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The Enigma of Messer Bernardo's Illegitimacy**

[stampato in *The Art and Language of Power in Renaissance Florence: Essays for Alison Brown*, ed. Amy R. Bloch, Carolyn James, and Camilla Russel. *Essays and Studies*, 42. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2019, pp. 45–64]*

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OFFPRINT FROM

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MACHIAVELLI'S FAMILY AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND: THE ENIGMA OF MESSER BERNARDO'S ILLEGITIMACY

LUCA BOSCHETTO

This essay addresses the historical foundation of rumours about the illegitimate birth of messer Bernardo Machiavelli — Niccolò's father (c. 1426–1500). These rumours began spreading during the writer's life and assumed new strength in the Italian historiography of the last decades of the nineteenth century. Since then, the question has continued to hover in studies on Machiavelli and remains unresolved.¹ In the fifteenth century, one forum where the issue apparently surfaced indirectly was in the dialogue *De legibus et iudiciis* (1483) by Bartolomeo Scala (1430–97). Addressed by the Florentine chancellor as his *amicus et familiaris*, Bernardo Machiavelli is in fact the main character of the dialogue (the other being the author himself). Focused on the issue of “whether law should be codified as the embodiment of unchanging reason, or whether it should adjust flexibly to changing circumstances,” the debate staged by Scala provides a valuable profile of Bernardo, a jurist who otherwise led a largely secluded life in Medicean Florence, neither holding public office, nor earning a living as a lawyer.² It seems quite peculiar that Scala inserted into those pages the apologue known as the *Leges*, taken from a collection of short fables he had sent to Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–92) two

¹ The foundations for the research presented here appeared in the entry on *Bartolomeo Scala*, by the present author, for the *Enciclopedia machiavelliana* (See Boschetto, “Scala, Bartolomeo.” As Scala and Machiavelli are among the authors most dear to Alison Brown, the opportunity offered by a volume in her honour to outline in broad terms the initial results of this work was irresistible. The same topic is addressed in an enlarged analysis in Boschetto, “Un uomo di basso e infirmo stato”.

² The most recent edition of the dialogue, sent to Lorenzo de' Medici in 1483, is Scala, *Essays and Dialogues*, 158–231; for an in-depth study of the topics of this work, see Brown, *The Return of Lucretius*, 27–31 (quotation in the text, 28), with up-to-date bibliography. On the implications for the young Niccolò of the friendship between Scala and his father Bernardo Machiavelli, dating back to the years when both were probably students of civil law at the Studio fiorentino, see Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, 318–320 and n. 1. For a recent biographical sketch, see Guidi, “Machiavelli, Bernardo.”

years before. This is in fact a text where “an illegitimate son of noble parents” (“nobilis spurius”) attacks the laws by which, due to the illegitimacy of his birth, he is unjustly deprived “of the rich inheritance of his family and the honor of citizenship in his country.”³ Surely such content would have been embarrassing for the interlocutor of Scala in the *De legibus*, if he were in fact illegitimate. This unresolved issue invites the following question: what impact could the possibly illegitimate birth of messer Bernardo have had on his son Niccolò, in terms of social status, citizens’ esteem, and the opportunity to take an active part in the political life of the city?⁴

In taking up this question, studies, past or recent, of Bernardo’s intellectual and cultural profile have been left aside, although they, of course, shed crucial light on the education Machiavelli received during his juvenile years.⁵ In the analysis that follows, instead, Bernardo emerges as essentially the bearer of the juridical and symbolic capital (rights and property, name, coat of arms, antiquity of lineage) transmitted from generation to generation through the paternal line. All this represented a legacy not in the least negligible, in “a society in which,” as Christiane Klapisch-Zuber reminds us, “establishing the prolongation of the lineage and proving the antiquity of its origin were the same as claiming a portion of political power and securing its steady transmission.”⁶

After briefly outlining the first modern doubts about Bernardo’s origins raised in the historiography of the second half of the nineteenth century, this essay focuses on two issues related to this problem. Firstly, it presents the main results of a new exploration of the family papers of Bernardo Machiavelli. Secondly, keeping in mind one of the most important lessons of Alison Brown’s scholarship, it uses the political language of the time to analyse a passage on the origins of Niccolò Machiavelli written by the Florentine historian Bartolomeo Cerretani (1475–1524), the more profound implications of which have been apparently disregarded in the historiography on the famous Florentine secretary.

³ See Scala, *Essays and Dialogues*, 190–192.

⁴ The status of illegitimates in the Florentine society of the time has been thoroughly studied by Kuehn, *Illegitimacy in Renaissance Florence*. See also, by the same author, “Leon Battista Alberti come illegittimo fiorentino.”

⁵ See below, n. 47, for the relevant literature on this subject.

⁶ For the quotation, see Klapisch-Zuber, “L’invenzione del passato familiare a Firenze,” 25.

