



A “cavalier pensoso” between Machiavelli and Petrarch

Carlo Varotti, University of Parma

Abstract: Whereas much of Machiavellian lyric opus reveals a character of “anti-Petrarchism,” the relationship between Machiavelli and Petrarch’s civil poetry is more complex and intricate. It is not by chance that Machiavelli selected Petrarch’s verses to close *The Prince*. This article explores Machiavelli’s relationship not merely to Petrarch as a poet but notably/especially to the author of *Epistulae familiares*, a work of great importance for the overall culture of the Renaissance. Considering Machiavelli’s quotes from canzone *Spirto gentil* (*Rvf* 53) in the twenty-ninth chapter of the sixth book of his *History Of Florence* (the story of the noble and unfortunate plot of Stefano Porcari), this paper emphasises the complexity of references in these quotations and Machiavelli’s deep meditation on glory and the relationships between ideals and reality. Some subtle allusions and linguistic occurrences reveal that Machiavelli had read and profoundly meditated on Petrarch’s *Familiars* XIII 6, dedicated to Cola di Rienzo’s enterprise. The strong and sometimes cynical sense of reality manifested by Petrarch in that letter clearly made a great impression on the Renaissance writer.

It has been authoritatively documented that the exposure of Machiavelli to the Petrarchan lyrical poems was anything but sporadic. It is well known that Petrarch’s work was among the texts that Machiavelli took with him in his daytime walks during the idle days of the Sant’Andrea exile, as was documented in the most famous of his letters, the letter of 10 December 1513 to Francesco Vettori (Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere* 1158-1160). While these readings were described as including “minor poets” and were less important than the evening meditations, when the amenities of erotic poetry gave way to the ancient historians, they nonetheless left quite a few signs in Machiavelli’s works, as many critics have suggested (see Scarpa, for example).

One can easily recognise in the Machiavellian lyrical work an “anti-Petrarchan” vocation which, in using the model for a parody, reveals his familiarity with and full command of the Petrarchan code. While the Petrarchan love code becomes the subject of a full parody in the comedy—as it happens in the *topoi* that fill some of Callimaco’s monologues in the *Mandragola*—often the parodic use of the Petrarchan work is more subtle and veiled. It is not surprising that rather than in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* it is used more in the *Trionfi*, a text whose marked closeness to the forms and themes of Dante was certainly more to Machiavelli’s tastes.

Things are quite different when we consider the relationship with Petrarch's political and civil poems. Not only does *Italia mia* (Rvf128) provide the verses placed at the end of *Principe*, as an appropriate conclusion to a page with a highly rhetorical tone, but also *Spirto gentil* (Rvf53), the other great political and civil canzone of the *Canzoniere*, provides the last chapter of the *Principe* with images and *topoi*, in a stimulating network of references (Scarpa 269; Bausi 47).

But let us set aside the many possible allusions and echoes to Petrarch that can be found in Machiavelli's pages. If we limit our research to the explicit Petrarch quotations that Machiavelli uses, we find that there are only two: the aforementioned conclusion of the *Principe* and three verses from *Spirto gentil* that Machiavelli quotes in chapter VI 29 of the *Istorie fiorentine*, which tells of Stefano Porcari's failed Roman plot of 1453.

Machiavelli writes that the protagonist of the tragic episode, a noble Roman imbued with humanist studies, dreamed of reviving with his deeds Rome's past greatness and the ancient values of republican liberty trampled by priestly tyranny. It is an illusory dream (a veritable literary blunder), as Machiavelli will not fail to point out, with an ironical touch, at the end of the chapter; and it is a dream fomented by the great republican Latin historical tradition and by the model specimens of an ideal heroic gallery. Machiavelli claims that Porcari's heroic and libertarian spirit was fomented by the "civil" Petrarch, whose verses the Roman humanist had constantly contemplated. Petrarch does seem to espouse such a view based on Livy and Petrarch's rereading of him over the decades—one example among many is Petrarch's celebration of Scipio as the perfect republican hero, between the *Africa* and the three rewritings/extensions of the biography of this *vir illustris* par excellence. But let us read the text of the *Istorie*:

Facevagli sperare di questa impresa felice fine i malvagi costumi de' prelati e la mala contentezza de' baroni e popolo romano; ma sopra tutto gliene davano speranza quelli versi del Petrarca, nella canzone che comincia: «Spirto gentil che quelle membra reggi», dove dice:

Sopra il monte Tarpeio canzon, vedrai
Un cavalier che Italia tutta onora,
Pensoso più d'altrui che di se stesso.

