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Pontano, Machiavelli and Prudence: Some Further Reflections

A stampa in
From Florence to the Mediterranean and Beyond. Essays in Honour of Anthony Molbo,
edited by Diogo Ramada Curto, Eric R Dursteler, Julius Kirshner and Francesca Trivellato.
Firenze, 2009, pp. 117-125

Distribuito in formato digitale da
«Storia di Firenze. Il portale per la storia della città»
<<http://www.storiadifirenze.org>>

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PONTANO, MACHIAVELLI AND PRUDENCE:
SOME FURTHER REFLECTIONS

1. Many years ago Felix Gilbert pointed out the impact of Giovanni Pontano's works on the Florentine humanists who used to meet in the 'Orti Oricellari' just after 1500. Those discussions, led by Bernardo Rucellai (who had met Pontano in Naples in 1486) often focused on Livy – a Livy read in an aristocratic perspective, widely different, as Gilbert noted, from the Republican Livy later advocated by Machiavelli and his young followers.¹ A link between the two stages of the 'Orti Oricellari' debates may have been provided by Pontano's *De prudentia*. Giovanni Corsi brought to Florence a copy made from the original manuscript, probably in the year of Pontano's death (1503), and published it in 1508. A slightly different version, edited (and sometimes modified) by Pietro Summonte, came out in Naples in the same year.²

In dedicating Pontano's *De prudentia* to Cosimo Pazzi, archbishop of Florence, Giovanni Corsi, who declared himself «pupil of Bernardo Rucellai», nostalgically evoked Florence's glorious past under the government of Cosimo's uncle, Lorenzo de' Medici. Following Carlo Dionisotti's suggestion, we may imagine Machiavelli ironically smiling at Corsi's dedicatory letter

¹ F. GILBERT, *Bernardo Rucellai and the Orti Oricellari. A Study on the Origin of Modern Political Thought*, «Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes», 12 (1949), pp. 101-131: 105, 110, 118.

² All subsequent quotations are from J. PONTANO, *De prudentia*, Florentiae, Giunti, 1508 (Biblioteca dell'Archiginnasio, Bologna, shelf-mark: 16.i.I.10; I also consulted a copy of the Neapolitan edition: Biblioteca Universitaria, Bologna, shelf-mark: Raro. D. 34/1). The Florentine edition is closer to Pontano's lost manuscript: see L. MONTI SABIA, *Per l'edizione critica del De prudentia di Giovanni Pontano*, in *Tradizione classica e letteratura umanistica. Per Alessandro Perosa*, ed. by R. Cardini et al., II, Roma, 1985, pp. 595-615 (on p. 600 the copy made by Corsi is dated between the spring and autumn 1503). See also P.O. KRISTELLER, *Un uomo di stato e umanista fiorentino: Giovanni Corsi*, 1936 (in *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, Roma, 1956, pp. 242-257, with an appendix) as well as the entry 'Corsi, Giovanni' in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (by P. Malanima).

and enjoying (*gustando*) Pontano's treatise.³ But the latter verb is too elusive. Curiously, Dionisotti did not mention Brian Richardson's compelling argument that Pontano's *De prudentia* had been an important precedent, both in form and in content, of Machiavelli's *Discorsi*.⁴

At the end of his detailed demonstration Richardson wrote: «There is no closer parallel between the *Discorsi* and any other work of this period as regards the use of Livy to provide examples for imitation». This remark sounds convincing – more convincing, in fact, than Richardson's reference to *De prudentia*'s alleged «scholarly approach». In the fourth and fifth books of his treatise Pontano boldly juxtaposed ancient (mostly Livian) and contemporary examples of prudence – Numa Pompilius and Giovanni Caracciolo, Archelaus and Lorenzo de' Medici, and so forth – as well as examples of lack of prudence, like Ludovico Sforza. This heterogeneous series looks like a striking anticipation of Machiavelli's *Discorsi*, a work which does not seem to belong to any preexisting genre.⁶

2. But Machiavelli's *Discorsi* (as well as, more generally, Machiavelli's approach to politics) were indebted to Pontano's *De prudentia* also on a different level. Richardson rightly rejected the alleged opposition between Pontano's philosophical and Machiavelli's political approach, remarking «the practical (both ethical and political) application which Pontano wanted his writing to have». This point deserves a closer scrutiny.