*The Question of Bernardo's Illegitimacy in Machiavelli Studies
between the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*

The circumstances surrounding Bernardo Machiavelli's birth became an important issue in the era of the so-called 'Scuola storica,' starting from the 1870s. At first, the discussion centred on a letter written in the last days of 1509 by Biagio Buonaccorsi to Niccolò Machiavelli, while the latter was abroad as envoy of the Republic. In this letter, Buonaccorsi referred to the fact that Niccolò had been denounced in Florence before the notary of the Defenders of the Laws (*Conservatori delle Leggi*) by "a masked man" who confronted Machiavelli with the following assertion: "for having been born of a father etc., in no way can you exercise the office that you hold etc."⁷ The interpretation of the first "eccetera" divided nineteenth-century historians. On the one hand, Luigi Passerini commented that "Bernardo, father of our Niccolò, was born illegitimate" and Francesco Nitti concurred;⁸ on the other hand, Pasquale Villari challenged such an interpretation. In his biography, Villari was the first to speculate that the allegation against Machiavelli referred to by Buonaccorsi could instead concern "a question of taxes or debts to the State left unpaid by Machiavelli's father," disqualifying him "from holding any public office, a prohibition that the malevolent were perhaps desirous to enforce in his son's case."⁹

Since the end of the nineteenth century, the letter by Buonaccorsi has often been cited in studies on Machiavelli. With very few exceptions, among

⁷ The letter is dated 28 December 1509; for the English translation, see Atkinson and Sices, eds., *Machiavelli and His Friends*, 192–193 and 488–489 (Letter 181). The Italian text in Machiavelli, *Lettere*, 2:208–209: "[...] che per esser nato voi di padre etc., non potete ad modo alcuno esercitare lo officio che voi tenete etc." The decision by Soderini to send Machiavelli to Mantua and Verona to visit the Emperor Maximilian, where he received the letter by Buonaccorsi, was widely and bitterly contested in Florence. For these events, see below in the text.

⁸ Machiavelli, *Le Istorie fiorentine di Niccolò Machiavelli*, eds. Fanfani and Passerini, 1:lxix: "Bernardo padre del nostro Niccolò era nato illegittimo." The same claim was repeated by Nitti, *Machiavelli nella vita e nelle dottrine*, 3: "Bernardo era figlio unico ed illegittimo di Niccolò di Boninsegna." On the magistracy of the Conservatori delle Leggi, whose jurisdiction encompassed the task of verifying whether candidates appointed for public offices met all legal requirements, including the legitimacy of birth, see Zorzi, "I fiorentini e gli uffici pubblici," 733–735 (cited in Kuehn, *Illegitimacy in Renaissance Florence*, 84–85 and n. 67).

⁹ Villari, *Niccolò Machiavelli and His Times*, 3:84–86.

which it is worth remembering Sergio Bertelli, historians have generally accepted the fiscal explanation first introduced by Villari, although the question remained open.¹⁰ Not by chance, this was also the view championed by Roberto Ridolfi in his influential *Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, published in 1954. In the seventh Italian edition of his work, Ridolfi went so far as to dismiss as gossip the suppositions about Bernardo's illegitimacy that one of the scholars who preceded him had formulated.¹¹ As for the nature of the charge against Machiavelli, Ridolfi was categorical: "It is quite clear, however, that Bernardo was *"a specchio"*, that is, an insolvent debtor of the commune. This was the condition and not his father's illegitimacy which also disqualified the son from holding public office."¹²

Revisiting the Machiavelli Family Papers

Challenges to Ridolfi's reconstruction have come in the form of archival insights from the records pertaining to Bernardo and to Niccolò's grandfather (a still almost completely obscure figure and namesake), Niccolò di Boninsegna. These records offer fresh evidence that supports the illegitimate birth of Bernardo Machiavelli. While a detailed analysis is not within the scope of this brief essay, a key point to note from Bernardo's fiscal assessments is that Bernardo was already born when his father Niccolò submitted his report ("portata") in the 1427 Catasto, claiming to be single and childless. A will made by Niccolò di Boninsegna shortly before dying is also pertinent. Although, unfortunately, the original of this document has not survived, its content is known thanks to the summary made by a family friend of the Machiavelli. It seems highly significant that again, according to this precis, there was no mention whatsoever of Bernardo in Niccolò's will. As for the first issue, it has already been observed that Bernardo's father, at the time he submitted his entry in the first Catasto on 12 July 1427, was single and declared no other "mouth" ("bocca") in his household except himself. In January 1431, on the

¹⁰ See especially Bertelli, review of Martelli, *L'altro Niccolò di Bernardo Machiavelli*, 228–229. Bertelli's conjecture that Bernardo was legitimised by his father Niccolò di Boninsegna shortly after his birth, though lacking any documentary evidence, has been widely accepted in English-speaking scholarship. Starting from a different perspective, Nicolai Rubinstein also considered probable the illegitimate birth of Bernardo Machiavelli (see below n. 35).

¹¹ Ridolfi, *Vita di Niccolò Machiavelli*, 180–181 (text) and 423 (n. 19 and 20).

¹² Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, 112–113.

occasion of the next fiscal assessment, he was no longer among the living and his inheritance was considered vacant (“giacente”), since no one among those concerned with his succession had accepted it.¹³ Bernardo's father died between May and August 1430. However, it is possible that after submitting his report to the 1427 Catasto, Niccolò di Boninsegna married, potentially giving birth to offspring whose status would have been legitimate.

