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Ovid and Dante in Machiavelli Towards a General Perspective¹

ABSTRACT: In this article, I propose a fresh reading of Niccolò Machiavelli's work. I am interested in how his views and writings were influenced by the works of the two poets he loved and emulated a lot (if not the most); Dante and Ovid. I first examine Machiavelli's literary culture and his relationship to the Classical tradition. I then discuss the reception of Ovid in the Middle Ages and in Dante, and then in Machiavelli, as I finally look at the relationship of the author of *The Prince* and *The Discourses* to his great Florentine predecessor. In doing so, I will try to show that this particular poetic tradition inspires and guides not only Machiavelli's lesser-known poetic works, but also his famous and highly influential writings.

KEYWORDS: Ovid, Dante, Machiavelli, poetry, Classical tradition, Renaissance

¹ This article is conceived as a synthetic and exploratory study, intended primarily as an intellectual orientation within a complex and relatively underexplored field: the poetic dimension of Machiavelli's thought and its entanglement with the legacies of Ovid and Dante. Rather than offering a detailed philological analysis of intertextual references, I aim to sketch a broader interpretive framework that may serve as a foundation for future, more specialized inquiries. The intended audience – classical philologists who may be less familiar with the nuances of Machiavelli's literary culture – will, I hope, find here a conceptual map that situates the Florentine thinker within a continuum of poetic and philosophical traditions. The ambition of this essay is not to exhaust the topic, but to open it.

HIC SITVS EST PHAETON CVRRVS AVRIGA PATERNI
QVEM SI NON TENVIT MAGNIS TAMEN EXCIDIT AVSIS

HERE PHAETON LIES: IN PHOEBUS' CAR HE FARED,
AND THOUGH HE GREATLY FAILED, MORE GREATLY DARED.
(Ovid, *Metamorphoses* II 327–328)

Io credo, credetti e crederrò sempre che sia
vero quello che dice il Boccaccio:
che gli è meglio fare e pentirsi, che non fare e pentirsi.

I believe, believed, and will always believe that what Boccaccio says is true:
that it is better to act and regret than not to act and regret.
(Machiavelli, *Letters*, to Francesco Vettori, February 25, 1514)

I. Introduction

Each of the three authors to be discussed here has accumulated an innumerable number of editions, studies, and commentaries on their works over the centuries. Studies on Ovid, Dante, and Machiavelli have, in essence, become separate subdisciplines within literary studies. To discuss, even briefly, the bibliography of these subjects is therefore impossible. Moreover, even the literature concerning the mutual relationships of these great poets (yes, the author of *The Prince* will also be regarded as a poet here) is so rich that even a survey of it needs to be narrowed down, focusing solely on works directly related to the topic at hand,²

² For Ovid's reception: Rand 1926; Wilkinson 1955; Binns 1973; Martindale 1988; Gallo, Nicastrì 1995; Papponetti 1997; Hardie, Barchiesi, Hinds 1999; Schubert 1999; Coulson, Roy 2000; Keith, Rupp 2007; Clark, Coulson, McKinley 2011; Harich-Schwarzbauer, Honold 2013; Poignault, Vial 2020; Consolino 2022; Bury 2003. On the Ovid-Dante relationship: Sowell 1991; Maślanka-Soro 2015. On Dante and his influence: Auerbach 1966; Jacoff 1993; Gilson 2005; Barolini 2006; Reynolds 2006. On Machiavelli, with special reference to his relationship with the Classical tradition: Sasso 1987; Sasso 1988a, Sasso 1988b; Skinner 1981; Najemy 2010; Rossi 2020; Strauss 2020; Pocock 1975. Also, a fresh and in-depth study on Machiavelli: Ginzburg: 2022.

which, by the way – being quite general – requires further clarification from the outset.

Firstly, I would like to explain what I mean when I mention “Ovid”, “Dante”, and “Machiavelli” – beyond the obvious. By treating these names metonymically, I intend to suggest that we are dealing with: (1.) a poet who essentially sums up the classical Greco-Roman epic tradition (and beyond); then – (2.) a poet who plays a similar integrating and all-encompassing role over a thousand years later, in the context of Christian Europe; and finally... (3.) the third: Niccolò Machiavelli, aptly described by a distinguished historian of ideas as “the most radical representative of Renaissance humanism”³ – one of those who, as time has shown, set the course for the Modern Age.

Secondly, my intention is not to track the passages in Machiavelli’s texts that indicate the influence of these two great poets on him⁴ – scholars have frequently pointed out such passages.⁵ What interests me is how the readings of Ovid and Dante – along with Machiavelli’s relationship to their stances as men of letters and exiles⁶ – helped shape the worldview and work of a writer who, in the popular consciousness, is primarily seen as the author of political treatises. The harmful effect of this way of thinking, in my opinion, is the split we observe in Machiavelli studies: one stream focuses on Machiavelli as a writer, while another focuses on Machiavelli as a politician.⁷

The thesis I propose arises at the intersection of these two aforementioned areas – literature and political theory: I wish to show that the

³ Pocock 1975: 74.

⁴ I am aware that the reader may feel somewhat disappointed by such a preliminary outline. However, I believe it is essential to first construct a broader conceptual model for this relationship between the authors. The last thing I would want is to reduce Machiavelli’s Dantism and Ovidianism to a mere catalogue of thematic borrowings.

⁵ In addition to those mentioned earlier, particularly interesting are: Najemy 1993; Bausi 2002; Bausi 2005; Eisner 2019. Also: Resch 2025, where an analysis of Dante’s influence on Machiavelli was carried out using computer techniques.

⁶ The theme of exile and the literary portrayal of the writer as an outcast – separated from loved ones, cultural and political life, or even language itself – deserves a separate study. Such a study should trace the topos of exile and, more broadly, the influence of Ovid’s Pontic poetry on both Machiavelli and Dante.

