perspectives as informed by the visual art of the time as well as old and new rhetorical and literary tools.\(^{31}\) I have focused on Machiavelli’s application of realist perspectivism with respect to altering the immediate political situation through the readers, as the two texts’ dedications attest to.

The conspiratorial ambush I have argue that Machiavelli arranges between *The Prince* and the *Discourses* if enacted, is a possible solution to the transition problem – moving from a principality to a republic – which Dietz argues is unaccounted for by Wolin. In regard to the political situation that most closely engaged Machiavelli, the transition from a principality to a republic occurred without bloodshed in 1494, when the Medici left Florence due largely to foreign forces, but lacking such *fortuna*, it was for Machiavelli’s co-conspirators to ambush the person/s behind the princely mask. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli notes that ‘a turbulent populace […] can easily be brought to behave itself […] There is no one to talk to a bad prince, nor is there any remedy except the sword […] To cure the malady of the populace a word suffices and the sword is needed to cure that of a prince’ (Machiavelli 2003, 256–257; emphasis added). To get a sword to swing and strike, however, sometimes also words are required. Just such words, I have argued, Machiavelli’s inked to paper.

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\(^{31}\)Readers of these texts also find commentaries on contemporary politics and culture, thoughts, and inventions in regard to different regime forms historically and trans-historically, as well as the nature and practice of politics, philosophy, and religion.
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