However, it is important to stress that such a reconstruction is not supported by adequate evidence. On the one hand, records pertaining to a bequest from Niccolò di Boninsegna exclude the possibility that he had ever married, a circumstance that would have implied, for example, the obligation for his heirs to give back the dowry to his widow. On the other hand, a systematic search through the Catasto records of both the Machiavelli family and their circle of Florentine friends has shown, without any doubt, that Bernardo actually was born *before* the enactment of the 1427 Catasto. Evidence for this is provided by two documents that have so far escaped the attention of scholars. One of these records is the *portata* submitted on 31 January 1431 for the second Catasto by Bernardo's paternal uncle, Giovanni Machiavelli. In his report, Giovanni included among the members of his household: “Bernardo, son of Niccolò Machiavelli, who is my nephew. As no one is willing to support him, I have to take care of him myself.”¹⁴ The second piece of evidence comes from the verification carried out by the Officials of the Catasto on the same occasion. The Officials, scrutinising the dependants of the household for which Giovanni Machiavelli claimed the deduction of two-hundred florins, specified that the little Bernardo was at this point “five years old.”¹⁵

¹³ See Bertelli, “Noterelle machiavelliane,” 786 n. 43. The original *portata* of Niccolò di Boninsegna is in Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF), Catasto 18, fols. 1172r–1173r. In his report, Niccolò, who was assessed in the quarter of Santo Spirito (district of Nicchio) and declared to be about forty-two years old (“anni 42 o circha”), speaking about the deductions of 200 florins allowed by the law for each individual living in the household, specified: “E più la mia persona, la quale vo' ragionate per la leggie quello che agli altri, f. 200.” In the following two fiscal surveys, assessed in 1431 and 1433, the inheritance of Niccolò was declared in both cases ‘vacant.’ See, respectively, ASF, Catasto 335, fol. 609r–v and ASF, Catasto 434, fol. 385r. On the repudiation of inheritance in fifteenth-century Florence, see Kuehn, *Heirs, Kin, and Creditors*.

¹⁴ ASF, Catasto 335, fol. 191r: “Bernardo di Niccolò Machiavelli, ch'è mio nipote e nonn è chi gli dia le spese: tocchano a dare a me”.

¹⁵ ASF, Catasto 394, fol. 90r (“anni 5”). The same age is also attributed to Bernardo in the report to the 1431 Catasto by a friend of Niccolò di Boninsegna (on this, see below in the text).

It would seem that, for reasons yet to be elucidated, Niccolò di Boninsegna decided in 1427 not to mention the existence of the son he had sired by a woman whose identity remains unfortunately mysterious and with whom the child was then perhaps residing. In so doing, he renounced the deduction that the law allowed also for illegitimate children and that Bernardo's uncle claimed four years later. Likely born sometime around 1426, the beginnings of Bernardo's life were probably, therefore, difficult, as was the case with other children who found themselves in a similar position. Though recognising that he belonged to the Machiavelli family, whose name Bernardo was entitled to bear, the law imposed many severe limitations, excluding him, for example, from ever possessing and exercising the political rights that legitimate members of the male line enjoyed.¹⁶

During his juvenile years, Bernardo lived with the families of his paternal uncles (after the death of Giovanni, in 1439, he moved to the household of the other uncle, Totto). He was apparently excluded, at least in the first instance, from the bequest left by his father. This emerges from the 1431 Catasto report of the rich banker Giovanni di Barduccio Cherichini, a friend and business partner of Niccolò di Boninsegna. From Cherichini, Bernardo would eventually receive the two paternal farms "al Poggio" and "alla Strada," both situated at Sant'Andrea in Percussina, which were in turn inherited, at his death, by his own son, Niccolò Machiavelli. However, it is telling that this estate, the only asset belonging to Bernardo when he submitted his first fiscal report in 1447, did not come directly to him from his father's inheritance.¹⁷ On the contrary, the two farms had been transferred to him some years before by Cherichini, thanks to an arbitration supervised by the Merchant Court of Florence.¹⁸ The behind-the-scenes activity of this transfer is partly revealed by the Catasto report of Cherichini, who explains that the farms had become part of his property through a legacy handed down to him from Niccolò di Boninsegna. This legacy formally aimed to pay off a debt of five-hundred florins that Niccolò owed Cherichini. However, addressing the Officials of

¹⁶ On this point, see Kuehn, *Illegitimacy in Renaissance Florence*, 70–86. For the ambivalent attitude of Florentines towards their illegitimate children that emerges from the records of the Catasto, see particularly 97–99 and 131–132.

¹⁷ For Bernardo's report, see ASF, Catasto 649, fol. 552r–v.