⁷ On one hand, eg.: R. Ridolfi, G. Sasso or J.M. Najemy; on the other, eg.: L. Strauss, J.G.A. Pocock, Q. Skinner.

poetic tradition into which Machiavelli consciously placed himself (restoring some of its elements while negating others) forms an important and inherent foundation of his political theories.

II. Machiavelli and the Classical tradition⁸

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in 1469 in Florence and tied his fate to this city forever. It was here that he was educated, participated in public life, and where he also died in 1527. He was connected with the republican environment, and with the return to power of the Medici family, and consequently the end of the Florentine Republic in 1512, he was removed from office and forced into exile. He settled for two years in his family villa in Sant'Andrea in Percussina, several dozen kilometers from the city.⁹

This period of forced exile in the countryside – although psychologically very difficult for someone who had been deeply involved in the life of a city like Florence (which, at the time, was in many respects the capital of Europe) – turned out to be incredibly productive creatively. It was then that Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* and began work on *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of the History of Rome by Livy*; this period also marked his poetic works (including numerous poems and the unfinished longer piece *Asino*)¹⁰ as well as his theatrical works (the highly regarded and frequently performed comedies *Mandragola* and *Clizia*).¹¹ Later years saw the publication of *The History of Florence* and *The Art of War*. Additionally, from the letters he wrote passionately throughout his adult life, the most interesting ones for us come precisely from the time of his forced stay in Sant'Andrea in Percussina. This period was a turning point in Machiavelli's life. But

⁸ Especially 3 volumes of Sasso (1987–1988).

⁹ Machiavelli's biographies are countless. Here are those upon which I have most often relied: Ridolfi 1969; Viroli 1998, Bausi 2005.

¹⁰ Anselmi, Fazion 1984. In this article, I retain the title in its original form. This choice reflects, first, the fact that it denotes an exploratory concept rather than a bibliographically identifiable source. Second, this version is the one typically adopted in English-language academic discourse.

¹¹ Ridolfi 1968.

before we move with the writer to the village outside Florence, let us first try to outline the intellectual backdrop for our considerations.

The times of Machiavelli were not only marked by political turmoil, changes in government, and the growing threats to the freedoms of the Italian republics from France, the Empire, or the Papal States. It was also the era of the mature Renaissance, the rebirth of antiquity, as the name suggests.¹² Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, sanctified by tradition, had long been the three-headed crown of Florence; Lorenzo de' Medici invested all his energy in culture, and figures like Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Poliziano, and Marsilio Ficino elevated Italian humanism to its heights, passing on its achievements to future generations. It was in this period that immortal works were created – alongside Machiavelli – by Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci. If the Renaissance is understood as the coda of the Middle Ages, this world was now coming to an end. Europe was now faced with new challenges, the most spectacular of which was probably the Reformation, shaking its very foundations. The Renaissance – even in the case of such a radical as Pico, the author of *On the Dignity of Man* – while rediscovering human greatness, remained firmly within the framework of the great Christian plan.

The luminaries of the Renaissance typically did not reject Christianity; rather, they sought to reinterpret and enrich it. Within this broader intellectual transformation, Machiavelli stands out as one of the most compelling voices in the reimagining of political thought – though he was by no means alone in shaping this revolution.

As was fitting for a young Florentine of those times, he received an excellent humanist education, though much suggests that – like Dante – he was primarily self-taught. His father, Bernard, had spent years collecting a library of classical texts, so Niccolò – something that will be reflected throughout his entire literary work – had the opportunity to become thoroughly familiar with the canon.¹³ J.B. Atkinson: “Among the ancient authors Machiavelli studied were Greeks that, because he never learned that language, he read in Latin translations, including Aristotle, Plato, Plutarch, Polybius, and Thucydides, and Romans whose works

¹² Burckhardt 1990; Kristeller 1955.

¹³ Ginzburg 2022: 2–3.

he read in Latin, including the moral philosophers Cicero and Seneca, the historians Caesar, Livy, Tacitus, and Sallust, the poets Ovid, Virgil, and the playwrights Plautus and Terence”.¹⁴ Also, Lucretius. These readings not only provided Machiavelli with a solid humanistic education and helped refine his masterful style, but also shaped his attitude toward the past. Unlike Dante, who looked to the Roman Empire as his reference point, Machiavelli’s focus was on the Republic.¹⁵

The influence of ancient literature, particularly – due to the interest of philosophers and historians of ideas in this writer – philosophical and historical prose, has been frequently discussed, and we know quite a lot about the place of the works of Livy, Polybius, or the Greek philosophers in Machiavelli’s thought.¹⁶ However, what stands out is the fact that relatively little has been said about the role and influence of poetry.¹⁷ This is a result of the aforementioned divide (Machiavelli the politician – Machiavelli the literary figure).

Meanwhile, the organic connection between Machiavelli’s political works and the poetic tradition, which we can now define as Ovidian-Dantean, leaves no doubt. What’s more, the author himself provides hints – almost anticipating that the reader might need them – as he recounts how he spends his time in Sant’Andrea in Percussina. In the famous and very important (also on a metatextual level) letter to his friend, Francesco Vettori, our author writes: “Leaving the woods I go to a spring [*una fonte*], and from there to one of my bird traps. I have a book under my arm, either Dante, Petrarch, or one of the minor poets, Tibullus, Ovid, or the like. I read of their amorous passions [*amorose passioni*] and their loves [*amori*], remember mine, and take pleasure for a while in these thoughts. Then I walk down the road to the tavern, speak to passersby, ask them news of their villages, learn various things, and note various tastes and thoughts of man. (...). When evening comes I return home and go into my study. At the door I take off my everyday clothes, covered with mud and dirt, and don garments of

¹⁴ Najemy 2010: 15–16.

¹⁵ Strauss 1970: 23.

