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SENSORIAL LANGUAGE IN MACHIAVELLI'S *IL PRINCIPE*¹

A study of Machiavelli usually involves the challenge of deciphering and reconciling what appear to be varying and even conflicting ideas found in his works, but it is perhaps equally important to examine the modes of expression that the author devises and that provide considerable pleasure to the readers of his texts. Machiavelli himself might not approve of such a focus on the stylistic features of his writing: after all he declared in the dedicatory letter to *Il principe* that he had adopted no “ornamento estrinseco” in the work.² In like manner in *Proemio A to Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* he insisted that history books should be read for what they can teach us, not simply for any aesthetic reasons that might derive from the pleasure (“piacere”) of reading about a variety of events from the past.³ Yet, despite his insistence on the utility of texts, it is clear that he was a master of style and demonstrated this flair consistently in all that he composed. Moreover, the stylistic features of his works reveal a great deal about his very thought for, rather than being extrinsic ornaments, they may be interpreted as valuable clues to the intrinsic meaning of the texts.

Many studies have been produced concerning Machiavelli's writing style, his use of figurative language in *Il principe*, and the generally

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference of the Renaissance Society of America in San Diego (March 2009) and another was prepared for but not delivered at the conference of the Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies at Concordia University in Montreal (May 2010), p. 43.

² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il principe*, Rizzoli, Milano 1997, p. 84. All quotations from the text are taken from this edition. Machiavelli's is a conventional statement according to the rhetoric of anti-rhetoric, as defined by Paolo Valesio, *Novantiqua: Rhetorics as a Contemporary Theory*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1980, p. 43 and is not to be taken literally, of course.

³ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, ed. Giorgio Inglese, Rizzoli, Milano 1984, p. 56.

'poetic' and rhetorical nature of his prose.⁴ In an early book of 1952 on the language of Machiavelli's writings, Fredi Chiappelli examined the imagery found in *Il principe*, and in later studies too the scholar noted how, from the very beginning, the tendency toward the use of metaphors was Machiavelli's spontaneous manner of expression. Such forceful organizing images as archers, trees, rivers, dams, weather, buildings (including doors), and medicine, highlighted by Chiappelli and all of which underscore the view that states are like natural organisms⁵ subject to evolution and death, are familiar to readers of *Il principe* and are also to be found in Machiavelli's early official writings.⁶ Another particular pattern of imagery in *Il principe*, that of religious redemption, was singled out for analysis by Charles D. Tarlton.⁷ John Bernard too in an article of 2006 speaks of "the plasticity of the synthetic imagination always lurking near the surface of Machiavelli's political analyses",⁸ a feature found in one of Machiavelli's sources, namely, Lucretius, who was particularly fond of analogies.

One aspect of Machiavelli's linguistic practice in *Il principe* is the use he makes of what might be called sensorial language. An author and politician who strongly advocated adherence to actual truth ("la verità effettuale"), he often appeals to the senses in the formulation

⁴ Francesco Bausi, *Machiavelli*, Salerno, Roma 2005 provides a useful review of the literature on pp. 352-362.

⁵ Fredi Chiappelli, *Studi sul linguaggio del Machiavelli*, Le Monnier, Firenze 1952, p. 88.

⁶ In connection with Machiavelli's *Legazioni*, Chiappelli states that "la spinta immaginativa ed affettiva in cui sorgono le espressioni figurate è forte fin dagli inizi", *Nuovi studi sul linguaggio del Machiavelli*, Le Monnier, Firenze 1969, p. 43. Later in *Primi avvisi su come lavorava Machiavelli*, in *The Languages of Literature in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Peter Hainsworth et al., Clarendon, Oxford 1988, p. 124, Chiappelli speaks of "il proluvio metaforico che gli viene spontaneo" and that the author tried early on to suppress.

⁷ Charles D. Tarlton, *The Symbolism of Redemption and the Exorcism of Fortune in Machiavelli's "Prince"*, "Review of Politics" XXX, 1968, pp. 332-348. On the imagery of landscape see Charles D. Tarlton, "Fortuna" and the Landscape of Action in Machiavelli's "Prince", "New Literary History" XXX, 1999, pp. 737-755.

⁸ John Bernard, *Writing and the Paradox of the Self: Machiavelli's Literary Vocation*, "Renaissance Quarterly" LIX, 2006, pp. 59-89. He speaks of Machiavelli's "fertile imagination", "plastic imagination", and "inventive plasticity" (pp. 59, 60, 63, and 86).

of his ideas.⁹ This feature can be connected, moreover, to some of the other categories of imagery and expressive modes that underlie his best-known tract.