¹⁸ See ASF, Notarile antecosimiano 10445, fol. 49r–v, 8 April 1443. The definitive agreement was reached three years after this judgment. See ASF, Notarile antecosimiano 10445, fol. 232v, 7 May 1446.

the Catasto, Cherichini admitted that before Niccolò's death the two men had made a sort of secret deal that weighed on his conscience. Even though its precise details are not known, it would seem that the pact involved the use of the farms by Cherichini, in keeping with the wishes of Niccolò.¹⁹

On that same occasion, as already mentioned, Cherichini provided a summary of Niccolò di Boninsegna's will, which today is lost due to the dispersion of the registers of the notary who drew up the deed.²⁰ From this summary, it appears that Niccolò made his brother Giovanni his universal heir, but, in the event that the latter did not accept the inheritance, it was to pass to Cherichini, who, in the report, was hasty to declare his renunciation of the bequest. At that point, according to Niccolò's wishes his estate should have gone to the company of Orsanmichele or, in the case of a further renunciation, return to Niccolò's brothers *ab intestato*. In his *portata*, Cherichini also affirmed that Niccolò "had left a male child, named Bernardo, who is about five years old: he lives with Giovanni di Boninsegna Machiavelli."²¹ It goes without saying that, had Bernardo been of legitimate birth, his father should have mentioned him in his will, probably as universal heir, and named the guardians, who, according to the law, had to take care of minors.

As for the alleged insolvency of Bernardo Machiavelli, it is possible to demonstrate that, once married (1458), Bernardo was able to pay his taxes regularly to the Commune. This marks a difference compared to his youth, when it was very difficult for him to pay in full the forced loans ("gravezze")

¹⁹ "Niccholò di Boninsegna Machiavelli mi lasciò per testamento duo poderi posti nel popolo di Santo Andrea in Percussina, podesteria di San Chasciano cho' loro confini de' quali poderi non so la rendita de' qua' poderi segretamente e sopra mia choscientia so quello n'ò a ffare." See ASF, Catasto 331, fols. 542r–555r. See also the annotations by the Officials of the Catasto in ASF, Catasto 393, fol. 57r.

²⁰ It should be pointed out that the will was made in 1430, a period when Bernardo was certainly already alive. See ASF, Notarile antecosimiano 21425, fol. 13v: "Nicholò di Boninsegna Machiavegli 1430 fé testamento et rede Giovanni suo fratello."

²¹ "Lasciò detto Niccholò uno fanciullo maschio ch'à nome Bernardo d'età di circha anni 5, àllo in chasa Giovanni di Boninsegna Machiavelli. Fecie Niccholò suo testamento e fecemi il sopradetto lascio. E ppiu lasciò Giovanni suo fratello ereda [...]. Lasciò più debiti, a' quali non so se sopplirà il suo; dove non supplisse arei a supplire choi duo poderi di sopra scritti, e mancherebbono quello, e potrei meno supplire alla intentione sua. Però a questo bisogna avere buon righuardo, però ogniuno debba stimare quello ne voglio fare del resto, per mio honore e debito di chonscientia." See ASF, Catasto 331, fols. 542r–555v; 555r.

imposed by the Florentine authorities.²² Besides, even if it is true that Bernardo, as proved by his *Libro di ricordi*, cannot properly be described as a well-to-do citizen, the value of the real estate he declared in the Catasto of 1480, as has also been recently observed, was “not inconsiderable.” Moreover, this value was not subject, until the end of the fifteenth century, to any decreases.²³

On 28 June 1480, Bernardo personally submitted his report for the new tax (“graveza nuova”), the so-called “decima scalata”; his share exceeded thirteen florins.²⁴ In order to avoid insolvency and have his name entered on the list of the debtors of the Commune (“specchio”), a situation which would also have damaged other members of his household, Bernardo was careful to reach an agreement with the Officials of the Monte almost every year during the following decades.²⁵ His position was still solid in 1498, two years before his death. It is worth noting, for example, that by then he had been able to pay the forced loans imposed with the new tax (“ventina”) passed in January 1496, when his share amounted to two-and-a-half florins. So, in the period between August 1497 and November 1498, he paid out the sum of almost forty florins to the Commune.²⁶

If the social composition of his district, the Nicchio, was similar to that of the Green Dragon, in the same quarter of Santo Spirito, whose tax records for the 1496 *ventina* are extant, Bernardo would have positioned himself, by and large, among the middle echelons of wealth in his district.²⁷ Indeed, dur-

²² And so, for example, in the census of 1447 Bernardo, then still in his twenties, claimed his inability to pay the forced loans he owed to the Commune: “nolle posso paghare, però non ò altro: veggiate che a pena ne posso stremamente vivere.” See ASF, Catasto 649, fol. 552r-v. On the problems of these early years, see also Guidi, “Machiavelli, Bernardo,” 109–110.

²³ See on this point Conti, *L'imposta diretta*, 317: “pur non essendo molto agiato, [Bernardo Machiavelli] possedeva nel catasto del 1480 una discreta proprietà immobiliare, valutata f. 1584” and Biscione, “Il patrimonio immobiliare dei Machiavelli.”

²⁴ See Machiavelli, *Libro di ricordi*, 115–116 and ASF, Catasto 994, fols. 128r–130r. His taxable income amounted to f. 1583 s. 11 d. 1; his individual share, with the addition for the “head,” to f. 13 l. 0 s. 4 d. 0.

²⁵ This is documented in his *Memoirs*; see Machiavelli, *Libro di ricordi*, 127, 148, 171, 196, 207, and 221, as emphasised by Conti, *L'imposta diretta*, 315–317.