¹⁶ Rossi 2020; Strauss 2020; Pocock 1975.

¹⁷ The most interesting and comprehensive discussions on this subject are found in the works of Bausi 2002, Bausi 2005, Najemy 1993 and Najemy 2010.

court and palace. Now garbed fittingly I step into the ancient courts of men of antiquity [*antiqui huomini*], where, received kindly [*amorevolmente*], I partake of food that is for me alone and for which I was born, where I am not ashamed to converse with them and ask them the reasons for their actions. And they in their full humanity answer me. For four hours I feel no tedium and forget every anguish, not afraid of poverty, not terrified by death. I lose myself in them entirely. And because Dante says, ‘Having heard without retaining is not knowledge,’ I have noted down how I have profited from their conversation and composed *De principatibus*, a little study in which I probe as deeply as I can into deliberations on this subject, exploring what a principality is, its genus, how it is acquired” (*Let.* October 10, 1513).¹⁸

There are several points in this letter that I would particularly like to highlight. First, Machiavelli clearly divides the authors he reads into two categories: those he reads in the morning (the poets) and those he reads in the evening (the historians and philosophers). Second, the authors who occupy him in the morning are read “at the source”, which can (and should) obviously be understood metaphorically as well. Third, writing occurs almost in dialogue with the ancients: Machiavelli converses with them and learns from them. Therefore, what he writes is supported by the authority of Greek and Roman authors. In other words, he creates his works under the influence of images, visions, and poetic inspiration (!).

Machiavelli was a poet.¹⁹ The fact that his works have rightly found a place in the canon of political literature, and that the author’s name has unfortunately become synonymous with the “teacher of tyrants”,²⁰ has contributed to the marginalization of his poetic output. True, these

¹⁸ Eisner 2019: 36.

¹⁹ Montanari 1968; Ridolfi 1968; Anselmi, Fazion 1984; Ascoli, Kahn 1993; Hoeges 2006.

²⁰ Currently, the reception of Machiavelli is more nuanced. “This striking transformation of Machiavelli’s image is the result of a series of analytical studies by scholars from England, the United States and New Zealand” (Ginzburg 2022: 1–2). And yet, *The Discourses* were published in London as early as 1636, while *The Florentine Histories* appeared in 1595. His *Works* from 1720 (the third edition) refer to the author as “the famous Niccolò Machiavelli, citizen and secretary of Florence”. Therefore, the tradition of Machiavelli as a republican thinker has a long history in the English-speaking world.

are either unfinished works or not of the highest quality – at least not artistically comparable to his prose writings.²¹ However, excluding this aspect from the reflection on Machiavelli does not merely obscure his image, it distorts it. We often forget that his political prose writings are, in fact, literary texts, highly artistic and deeply immersed in literary tradition, and that their author was a poet with specific aspirations and a concrete vision of the world. This vision, let us say right away, was not fully realized by Machiavelli: we can surmise that his *opus magnum* was meant to be the poem *Asino*,²² about which Machiavelli writes in one of his letters to a friend, Lodovico Alamanni: “These last few days I have read the *Orlando furioso* of Ariosto, and truly the poem is beautiful [bello] throughout, and in many places it is marvelous [mirabile]. If you see him there, give him my regards, and tell him I only regret that, having recalled so many poets [in the proem to the *Furioso*’s last canto], he left me out like a prick, and that he has done to me in his *Orlando* what I will not do to him in my *Asino*” (Let. December 17, 1517).²³

III. Ovid and Ovidian tradition before Dante

Ovid, like Horace and Virgil, quickly earned the status of a classic. In the traditional Roman literature of the imperial period, he was celebrated as a virtuoso of words by the most important figures: Seneca, Lucan, and Martial. Christian authors, however, had an ambivalent attitude towards him and his works. While, for example, Tertullian did not share the admiration for the author of the *Metamorphoses*, figures more favorable to the pagan heritage of the Greeks and Romans, such as St. Augustine and St. Jerome, held Ovid in high regard, and the poet Prudentius was even referred to as *Ovidius Christianus*. In the late antiquity, it became an unwritten rule, even among Christian authors, to

²¹ De Sanctis 2017: 585.

²² This longer poem, written in Dantean *terzarima* and in dialogue with *The Divine Comedy* was supposed to be a synthesis of the Greco-Roman and the Italian vernacular traditions. Najemy 2010: 200.

²³ Ascoli, Capodivacca 2010: 194.

stylistically imitate Ovid. Those who tried to compete with the master – such a master! – had a chance of enduring.

Ovid never disappeared.²⁴ Just like antiquity never disappeared. Rather, we can speak of periods of lesser and greater influence, and in any case, this influence is sometimes harder for us to grasp. However, these threads are never truly broken; they weave through the labyrinth of history until someone eventually catches them and finds a way to apply them. Different generations have different needs, different appetites, and tastes. Already in the period of the so-called Carolingian Renaissance (8th–10th centuries), which undoubtedly marked a certain shift towards the classical Latin authors, we observe a renewed reception of Ovid: the poet is now ever more eagerly imitated and commented upon.²⁵

The true Renaissance of interest in Ovid, however, begins only in the 12th and 13th centuries. The poet then becomes one of the pillars of what can be called the pre-Renaissance of the Middle Ages. Thus, Ovid breaks into schools, and his works enter the canon, becoming the foundation of humanistic education; colleges and the first universities take his works under scrutiny: scholars eagerly read, edit, comment on, and interpret this rich, thematically and formally diverse body of work. Ovid's verses – still mostly in manuscripts and copies – from London and Paris to Toledo, Córdoba, and Palermo, all the way to the republics of northern Italy, conquer the hearts of readers across Europe. Later scholars will aptly call this most fortunate time for Ovid the "Ovidian Age" – *Aetas ovidiana*.²⁶

E.K. Rand wrote: "Humanists like John of Salisbury and Peter de Blois, scholastics like Alanus de Insulis and Roger Bacon, Vincent of Beauvais the encyclopedist, John of Garland the educator, mystics like Hugo of St. Victor and Bernard of Clairvaux, His Holiness Pope Innocent III in his *De Contemptu mundi*, – these and many more cite Ovid

²⁴ Broadly on this subject: Hexter 1986; Coulson, Roy 2000; Clark, Coulson, McKinley 2011.

