



MACHIAVELLI'S PUBLIC CONSPIRACIES

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When it comes to his treatment of political conspiracies, Machiavelli can seem indifferent to whether his advice serves princes or subjects, or both. In the beginning of his chapter “Of Conspiracies” in the *Discourses*, he writes:

It seems to me proper now to treat of conspiracies, being a matter of so much danger both to princes and subjects; for history teaches us that many more princes have lost their lives and their states by conspiracies than by open war. But few can venture to make open war upon their sovereign, whilst every one may engage in conspiracies against him. On the other hand, subjects cannot undertake more perilous and foolhardy enterprises than conspiracies, which are in every respect more difficult and dangerous; and thence it is that, although so often attempted, yet they so rarely attain the desired object. And therefore, so that princes may learn to guard against such dangers, and that subjects may less rashly engage in them, and learn rather to live contentedly under such a government as Fate may have assigned to them ... I shall treat the subject at length, and endeavor not to omit any point that may be useful to the one or the other.¹

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince and the Discourses* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 410. Cited henceforth as either *The Prince* or *The Discourses*. All translations from this edition, although at times I supply the Italian when it is useful. In Italian, this passage reads:

“Ei non mi è parso da lasciare indietro il ragionare delle congiure, essendo cosa tanto pericolosa ai principi ed ai privati. Perché si vede per quelle molti più principi avere perduta la vita e lo stato che per guerra aperta: perché il poter fare aperta guerra ad uno principe è concesso a pochi, il poterli congiurare contro è concesso a ciascuno. Dall'altra parte, gli uomini privati non entrano in impresa più pericolosa né più temeraria di questa, perché la è difficile e pericolosissima in ogni sua parte. Dove ne nasce che molte se ne tentano, e pochissime hanno il fine desiderato. Acciocché adunque i principi imparino a guardarsi da questi pericoli, e che i privati più timidamente vi si mettino, anzi imparino ad essere contenti a vivere sotto quello imperio che dalla sorte è stato loro proposto, io ne parlerò diffusamente, non lasciando indietro alcuno caso notabile in documento dell'uno e dell'altro.”

See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere (Discorsi Sopra la Prima Deca di Tito Livio)*, in *La Letteratura Italiana: Storia e Testi*, Vol. 29 (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore), p. 320.

If anything, in this passage, Machiavelli's understanding of conspiracies seems to favor princes insofar as he suggests that conspiracies tend to favor princes over subjects seeking to restore their liberty. Thus he offers that subjects might be better off learning to "live contentedly under such a government as Fate may have assigned to them." And yet, as is so often the case with Machiavelli, even in the very passage in which he delivers this verdict, he may be saying more than one thing at the same time. For example, although he offers that the conspiracy of the subject against the prince is "perilous and foolhardy" he nonetheless offers (and he follows through in the *Discourses* itself) to show how conspiracies can nonetheless be "useful" (that is the English translation used here, in Italian the term is "notabile," or notable, i.e., worthy of study) to the subjects.² In other words, conspiracies by subjects may be difficult but not impossible (indeed "many more princes have lost their lives and their states by conspiracies than by open war"). If we take this view seriously, then it allows us to read the passage in a slightly different light. If in fact conspiracies by the subjects of a prince are possible, then perhaps when Machiavelli writes that subjects "may less rashly" engage in them, he does not simply mean this in a negative sense. A "less rash" approach to conspiracies may in fact improve the chances of their success against unpopular princes since—as Machiavelli informs us—"everyone may engage in conspiracies against him." This reading of how the people may conspire "less rashly" is perhaps even clearer in the original Italian where he states "e che i privati più timidamente vi si mettino" (literally: "and so that the subjects can more timidly put themselves into [conspiracy]"). For Machiavelli to advocate "more timidity" might possibly suggest "greater conspiracy" as well.³ Despite his stated desire to help princes prevent conspiracies and his advising subjects to avoid conspiracies altogether, we see that perhaps Machiavelli is offering the subjects something after all. Perhaps we might even say that Machiavelli appears to be conspiratorial in his description of conspiracies.

The argument that Machiavelli's sympathies lie with the people, although not uncontested, is not in and of itself particularly novel.⁴ The

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. Machiavelli's use of the term "privati" here is telling. He generally calls the people alternatively "gli uomini," "il popolo," "la moltitudine," or, specifically referring to the Roman Republic, "La Plebe," but in this chapter on conspiracy (although not only here, to be sure) he refers to the people as "private," emphasizing their private, depoliticized nature (a state, however, that could be changed by conspiracy itself).

⁴ Even if we leave Machiavelli's own contemporaries out of the equation, Rousseau, for one, makes this argument when he writes that Machiavelli "professed to teach kings; but it was the people he really taught" (qtd. in Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us* [New York: Verso Press, 1999], p. 30).

majority of contemporary Machiavelli scholars acknowledge a thinly or perhaps not so thinly disguised republican sentiment on Machiavelli's part (particularly in the *Discourses*).⁵ But even this camp is not uniform in its view of what Machiavelli is up to. For example, Victoria Kahn argues that Machiavelli is often misread as a humanist philosopher, and, by extension, as a particular kind of republican theorist. Kahn argues that Machiavelli appropriates "the humanists' rhetorical strategies in order to educate his reader to an antihumanist conception of imitation and practice."⁶ In this way, she tells us Machiavelli seeks to avoid the "ethical domestication of *virtù*" to allow the prince, as well as the subjects, a greater ability to act strategically in ways that may, or may not, lead to republican outcomes.⁷

If Machiavelli's sympathies are in question, it may be more fruitful to focus on the effects and enactments of his text. When it comes to the question of such effects, it is worth paying close attention both to the rhetoric and to the construction of Machiavelli's texts (as Kahn herself suggests). If we look at his works in this way, it could be argued that Machiavelli may be doing more than secretly expressing a sympathy (if that is what he has) for the people and hoping that they rather than the Prince might heed his advice. In this essay, I will argue that when Machiavelli gives advice both to princes and subjects, he is vastly favoring the public not so much (or not only) with sympathy but also with the effects of his writings; in publishing the secret machinations of princes he is revealing their secrets, while in publishing the possibilities of a people's

⁵ Some of the better-known texts that advance this view include J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) and Hanna Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Another tangentially related debate that dominates Machiavelli studies is whether he is part of the humanist tradition or more of an advocate of "Realpolitik." For the connection to humanism, see Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) and, in a slightly different vein, Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: The Renaissance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1978). Those who distance themselves from this position include Felix Gilbert, "The Humanist Concept of the Prince and *The Prince* of Machiavelli," *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 2 (December 1939), 449–483; J.R. Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy* (New York: Collier Books, 1963); Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). More recent scholarship on such issues includes Victoria Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric: From the Counter-Reformation to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) and Miguel Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000).