²⁶ ASF, Monte Comune o Delle Graticole, II, 2485, fol. 90a and fol. 90b. To be precise, he paid in total 15 “ventine” and a half.

²⁷ The extant register of the Green Dragon (ASF, Estimo 92) has been studied by Clough, *Machiavelli Researches*, 50–51.

ing the last years of his life, coinciding significantly with the period in which his son Niccolò was becoming more and more visible in the public arena, Bernardo Machiavelli was, in no way, deep in debt. Conclusive evidence of his quite sound economic station is provided by evidence that, at least from 1478, Bernardo appears to have been in possession of an investment of 1,150 florins in the public debt (Monte), the interest from which (“paghe”) he regularly employed to pay his taxes.²⁸ Thus, the reconstruction of the relationship between Bernardo and the Florentine tax authorities during the last decades of his life compels us to abandon once and for all the theory of his insolvency, dear to Ridolfi and to many other historians after him. In other words, those who insist on explaining the “eccetera” of Buonaccorsi’s letter in terms of a default of tax payments by Niccolò’s father simply challenge the facts.

*“Niccolò Machiavelli, Chancellor, Son of a Bastard
of the Machiavellis”*

If Buonaccorsi’s intention, in the letter to Machiavelli, had been perhaps not to be too explicit about Bernardo’s past, the historian Bartolomeo Cerretani, on the contrary, was ready to assert openly the illegitimate birth of Niccolò’s father in a passage of his *Memoirs* (“Ricordi”) that reveals him as a harsh opponent of both the gonfalonier Piero Soderini and of his collaborator Niccolò Machiavelli.²⁹ It is telling that Cerretani’s declaration dates to only a few weeks before the anonymous report of December 1509 against Machiavelli. It is, furthermore, quite clear that Cerretani’s words originated from the same, embittered political climate. Elected in September of that year among the Twelve Good Men (“XII Buonomini”), one of the advisory colleges of the *Signoria*, Cerretani emphasises the severe disagreement that divided him and his colleagues on the one side, and the gonfalonier Soderini and the *Dieci di Balìa* on the other. The clash became even more evident when the

²⁸ It will be sufficient to cite only the first register, concerning the creditors for the Quarter of Santo Spirito, dated 1477–1478, where it is written: “messer Bernardo di Niccolò di Boninsengna Machiavegli f. millesessantatre” (ASF, Monte comune o delle graticole, II, 203, fol. 19r); and the last register where the credit appears, dated 1500–01: “messer Bernardo di Nicholò Machiavegli f. millecentocinquantuno,” followed by the scribe’s usual annotation, at the margins of the yearly accumulated interest, “danosi per le sue gravetze.” See ASF, Monte comune o delle graticole, II, 221, fol. 18r.

²⁹ On Cerretani’s attitude towards Machiavelli, see the biographical sketch by Malanima, “Cerretani, Bartolomeo.”

Ten decided to appoint Machiavelli, their chancellor, as envoy for a delicate mission to the Emperor Maximilian (r. 1508–19). He was to travel to Mantua with the second instalment of the considerable sum that the Republic of Florence had agreed to pay to the emperor.³⁰ With regards to this difficult situation, Cerretani recorded in his *Memoirs* that the government decided “to send Niccolò Machiavelli, chancellor, son of a bastard of the Machiavellis,” adding that the appointment of Machiavelli was decided, despite several protests and growing opposition. But because, Cerretani maintained, the chancellor was “just like a spy of the gonfaloniere,” Soderini “insisted on sending him there anyhow, thus provoking the greatest disappointment amongst the members of the College and the good citizens.”³¹ There is an evident similarity, it should be noted, between these events and what had occurred two years earlier, when Machiavelli, having already been designated by Soderini as envoy to the same Emperor, was instead replaced with Francesco Vettori. The strong opposition faced then by Machiavelli is reported in a passage of Guicciardini’s *Storie fiorentine*.³²

The embarrassment provoked by such a crude remark (“figliolo d’uno bastardo de’ Machiavelli”) led predictably to some historians trying to diminish its significance. Therefore, for example, Ridolfi argued that “these words

³⁰ Machiavelli was finally given the task of delivering the amount of 10,000 florins, the second of the three instalments agreed with the Emperor. A debate about the negotiations between the Republic and Maximilian took place among the advisors assembled by the *Signoria* on 16 October 1509; see Fachard, ed., *Consulte e pratiche*, 239–240.

³¹ Cerretani, *Ricordi*, 214: “[I Dieci] dissono che gl’era di bisogno et che vi si mandassi Nicholò Machiavelli cancelliere, figliolo d’uno bastardo de’ Machiavelli; questo a nessuno chonto non piaceva a molti pure perché gl’era chome una spia del g(onfalonie)re ve lo manddò a ogni modo, il che non potete più dispiacere al collegio e a’ buoni ciptadini.” The passage in question was first mentioned in 1911 by Oreste Tommasini, in the additions to his work on Machiavelli. See Tommasini, *La vita e gli scritti di Niccolò Machiavelli*, 2:958–959. Cerretani refers to the strong opposition met by Machiavelli also in his *Storia fiorentina*, objecting again to the conduct of Soderini: “Pure ultima[me]nte per opera del g(onfalonie)re, metendo da parte gl’ordini e la voglia de’ collegii e altri ciptadini, ve lo mandò a suo modo, e questo fu Nic(ol)ò Machiavelli chanccelliere de’ dieci, il che dispiacque assai.” See Cerretani, *Storia fiorentina*, 387–388.