²⁵ Maślanka-Soro 2015: 46.

²⁶ Rand 1926: 112; Maślanka-Soro 2015: 47–48.

as an authority on morals and other sober subjects. Abelard takes counsel with Ovidius Ethicus in discussing monastic rules”.²⁷

There is no one Ovid anymore, there are plenty. And each of them the master in his own field. Apart from *Ovidius Christianus* there are: *Ovidius Eticus* (Ovid the Ethic), *Ovidius Theologus* (Ovid the Theologist), *Ovidius Medicus* (Ovid the Medic) and *Ovidius Magus* (Ovid the Magus). There is *Ovidius Minor* or *Ovidius Amorigraphus* (Ovid the Psychologist), and at last, this grand author of the masterfully written *Metamorphoses*, considered the pagan Bible – *Ovidius Maior*.²⁸ Later there will be another one: *Ovidius Exsul* (the Exiled Ovid).²⁹

Commentators of this time interpret the *Metamorphoses* in a Christian spirit: in the myths of heroes transforming into animals, trees, or stones, they see allegories of the degeneration of human nature due to sin. For them, Ovid is not an amoral describer of mythical transformations – as early Christianity had often viewed him – but a devout, almost saintly teacher of universal morality. This transformation, interpreted in this way, is the so-called *mutatio moralis*, which traces back to the late ancient treatise *Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, and further – in its roots – to Cicero (*De off.* 1.13.41).³⁰

Thus, Ovid stands on the threshold of the Renaissance as the great arch-poet of the Greco-Roman world, but also – almost – of all of Christian Europe. However, while on the level of allegorical reading, almost any myth could be Christianized, the *Metamorphoses*, in its very philosophical, historiographical, or theological intent – as a “sacred text” or even a handbook or breviary – were, of course, absolutely unacceptable for a Christian. For in Ovid’s world, it is not God who rules, but Fate, the blind force of destiny. And then came Dante.

²⁷ Rand 1926: 132.

²⁸ Rand 1926: 131–143; Maślanka-Soro 2015: 47–48.

²⁹ My study serves as an entry point into the theme of *Ovidius Philosophus* (Ovid the Philosopher). I argue that viewing Ovid as a philosopher – as a theorist and commentator on the human condition – holds great promise for generating new insights.

³⁰ Maślanka-Soro 2015: 47–48; Ascoli, Kahn 1993: 243.

IV. Ovid in Dante

“For Dante, Ovid in one of the great world-poets, one of those whom with Virgil, his good guide, he meets in the pleasant greensward that delights the reader, somewhat unexpectedly, in the Limbo or Hell; Homer, Horace and Lucan are the other two members of this tranquil group, and Statius greets the two travelers in Purgatory. Dante’s reading of Ovid is shown by the most diverse sorts of reminiscence, which are more abundant than those of any Latin poet except Virgil. The spirit of Ovid the lover, chastened and refined, comes to Dante through the troubadours and the singers of the *dolce stil novo*; it is exalted, in the lyrics of the *Vita nuova* and the *Convivio* and finally in the divine allegory of the Comedy, to heights of which Ovid never dreamed.”³¹ Dante, as we can guess, was a self-taught scholar. He began reading Latin authors late (after the age of 25), so his studies did not follow a classical path. He read whomever and however he wanted.³²

Although in his youthful *Rhymes* Dante does not reveal his fascination with the poets of ancient Rome, in the *New Life* and the *Banquet*, Ovid – alongside other ancient masters – does appear, though in a rather conventional role. However, in the final section of the second of these works, his role clearly grows. For Dante, before the *Divine Comedy*, the Roman poet is indeed an important authority in the field of poetry, providing him with useful quotations, but at this stage, it is difficult to speak of any rivalry or dispute.³³

Researchers today have no doubts that Ovid, above all with his *Metamorphoses*, plays a role in the *Divine Comedy* that is no less significant – though certainly less highlighted – than that of Virgil. At this stage of his life – having reached, as we remember, the halfway point – Dante finally feels ready to engage in a fair duel with Ovid. Again, Rand: “With *Ovidius Magus* he has no concern, save with the magician who can set a metamorphosis before our eyes. To him he flings the challenge of a rival in his art. As he describes the simultaneous transformation of the robber Brunelleschi into the form of a serpent and of

³¹ Rand 1926: 143–144.

³² Maślanka-Soro 2015: 21.

³³ Maślanka-Soro 2015: 82–87.

the serpent into the form of Brunelleschi, he exclaims: ‘Let Ovid be silent concerning Cadmus and Arethusa, for if, poetizing, he converts him into a serpent and her into a fountain, I envy him not; for two natures front to front never did he transmute, so that both the forms were prompt to exchange their matter’ (Inf. XXV 97, transl. Norton).³⁴ The theme of transformation is one of the most important in Dante’s masterpiece. Both the pilgrim Dante and the Christian reader undergo transformation; so does the body – in its rivalry with Ovid – and the soul, where the poet follows the tradition of medieval commentaries. In this way, a synthesis of Greco-Roman and Christian traditions is created. Ovid, deeply studied, challenged to a duel, and ultimately rejected, becomes one of the intrinsic elements of the *Divine Comedy*. The conscious and consistent dialogue between Dante and Ovid is directed towards contrasting the pagan *Metamorphoses* with a new work on transformation – the Christian *Divine Comedy*.³⁵