Sapeva messere Stefano i poeti molte volte essere di spirito divino e profetico ripieni; tal che giudicava dovere ad ogni modo intervenire quella cosa che il Petrarca in quella canzone profetizzava, ed essere egli quello che dovesse essere di sì gloriosa impresa esecutore; parendogli, per eloquenzia, per dottrina, per grazia e per amici, essere superiore ad ogni altro romano (*Istorie fiorentine* VI).

The dissolute manners of the priesthood, and the discontent of the Roman barons and people, encouraged him to look for a happy termination of his enterprise; but he derived his greatest confidence from those verses of Petrarch in the canzone which begins "Spirto gentil che quelle membra reggi," where he says,—

“Sopra il Monte Tarpejo canzon vedra, Un cavalier, ch' Italia tutta onora, Pensoso piu d'altrui, che di se stesso.”¹

Stefano, believing poets are sometimes endowed with a divine and prophetic spirit, thought the event must take place which Petrarch in this canzone seemed to foretell, and that he was destined to effect the glorious task; considering himself in learning, eloquence, friends, and influence superior to any other citizen of Rome. (*History of Florence* VI 6)

We should mention that in the autographed draft of the *Istorie* (of which we have only scattered fragments including the one related to chapter VI 29), Machiavelli attributed the verses of the quote to the canzone *Italia mia*, realising his mistake only in the definitive version. A mistake, evidently, not always reflects a lack of familiarity with a text: here perhaps there was an objective overlapping, in his memory, of the two political canzoni that had always provided him with themes, vocabulary, and cadences. One should notice that the image of the reformer seated on the “Tarpeian Rock” acquired in Machiavelli’s eyes the suggestive power of the solitary reformer, the founding or re-founding hero of the community and of its shared values, as evoked in the *Discorsi* I 9 “Come egli è necessario essere solo a volere ordinare una repubblica di nuovo, o al tutto fuor degli antichi suoi ordini riformarla” (“To found a new republic, or to reform entirely the old institutions of an existing one, must be the work of one man only.”). An adjective such as “pensoso” is a pregnant term in the Petrarchan lyrical vocabulary which can operate as a generating element of associative memory, and among the numerous occurrences we must naturally include the extremely successful *incipit* of *Rvf* 35 that links the term almost proverbially to a solitude that is a possible sign of an exceptional nature.

Machiavelli’s account of Porcari’s failed plot is the first of the three examples recalled by Machiavelli in the conclusive books of the *Istorie*. It will be followed (in VII 33-34) by the tale of the Milanese plot of 1476, with the death of duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza, and, in the first chapters of the eighth and final book, the tale of the Pazzi plot. Machiavelli revealed what he thought of plots on a practical and political level in the small treatise *Delle congiure*, in *Discorsi* III 6. The telling of the three plots in the *Istorie* does not change his judgement on their ineffectiveness. He argues that they are generally destined to fail during their preparation and, at any rate, they are devoid of lasting effects unless they are supported by a vast and structured political and social consent. What is striking in the story of the Porcari plot, and the subsequent Milanese plot, is a shared aspect: they are both born from an exalted celebration of the libertarian greatness of ancient republican Rome. Porcari was a humanist, imbued with readings and dreams of the ancient world, and behind the young noblemen who stab the duke of Milan to death there are the teachings of the humanist Cola Montano, who had taught them “come tutti gli uomini famosi si erano nelle repubbliche e non sotto i principi nutriti, perché quelle nutriscono gli uomini virtuosi, e quelli li spengono” (“the most celebrated men had been produced in republics and not reared under princes, that the former cherish virtue, while the latter destroy it...”; *Istorie* VII 33). A sort of humanist “dream,” imbued with ideals of glory and entrusted to the

memorable and exemplary act or *dictum*, is theatrically pronounced by Olgiati, one of the Milanese plotters, in front of the executioner in the hope that it would be remembered forever: “Mors acerba, fama perpetua, stabit vetus memoria facti” (“Death is bitter but fame is eternal; the memory of this deed shall long endure”; VII 34).