³² “[...] e però si propose per molti che e’ sarebbe bene mandarvi uno uomo. E fu eletto per opera del gonfaloniere, che vi voleva uno di chi e’ si potessi fidare, el Machiavello; el quale mettendosi in ordine per andare, cominciorono a gridare molti uomini da bene, che e’ si mandassi altri, essendo in Firenze tanti giovani da bene atti a andarvi ed e’ quali era bene che si esercitassino.” See Guicciardini, *Storie fiorentine*, 297.

are spoken in malice out of hatred for Soderini and his 'mannerino' [tool],” and that “the phrase could be interpreted simply as a sneer at that decaying and, according to him, degenerate branch of the family.”³³

It would be a mistake to consider Cerretani's comment a simple verbal offence. The key for understanding the exact meaning of his expression is to be found instead in the vocabulary of contemporary politics. This becomes clear if one pays attention to the lively discussions that preceded and followed the introduction of the *Consiglio Maggiore*, the new institution that, after the fall of the Medici régime at the end of 1494, became the centre of Florentine political life. The Council, as is well known, was first established by the laws of 22–23 December, which articulated the criteria for membership. Those eligible had to be over twenty-nine years of age, be of legitimate birth, and to have the so-called *beneficio*. More specifically, a citizen who possessed the *beneficio* needed to be able to go back three generations in the direct male line, that is to the paternal great-grandfather, to find an ancestor who had occupied — or at least had been drawn from the electoral purses for this purpose — one of the offices of the *Tre Maggiori Uffici* (the *Signoria* and its two advisory colleges, the Twelve Good Men and the Sixteen Gonfaloniers).³⁴ Incidentally, the fact that the name of Bernardo Machiavelli is absent from the lists of the *Consiglio Maggiore*, even though he certainly possessed the *beneficio* (thanks to the offices held both by his father Niccolò and especially by his grandfather Boninsegna), persuaded Nicolai Rubinstein to consider credible the rumour about his illegitimate status.³⁵ Since the conjecture of Bernardo's insolvency, has been shown above to be unfounded, it is worth following the clue provided by Cerretani and investigating what appears at this point the more plausible solution.

The December laws did not fix once and for all the structure and functions of the *Consiglio Maggiore*. On the contrary, both before and after the passage of this act, animated discussions took place in Florence to regulate the working of a Council that would have involved more than three-thousand citizens. In this context, special attention was predictably given to the issue of membership and the requirements of eligibility for the new institution. As remarked by Rubinstein, “the controversies over the political significance of

³³ Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, 2 and 257 n. 4.

³⁴ The laws in question are published in Cadoni, ed., *Provvisioni concernenti l'ordinamento*, 1:33–60, with commentary and a discussion of the earlier bibliography.

³⁵ See Rubinstein, “Machiavelli and the World of Florentine Politics,” 7 and n. 10.

the Great Council begin with the preparation of the reform schemes,” these being the proposals submitted by several citizens and magistracies probably as a result of the influence of Savonarola himself, shortly before the institution of the *Consiglio Maggiore*.³⁶

One of the projects for the new Council presented in the political turmoil of the first weeks of December, whose text has survived, was championed by the aristocratic leader Pier Capponi (1446–96) and was clearly directed towards the establishment in Florence of a *governo stretto*, one with a strongly restricted membership. At the same time, he advocated the idea of compiling a “book of families.” In this book, to cite his words, “all the families, from both the minor and major guilds, are to be listed when qualified to be present in the council,” and he added that “these families must be approved by the present Lords and their Colleges.” As Capponi makes clear, the purpose of this plan was to avoid mistakes and abuses in the reconstruction of ancestry, so as to prevent “unworthy men” from illegally appropriating the *beneficio*. Significantly, the Florentine politician pointed out that the book “should not include bastards or son of bastards.”³⁷

If Capponi’s proposal was not immediately embraced, it was not definitively put aside either. As a matter of fact, if things had remained in accordance with the laws that established the new Council in late-December 1494,

³⁶ See Rubinstein, “Politics and Constitution,” 207 (cited from rpt. edition). The primary study on the subject of the Great Council is Rubinstein, “I primi anni del Consiglio maggiore.” Recent scholarship includes Guidi, *Lotte, pensiero e istituzioni politiche* and Cadoni, *Lotte politiche e riforme istituzionali*.