⁶ Victoria Kahn, "Virtu and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli's *Prince*," in Victoria Kahn and Albert Russell Ascoli, eds., *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 199.

⁷ *Ibid.*

actions, he is giving form and strategy to a desire that is no secret at all. In this way, Machiavelli can be considered to be engaging in a language of what might be called “open secrets” or “public conspiracies,” a kind of lopsided public discourse which is explicitly non-symmetrical in character insofar as it does not help or hurt princes and publics equally. As I will argue further in this paper, Machiavelli’s use of open secrets, as well as his advocacy of using publicness (and publicity) as a weapon of popular power, allows him to pay lip service to the support of princes even as the very fact of his writing serves to promote a conspiracy of the people, a conspiracy which is, as it were, performed “hidden in plain sight,” in a language which is accessible to all but which, as we will see further, benefits only the public itself.

I will conclude this discussion by comparing Machiavelli’s relationship to the public to Kant’s (or at least Kant as he is interpreted by Hannah Arendt). I will argue against the notion that Machiavelli has no ethical code when it comes to politics. Rather, I claim that Machiavelli simply has a different ethical code than Kant, one that is defined and embodied by his understanding of conspiracy, just as he has a correspondingly different understanding of what constitutes a “public.” I will try to show further that, in some ways, Machiavelli may offer Arendt more of what she is looking for in her own considerations of politics than Kant (or her version of Kantianism) does.

Public Acts and Open Secrets

To make the argument that Machiavelli supports public conspiracies is not the same thing as claiming that he is in favor of transparency or that he calls for conspiracies that are openly proclaimed to the prince himself. In the same chapter on conspiracies considered above, Machiavelli tells us:

[I]t requires the extremest prudence, or great good fortune, that a conspiracy shall not be discovered in the process of formation. Their discovery is either by denunciation or by surmises.... [T]reachery is so common that you cannot safely impart your project to any but such of your most trusted friends.... Of such reliable friends you may find one or two; but as you are necessarily obliged to extend your confidence, it becomes impossible to find many such, for their devotion to you must be greater than their sense of danger and fear of punishment.⁸

⁸ *The Discourses*, p. 416.

Here, secrecy, that is to say, hiding one's activities from those against whom one is plotting, is both crucial and nearly impossible to maintain. Indeed, it may be because of the extreme difficulty of keeping secrets, the treachery of fellow citizens, and the various hazards posed to such conspirators, that Machiavelli resorts to a more "open" style of plotting in the first place.⁹

Throughout his writings, Machiavelli tells his readers that if they have the power to openly overthrow an unwanted government, they ought to do it; conspiracies are, by definition, committed from a position of weakness, of uncertain outcomes. As we have seen, popular conspiracies seem even more precarious than princely ones. And yet, as we will see further, Machiavelli offers the people certain advantages in their struggle with princes, advantages which may help such conspiracies to succeed despite their inherent difficulties.

The first advantage may be obvious but is worth plainly stating nonetheless, namely, the very fact that Machiavelli pontificates upon the question of conspiracies in a public, and published, venue. Even in *The Prince*, where Machiavelli seems very explicitly to be counseling princes on how to seize and maintain power at the expense of the populace, the fact that this "advice" is given in a public forum affects the impact and meaning of what Machiavelli is offering. Although *The Prince* was not in fact published during his lifetime it was widely circulated and commented upon.¹⁰ Machiavelli supposedly sent his intended Prince (first Giuliano and then Lorenzo de Medici) one version of the manuscript "beautifully lettered on vellum and richly

⁹ It is worth noting that for Machiavelli, conspiracies are generally only possible or necessary in times of unrest and discontent. For Machiavelli, a benign and popular ruler has little to fear from popular uprisings, since a republic that is blessed with *virtù* hardly needs to worry about private conspiracies. Thus, in the *Discourses* he tells us that the attempt by Spurius Cassius and Manlius Capitolinus to usurp power during a time when the Roman Republic was strong and well ordered came to nothing. In the case of Spurius, who tried to bribe the people to gain power at their expense, Machiavelli writes, "if the people had been corrupt, they would, so far from refusing this offer, have accepted it, and thus have opened the way for Spurius to the tyranny which now they closed against him" (*ibid.*, p. 437). Similarly, in the case of Manlius, despite his popularity and power, when he was put on trial, he was defended neither by the nobility nor by the people themselves. Machiavelli tells us at that time the people's "love of country had more power over them than any other sentiment" (*ibid.*, p. 439). Conspiracies by and large, then, are products of bad times, such times as Machiavelli himself lived through, and his theories about and articulations of conspiracy reflect this basic fact. Given such times, Machiavelli expects that people cannot in fact be trusted to keep secrets. This is where Machiavelli's strategy of open conspiracy comes into play.

¹⁰ Garrett Mattingly, "Machiavelli's Prince: Political Science or Political Satire?" *The American Scholar*, vol. 27 (1958), p. 491. The *Art of War* was the only major text of Machiavelli's that was actually published in his lifetime. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1965), Introduction by Neal Wood, p. xviii.

bound,” but he also circulated the manuscript amongst his friends and other selected audiences.¹¹

Were Machiavelli to have written *The Prince* as a private letter to one prince, the same book would take on a very different connotation. In such a case, the argument that there is any kind of republican agenda in the book would be harder to defend, since the prince himself would be the sole audience for whom the book was intended (unless you could argue that somehow Machiavelli wanted to subvert the prince by giving him bad advice). By definition, Machiavelli is “advising” the prince in public, that is to say, before an audience who is witnessing, reading, and learning about his counsel. Thus, whereas princes almost by definition have private advisors who tell them how to manage power, to publicize such counsel is in a sense to let the rest of us in on the prince’s secrets (in the guise of advising him). In publishing his work, Machiavelli creates a kind of non-symmetrical relationship insofar as telling the Prince’s secrets hurts the prince and helps the people. The very existence of the text of *The Prince* as a publicly circulated document thus performs a kind of advantage on behalf of the people.

If we keep the public nature of this discourse in mind, it may change the way we interpret specific passages in Machiavelli’s writing. For example, in the *Discourses*, he writes:

If republics are slower than princes, they are also less suspicious and therefore less cautious; and if they show more respect to their great citizens, these in turn are thereby made more daring and audacious in conspiring against them.¹²

This passage can be read in two ways: either as “advising” the prince on how to take advantage of people (republics are “less suspicious and therefore less cautious”) or warning republics not to be taken advantage of by would-be princes (who are “thereby made more daring and audacious in conspiring against them”). We can see that although the language seems neutral in regards to outcome, the very fact of being widely circulated inherently throws Machiavelli’s lot in with the reading public since princes by definition know how to seize or maintain power, but the people may not be so well versed (or so well guarded against a prince’s machinations, as we see in this very example).

¹¹ Mattingly, “Machiavelli’s Prince,” p. 491. Mattingly points out that this copy has never been seen since, possibly implying that the Medicis were less than thrilled with Machiavelli’s “gift” to them.

