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“In What Mode Faith Should Be Kept by Princes”

By Niccolò Machiavelli

1513/1532

[Machiavelli, Niccolò. “In What Mode Faith Should Be Kept by Princes.” Chapter 18 in *The Prince*. Translated and with an Introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield. Second Edition. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. 1998. Pages 68–71. Copyright The University of Chicago. Reproduced with permission of University of Chicago Press (Grant no. 110311; expires 6/19/2022).]

All footnotes are those of the translator.

How praiseworthy it is for a prince to keep his faith, and to live with honesty and not by astuteness, everyone understands. Nonetheless one sees by experience in our times that the princes who have done great things are those who have taken little account of faith and have known how to get around men’s brains with their astuteness; and in the end they have overcome those who have founded themselves on loyalty.

Thus, you[1] must know that there are two kinds of combat: one with laws, the other with force. The first is proper to man, the second to beasts; but because the first is often not enough, one must have recourse to the second. Therefore it is necessary for a prince to know well how to use the beast and the man. This role was taught covertly to princes by ancient writers, who wrote that Achilles, and many other ancient princes, were given to Chiron the centaur to be raised, so that he would look after them with his discipline. To have as teacher a half-beast, half-man means nothing other than that a prince needs to know how to use both natures; and the one without the other is not lasting.

Thus, since a prince is compelled of necessity to know well how to use the beast, he should pick the fox and the lion,[2] because the lion does not defend itself from snares and the fox does not defend itself from wolves. So one needs to be a fox to recognize snares and a lion to frighten the wolves. Those who stay simply with the lion do not understand this. A prudent lord, therefore, cannot observe faith, nor should he, when such observance turns against him, and the causes that made him promise have been eliminated. And if all men were good, this teaching would not be good; but because they are wicked and do not observe faith with you, you also do not have to observe it with them. Nor does a prince ever lack legitimate causes to color his failure to observe faith. One could give infinite modern examples of this, and show how many peace treaties and promises have been rendered invalid and vain through the infidelity of princes; and the one who has known best how to use the fox has come out best. But it is necessary to know well how to color this nature, and to be a great pretender and dissembler; and men are so simple and so obedient to present necessities that he who deceives will always find someone who will let himself be deceived.

I do not want to be silent about one of the recent examples. Alexander VI never did anything, nor ever thought of anything, but how to deceive men, and he always found a subject to whom he could do it.

And there never was a man with greater efficacy in asserting a thing, and in affirming it with greater oaths, who observed it less; nonetheless, his deceits succeeded at his will, because he well knew this aspect of the world.

Thus, it is not necessary for a prince to have all the above-mentioned qualities in fact, but it is indeed necessary to appear to have them. Nay, I dare say this, that by having them and always observing them, they are harmful; and by appearing to have them, they are useful, as it is to appear merciful, faithful, humane, honest, and religious, and to be so; but to remain with a spirit built so that, if you need not to be those things, you are able and know how to change to the contrary. This has to be understood: that a prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things for which men are held good, since he is often under a necessity, to maintain his state, of acting against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion. And so he needs to have a spirit disposed to change as the winds of fortune and variations of things command him, and as I said above, not depart from good, when possible, but know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity.

A prince should thus take great care that nothing escape his mouth that is not full of the above-mentioned five qualities and that, to see him and hear him, he should appear all mercy, all faith, all honesty, all humanity, all religion. And nothing is more necessary to appear to have than this last quality. Men in general[3] judge more by their eyes than by their hands, because seeing is given[4] to everyone, touching to few. Everyone sees how you appear, few touch what you are; and these few dare not oppose the opinion of many, who have the majesty of the state to defend them; and in the actions of all men, and especially of princes, where there is no court to appeal to, one looks to the end. So let a prince win and maintain his state: the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone. For the vulgar are taken in by the appearance and the outcome of a thing, and in the world there is no one but the vulgar; the few have a place there[5] when the many have somewhere to lean on. A certain prince of present times, whom it is not well to name,[6] never preaches anything but peace and faith, and is very hostile to both. If he had observed both, he would have had either his reputation or his state taken from him many times.

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[1] The formal or plural you.

[2] A possible source for this: Cicero, *De Officiis* I.11.34; 13.41.

[3] lit.: universally.

[4] lit.: touches.

[5] One manuscript says “the few have no place there . . .”; and the authorities have divided, Casella, Russo, and Sasso accepting “no place,” Chabod and Bertelli “a place.”

[6] Apparently Ferdinand the Catholic [King of Spain], whom Machiavelli unhesitatingly names in Chapter 21.

Original Author Sort: Machiavelli, Niccolo
Publication Date: 11513.00.00.##
Topic: Critics of the Natural Law Tradition
Subtopic: Machiavelli
Publication Date Range: 1513

Source URL: https://www.nlnrac.org/critics/machiavelli/primary-source-documents/the-prince