³⁷ “Et che si faccia uno libro nel quale si scriva tutte le famiglie tanto d’artefici quanto delle arti maggiori che hanno ad intervenire nel detto consiglio, le quali famiglie sieno dichiarate pe’ Signori et Collegi presenti. Et dichiarato la famiglia s’intenda esservi dichiarato tutti quelli che hanno l’età di quella famiglia, non vi si mettendo bastardi o figliuoli di bastardi, et accioché di detti bastardi non sia questione. Et perché e’ ci è molti che pigliono e nomi adulterati delle case, come e Giuochi et Bustichi et altri, et anche per havere dato beneficio a molti huomini indegni, che sarebbe male mettervi e loro consorti contadini, medesimamente s’abbino gli uomini di quelle case a squittinare tra Signori et Collegi et per le 25 fave si faccia tale approvazione [...]” For the draft of the project, see Ricordi di Piero Capponi in ASF, Carte Stroziane, II, 95, ins. 19, fols. 241r–242v (for the quotation, taken from the last paragraph, “I° libro delle famiglie et quali habbino a essere si dichiarari” fol. 242r–v). This text was first published, with commentary, by Bertelli, “Constitutional Reforms in Renaissance Florence,” 161–164; and also, with the other three reform schemes dating back to December 1494, in an appendix to Guidi, *Ciò che accadde al tempo della Signoria*, 198–200.

Niccolò Machiavelli would have certainly become a member of the *Consiglio Maggiore* just a few years later, on his twenty-ninth birthday. Not only did he actually possess a *beneficio*, thanks to the offices held by his grandfather and great-grandfather in the *Signoria* and in the Colleges, but he also was the legitimate child of Bernardo and Benedetta Nelli. And yet, as in his father's case, it would be fruitless to search for his name in the surviving lists of the Council for the subsequent years.³⁸

What then, was the reason for his exclusion? The answer emerges from a careful reading between the lines of the legislation passed during the first years of the Council. The proposal by Pier Capponi to exclude from the *Consiglio Maggiore* citizens whose fathers were of illegitimate birth was actually included among the articles of a very important law passed on 26 November 1495. Abolishing the scrutinies, this law radically changed the electoral method for the vast majority of public offices, which from that point on were in practice reserved only for members of the Council.³⁹ Members of the *Consiglio Maggiore* thus increased their privileges. It seemed perhaps reasonable to improve still further the composition of this institution, as Savonarola himself had kept saying in the sermons delivered during the previous month.⁴⁰ For his part, the historian Piero Parenti (1450–1519), commenting on the content and consequences of the law, wrote that: “The *Consiglio Grande* was purged of those descended from bastards, going back to the forefathers” (the law, going well beyond the original intention of Capponi, excluded from membership all those citizens whose fathers and even grandfathers were of illegitimate birth).⁴¹

The bill of autumn 1495 stripped the then-twenty-six-year-old Niccolò Machiavelli of any chance, or hope, of actively participating in contemporary Florentine political life. All that remained open to him was, at most, a career in

³⁸ See Rubinstein, “Machiavelli and the World of Florentine Politics,” 7 and n. 10.

³⁹ The text of the law is in Cadoni, ed., *Provvisoni concernenti l'ordinamento*, 1:209–221, with bibliography and commentary.

⁴⁰ Savonarola had resumed his preaching on 11 October 1495, after a break of two-and-a-half months (Savonarola, *Prediche sopra i salmi*, 2:182–203). For the defence of the *Consiglio Maggiore* and the recommendation that the Florentines take the opportunity to improve this crucial institution, see for example the sermon xxix, delivered on 18 October 1495 (Savonarola, *Prediche sopra i salmi*, 2:204–222).

⁴¹ See Parenti, *Storia fiorentina*, 1:291: “A di 26 [di novembre 1495] nuova riforma circa la imborsazione delli uffici si fece. Vinsesi con qualche difficoltà [...] nettossi el Consiglio Grande de' discesi di bastardi ripetendosi fino alli avoli, il che parse alquanto duro.”

administration, which could be only of a strictly executive nature. It is rather ironic that Machiavelli's election to the chancery is dated only a few weeks after 3 May 1498, when, having reached twenty-nine-years of age, without the law in question he would have seen his name included on the lists of the *Consiglio Maggiore*.⁴² It is exactly this painful matter that Cerretani intended to remind his adversary of when he listed the qualification of "chancellor" (which, as an aside, in the period after the coup against the Medici, had assumed an ambiguous connotation) and added the remark: "son of a bastard of the Machiavelli family." That is, Cerretani, and likely many others whose voices have not come down to us, emphasizes in his *Memoirs* that Niccolò was son of an illegitimate father and therefore, in the Florence of the time, deprived of active political rights: a second-rate citizen, in sum, who could not be placed before many "noble young men" ("giovani da bene"). And, yet, this is exactly what Soderini had repeatedly tried to accomplish, both in 1507 and 1509, by favouring him for diplomatic missions of some importance that were traditionally reserved for a restricted social and political élite. In the eyes of Cerretani, this was a grave error. Nor could Machiavelli's maintenance of a free and independent spirit while exercising his tasks as chancellor or envoy be tolerated, since this constituted disrespectful and inappropriate behaviour, at least according to his enemies among the citizens of the political class.⁴³ Some contemporaries conceded his cleverness, a quality that allowed him to overcome the constraints of life — after all, this is precisely what Paolo Giovio (1483–1552) meant in his two portraits of Machiavelli, speaking in the *Elogia* of a writer endowed with a very "fine brain" (*habile ingenium*) and in the *Dialogus de viris et foeminis aetate nostra florentibus*, written in 1527, of someone "who, though lacking good luck, possesses to the highest degree a very pleasant mind" (*amoenum ingenium*).⁴⁴

In the end, those who sought to explain the "antagonistic spirit" and the "intellectual restlessness" that can be traced in the thought of Machiavelli, in

⁴² Cadoni, ed., *Provvisioni concernenti l'ordinamento*, 1:215–216.