Let us not forget, finally, that both Ovid and Dante experienced exile – though the circumstances and conditions were different, and they each experienced it in their own way. While “Ovid’s treatment of Rome is filled with his nostalgia and longing, perhaps for a way of life rather than a physical location, and it is frequently represented as the antithesis of Tomis”,³⁶ [Dante’s] “relationship with the city which exiled him moves continually between love and condemnation, nor is he always so careful to distinguish between the city and its citizens”.³⁷ For Dante, however, even in the context of exile, *Ovidius Maior* – the author of the *Metamorphoses* and perhaps the greatest rival among poets – is always more important than *Ovidius Exsul*.³⁸ It is worth noting: the Dante that Machiavelli knows is not only the Florentine classic,

³⁴ Rand 1926: 144. In Singleton’s translation: “Concerning Cadmus and Arethusa let Ovid be silent, for if he, poetizing, converts the one into a serpent and the other into a fountain, I envy him not; for two natures front to front he never so transmuted that both forms were prompt to exchange their substance” (Alighieri 1971: 265).

³⁵ Maślanka-Soro 2015: 382.

³⁶ Wilson 2002: 62.

³⁷ Wilson 2002: 65.

³⁸ Wilson 2002: 68. On Dante’s poetics of exile: Raffa 2002.

the author of *The Divine Comedy*, treatises on power and language, or poetic works. The Dante of Machiavelli is also the anti-Ovid.³⁹

V. Ovid in Machiavelli⁴⁰

1. *Co-experiencing*⁴¹

Let us now return to Sant'Andrea in Percussina and the letter Machiavelli sent to Vettori on December 10, 1513. This is one of the most important texts written by the author of *The Prince*. Its content might seem trivial: we learn how Machiavelli spends his days during his forced stay in Sant'Andrea in Percussina and that he has finished his treatise on power, over which he is now contemplating publication. In reality, the author scattered various clues regarding his own creative process throughout the text – and not only in this letter.

Ovid appears alongside Dante, Petrarch, and Tibullus – as an author read in the morning: at the source (*una fonte*). The two ancient Roman poets are also referred to as “minor” (*minori*), which – to clarify immediately – is not intended as a pejorative term. It is a technical designation: referring to the elegists of the time of Augustus, Roman authors of love poetry. By the way, all four of these poets appear here as authors of such literature – which, for Machiavelli, is meant to bring comfort during his exile. He expresses this explicitly: “I read of their amorous passions [*amorose passioni*] and their loves [*amori*], remember mine, and take pleasure for a while in these thoughts” (December 15, 1513). But the recipient is Vettori, a man perhaps as well-read and intelligent

³⁹ At the level of poetic worldview and the philosophy of history and human nature, Machiavelli perceives these two poets as positioned along opposing vectors. A more extensive development of this thesis, however, requires a separate study – presumably one of a more philosophical than strictly philological nature.

⁴⁰ In addition to the cited studies, see also Palutan 2014.

⁴¹ I approach Machiavelli's engagement with Ovid not through isolated citations, but through the affective and intellectual posture he adopts toward poetry during exile. His letters suggest that reading Ovid was not merely scholarly, but existential – an act of shared experience. This lens allows us to grasp how poetic memory and personal displacement shaped his political imagination.

as the author himself, with whom Machiavelli often communicates in a code, signaling the literary sophistication (and fondness) shared by both correspondents for Ovid's works – echoes of which in the Machiavelli-Vettori letters have been traced by J.M. Najemy.⁴²

Researchers provide irrefutable evidence of the presence of the *minor* Ovid not only in Machiavelli's letters and plays but also in *The Prince*. This is a valuable observation, as while the letters and dramatic works feature *amores* as one of the themes of Machiavelli's writings, *The Prince* – which, along with *The Discourses*, is of particular interest to us here – is, after all, a political treatise and seemingly has little in common with love poetry. While: "Machiavelli applies Ovid's amorous strategies to the realm of politics not only to legitimize breaking vows but also to claim that his approach is realistic, to disregard the prince's moral status, and to valorize violence".⁴³ The effective "prince", after all, is the one who listens to the poet's advice and dares to act; the one who finds in themselves *virtù* and reaches for what is theirs. Whether as a lover or as a warrior/politician, the mechanism of action is exactly the same.

In his use of *Ars Amatoria*, Machiavelli is subtle, but in his use of exile poetry (*Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*), he is even more delicate. Ovid's works from the later stage of his life are filled with suffering, sorrow, pain, and lament. The only thing that offers hope and comfort is poetry. The same can be said for Machiavelli in the years 1513–1515, when, removed from politics and exiled from the city, he reflects on his career and his life.

Moreover, this is not an unmotivated thesis. At the intertextual level, the author gives us clear signals that he reads not only Ovid's love poems, but also exile poems during his stay in Sant'Andrea in Percussina. In his letters from exile, Ovid laments that the people of Pontus do not know Latin "and laugh stupidly at Latin words".⁴⁴ These people, the Getae, couldn't read his poetry, and Ovid fears that surrounded by them, he is losing his Latin and absorbing elements of the

⁴² Najemy 1993: 267–316. They both know it all: the *Loves*, the *Heroines*, the *Art of Love*, the *Cure for Love*, the exile poetry, and of course the *Metamorphoses*.

⁴³ Eisner 2019: 43.

⁴⁴ *Et ridet stolidi verba Latina Getae* (*Tristia* V 10, 38).

Getan language into his writing (Tristia III 1, 17–18; III 14, 43–52).⁴⁵ This fear of language transformation is echoed in Machiavelli's exile, where he worries about his own language changing. He writes in Latin (and *Ex Percussino*) to Vettori in December 1514,⁴⁶ possibly reflecting his concern about exile's effect on speech. Both Ovid and Machiavelli express fears that isolation in foreign places could change their language, even leading them to write in another tongue. In both cases, exile makes their language feel foreign, and they must relearn it like children.⁴⁷ Machiavelli openly does recall the exile topos in his letters, but *The Prince* – I argue – is an indirect yet important testament to this morose mood.