Before analyzing the text further it is essential to review the generally held ideas about the sensorial system that the author would have been familiar with. The five senses were traditionally arranged in hierarchical order with sight and hearing at the top. These superior senses served as the chief vehicles for cognition, as Stephen Nichols explains in his book.¹⁰ On the other hand, taste, smell, and touch (that is, the bodily senses, which were condemned in the Christian tradition as being related to sin¹¹) occupied instead positions at the bottom of the hierarchy. The same gradation informed early Renaissance love theory too with spiritual love, which involved the higher senses, winning praise over physical love, which engaged instead the lower senses and thus represented the lower rungs of the ladder of love.¹² An examination of the references to the senses in *Il principe*, will demonstrate that Machiavelli draws frequently from the lower range of the five sensorial categories, thereby overturning the traditional hierarchy inherited from the Middle Ages and also the Neoplatonic ideology that dominated much of the culture of the day.

This does not mean that Machiavelli excludes altogether what were deemed the most lofty of the senses according to the conventional scheme, for he does refer to the sense of sight, along with foresight.

⁹ The phrase appears in *Il principe*, Chapter 15, p. 147. The aesthetic element and the images relating to sensory cognition found in Machiavelli's *Dell'asino d'oro* are analyzed in Diego A. von Vacano, *The Art of Power: Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and the Making of Aesthetic Political Theory*, Lexington Books, Lanham 2007 (see especially Introduction, pp. 2 and 4). For an analysis of Machiavelli's theory of sensation see, especially pp. 83-95.

¹⁰ Stephen G. Nichols, *Prologue*, in *Rethinking the Medieval Senses. Heritage/Fascinations/Frames*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols, Andreas Kablitz, and Alison Calhoun, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2008, p. vii.

¹¹ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Introduction: Erudite Fascination and Cultural Energies. How Much Can We Know About the Medieval Senses*, in *Rethinking the Medieval Senses*, p. 7.

¹² The traditional hierarchy as related to the spatial ordering and imagery of Neoplatonic love that was typical of the Renaissance and its aspiration to reach higher levels, is described by Marc Bensimon, *Modes of Perception of Reality in the Renaissance*, in *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance: Beyond the Fields of Reason*, ed. Robert S. Kinsman, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1974, pp. 221-271.

But whereas the higher senses in the philosopher Marsilio Ficino's orderly scheme enabled man to arrive at ultimate truth and to experience the divine through contemplation of the angels and God, and even by listening to the divine music of the spheres, for Machiavelli instead sight is deceptive. An oft-quoted passage from Chapter 18 of *Il principe* explains how the majority of the people see only the surface of things. Few are those who have the possibility to feel how things really are ("tocca a vedere a ognuno, a sentire a pochi"¹³). We may deduce from this distinction between appearance and reality that feeling, or the sense of touch, is more important than seeing for Machiavelli. In this connection Wayne A. Rebhorn has observed how Machiavelli "invert[ed] the traditional hierarchy of the senses, in which sight was privileged over touch, just as he invert[ed] the beast-man hierarchy in praising his prince as a lion and a fox"¹⁴ that is, seeking models in animal and not angelic behaviour. Sebastian de Grazia too points out that Machiavelli "grants simple sight to everyone, while restricting the long sight, the touch, feel, or grasp, and the taste of history and experience to few."¹⁵ Turning to other parts of the treatise one finds that in Chapter 9 of *Il principe* foresight is designated by Machiavelli simply as "vedere", the infinitive *to see* serving as a noun in the description of the "grandi", one of the two humours of society, who, with respect to their lower placed counterparts comprising the "popolo", possess more of this quality and therefore present a greater threat to the prince.¹⁶ Furthermore, the words *prevedere* (to foresee) and *vedere discosto* (to see from a distance) are used in Chapter 3 of *Il principe*¹⁷ to delineate the quality of foresight that forms part of political *virtù*. But this attribute, displayed most excellently by the ancient Romans, involved, according to Machiavelli, nothing supernatural whatsoever. Indeed for the Renaissance writer there could be some rather questionable practices

¹³ *Il principe*, p. 157.

¹⁴ Wayne A. Rebhorn, *Lions and Foxes: Machiavelli's Confidence Men*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1988, p. 91.

¹⁵ Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1989, p. 288.