From the observations that conclude his telling of the Porcari plot, it is clear that Machiavelli in examining these plots questioned a set of themes and ideals that had marked his own conscience and his extremely personal (and emotionally ardent) relationship with the exemplarity of the Roman republic. He observes that “veramente puote essere da qualcuno la intenzione di costui lodata, ma da ciascuno sarà sempre il giudizio biasimato; perché simili imprese, se le hanno in sé, nel pensarle, alcuna ombra di gloria, hanno, nello eseguirle, quasi sempre certissimo danno” (“...though some may applaud his intentions, he must stand charged with deficiency of understanding; for such undertakings, though possessing some slight appearance of glory, are almost always attended with ruin”; VI 29, 14). Between the “glory” and the almost certain “ruin” we can measure the distance between the illusory myths of some humanism and a new melancholic awareness of the compulsory limits that real situations put on human projects. After all, Machiavelli was writing this when he was more than fifty years old, when he had already entrusted to Fabrizio Colonna’s words (a great of the past, and by then faded, generation) the disillusionment with many combative and “virtuous” ideals of the past.

Why does Machiavelli go back to the Petrarch of the great civil canzones in describing that exalted way of seeing things that irreparably marks Porcari’s ingenuous illusion? This is the same Petrarch who marked the passionate ending of the *Principe*. Certainly in the “shadow of glory” dreamt by Porcari, Machiavelli places a part of himself and his own myths. In other words, he establishes a sort of parallel between himself and Porcari that is marked and sealed by the common reference to Petrarch as the master of civil and political ideals, founder of many moral and political thoughts. This is an idea of Petrarch that literary critics have always undervalued, as Gian Mario Anselmi rightly revealed to us recently (34).

In the Porcari story we find various aspects that, as is always the case with an active reader such as Machiavelli, set in motion complex associative connections, generally very free, but always richly creative. For Machiavelli, the “knight” seated on the “Tarpeian Rock” in the *Spirto gentil* canzone could only be Cola di Rienzo. This leads us almost naturally to exploring Machiavelli’s relationship to one of the most intense Petrarchan passages on the Roman tribune. Intense, that is, not in terms of the high level of the rhetorical tone and for the exhortative afflatus of other passages dedicated to him, but because of the lucid and cold analysis with which Petrarch analyses Cola’s human and political experience.

Based on the reference to Petrarch in relation to the Porcari plot in the *Istorie*, it is very difficult to exclude Machiavelli’s knowledge of Petrarch’s *Familiare*, XIII 6, sent to Francesco Nelli in August 1352, when Cola was brought as prisoner to Avignon, where Petrarch was living at that time. Supposing Machiavelli’s direct knowledge of a Petrarchan “Letter on Familiar Matter” opens a difficult question. The *Familiare* had a relatively limited circulation in Florence in the fifteenth century. What was the source of

Machiavelli's knowledge? The 1492 edition does not resolve our question: it only includes the first eight books. We have, however, various Florentine manuscripts containing collections of the *Familiars* and most importantly we must not underestimate the case of the famous "institutio principis" of XII 2 (letter to Niccolò Acciaiuoli), conveyed in a large number of Florentine manuscripts (*Codici latini del Petrarca* 124-77). The available data seems to suggest a selective circulation focused on political and civil themes as confirmation of the importance, in this respect, of Petrarch's magisterial teachings. We must not forget that at the time of the *Istorie* Machiavelli frequented at length the Orti Oricellari group, coming into direct or mediated contact also with less obvious texts of the humanist tradition that probably had not been part of his younger cultural background (Bausi; Rinaldi 11-26).

It has been rightly observed that the "Letter on Familiar Matter" XIII 6 (*Opere* 781-87; *Letters on Familiar Matters* 193-98) is inspired by a sort of Machiavellianism *ante litteram* (Anselmi 40-45; D'Alessandro 46-47). This is clearly evident in the extremely harsh and pitiless words that describe Cola di Rienzo in Avignon as a prisoner, subjected to a tragic destiny that he himself had deserved. He is a man "ut valde miser sic minime miserabilis" ("miserable though he is, I know not whether he is worthy of pity"): truly worthy of the misfortune that befell him. We cannot fail to note the intimately "Machiavellian" substance of the condemnation for actions that were not able to meet the *necessitas*, to give an effective response to the challenges of reality, and that "state of things" that we could in a Machiavellian way translate as something in between *fortuna* (fortune) and *occasione* (opportunity). "Est quidem, fateor, omni supplicio dignus quia quod voluit non adeo perseveranter voluit ut debuit et ut rerum status necessitasque poscebat" ("I admit that he is indeed worthy of any kind of punishment, because what he wished he did not wish as much persistence as he should have and as circumstances and necessity required."). Petrarch expresses directly his disappointment for a person who was not able to meet the expectations of the historical moment. And the Machiavellianism *ante litteram* that we mentioned earlier is revealed in the condemnation for an unrealistic and illusory action (Machiavelli would have spoken of an "imagined" reality), not proportionate with the reality of the means and therefore destined to the grotesque failure of dreams.