There is no doubt that the author of *The Prince* – written concurrently with the letters analyzed by Najemy – takes the exiled Ovid as a model; and he wants us to know it. Both poets enjoyed success in their cities, both were exiled by the caprice of fate (*Fatum*), cut off from affairs and people, both were “stuck” in exile among barbarians (unlike Dante!), both experienced the drama of alienation, both relied on the intercession of friends with rulers, and, finally, both sought solace in poetry.

In this light, *The Prince* can also be read as a record of the dramatic experiences of a man who has lost everything. Machiavelli was not only dismissed from his official positions, but also subjected to horrific, several days-long tortures (something to keep in mind when reading his works). He ended up in Sant'Andrea in Percussina as a man crushed both physically and mentally: not only had he become a victim of the new regime, but many of his fellow countrymen had suffered as

⁴⁵ *Siqua videbuntur casu non dicta Latine, / In qua scribebat, barbara terra fuit* (III 1, 17–18); *Saepe aliquod quaero verbum nomenque locumque, / Nec quisquam est a quo certior esse queam. / Dicere saepe aliquid conanti – turpe fateri! – / Verba mihi desunt dedidique loqui. / Threicio Scythicoque fere circumsonor ore, / Et videor Geticis scribere posse modis, / Crede mihi, timeo ne sint inmixta Latinis / Inque meis scriptis Pontica verba legas, / Qualemcumque igitur venia dignare libellum, / Sortis et excusa condicione meae* (III 14, 43–52).

⁴⁶ Machiavelli 1961: 350. The fragment also contains a significant quotation from Ovid (*Met.* XIII 507): *[i]acet Ilion ingens, / eventuque gravi finita est publica clades, / sed finita tamen; soli mihi Pergama restant.*

⁴⁷ Najemy 1993: 295.

well, and his homeland, Florence, had failed as a republic. *The Prince* is, in a sense, also an expression of great despair and bitter disillusionment: power always prevails.

When Machiavelli, in the widely discussed letter from December 10, 1513, contemplates whether he should publish *The Prince*, or perhaps withhold it due to the controversial content contained within, we are inevitably reminded (surely not without reason) of Ovid's reflections on the censorship of his poems and the significant words he wrote, which we cannot fail to recall here: "I assure you, my character differs from my verse (my life is moral, my muse is gay), and most of my work, unreal and fictitious, has allowed itself more license than its author has had. A book is not evidence of the writer's mind, but respectable entertainment; it will offer many things suited to charm the ear" (Tristia II 353–358; Wheeler). When we realize how deeply Ovid's influences permeate the text of *The Prince* and how important an author he was for Machiavelli, not only the reading of this famous treatise but also its author appears in a new light.

2. *Re-enacting*⁴⁸

The Discourses on Livy are the most extensive and important, although – as we know – not the most famous work of Machiavelli. *The Prince* and *The Discourses* – two great treatises on ways to strengthen state power – can be viewed either complementarily or separately. Today, there is no agreement among scholars of Machiavelli's political theory as to whether these works can be interpreted as a coherent exposition or whether they represent two conflicting worldviews. Assuming we are dealing with literary works, this problem essentially disappears. The coherence (or lack thereof) of Machiavelli's philosophy – in relation to his "poetic worldview",⁴⁹ which concerns me here – becomes

⁴⁸ Rather than treating *The Discourses* as a systematic treatise, I read them as a literary construction shaped by a worldview rooted in transformation. This approach, inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, does not conflate the two works, but highlights a shared logic of change – one that challenges Christian teleology and reclaims antiquity on new terms.

⁴⁹ By 'poetic worldview,' I mean a way of thinking shaped by imagination, myth, and symbolic ideas about human life and politics, rather than by strict logic or systematic philosophy.

a secondary issue. The poet (even if he is a poet-philosopher) is not obliged to be coherent. What matters is how convincing the world he creates is.

As is well known, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Machiavelli's *Discourses* differ in both form and content:⁵⁰ the former is a poem written in hexameter verse, dealing with myths and legends, while the latter is a prose treatise focused on ancient Rome and the contemporary Florence of the author. What makes these works similar, however, is undoubtedly their composition, which gives the impression of being chaotic and digressive, yet is consciously structured. Furthermore, both works share a conviction in the primacy of Rome. Finally, these works align in terms of the worldview they express – a worldview that is distinctly non-Christian. On both the level of the text and the core ideas, the guiding principle is continuous transformation.

Machiavelli, as I pointed out earlier, is the thinker who, for the first time (or certainly one of the first), so openly and consistently opposes the Christian order sanctified by a long tradition: there is no divine plan, no divine providence – the world is ruled by blind and changing fortune. Machiavelli reads Ovid as the ancients did – that is, before the Christian interpreters began to read him allegorically – and finds in the *Metamorphoses*, cleansed of any Christian influences, a model for his own subversive work. At the beginning of the second book of his great treatise, Machiavelli writes: “That these floods, pestilences and famines happen, I do not think anyone can doubt, for plenty of them are recorded everywhere in history, their effect in obliterating the past is plain to see, and it seems reasonable that it should be so. For, as in the case of simple bodies, when nature has accumulated too much superfluous material, it frequently acts in the same way and by means of a purge restores health to the body. Similarly in the case of that body which comprises a mixture of human races, when every province is replete with inhabitants who can neither obtain a livelihood nor move elsewhere since all other places are occupied and full up, and when craftiness and malignity of man has gone so far as it can go, the world must be purged in one of these three ways, so that mankind, being reduced to comparatively few

⁵⁰ On the structure of *The Discorsi* and its relation to Livy's work: Machiavelli 1950: 59–65.

and humbled by adversity, may adopt a more appropriate form of life and grow better” (Disc. II 5, transl. Walker).⁵¹ The fragment undoubtedly remains heavily influenced by Stoic thought.