¹² *The Discourses*, p. 431.

An even greater popular advantage for Machiavelli lies in his understanding of the quality of so called “public” knowledge among both princes and people, establishing exactly the non-symmetrical nature of these respective knowledges to which I have been referring. In the *Discourses* he writes:

[The people, in seeking to “bestow office” on one of their number] do ... better ... when they base their choice upon a number of good actions known to have been performed by him; for in that case they are never deceived.... Thus the people are always less liable to the influence of erroneous opinions and corruption than princes; although it might happen that the people are deceived by public opinion and the fame and acts of a man, supposing him to be better than he really is, which would not happen to a prince, who would be informed of it by his counselors. Therefore so that the people might not lack similar counsel, the wise lawgivers of republics have ordered that, in the appointment of men to the highest positions, where it would be dangerous to place inefficient persons, every citizen should be allowed, and in fact it should be accounted honorable [e gli sia imputato a Gloria—literally, “to attribute glory to them”] for him to publish in the assemblies the defects of any one named for public office; so that a people fully informed, might form a more correct judgment.¹³

Here, Machiavelli directly acknowledges the different perspective of princes and people. Princes have one single perspective, relying on their own judgments and also on the quality of their counselors. The people, when left to their own, separate, devices, are not dissimilar, but when they are allowed access to “public” information (i.e., when they have access to each other, when they form an actual and interactive public), they have a more multifaceted and hence possibly more objective understanding of things (insofar as they are “less liable to the influence of erroneous opinions and corruption than princes”). Although they too can be deceived, their multitudinousness is itself the people’s best defense against misjudgment. In this case, their knowledge is not based on personal belief, which is fallible and easily deceived, but also on the experiences and knowledge of all their individual members. Collectively the people can be said to “know” everything about those who live amongst them, while the prince only “knows” what he himself has experienced or has been told to be true. In speaking of members of the populace “publishing” their

¹³ Ibid., p. 512; *Discorsi in Opere*, p. 398.

knowledge of various other persons, Machiavelli directly acknowledges the potentially different and better epistemology of the people. Making something publicly known adds it to the collective experience; it is no longer part of the private domain of princely “advice.”

In a similar vein, Machiavelli describes the ways that the public may be not only better informed, but a better judge than princes. This better judgment is, once again, a product of the public’s unique position and perspective. For example, in *The Art of War*, Machiavelli speaks of soldiers who fight to the death for their general. He tells us that one factor that motivates these soldiers is the esteem that they have for the general himself: “Such esteem is a result of the opinion they have of his *virtù*, rather than of any particular favor they have received from him.”¹⁴ In other words, in this case, esteem is not simply a matter of favors and opinions but is a recognition of the public spiritedness of the general himself. As members of that public, the soldiers are acknowledging not just a personal favoring (as they might presumably do with the prince), but rather, their collective self-interest as reflected in the concept of *virtù*.

For Machiavelli, public esteem (or “glory”), like public knowledge, must be actually produced by certain practices and institutions (“e gli sia imputato a Gloria”).¹⁵ Once again in *The Art of War*, Machiavelli considers

¹⁴ *The Art of War*, p. 129.

¹⁵ *Discorsi in Opere*, p. 398. Perhaps Machiavelli’s most famous passage concerning glory comes in *The Prince* when he describes Agathocles, the commoner who rose to power via sheer brutality. He famously writes, “It cannot be called virtue to kill one’s fellow citizens, betray one’s friends, be without faith, without pity, and without religion; by these methods one may indeed gain power, but not glory” (*The Prince*, p. 32). In her consideration of this passage, Victoria Kahn contends with various interpretations, specifically comparing Machiavelli’s treatment of Agathocles in chapter 8 of *The Prince* and his treatment of Cesare Borgia in the preceding chapter. Borgia, although equally brutal, was the more popular of the two, and Machiavelli seems to consider his actions more favorably than Agathocles’. Kahn distances herself from Claude Lefort’s claims that Machiavelli was being entirely critical of Agathocles. She notes that Agathocles is soon after “offered as an example of someone who used cruelty well rather than badly, and who was consequently ‘able to reassure people, and win them over to his side with benefits’” (Kahn, “Virtu and the Example of Agathocles,” p. 205). But as we have already seen, such actions in and of themselves do not lead to glory, but only to acquiescence (maybe even popularity), a private calculus that each of us makes for ourselves. Kahn furthermore hints that there remains at least the possibility of some ethical substance in the nature of glory, although not necessarily something that classical rhetoricians would recognize. In what she calls an “optimistic” version of how to read Machiavelli (and she goes on to supply a more pessimistic reading as well), Kahn writes of how the need to win esteem—and ultimately glory—can in effect serve as a real check on private ambition:

The prince must in the long run please his audience if he is to maintain his rule. In the end, the rhetorical topic of truth proves to involve an ironic

that one of the reasons that the Romans were so successful in maintaining their republic for so long was that they were very good at publicly recognizing merit, particularly the merit of selflessness and courage in war. He writes:

In this manner, each man's desert was properly taken notice of, recompensed by the consuls, and honored publicly; those who obtained any reward for services of this kind, besides the reputation and glory which they acquired among their fellow soldiers, were, when they returned from the wars, received by their friends and relations with all kinds of rejoicing and congratulations. It is no wonder, then, that a people who were so exact in rewarding merit and punishing offenders should extend their empire to such a degree as they did; they are certainly highly worthy of imitation in these respects.¹⁶

Here, glory is actually produced through the workings of the state itself such that it forms and enacts the very public who respond to it.¹⁷ This is a kind of virtuous cycle of continual collective affirmation.¹⁸

version of the ethical constraint that the humanists located in custom and consensus. This constraint also helps us to see how the analysis of power in *The Prince* logically gives way to that in the *Discourses*: the prince, to be successful in the long run, must found a republic because republics are capable of greater longevity and *virtù* than principalities. The “understanding” reader will see that when representation and force are mutually implicated, when representation becomes a means of power, and thus finally when power is mitigated by the exigencies of persuasion, the short-lived individual self-aggrandizement gives way to communal glory, and the prince must of necessity become a fellow citizen. (Ibid., pp. 213–14)

Kahn demonstrates quite effectively how Machiavelli does not merely describe but practices the manipulations of public esteem (taken in its broadest sense) on his own readers. To get the reader to accept a more destabilized and contingent notion of *virtù*, the very question of what they find worthy of esteem must itself be explored and exploited. It is worth noting, however, that when we add public conspiracy as an actual possibility in Machiavelli's considerations, the need to either tolerate or depend on a prince lessens considerably.

¹⁶ *The Art of War*, p. 164.

¹⁷ Although this example is drawn from the ancient Roman republic, a time when *virtù* is widespread, as Machiavelli points out in the beginning of the *Discourses*, there is no reason that contemporary people cannot similarly recognize and respond to *virtù* or acts worthy of glory.