¹⁶ *Il principe*, p. 123.

¹⁷ *Il principe*, p. 93. The digitized versions of Italian literary texts available in Letteratura Italiana Zanichelli (LIZ), co-ord. Pasquale Stoppelli and Eugenio Picchi have been most useful tools for the present analysis.

associated with this type of virtue. On the subject of the need to cultivate appearances, princes are inclined to simulate and dissimulate and, in order to clarify his recommendations in this connection in Chapters 18 and 19 of *Il principe*,¹⁸ Machiavelli utilizes the verb *colorire* (to mask) and the related noun *colore* (or pretext), words whose literal meaning, colour, refers fundamentally to the sense of sight.

In spite of the often non-conventional references to sight that are quite frequent in *Il principe*, it is actually the appeal to the lower senses that is most striking in Machiavelli's text, and the contrast between sight and touch already cited is not the sole example. The analogy of taste is adopted at the end of Chapter 8 in another well-known passage based on a metaphor displaying what Chiappelli termed physicality.¹⁹ It contrasts the appropriate manner of enforcing harsh measures on the one hand – in large doses and all at once, just as one would administer a bitter medicine –, to the effective method for introducing beneficial measures, in this case gradually so that, rather than being swallowed quickly and tasted as little as possible, they will be prolonged and savoured fully (“le iniurie si debbono fare tutte insieme, acciò, che, assaporandosi meno, offendino meno: e' benefizii si debbono fare a poco a poco, acciò si assaporino meglio”²⁰). At the beginning of *Discorsi* too when in *Proemio A* Machiavelli condemns the superficial way of reading history books (“le storie”) for strictly aesthetic pleasure, he stresses that one must instead draw the sense or meaning from them (“trarne” “quel senso”) and savour the taste that they contain (“gustare di loro quel sapore che le hanno in sé”).²¹ The sense of taste is again in play here, but in this case it is a beneficial and pleasant taste that is emitted by historiographical texts.

Of particular interest, moreover, is something that, it would appear, has not been stressed by the critics to date, namely, Machiavelli's recourse in *Il principe* to the sense of smell. In Chapter 6, on the subject of imitating the greatest examples (“grandissimi esempli”), where it is advised that one aim high, as an archer would do in order to hit

¹⁸ *Il principe*, pp. 156 and 166.

¹⁹ Chiappelli, *Studi*, p. 96 refers to “la natura fisica di tale metafora”.

²⁰ *Il principe*, p. 121.

²¹ This passage from *Proemio A* of Machiavelli's *Discorsi*, p. 56, was singled out by de Grazia, p. 287, in connection with Machiavelli's ideas on knowledge.

the target, it is specified that this procedure will allow the archer to get close to or attain at least an “odore” or scent, that is, some semblance of the model’s abilities.²² Another figurative but very different usage of the term *odore* was to be found instead in Renaissance texts by Ficino²³ and Baldassar Castiglione.²⁴ In the case of Machiavelli’s two contemporaries, both representing to varying degrees the Neoplatonic ideology of the day, it is the veiled presence of divinity that is detected in the physical world or in the beauty of human beings. Far removed from them Machiavelli instead finds no hidden signs of the divine in the real world. His archer’s target consists of specific individuals like Moses and Cyrus, whose actions, however remote in time they may be, remain relevant.

But the example of olfactory elements that stands out in Machiavelli’s treatise on the prince is undoubtedly the exclamation that forms part of the rhetorical peroration in Chapter 26 of the work, to the effect that “A ognuno puzza questo barbaro dominio.”²⁵ Here the more elegant *odore*, used in a figurative sense by contemporary writers and even Machiavelli himself, gives way to a much baser appeal to the sense of smell with the verb *puzzare* (to stink). It is interesting that this strong word is placed in the midst of the uplifting final message that rings out in the exhortation of the treatise as the author urges his compatriots to rise up and unite. The concluding words of advice conveyed in the text in this manner thus remain firmly grounded in reality and, more specifically, in the senses. Yet another instance of an appeal to the olfactory sense is found just a little earlier, not far from the end of the treatise, in Chapter 23 where flatterers who fill the courts are compared to a veritable and difficult-to-avoid plague (“peste”²⁶). The

²² *Il principe*, p. 103. Salvatore Battaglia, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, Vol. XI, UTET, Torino 1981, pp. 815-817 gives many meanings for the word *odore*. While one is proper to mystical language, others include *ricordo* and *suggestione vaga*.