Prudence, Pontano wrote, is «neither science nor art, but is referred to actions». Pontano was obviously following Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as Aquinas's commentary on the latter, in which both politics and prudence were defined as «the right principle of possible actions» (*recta ratio rerum agibilium*).⁹ Words like 'agere' and 'actio' alluded to the Aristotelian dis-

³ C. DIONISOTTI, *Machiavellerie. Storia e fortuna di Machiavelli*, Torino, 1980, p. 142.

⁴ B. RICHARDSON, *Pontano's De Prudentia and Machiavelli's Discorsi*, «Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance», XXXIII (1971), pp. 353-357. There are no references to this essay in recent literature on prudence: see V. KAHN, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance*, Ithaca and London, 1985 (with some superficial comments on Pontano's *De Prudentia*, pp. 69-75); E. GARVER, *Machiavelli and the History of Prudence*, Madison, WI., 1987 (it does not mention Pontano).

⁵ RICHARDSON, *Pontano's De Prudentia*, pp. 353-354, 357.

⁶ For some comments on Machiavelli's *Discorsi* and their genre dimension see C. GINZBURG, *Ein Plädoyer für den Kasus*, in *Fallstudien: Theorie - Geschichte - Methode*, J. Süßmann, S. Scholz, G. Engel (eds.), Berlin, 2007, pp. 29-48.

⁷ RICHARDSON, *Pontano's De Prudentia*, p. 357.

⁸ PONTANO, *De prudentia*, cc. LVIIIv-LIXr: «Prudentiam neque scientiam esse, neque artem, sed in actionibus versari».

⁹ T. AQUINAS, *In decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis profundissima commentaria, cum triplici tex-*

inction between prudence and art, 'agein' and 'poiein': two verbs usually translated into Latin as *agere* and *facere*. All arts, Pontano pointed out, use hands; all of them are based on making (*facere*). «Prudence, on the contrary, not only refrains from making, but does not even act; it prefers to give directions to actions (*non uno modo non faciat, sed ne agat ipsa quidem, quin potius dirigat actiones*)».¹⁰

Pontano, having put forward this sharp distinction between prudence and art, slowly began to undermine it. His dissatisfaction may have been ignited by a native linguistic sensitivity, reinforced by his humanist education. He made a polemical allusion to «some recent philosophers, who, notwithstanding their intelligence, in following Aristotle, did not take sufficiently into account the particularities of Latin tongue»: possibly an oblique reference to Leonardo Bruni's translation of *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹¹ «Nam neque actio est factio, neque factio est actio» Bruni had written, following an established, medieval tradition.¹² In *De prudentia* Pontano refrained from using the word 'fatio'. Pointing out that Greek and Latin words sometimes do not match, he noted that the verb 'facere', for instance, has a very wide (*latissimus*) range of meanings:

dicimus enim, et *pacem fecit et bellum, et indutias fecit et foedera, et fortiter fecit et constanter, et filia me avum fecit, sororque avunculum, et verba fecit in Senatu, perinde ut Apelles fecit Alexandri imaginem et aeneum Phalaridi Perilaus taurum*.¹³

This list implicitly undermined the close association between arts and «making» (*facere*). Pontano began to unfold some implications of those linguistic remarks in the longest chapter of his treatise, devoted to the difference between *sapientia* and *prudentia*.¹⁴ Following Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1141a9-1149a12) Pontano noted that artists (*artifices*) like Phidias and Praxiteles were called *sapientes*, not *prudentes*, since *sapientia* is unrelated to moral vir-

tus translatione, antiqua videlicet, Leonardi Aretini, necnon Joannis Argyropili, Venetiis, Ottaviano Scoto, 1531, c. 95v: «Est autem et politica et prudentia quidem idem habitus: quia utraque est recta ratio rerum agibilium circa humana bona vel mala». The same definition in IIa IIae, q. 47,2.

¹⁰ PONTANO, *De prudentia*, c. LIXv.