¹⁸ Elsewhere in his work, Machiavelli supplies examples of the political effects of glory. We have already seen his discussion of Manlius, whose corrupt ambitions, Machiavelli tells us, were thwarted by the judgment of the people of Rome. Quoting Livy himself, Machiavelli writes of Manlius: “Thus ended the career of this man, who would have been memorable had he not been born in a free community” (*The Discourses*, p. 339). And he goes on to write: “[T]he means of attaining glory are different in a republic that is corrupt from what they are in a republic that still preserves its institutions pure” (ibid.). But even in a corrupt (or at least semi-

Here again we see Machiavelli praising the Roman Republic for practicing a kind of public knowledge that seems inherently oriented towards the public. Here too we see a kind of non-symmetry insofar as with a prince, one mainly admires (loves) him or dislikes (fears) him for his personal qualities, whereas in the case of the public it is the knowledge by and relationship to the public as such which matters. Since the prince is by definition not part of the public, he is removed from such practices. He might be incidentally better or worse for various aspects of public life or for various individuals who make up part of that public. He may earn their esteem based on his own particular qualities, but he is subject to a different calculus.¹⁹

In the passages considered above, Machiavelli praises the Roman republic for institutionalizing the publicization of information and of glory, and hence, making the Roman public a functional, enduring entity. Yet it is true that in his own time, such conditions no longer existed, suggesting that the public no longer existed in the ways that Machiavelli might desire; certainly it no longer has access to the very advantages that for Machiavelli are crucial in overcoming princely opposition. Machiavelli, however, partially fulfills this absent role himself by publicizing these strategies in the pages of his texts (and, as we will see, in the performance of his plays). In this way he reproduces (albeit in a conspiratorial, rather than institutionalized form) the Roman republic's use of publicness. Or perhaps more accurately, he advertises this strategy (in the guise of merely describing it) to alert would-be conspirators to the advantages and uses of the institutionalization of "popular knowledge."

The Rhetorical Figure of *Adianoeta*

In light of Machiavelli's acknowledgment of the differing perspectives between prince and people (a difference he famously dramatizes in his dedicatory letter to the Medicis via his contrast between the "high" perspective of the prince and

corrupt) republic, glory can still have a positive effect insofar as he tells us that "all states necessarily come to [corruption], unless (as we have shown above) they are frequently reinvigorated by good examples, and brought back by good laws to their first principles" (ibid., p. 440).

¹⁹ An entirely different set of judgments applies to the prince, a private language of interest and power, as opposed to a public language of duty and collective judgment. The public is perfectly conversant with the prince's "private" language. Indeed, Machiavelli's books are full of examples of the public being seduced and cajoled (where they alternatively "love" and "fear" the prince). Yet, in addition to this set of criteria, by virtue of being a public at all, the people also recognize another dimension of esteem, one that does not spontaneously adhere to various individuals and actions, but which is produced via the strategies of publicness that Machiavelli advocates throughout his work.

his own “low,” popular perspective), we might say that a given fact, statement, or opinion can be understood according to two entirely separate epistemologies: the prince’s private one and (potentially at least) the people’s public one.²⁰ Accordingly, anything that is said or done in “public” speaks, at least potentially, to people in a way that it does not speak to the prince himself. Here we get a better sense of the sources of the non-symmetry for Machiavelli, how apparent even-handedness can play into the public’s hands because saying one thing does not mean the same thing to all members of a given society, nor does it help all members equally.²¹

Rhetorically speaking, this understanding can be seen as Machiavelli employing the rhetorical figure of *adianoeta* (literally, “not noticed”), wherein words or phrases are understood to have two separate meanings, one “obvious” and one more subtle. We have already seen examples of this figure in our various ways of reading Machiavelli’s “advice,” depending on which audience is intended. As a rhetorical figure, *adianoeta* is particularly understood to mean that various members of an audience will understand the same words differently, some let in on the ironic nature of the figure and some not. While in classical rhetoric it might be the general understanding that the use of *adianoeta* allows those elites “in the know” to get a better sense of the esoteric meaning of a phrase or a word than the general audience, in Machiavelli, the figure is given a decidedly republican cast. Here, being “in the know” is a category reserved for the ordinary citizen, while the one who is excluded from knowledge is that most elite figure of all, the prince. If we consider Machiavelli to be employing this figure, we become explicitly aware of the critical role of the audience in terms of his discourse; Machiavelli’s language is not aimed at some generic audience but discriminates in terms of how it will be received. With this notion

²⁰*The Prince*, p. 4.

²¹ Machiavelli furnishes many instances of such non-symmetries not only of epistemology but of effectiveness. For example, in the *Discourses*, he tells us:

Rome was a republic that produced citizens of various character and disposition, such as Fabius, who was excellent at the time when it was desirable to protract the war, and Scipio, when it became necessary to terminate it. It is this which assures to republics greater vitality and more enduring success than monarchies have; for the diversity of the genius of her citizens enables the republic better to accommodate herself to the changes of the times than can be done by a prince. For any man accustomed to a certain mode of proceeding will never change it, as we have said, and consequently when time and circumstances change, so that his ways are no longer in harmony with them, he must of necessity succumb. (*The Discourses*, p. 442)

Here, the very plurality of the people is an advantage, for it supplies the right person for the right time in every case.

of *adianoeta* in mind, we can see how Machiavelli actually speaks, as it were, a double language without seeming to.

To see the workings of *adianoeta*, and to see how the value of publicness itself serves Machiavelli in a conspiratorial fashion, let us consider two of Machiavelli's best known plays, *Mandragola* and *Clizia*. Both appear on their surface to be frivolous, sexually themed farces, but in the prologue to *Mandragola*, Machiavelli warns us not to take him too lightly. If we take this advice to heart, we can see that in some senses these plays may serve as instantiations of what Machiavelli otherwise appears to be advocating or practicing in his more formal texts. After all, in the case of his plays, he has a live audience, responding to and interpreting his words. Here, in other words, he is not merely dealing with a "reading" public, but an actual one, whether composed of his fellow Florentines or other audiences. With this explicit presence of the public, some of the character of Machiavelli's "public conspiracies" becomes clearer. We will see how Machiavelli advocates for and employs the figure of *adianoeta*. We will also see how, by ensuring that the public is informed and vigilant, public conspiracies can succeed (as in *Mandragola*), while would-be princely conspiracies can be foiled (as in *Clizia*). Finally, we will see the nature of Machiavelli's "deception" insofar as what he advocates is not "lying" per se, but rather, deceiving only the prince while speaking the (properly encoded) "truth" to everyone else. In these plays, Machiavelli not only reveals these principles, but he dramatizes them via the plots of the plays themselves.