²³ Marsilio Ficino, *De amore*, Oratio II, Caput 6 and Oratio VI, Caput 10, in *Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon*, ed. Raymond Marcel, Société d’Edition “Les Belles Lettres”, Paris 1956, pp. 152 and 219. The term *odor* is used as a synonym of *vestigia*, or of *pedate* in the Italian version, *Sopra lo amore o ver’ Convito di Platone*, ed. G. Ottaviano, Celuc, Milano 1973, pp. 29 and 105.

²⁴ One of the several examples in *Il libro del cortegiano* (“odor di [...] divinità”, Book III, Chapter 52) is analyzed by Carlo Ossola, “*Il libro del cortegiano*”: *esemplarità e difformità*, in *La corte e il “Cortegiano”*, Bulzoni, Roma 1980, Vol. 1, pp. 54-64.

²⁵ *Il principe*, p. 194.

²⁶ *Il principe*, p. 182.

Italian word *peste*, in addition to signifying stench, often has figurative meanings too – always negative ones, of course. Such unpleasant connotations associated with disease and foul smells are present here and in occurrences of the word found in other works by Machiavelli as well, namely *Discorsi*, *Storie fiorentine*, and the poem on ingratitude. In *Discorsi*, Book I, Chapter 37 and Book III, Chapter 8, *peste* is employed to describe difficult political problems; and in *Istorie fiorentine*, Book IV, Chapter 21, a treacherous commissioner is labelled “una peste mortifera”; while in verse 40 of the poem *Dell'ingratitude*, the personified figure of Ingratitude is likened to a plague.²⁷

It is interesting to note in passing that, while stench pervades the world of human politics and human relations as Machiavelli sees them, just as they were the properties of Dante's hell (in *Inferno* the word *puzzo* occurs in Cantos 11: 5 and 29:50²⁸), Machiavelli's underworld, on the contrary, as described in the short story *Belfagor*, is orderly and harmonious, infernal clamour and corruption being relegated instead to the earthly sphere.

At this point, in addition to observing the effects of these terms as used by Machiavelli in each of their contexts, it is useful to examine the exact placing of these references to the five senses. What such an examination reveals is that in *Il principe* Machiavelli arranges them almost in reverse order with respect to the conventional hierarchy since the climax of the treatise is reached with the sense of smell and not with sight. This overturning of the hierarchy of the senses may be related to the parodic tendency of much of Machiavelli's writing – something that is evident not only in the novella *Belfagor*, but also in one of his little-known compositions, namely, the *Capitoli per una compagnia di piacere* that I have had occasion to analyze elsewhere.²⁹

²⁷ *Discorsi*, pp. 141 and 493; *Istorie fiorentine*, in *Tutte le opere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, ed. Francesco Flora and Carlo Cordié, Mondadori, Milano 1960, Vol. II, p. 198; *Dell'ingratitude*, in *Tutte le opere*, Vol. II, p. 704.

²⁸ Dante Alighieri, *La divina commedia*, ed. S. A. Barbi, Sansoni, Firenze 1959, pp. 96 and 275.

²⁹ Olga Zorzi Pugliese, *Machiavelli e le confraternite: partecipazione e parodia, in Brotherhood and Boundaries: Fraternalità e barriera*, ed. Stefania Pastore, Adriano Prosperi and Nicholas Terpstra, Edizioni della Normale (ETS), Pisa 2011, pp. 259–274; and *Machiavelli and Confraternities: Oratory and Parody, in Faith's Boundaries: Laity and Clergy in Early Modern Confraternities*, ed. Nicholas Terpstra, Adriano Prosperi, and Stefania Pastore, Brepols, Turnhout 2012 (in press).

Whether all parodic or not Machiavelli's sensorial references can certainly be related to the general verticality that structures much of the imagery underlying the text of *Il principe* and his other writings too. De Grazia describes the vertical motion that characterizes the imagistic dimension of Machiavelli's writing as an "up-and-down, ceaseless alternation"³⁰ and, in connection with the *Istorie fiorentine*, he states that Machiavelli "applies the up-and-down figure of speech to many sorts of ideas and things – states, persons, whole civilizations, fortune – and employs it in couplets of health and disease, order and disorder, rise and fall, good and bad, recovery and relapse, corruption and redemption."³¹ And to this list one could add the images which recur in *Il principe* of buildings that need foundations in order to remain standing and plants that need roots in order to withstand external forces and remain upright.