⁴³ Machiavelli's difficult relationships with the *ottimati*, and the offensive remarks received from elite figures such as Alamanno Salviati, are well known (see, for example, Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, 99). The reading between the lines of his letters, as demonstrated by Najemy, "The Controversy Surrounding Machiavelli's Service," brings to light the impatience of the citizens belonging to the political class towards Machiavelli's behaviour. This is manifest, for example, in the letters exchanged in November 1503 between Machiavelli and Agnolo Tucci, who was then sitting on the *Signoria* (107–108).

⁴⁴ For Giovio and Machiavelli, see Michelacci, "Giovio, Paolo."

terms of his frustration at the impossibility of testing himself in the political arena, were probably right.⁴⁵ The origins of such frustration, were rooted in one of the more delicate and obscure pages of his family history. Echoes of this vicissitude, pertaining to the intimate sphere of Niccolò's private life, can be perhaps still detected in some of his writing, even in the final words of the dedicatory letter of *The Prince*. Here the author, using an expression whose profound implications might have escaped the attention of readers, does not hesitate to define himself as "a man of humble and humblest status" ("uno uomo di basso e infimo stato").⁴⁶ Of course, the attention recently devoted to both Bernardo's intellectual personality and to his library has revealed the crucial importance of the education received by Niccolò in his youth while he was living in the paternal home.⁴⁷ In this story, however, there is perhaps also a further side for consideration, which reintroduces the issue posed at the beginning of this essay: that is, the extent to which his father's illegitimate birth might have affected the fate of the son.

From this perspective, it would be tempting to ask if Machiavelli settled his score with an unfortunate family history in the *Mandragola*, begun around 1518. In the grotesque character of messer Nicia, it is easy to see how this figure may have been constructed by the author from several features that have much in common with the historical figure of Bernardo Machiavelli. Like Bernardo, for example, Nicia is a lawyer — a doctor of law who, as the latter himself explains, does not actually practice his profession. Moreover, he is not at all involved in Florentine political life: "In this city, people without status, people like me, can't even find a dog willing to bark at them. And we're only good enough to go to funerals or weddings or pass the day sitting on

⁴⁵ See Fubini, "Note machiavelliane e para-machiavelliane," 385–387.

⁴⁶ This expression, where "infimo," as Giuseppe Lisio observed a long time ago, is actually the superlative grade of the adjective "basso," deserves probably more attention than it has hitherto received. See, for example, line 185, normally not noted in commentaries on *The Prince* ("come d'infimo stato alto si saglia"), in the *Capitolo di Fortuna*, his chapter on fortune. The adjectives "basso" and "infimo" are linked with the topic of Fortune also in Boccaccio's *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*, a text no doubt familiar to Machiavelli.

⁴⁷ On Bernardo's culture, see Perini, *Postfazione*, 299–304 and 310–316, with an up-to-date bibliography. The books mentioned in Bernardo's *Ricordi* are listed in Atkinson, *Debts, Dowries, Donkeys*, 167–171. Recent scholarship also includes Bausi, "Da Bernardo a Niccolò Machiavelli." On the interesting annotations left by Bernardo's hand in the margins of the manuscript Riccardiano 2263, see Bacchelli, "Un manoscritto postillato del padre di Machiavelli" and Bausi, "Un nuovo libro di Bernardo (e di Niccolò?) Machiavelli."

the proconsul's bench giggling like young girls."⁴⁸ The meanness of the main character of the comedy might also have a basis in real life. It is true that, in contrast to Machiavelli's father, messer Nicia is "very rich"; however, judging from Bernardo's *Memoirs*, both men shared an aptitude for frugality.⁴⁹ In other words, it is between the lines of his most famous comedy that Niccolò Machiavelli may have at last found the force to expiate the ancient humiliations caused by his origins, transmitted to him through the blood of messer Bernardo.

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⁴⁸ Giannetti and Ruggiero, eds., *Five Comedies from the Italian Renaissance*, 84 (Act II. 3).

⁴⁹ The resemblance between Nicia and Bernardo Machiavelli has sometimes been noted in Machiavelli studies, although without being taken too seriously. See Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, 2 and 257 n. 5: "That he exercised his profession very seldom and that his earnings were small, as I say above, is apparent from his *Libro di ricordi*, cit. infra. It is of course pure conjecture, but it is possible that the words Niccolò put in the mouth of messer Nicia, who was also a doctor of laws, in Act II, sc. iii of *Mandragola*, are ones he often heard his father speak in jest." Dionisotti discusses at length the same issue, although not on the basis of the words in question: "trasferibili da messer Nicia allo squattrinato e meschino padre di Machiavelli." See Dionisotti, "Appunti sulla *Mandragola*," 225–226.

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