Mandragola

In *Mandragola* ("the Mandrake Root") we see a cast of characters plotting (conspiring) to seduce a young married woman. Machiavelli's foil in the play is named Ligurio, a behind the scenes plotter who contrives to help a younger man named Callimaco to seduce Lucretia (in Italian, Lucrezia), the wife of an older, foolish man named Nicia. (who is often considered a kind of stand-in for a prince).²² Lucretia herself can be seen as a stand-in for Florence, for the public which has to be wooed by a younger, more deserving man. In hatching his plot, Ligurio has Callimaco pose as a doctor who offers to "cure" Lucretia's infertility (in fact it is obviously Nicia who is infertile) by having her consume a mandrake root. The "doctor" tells her that the root will allow her to become pregnant but that it is also a deadly poison which will kill the next man she

²² This is certainly the way that Hanna Pitkin interprets the play (see Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman*, p. 30).

sleeps with. Callimaco then effects a second disguise as a pauper who is meant to sleep with Lucretia to draw off the poison (himself supposedly dying in the process). Nicia, eager to become a father, actually undresses Callimaco and puts him in bed with his own wife. After Callimaco succeeds in his scheme (which can only really be called a rape), he reveals himself to Lucretia and she agrees to become his lover behind Nicia's back. At the very end of the play we get the following bit of dialogue when Nicia (now a cuckold) and Lucretia see Callimaco approaching them. Recall that Nicia still thinks Callimaco is a doctor:

NICIA: Doctor, let me present you to my wife.

CALLIMACO: With pleasure.

NICIA: Lucretia, this is the man who'll cause us to have a staff to support our old age.

LUCRETIA: I'm delighted to meet him and want him to be our closest friend [in Italian: "nostro compare," literally our dear friend or, better yet, accomplice].

NICIA: Now bless you. And I want him and Ligurio to come and have dinner with us this noon.

LUCRETIA: Yes, indeed.

NICIA: And I'm going to give them the key of the room on the ground floor in the loggia, so they can come there when it's convenient, because they don't have women at home and live like animals.

CALLIMACO: I accept it, to use it when I like.²³

This bit of dialogue perfectly demonstrates the strategies of *adianoeta*. The audience is of course laughing at all of these lines because they have access to knowledge that Nicia is denied (very much including the bawdy sexual double entendres about "staffs" [in Italian: "bastone"], etc.).²⁴ They know, as Nicia does not, that the whole story of the mandrake root is fake, a conspiracy meant to trick him. Although Machiavelli is notorious for gleefully advocating lying, neither Callimaco nor Lucretia are actually telling lies; the only person being deceived is Nicia and that is because of his limited (and private) knowledge. This is in fact not so much deception as it is *adianoeta*. Thus, when Nicia says "let me present you to my wife" and Callimaco responds "with pleasure," he is clearly alluding to the sexual pleasure he has enjoyed with her, and when

²³ Niccolò Machiavelli, "Mandragola," in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, Volume 2, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 820–21; *Opere*, p. 1033.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Lucretia says that she wants Callimaco to be her “closest friend,” here too she is telling the truth. It is only Nicia who does not understand what she means by this. The audience laughs because they are in on the conspiracy and delight in the openness with which Callimaco and Lucretia can fool Nicia.

In addition to the cast of characters described above, as already noted we also have a real audience (and hence a “public”) viewing and responding to this play. Just as for Machiavelli princes have limited perspective, Nicia has access to only one viewpoint, his own. He is furthermore subject to myriad bad advisors (the “doctor,” a priest, and Ligurio himself). The audience, on the other hand, fully understands both Nicia’s viewpoint as well as their own enlarged, public viewpoint. This helps elucidate Machiavelli’s point about the lack of symmetry between the relative perspectives of prince and population. The population can be let in on things via the very act of having the play be performed—a revival, however altered (and conspiratorial), of the Roman practice of publicization.

Callimaco and Brutus

In a way, then, the play might be considered to serve as a kind of dress rehearsal for an actual, political conspiracy. This point becomes more credible when one considers the parallels between Callimaco as a character and Junius Brutus, the founder of the Roman Republic and a prominent figure in the *Discourses*. In both cases, the hero overcomes a compromised past to rise to the occasion. In both cases, the rape of Lucretia is the pivotal event. In both cases, a conspiracy is undertaken at the expense of some prince or king (and it succeeds). There are, of course, major (and telling) differences between these characters. Callimaco is in effect the rapist, and not merely the avenger, of Lucretia and he seems to play the role more of seducer than liberator. Machiavelli reminds us that Brutus “played the fool” in the years before his establishment of the Roman Republic, whereas Callimaco is not shown to be “playing a fool” so much as being one.

Yet, different as they may be, we see a similar role for Machiavelli himself in telling their respective stories and in leading them, as it were, to a new appreciation and support for publicness itself. In both cases, Machiavelli demonstrates how a story can be spun to reconfigure a private person into a public citizen. According to Machiavelli, Livy himself offered that Junius Brutus played a fool mainly to protect his life and his property, but Machiavelli reinterprets this argument: “if we well consider his conduct we are led to believe that he had another reason, which was that by thus avoiding observation

he would have a better chance of destroying the kings.”²⁵ Here, Machiavelli plays a similar role to that of Ligurio in *Mandragola*, reinterpreting his character in order to make a conspiracy possible or effective—at least in theory—whereas one had not even existed before.

Given that in his own lifetime, Machiavelli was faced with a more or less indifferent, depoliticized public who acted largely as a collection of private and self-interested citizens (and hence, easily subject to princely manipulations), his task, as I see it, is to tell a story that would convert such specimens into active conspirators. In the case of Junius Brutus, Machiavelli shows how a previously indifferent citizen can be reconfigured as having been a “plotter” all along. In this way his fellow Florentines can similarly come to see themselves as “secret plotters” after the fact, offering a non-violent version of Machiavelli’s call to “kill the sons of Brutus” (i.e., those compromised collaborationists he lives amidst), by turning them (rhetorically) into co-conspirators.²⁶ In the case of Callimaco, we can see a strategy to get an indifferent son of the city to “fall in love with the public [i.e., Lucretia]” when they were initially motivated purely by private considerations (in this case, sexual conquest). Such strategies, which both dramatize the point and instruct the public, are made possible only via the use of “open secrets,” of *adianoeta*. With his powers of publicity firmly in hand, Machiavelli can employ a double language, instructing and reimagining his audience members (as co-conspirators) even as he fools and excludes the prince while doing so.

Such a strategy is, of course, not reserved for his plays. We see Machiavelli employing more or less the same technique in the *Discourses* when he describes how to plot against a prince:

[I]f their [i.e., the plotters’] condition be such that their forces do not suffice for open war against the prince, then they [i.e., the would-be conspirators] should seek by every art to win his friendship, and for this purpose employ all possible means such as adopting his tastes, and taking delight in all things that give

²⁵ *The Discourses*, p. 403.