This same idea is expressed in the final book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: “Nothing retains its own form; but Nature, the great renewer, ever makes up forms from other forms. Be sure there’s nothing perishes in the whole universe; it does but vary and renew its form. What we will call birth is but a beginning to be other than what one was before; and death is but cessation of a former state. Though, perchance, things may shift from there to here and here to there, still do all things in their sum total remain unchanged” (*Met.* XV 252–259, transl. Miller).⁵²

It is worth noting that Machiavelli’s *Discourses* are not only a commentary on the work of Titus Livius, but also a grand and intricately composed poem about change, impermanence, and constant transformation; they are the new *Metamorphoses*. Just as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* explores the ever-changing nature of the world through myth and legend, Machiavelli’s *Discourses* delve into the mutable nature of politics, society, and power. In both works, the idea of transformation – whether through personal or political upheaval – remains a central theme.

VI. Dante in Machiavelli⁵³

1. *Admiration and criticism*

There is no doubt that Dante is one of the best-known authors for Machiavelli. Dante’s works, particularly the *Divine Comedy*, had a significant

⁵¹ Machiavelli 1950: 374.

⁵² *Nec species sua cuique manet, rerumque novatrix / Ex aliis alias reddit natura figuras: / Nec perit in toto quicquam, mihi credite, mundo, / Sed variat faciemque novat, nascique vocatur / Incipere esse aliud, quam quod fuit ante, morique / Desinere illud idem. Cum sint huc forsitan illa, / Haec translata illuc, summa tamen omnia constant* (*Met.* XV 252–259).

⁵³ In addition to the cited studies, see also Sasso 2014. In this part of the article, due to the vast number of threads, I limit myself to those that I consider most important for the topic I am interested in. I omit here, for example, Dante’s and Machiavelli’s

impact on the intellectual environment in which Machiavelli developed his own ideas.

Machiavelli's relationship with Dante as a reader is ambivalent. On one hand, the author of the *Divine Comedy* is a constant companion to him, serving as a point of reference, an advisor, and a treasure trove of quotes (often cited from memory,⁵⁴ which indicates Machiavelli's excellent command of the great predecessor's works), as well as offering remarks like this one (from a letter to Vettori): "And because Dante says, 'Having heard without retaining is not knowledge', I have noted down how I have profited from their conversation" (*Let.*, December 15, 1513). In Machiavelli's poetry, his inspirations are also clear: the poems *Di Fortuna* (192 verses) and *Dell'Ingratitudine* (182 verses) each contain 14 citations; the poem *Dell'Ambizione* (187 verses) has 20 citations; and the poem *Dell'Occasione* (22 verses) includes 2 citations. References or allusions to Dante's verses – used to illustrate an episode or mood, or to situate a given work within a specific literary tradition – appear both in private letters and in Machiavelli's poetry. In other words, Dante is, for Machiavelli the reader and Machiavelli the poet, a significant intellectual and spiritual authority.

On the other hand, Machiavelli critically evaluates the exilic stance of his great predecessor. When Dante writes in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*: "To me, however, the whole world is a homeland, like the sea to fish" (DVE I, vi, 3; Botterill),⁵⁵ he expresses his universalist disposition, to which the idea of empire (beginning to take shape and momentum in his thought at that time) gave vigor and concreteness. In other words, Dante considered himself a citizen of the world. For Machiavelli, exile from Florence was painful primarily because he was cut off from its affairs (his way of life, like Ovid), and his only concern was whether he would manage to return and regain some position there. Let us remember that his desire to offer a copy of *The Prince* to one of the

considerations on language, or the latter's reflections on the subject (Chiappelli 1974; Frosini 2021), as well as the Dantesque atmosphere and anti-Dantism in the so-called "Machiavelli's dream" (Sasso 1988b: 280–285).

⁵⁴ See the letter to Vettori from January 31, 1515, in which the quote appears with errors (Machiavelli 1961: 373).

⁵⁵ Quoted from: Kumar 2022.

Medici⁵⁶ was precisely tied to his hope of returning to favor (and to his beloved city). Dante would only return if he were properly welcomed; Machiavelli returned – as the humble servant of his capricious homeland. Hence, admiration and criticism. At the same time, it is significant and worth noting that Dante – so overtly present elsewhere – does not appear explicitly in *The Prince*, and is mentioned only twice in *The Discourses*.

2. Emulation

Similar to the minor poetic works, Dante is also present in the more substantial *Asino*. Here – as the great poet with whom one had to compete. A.R. Ascoli and A.M. Capodivacca observe: “Dante, however, is undoubtedly Machiavelli’s most powerful poetic influence, here and elsewhere. The debt is registered not only in prosody, but also in innumerable verbal echoes, which, however, are consistently ‘contaminated’ by Machiavelli’s desacralizing, satiric tendencies, frequently expressed by a structured juxtaposition with the words of other vernacular precursors. For instance, like the *Divine Comedy*, the *Asino* begins its narration with a first-person-singular protagonist who, lost in a dark wood at a critical moment in his life, encounters a guide. But the guide, Circe’s unnamed handmaiden, is a sensualized, terrestrial conflation of Dante’s Virgil and Beatrice”.⁵⁷

And indeed, recent studies, which employed modern computational tools, have yielded astonishing, though perhaps expected, results in the form of conclusions about the inherent Dantism in Machiavelli’s *Asino*. Analogies between the *Divine Comedy* and the *Asino* can be found at every level of the text: in its structure, plot, style, lexicon, and, of course, versification.