Petrarch's letter about Cola di Rienzo not only functions as intermediary for Machiavelli's judgement on Porcari's unrealistic and "humanist" plot, but it also acts almost as its palimpsest; this emphasizes that an important theme of the letter is the abuse of the noble title of poet and of the "divine gift" (*divinum munus*) of poetry. In the concluding part of the letter Petrarch hints at Cola's reputation as a poet. This theme returns in a circular movement to the idea expressed at the beginning of the letter—of poetry as "divine gift"—and evokes the ancestral link between poetry and necromancy. Thus, the ancient medieval legend of Virgil "nigromanticus" reverberated even with Petrarch who, even though an enemy of divination and magic, had often been considered, due to his ancient "friendship" with Virgil, a necromancer: "ipse ego, quo nemo usquam divinationi inimicior vivit aut magia, nonnunquam ... propter Maronis amicitia nigromanticus dictus sum" ("I myself, the greatest enemy of divination and magic, am oftentimes called necromancer by these

excellent judges because of my admiration for Virgil”; 197). Already in the first part of the letter, where he had hinted at the letters written in the past to support Cola’s reform project, Petrarch exclaimed that “divinare enim non soleo, atque utinam nec ipse etiam divinasset!” (“unaccustomed as I am to being a prophet, I indeed wish that he had not tried to be one!”; 194).

Through Petrarch’s letter and the definitive and extremely harsh critical judgement of Cola di Rienzo, Machiavelli constructs a subtle and mocking game of references. Porcari, who identified himself with Cola, the solitary knight seated on the “Tarpeian Rock,” attributed to Petrarch that prophetic spirit that the same Petrarch had rejected, replacing the dreams of poetry with the harsh law of *necessitas* and power. Thus, in Machiavelli’s shaded and elusive judgement of Porcari, between the pure wishful thinking and the kind of “glory” that can even briefly illuminate such conspiracies, there is a melancholic allusion to his own dreams.

The prophecy of the redemption with which the *Principe* ended, mediated by the “divine” and prophetic words of the poet from Arquà, revealed itself to be, after all, no less illusory, and no *virtù* had in fact advanced to take up arms *contro a furore*.

¹ Sic in *History of Florence*. “On the Tarpein Mount, Song, you will see / a knight whom all Italy honors / who cares more for others than for himself” (Petrarch *Canzoniere* 53; Petrarch’s Lyric *Poems* 130).

Works Cited

- Anselmi, Gian Mario. *L’età dell’Umanesimo e del Rinascimento*. Roma: Carocci, 2008. Print.
- Bausi, Francesco. *Petrarca, Machiavelli, il “Principe,”* in *Niccolò Machiavelli: politico, storico, letterato. Atti del convegno di Losanna, 27-30 settembre 1995*. Ed. J.-J. Marchand. Roma: Salerno editrice, 1996. 41-58. Print.
- Codici latini del Petrarca nelle biblioteche fiorentine*. Ed. M. Feo. Firenze: Le Lettere, 1991. Print.
- D’Alessandro, Francesca. *Petrarca e i moderni. Da Machiavelli a Carducci*. Pisa: ETS, 2007. Print.
- Machiavelli, Niccolò. *Tutte le opere*. Ed. M. Martelli. Firenze: Sansoni, 1971. Print.
- . *Istorie fiorentine*. Eds. C. Varotti and A. Monteverocchi. Machiavelli, Niccolò, *Opere storiche. Edizione Nazionale delle opere, tomo II*, Salerno editrice, Roma, 2010.
- . *History Of Florence And Of The Affairs Of Italy From The Earliest Times To The Death Of Lorenzo The Magnificent*. Ed. Hugo Albert Rennert. 2006. Web. 21 Dec. 2010. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2464/2464-h/2464-h.htm#2H_4_0046>.

Petrarca, Francesco. *Opere. Canzoniere. Trionfi. Familiarum rerum libri*. Firenze: Sansoni, 1993. Print.

---. *Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics*. Transl. Robert Durling. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1979.

---. *Letters on Familiar Matters*. Trans. Aldo S. Bernardo. New York: Italica Press, 2005. Print.

Rinaldi, Rinaldo. *Scrivere contro. Per Machiavelli*. Parma: Unicopli, 2009. Print.

Scarpa, Emanuela. "Machiavelli e la 'neutralità' di Francesco Petrarca." *Lettere Italiane* 27 (1975): 263-85. Print.