²⁶ Such a conspiracy might be literally true insofar as a few years after the play was finished (in 1522), a conspiracy featuring Machiavelli’s friends Luigi Alamanni (to whom he had dedicated *Life of Castruccio Castracani*) and Zanobi Buondelmonte (to whom he had also dedicated the *Life of Castruccio Castracani*, as well as the *Discourses*) was foiled by the Medicis. Many of Machiavelli’s intellectual circle at Orti Oricellari, the estates of the family of the now deceased Cosimo Rucellai, were implicated and arrested and/or exiled. Machiavelli was let off the hook, despite great suspicion of being involved. See Ross King, *Machiavelli: Philosopher of Power* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), pp. 202–3. Mark Hulliung suggests this possibility in *Citizen Machiavelli*, p. 95.

him pleasure. Such intimacy will insure tranquility without any danger, and enable you to share the enjoyment of the prince's good fortune with him, and at the same time afford you every convenience for satisfying your resentment [e ti arreca ogni commodità di sodisfare allo animo tuo].²⁷

While he is careful to avoid any mention of himself, this passage can be read as a perfect explanation for what Machiavelli is up to in *The Prince*, beginning with the dedication, as well as an explanation for his seeming even-handedness throughout his writings. If we take this passage as being addressed specifically to a public audience (being, as it is, in the *Discourses*) we can read it as instructions for how to deploy and recognize the figure of *adianoeta*. It is like saying, “when I appear to be cozying up to the prince, know that I do so in order to better foment my conspiracy against him.” It turns Machiavelli's own seeming indifference (not unlike the indifference of Callimaco) into a conspiratorial stance and hence models for his readers a similar transformation.

Clizia

In *Clizia* we see something of a similar dynamic occurs as in *Mandragola*, although in this case it is not so much *adianoeta* that is dramatized and employed, but rather, simply an assertion of the power of publicness itself. In this case, as I interpret the play, the focus changes from how a public conspiracy can be employed to how princely conspiracies can be thwarted. In this way, reading *Mandragola* and *Clizia* in tandem, we can read these plays as the complement to Machiavelli's long chapter on conspiracies in the *Discourses*, which similarly handles both kinds of conspiracy. In the case of *Clizia*, there is not one conspiracy but two. Here too the prize is a woman, in this case Clizia herself, who never actually appears on stage. Cleander (Cleandro in Italian), a young man, is in a competition against his own father, Nicomaco, to seduce Clizia, who is a ward of the family. In order to get access to Clizia, both son and father try to get their personal servants to marry her, reasoning that with such a husband, they can then make Clizia their own mistress. This play, however, has a different outcome than *Mandragola*, one which is quite telling. Rather than have the younger Cleander triumph as Callimaco does in *Mandragola*, in *Clizia*, Machiavelli has both conspiracies essentially fail. Sofronia, the mother of Cleander and wife of Nicomaco, initially conspires with her son to keep her husband away from Clizia. She plays a trick on her husband by having her male servant dress up as Clizia and

²⁷ *The Discourses*, pp. 403–4; *Discorsi in Opere*, p. 315.

beat up Nicomaco when he makes advances on “her” after a phony (and same-sex) wedding. Yet after the short-term triumph of Cleander’s conspiracy, Sofronia decides that Cleander’s proxy cannot marry Clizia either, effectively denying Cleander’s quest. It is only at the end of the play that Sofronia changes her mind. Clizia’s rich father from Naples arrives and a proper marriage between Cleander and Clizia is arranged.

In this play, we see again the power of publicness. For either Nicomaco’s or Cleander’s conspiracy to succeed, they rely on secrecy and guile. Sofronia’s “counter-conspiracy” (if that is what we should call it), on the other hand, relies upon the public in order to succeed. Sofronia counts on the shame that either would incur if their plot was exposed, and she uses especially her husband’s secrecy as a weapon against him. When Sofronia triumphs over her husband, she tells him:

I never wanted to make a joke of you; but you’re the one who’s wanted to do it to all the rest of us, and finally to yourself. Aren’t you ashamed to have brought up a girl in your house with such care, and in every way as daughters of the best families are brought up, and then to try to marry her to a rascally and shiftless servant, because he’s willing you should lie with her? Did you think you were dealing with blind people, or with those who couldn’t upset these shameful plans of yours? I confess that I’ve managed all those tricks that have been played on you because, if I was to make you come to your sense, there was no other way than to get so many witnesses to your actions that you’d be ashamed, and then shame’d make you do what nothing else could.²⁸

To which a defeated Nicomaco replies: “[m]y Sofronia, do what you like; I’m prepared not to go beyond the limits you set, if only the thing doesn’t get known [non si risappia].”²⁹

In this case, Sofronia is not employing the figure of *adianoeta* directly, but she nonetheless is taking advantage of various forms of knowledge, both public and private, and using that difference to her advantage. Here, as with *Mandragola*, the nature of Sofronia’s deception is different than either Cleander’s or Nicomaco’s. Sofronia deceives these two men but she does not

²⁸ Machiavelli: *The Chief Works* (“Clizia”), p. 861.

²⁹ Ibid. Also see “Clizia” in *The Comedies of Machiavelli: Bilingual Edition*, eds. David Sices and James B. Atkinson (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1985), p. 386. “Risappia,” a term used in another form by Sofronia herself (right after the passage cited above) is a conjugation of the verb *risapere* which means “to make known” (from *sapere*, “to know”).

deceive the audience. Unlike these two figures, who are moved only by their private lusts, Sofrania has the esteem and interest of the public as her goal all along.³⁰

Although it is true that Cleander ends up with Clizia in the end, he gains her only through the ministrations of his mother, who has the true power in the family. While father and son operate from fear of exposure, Sofrania enlists the audience, who are omnipresent, as her allies; in her case, exposure (i.e., “publicness”) is not to be feared but is rather her prime weapon, the key to her strategy. The audience here is both figural and literal. They are figured in the play as a kind of viewing public whose scrutiny both Nicomaco and Cleander fear, but it is also a literal audience composed of the members of the Florentine public who have come to watch the play. In this way, the audience is, as it were, let into the plot, brought in on the joke at Nicomaco’s (and Cleander’s) expense. In this way, both *Clizia* and *Mandragola* can be shown to represent attempts to dramatize and reveal the strategies of conspiracy (and counter-conspiracy). Both plays draw upon even as they produce a sense of “publicness” which then serves as a weapon against princes (or at least princely figures).

The power of such conspiracies may be such that they overcome the compromises even of their author, Machiavelli himself. Several scholars have noted the similarity between the name “Nicomaco” and “Niccolò Machiavelli,” arguing that Nicomaco is a foil for Machiavelli himself.³¹ *Clizia* was written

³⁰ Ronald Martinez points out that the name Sofronia is etymologically related to the Greek virtue of *sophrosyne*, i.e., self-restraint or continence. See Ronald L. Martinez, “Benefit of Absence: Machiavellian Valediction in *Clizia*,” in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, p. 132.