The vertically ordered hierarchy of the senses implies a veritable ladder and this image is a common feature of Platonic philosophy, in particular in the concept of the chain of being and the theory of the ladder of love. Machiavelli mentions ladders and rungs of ladders specifically in many of his political and historical works and the terms bear meanings that are quite unusual. In *Il principe* the term "scala" occurs only once, but with quite extraordinary significance, in Chapter 20 where Machiavelli discusses the usefulness of having enemies who can be challenged, thus allowing the prince to climb farther up the ladder that these opponents have provided ("su per quella scala che gli hanno porta è nimici sua, salire più alto").³² This metaphor is of particular importance since the ladder that Machiavelli speaks of leads not to spiritual elevation or moral perfection, as in the traditional discourse of the Middle Ages, but rather to earthly glory. In his authoritative historical Italian dictionary Salvatore Battaglia explains that, in Machiavelli's usage, *scala* signifies a means to reaching an objective.³³ The context in which the term occurs demonstrates how

³⁰ de Grazia, p. 252. Although de Grazia's views on Machiavelli's religiosity may not meet with general consensus, his individual observations on the texts are insightful. See my review in "Quaderni d'italianistica", A. XII, N. 1, 1991, pp. 148-150.

³¹ de Grazia, p. 242.

³² *Il principe*, p. 173. This image is mentioned but not discussed fully by Chiappelli, *Studi*, p. 85.

³³ Battaglia, Vol. XVII, 1984, p. 750 cites Machiavelli as one of the authors who use the term with this meaning.

Machiavelli secularizes the image of the ladder, just as he secularized and intellectualized the idea of a rite of passage in the letter to Vettori – a text that I commented upon many years ago³⁴ – and just as he secularized, as every student of Machiavelli knows, the very concept of virtue. The critic Roberto Esposito, although he does not compare Machiavelli's metaphor of the ladder to that of the more spiritual tradition, does refer to the verticality of power (“verticalità del potere”³⁵) that informs Machiavelli's views. This is an image that bears archetypal connotations since, as one communications scholar puts it, “[v]ertical scale images, which project desirable objects above the listener and undesirable objects below, often seem to express symbolically man's quest for power”.³⁶ Although the word *scala* occurs only once in the text of *Il principe*, the idea of a ladder is suggested in the many references to “gradi”, or rungs, steps, and stages, that appear in his other political writings as well, too numerous to list here.

Machiavelli's use of the language of the senses – in a more revolutionary hierarchy, however – is one of the semantic fields that he utilizes creatively in his writing. It is reflective of a concrete linguistic register far removed from the strong classicizing trends evident in the works of many of his contemporaries – the *odor-puzzo* contrast being emblematic of this stark difference. In his fictional works too Machiavelli places emphasis on the lower senses: suffice it to recall in *La mandragola* the body search conducted on the young Callimaco by the foolish messer Nicia, who is also made to feign deafness and is indeed lacking in good sense, or the description in *Clizia* of the stinking limbs of the elderly Nicomaco whose vision – in all senses – is impaired, or Machiavelli's epistolary account of the old Veronese prostitute, a veritable plague whose horrible appearance and smelly breath offended his eyes and his nose and caused him to vomit all over her.

³⁴ Olga Zorzi Pugliese, *Passage to Humanism: A Renaissance “topos”*, “NEMLA Italian Studies” V, 1981, pp. 15–23; *Liminality and Ritual in the Renaissance Attitude Toward Antiquity*, “*Altro Polo*” VII, 1984, special issue: *The Classical Continuum in Italian Thought and Letters*, pp. 15–22.

³⁵ Roberto Esposito, *La politica nella crisi: “Il principe”*, in *La politica e la storia. Machiavelli e Vico*, Liguori, Napoli 1980, p. 163.

³⁶ Michael Osborn, *Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: The Light-Dark Family*, in *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth-Century Perspective*, ed. Robert L. Scott and Bernard L. Brock, Harper & Row, New York 1972, p. 385.

In brief, on the basis of this analysis, one might be tempted to say that Machiavelli adopts the Aristotelian view that all knowledge begins in the senses. But rather than a fully worked out philosophy deliberately followed to its logical conclusions, his stress on sensorial language may simply be the result of a general anti-metaphysical and pragmatic stance. By expressing himself in language that gives pride of place to solid physicality Machiavelli did truly succeed in conveying “la verità effettuale della cosa”, thereby guaranteeing a lasting readership that continues to be fascinated by his writings.

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