To summarize this research, the *Asino* is the *terzarima* text by Machiavelli that most strongly reflects Dantean characteristics. It closely resembles Dante’s *Comedy* in both content and structure, with numerous verbal parallels and frequent use of Dantean elements. Stylistically, the

⁵⁶ The treatise was dedicated to Lorenzo di Pietro de’ Medici, the grandson of the famous Lorenzo il Magnifico.

⁵⁷ Najemy 2010: 199.

Asino mirrors the *Comedy*, employing similitudes, periphrases, and variations in stylistic registers. It is also the only Machiavelli *terzarima* text to incorporate Latinisms and neologisms, reflecting a connection to Latin and a tendency for word creation. The text displays a notable phonetic roughness (*asprezza*) and uses light and color semantics, often paired with acoustic semantics. Visual descriptions tend to be epic and sublime, while acoustic ones have a comedic tone. The Dantean influence is evident throughout, with some sections showing a concentration of the *Comedy* references.⁵⁸ *Asino*, as we know, unfortunately remained unfinished.⁵⁹

3. Rejection

In a few words, let us also show another, more radical side of Machiavelli's relationship to Dante: rejection. As we remember, Dante sees the Roman Empire as the model for his universal monarchy. He believes that the perfect system that characterized this state is the only one that can provide all of humanity with universal peace, as well as both earthly and eternal happiness.⁶⁰ Machiavelli thinks quite differently – in his view, the principate begins, and the empire continues, the period of degeneration for Rome.⁶¹ Also, as J.G.A. Pocock writes: “The whole image of human authority and its history to which Florentines were supposed to look was being drastically reconstructed, deprived of its continuity and – in the most important sense – increasingly secularized. (...). The republic was not timeless [like empire], because it did not reflect by simple correspondence the eternal order of nature. (...). To affirm the republic, then was to break up the timeless continuity of the hierarchic universe into particular moments”.⁶² For Machi-

⁵⁸ Resch 2025: 719. The book Machiavelli und Dantes “Commedia”: Hermeneutische und digitale Perspektiven jenseits der Imitatio was authored by Sascha Resch and published in 2025 by De Gruyter. It combines hermeneutic analysis with digital methods to explore the relationship between Machiavelli's writings and Dante's *Comedy*.

⁵⁹ Only eight chapters have survived.

⁶⁰ Maślanka-Soro 2015: 95.

⁶¹ A comparison of Dante's and Machiavelli's views on good government and their relationship to Rome: Ebener 1947; Davis 1988.

⁶² Pocock 1975: 53–54.

avelli, the Roman Republic is considered the unsurpassed model for the Florentine Republic – a view that, in light of the above, seems logical – and it is to this republic that he dedicates his greatest work. This is a crucial point in the analysis of the Dante-Machiavelli, but also Ovid-Machiavelli, complex relationship: in *The Discourses*, sober historical and political thinking (Florentine here and now) meets the worldview of the author – poetic, philosophical, and religious. It is worth noting: Machiavelli's *Discourses* are not only a commentary on Livy and the new *Metamorphoses*, but also – as a substitute for the unwritten *Asino* – an anti-*Divine Comedy*.

VII. Conclusions

Machiavelli's works are constructed with full adherence to the principles of poetic art.⁶³ Indeed, their themes are mostly matters such as the state, power, or civic duties, but the motivations, ambitions, scope, approach, and – if one may say so – the execution, all bear the mark of a poet. Politics and literature here are two sides of the same coin: in his poetic works, Machiavelli engages in politics, while in his political writings, he infuses them with poetic qualities.⁶⁴

Historians and political thinkers are, of course, extremely important “interlocutors” and teachers for Machiavelli. But that is only half of his richly stocked library. Feeling himself a poet, he could not simply bypass Ovid (or others we do not mention here). Feeling himself a Florentine poet, however, he could not bypass Dante – just as Dante, heir to the Latin world, could not (but also did not want to) do without Ovid. However, Machiavelli could engage with the author of the *Divine Comedy* and, after delving into and critically examining his proposed model of the world, reject it – just as Dante, after studying the classics, ultimately did with Ovid.

The two great masters of Machiavelli – Ovid and Dante – had entirely different views on the mechanics and structure of the world, as

⁶³ Montanari 1968: 58–59.

⁶⁴ De Sanctis 2017: 585.

well as on humanity's chance to commune with the divine.⁶⁵ Machiavelli chose the one with whom he felt a kinship in terms of worldview and whose cosmos he could creatively utilize. The other – he attempted to overcome.

Machiavelli suffered one defeat after another: during his lifetime, he gained neither wealth, nor political position, nor recognition as an advisor, nor literary fame. His bold ideas were of no interest to anyone, and the reforms he initiated did not yield the expected results. He was an anonymous bureaucrat who, in his free time, immersed himself in the works of ancient authors. But he was also a dreamer and a visionary. As we know, he did not create an epic on the scale of the *Metamorphoses* or the *Divine Comedy*, but in his writing – which consciously continues the Ovidian-Dantean tradition – something as momentous as these works occurred. It was at this moment that the pre-Christian antiquity was reborn, and the spell of the “universal monarchy” was broken (although the secularization of Europe will still take “some” – five centuries! – time).

In this sense, Machiavelli's legacy is not only that of a political thinker who anticipated modernity, but also that of a poet who reawakened the ancient imagination in a world on the brink of rupture. His dialogue with Ovid and Dante is not merely a matter of influence, but of inheritance and transformation. By reclaiming classical myth and vision for a secular age, Machiavelli became not only a founder of modern political thought, but also a silent heir to the poetic tradition he both revered and redefined.

Fate, which so fascinated him, willed that only after his death would Machiavelli be respected and recognized as a keen interpreter of both political dynamics and human nature. As a poet, he remained unknown.

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⁶⁵ Maślanka-Soro 2015: 381.

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