³¹ In his analysis of *Clizia*, Martinez makes this claim, although he does not do so in terms of conspiratorial politics. For Martinez, the character of Nicomaco represents not some prince-like figure but rather Machiavelli himself (the name Nicomaco being, once again, a shortening of Niccolò Machiavelli—an argument that might be extended to “Nicia” in *Mandragola* as well) and that the play represents Machiavelli’s own bid for esteem and immortality. Martinez argues that Nicomaco’s failure to get Clizia is indicative of Machiavelli’s own advancing age. By showing Nicomaco to have been “reformed,” Machiavelli may in part be acknowledging the power of nature (or *fortuna*) over human action and that (as he says too in the *Prince*) some accommodation has to be reached. Martinez writes: “The drubbing of Nicomaco staged in *Clizia* consequently goes beyond mere self-chastening; it finally helps the author make his bid for fame as a playwright, humanist, and civilizer—in Machiavelli’s typology, for elevation to the rank of a cofounder, an *ordinatore*—one who joins in the continuous struggle to reestablish a *vivere civile*, now understood in a new, more comprehensive way” (ibid., p.142).

As Martinez notes (via Nino Borsellino), Machiavelli’s term “ritornare al segno” (“return to the mark”), often used to describe the way republics return to their origins, is also used to describe Nicomaco’s return to morality in *Clizia*, but “[u]nlike collectivities, however,

relatively late in Machiavelli's life and may suggest his own ambivalence about the compromises he was forced to make to regain some of his lost status in a post-republican Florence. Clearly, he had more or less successfully "cozied up" to the Medicis by that point, sitting out—or at least not being implicated in—the 1522 plot by many of his friends (including Zanobi Buondelmonti, to whom the *Discourses* is dedicated). But even if Machiavelli himself has become too compromised by his own comportment (i.e., even if his conspiracy remains on a purely rhetorical level) through his plays, Machiavelli shows how even his own compromises can be defeated by publicness. He shows that some kind of *virtù* can be brought even to the tired, the old, and the compromised (be it Nicomaco or Niccolò Machiavelli), thanks to the strategy of publicity, a strategy that favors no one individual person, not even Machiavelli himself, but works solely on behalf of the public as a whole.

Conclusion: Open Secrets and the Ethical Imperative

Returning to the question of the effects and outcomes of such a conspiratorial strategy, we might ask, if Machiavelli is not advocating lying and deception per se (or perhaps, if his advocacy of these things tends to be directed to princes rather than people), then can we consider him to be an "ethical" theorist after all? Even if we override a Derridean queasiness about the term "ethics," it is still not clear that Machiavelli would qualify for such a term, regardless of how we define it.³² After all, *something* illicit seems to be happening in Machiavelli's plays and books. He obviously relishes pulling one over on people (even if they seemingly deserve to be so deceived). His plays seem to celebrate cuckoldry, humiliation, and possibly even rape. Can we really consider such a figure to practice or promote a desirable set of ethics?

In order to answer this question, we should make a distinction. If by ethics we mean a moral and philosophical construct, then no, we cannot and should not consider Machiavelli to be an ethical political theorist. His contempt for what in ordinary English is confusingly called "virtue" (as opposed to the more muscular Machiavellian *virtù*) is marked and his love of gruesome and

Nicomaco cannot return to a previous point; as a numerical individual, he cannot be restored or reborn" (ibid., p. 136). The similarity of names does merit this kind of argument, although I would suggest that Nicia and Nicomaco may serve simultaneously as a kind of foil for Machiavelli himself as well as for some "prince-like" figure. This is certainly clear in the case of Nicia when Machiavelli complains (through one of his characters) that fortune has unfairly favored him—an attitude that can readily be connected to his considerations of the Medicis.

³²Derrida tends to speak of "responsibility" instead of ethics. See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 41.

tawdry tales probably disqualifies him from conventional ethical theory. But if we think about Machiavelli politically, that is to say, if we think about his *political* ethics (if such a term may be permitted), then perhaps we may consider him in light of this question after all. Machiavelli will always subordinate any principle, whether moral, religious, or otherwise, to political concerns (which is one of the reasons that he is so beloved by so many political theorists), and as such, the real question to ask with him may be to what extent does Machiavelli's understanding of public conspiracies offer us an "ethical" form of political behavior?³³

When we compare Machiavelli's notion of public conspiracies with Hannah Arendt's depiction of Kant's ideas about conspiracy and revolution, we can be better judges of how Machiavelli's strategy works and also whether such a system is practicable or desirable. In her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt produces what she contends is the political philosophy that Kant never wrote, particularly in terms of the question of judgment and politics. In his interpretations of her text, Ronald Beiner cautions us that we are not really dealing with Kant himself here; Arendt interprets Kant for her own purposes.³⁴ Keeping this in mind, we nevertheless see in Arendt's rendition an important set of points about the relationship between morality and political acts. Arendt tells us that for Kant any moral act must accord with the "transcendental principle of publicness."³⁵ This means that to be moral, an act must be able to be publicly declared beforehand. By definition, then, a conspiracy would be immoral because to announce it publicly would be to end it before it even started. For Kant, the true and proper judge of the morality of a given action is not the actor him- or herself, but rather, the "disinterested spectator," someone who is not involved in the event in question at all. Such a spectator constitutes the very public to whom that the moral act is to be

³³ In light of the Derridean concerns expressed earlier, we might say instead a "responsible" political theory. I'm sticking with the term "ethical," however, insofar as I will be comparing Machiavelli to Kant (or rather, to Arendt's version of Kant as somewhat mediated by Ronald Beiner), and Kant is an ethical thinker if anyone is.

³⁴ Beiner writes, for example, that "this liberty with Kant's written work is to some extent deliberate, for the claim that he did not have a viable political philosophy serves to justify Arendt's reconstruction of his unwritten political philosophy" (Ronald Beiner, "Interpretive Essay," in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982], p. 142). Beiner is not entirely critical of this tendency, he sees it in part as a way for Arendt to reconcile what she sees as the tragic nature of judgment with political life. Still, at several points, he bemoans a retreat that Arendt makes from seeing judgment as a cognitive and intellectual faculty. By making an essentially aesthetic argument (rooted in Kant and based on the fact that the world of politics is fundamentally for Arendt a world of appearances), she abandons her earlier conviction that judgment is part of the *vita active*.

³⁵ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 48.

revealed. As Arendt puts it, “[f]or the actor, the decisive question is ... how he appears to others (*dokei hoi allois*); the actor is dependent on the opinion of the spectator.”³⁶ For Arendt, this leads Kant into some curious traps. For example, he extols the French Revolution as epochal but condemns all of the particular actors of the French Revolution as venal and immoral. Similarly, for Kant, to plot a coup against a tyrant is immoral but to succeed in overthrowing a tyrant is moral. While he cannot approve of secret machinations, Kant’s sympathies, like Machiavelli’s, lie with the people themselves.

If such a move frustrates Arendt in her attempt to find a political philosophy in Kant, she does not really let on. Indeed, she appears to consider him favorably against Machiavelli himself when she writes that for Machiavelli “it is true that by resisting evil, you are likely to be involved in evil, [yet] your care for the world takes precedence.”³⁷ For Arendt, Kant’s argument is that, although in individual cases evil must be suffered to avoid doing evil oneself, the “idea of progress” that is invested by the disinterested spectator’s long term view of history tends to mean that in the end good (with some help from the self-destructive nature of evil) wins out.³⁸

The contrast between Arendt’s version of Kantian publicness and Machiavelli’s is thus quite stark. For Kant the central agent in action is not the actor but the disinterested spectator, while, as we have seen, for Machiavelli, his goal is almost the opposite; through his books, writings and plays, Machiavelli wants to convert disinterested spectators (such as Callimaco or the imagined readers of the *Prince* and *Discourses*) into interested actors. This is the point of all of his writings. Also, for Kant, one does not actually have to be physically together to know, or even to have ever met each other to constitute, a “public.” As Arendt notes herself, Kant considered himself a world traveler without having ever left his native Königsberg.³⁹ For Kant it is the act of imagination that is key to connecting with others, even spectral others that exist as utter abstractions. One need only imagine publicness to achieve it as a moral principle. Arendt reminds us that there is some limit to this abstraction: we must have actual people in the world in order for publicness to be possible. She tells us that for Kant the world would be a desert without human beings. But we don’t need those people to do anything more than exist some place, somewhere, for them to constitute a kind of “public.” By definition, she tells us, for Kant,

³⁶ Ibid., p. 55.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 50–51.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

“spectators exist only in the plural” but they have no necessary content other than this one quality.⁴⁰

Machiavelli on the other hand, has a very particular public in mind—the actual public of Florence, the public that he knows, his readers and his audience. This is a local, tangible public to whom he reaches out in his books and plays. As we see in the case of *Mandragola* and *Clizia*, Machiavelli’s public serves not as an imagined audience (as with Kant) but as a real, vital audience which may be neither harmonious or even always correct in its assumptions. Conceivably one could argue that insofar as these books and plays have an appeal to audiences beyond Florence, one could say that there, too, Machiavelli “imagines” a public; but even in this case, the publics that he imagines are actual communities, held together by bonds and experiencing common and real oppressions that he would like to address.⁴¹

If Arendt appears to prefer Kant to Machiavelli, at least as she figures Kant in this text, it seems to be because of what Machiavelli is willing to countenance for the sake of freedom. But if we revisit the notion of Machiavellian conspiracy vis-à-vis what Arendt appears to appreciate in Kant, we can see that Machiavelli may not be quite as immoral as he appears at first glance. As I have been arguing, it may be that what Machiavelli is calling for is not so much deception as allowing the prince’s own venal privacy to serve as a weapon against him. His nastier advice—how to cheat, lie and steal—is generally all addressed to princes. There, he is speaking their language and in the process exposing their ways to the people. When it comes to his advice to the people themselves, he generally employs an entirely different vocabulary. Indeed, the very paradox that Kant faces, whereby one must (immorally) lie and deceive in order to (morally) overthrow a tyrant, is solved by the use of the figure of *adianoeta* insofar as one *can* (and must) announce one’s intentions beforehand, only not to a disinterested spectator but rather to a very interested set of co-conspirators, one’s fellow citizens. By appearing to neutrally describe information (and thereby giving the appearance of neutrality more generally), Machiavelli is in fact publicizing it, that is to say, fomenting, at least potentially, a conspiracy of his readers and audiences, instigated in full public view.

It is here that we can see how, while failing to be an ethical philosopher, Machiavelli may yet assert an “ethical” politics. He can be considered ethical

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 63.

⁴¹ Arendt does acknowledge that Kant too had in mind a “reading public” which would make him not unlike Machiavelli in this case, but for Kant all this reading public has to do is judge, while for Machiavelli, he would like to incite them to action, if possible.

insofar as the public itself becomes, via the very practice of conspiracy he advocates, favored and empowered. The strategy of publicness thus offers a kind of ethical substance, a limit on what can and cannot be countenanced. The practice of politics that results from such strategies becomes less a naked battle for power and more a system that enshrines publicness itself as its basic principle.

Although Arendt has determined what Kant “has to say” on this subject (while recognizing the force of Kant’s own writing and thought on her interpretation), it still seems that Machiavelli might have been a better vehicle for her conception of publicness and its relationship to action (and hence, politics itself) than Kant. While for Kant, the actor is never “autonomous” because he or she is always acting for the approval of the spectator, for Arendt, action is indeed the *basis* of our autonomy because it springs, as it were, from nowhere. When we act, she famously tells us, we surprise ourselves, revealing “who” as opposed to “what” we are.⁴² This idea sits much better, as I see it, with Machiavelli’s notion of *virtù* and public conspiracies than with Kant’s own purely ethical treatment. Machiavelli can hardly be depicted as being as scrupulous as Kant when it comes to moral action, but it strikes me that in her own acknowledgment of the strange inconsistencies in Kant between approving acts and condemning actors, Arendt is coming up against a political philosophy that holds its nose against its own political nature. (To Kant’s credit, he never wrote such a political theory; it is Arendt herself who seeks to draw one out from his writings).⁴³ Machiavelli’s robust embrace of politics, his vibrant notion of publicness, and, perhaps most importantly, his notion of public conspiracies via the figure of *adianoeta*, offers, I would argue, part of what Arendt is looking for when she turned to Kant for a vision of an ethical, and also a viable, political philosophy.

Contemporary readers such as Arendt would do well to take Machiavelli’s conspiratorial strategies seriously insofar as he shows how to construct the very public that delivers him (and them) from the tyrants of his age. He shows us that we don’t have to wait around for our political allies to emerge; we can create them, as it were, out of thin air, via the narratives we tell about ourselves and by the rhetorical strategies we employ in doing so. In our own dark times marked by a tattered left, deep compromise with liberalism,

⁴² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 179.

⁴³ Beiner suggests that Kant *does* have a political theory (in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, among other places, which Arendt barely notes in these lectures), but it is one that Arendt herself is not interested in. See Ronald Beiner, “Interpretive Essay,” in *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, p. 142.

consumerism, and political indifference, Machiavelli can perhaps still play the role of Ligurio for us. What Machiavelli achieved in the media of his time, namely pamphlets, books, and plays, would surely work just as well, if not better, with newer media: film, television, the Internet. As long as there are audiences (even compromised, commercially oriented, and absentminded ones), there are always opportunities for new conspiracy and hence for new forms of political community.