¹¹ *Ivi*, c. VIIIr: «Recentiores enim philosophi, quamquam praestantissimi quidem, maximeque acuti viri, dum Graeco tamen modo, quibusque ab Aristotele traditum est verbis, philosophantur, parum curaverunt videre, quid Latine etiam dici, et quonam modo, quaque etiam ratione ac via, aut possit, aut etiam debeat».

¹² ARISTOTLE, *Libri Ethicorum decem de moribus per clarissimum virum Leonardum Aretinum e Graeco in Latinum traducti*, Romae, C. Suueynheym e A. Pannartz, 1473, cc. non numerate.

¹³ PONTANO, *De prudentia*, c. LXVr (my italics).

¹⁴ *Ivi*, cc. LXIIr-LXVIIr: «Quae sit differentia inter sapientiam et prudentiam».

tues: a conclusion suscribed by Aquinas in his comment upon *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹⁵ Then Pontano began to blur the boundary between *sapientia* and *prudentia*, referring to modern usage. Jurists, he remarked, are often called *sapientes*, although they use prudence in dealing with private and public issues. «In my childhood», he recalled, «I heard older people saying that Francesco Foscari and Cosimo de' Medici were *sapientes*, for their “excellent and very prudent” government of, respectively, Venice and Florence». But, Pontano went on «neither Giotto, nor Gentile da Fabriano, nor Jean of Burgundy, highly praised as painters, were ever called *sapientes*, although they painted in a truly excellent way».¹⁶

Therefore, Pontano suddenly concluded, in a genuine Aristotelian spirit, *prudentia* must be referred to actions (*actiones*) and decisions, *sapientia* to cognition (*cognitionem*). But this unexpected retreat paved the way to a further development. Our contemporaries (*nostris*), Pontano remarked, usually call «experts» (*peritos*) those who achieve prominence in one domain: in jurisprudence, like Bartolo, Baldo, and Ludovico (Bolognini); in warfare, like Niccolò Piccinino and Francesco Sforza; in oratory, like Leonardo Bruni; in painting, like Giotto; in sculpture, like Donatello. In Latin, their expertise may be more appropriately called *sapientia*. «We should make large concessions to usage», Pontano commented, «but we must also concede that the nature of the issue [literally: the reason of the thing] should not be ignored». Then once again he went back to the traditional Aristotelian distinction between ‘*prudentes*’ and ‘*sapientes*’: the former dedicate their actions to domestic and public life; the latter limit themselves to the knowledge and contemplation of celestial and natural things, and to the inquiry on human issues.¹⁷

3. Pontano’s tortuous path seems to indicate a tension between an allegiance to the traditional Aristotelian perspective, which stressed the difference between prudence and art, and an impulse to blur that difference, pointing out that in everyday language the two domains often overlap. This zig-zag tra-

¹⁵ AQUINAS, *In decem*, c. 93v.

¹⁶ PONTANO, *De prudentia*, c. LXIIIv: «At neque Ioctium neque Gentilem Fabrianensem aut Ioannem Burgundionem laudatissimos pictores e nostris quisquam appellaverit sapientes, licet egregie pinxerint».

¹⁷ *Ivi*, c. LXIIIr: «[...] sapientes vero qui cognitionem rerum tantum modo ipsi quidem habeant ab usu vero tum domestico tum civili omnino aversi, civilibusque ab actionibus, ac domesticis compendiis, sola cognitione, ac coelestium, naturaliumque contemplatione, humanarumque indagatione rerum contenti».

jectory was not devoid of inconsistencies, which a last revision might have possibly erased (*De prudentia*, as we have seen, was published posthumously). The passage devoted to painting, which apparently has escaped the attention of scholars, is somewhat surprising.¹⁸ Pontano remarks that politicians like Francesco Foscari and Cosimo de' Medici are sometimes called *sapientes*, rather than *prudentes*. In a symmetrical argument, we would expect a sentence explaining that some excellent painters have been referred as *prudentes*, rather than *sapientes*. Instead we come across a negative statement: none of those painters has ever been called *sapiens* – the praise received by Phidias and Praxiteles.¹⁹ Did Pontano mean that modern painters could not be compared to ancient sculptors? A comparison with the text from which Pontano most probably drew inspiration will confront us with a different argument.

Pontano's choices may have been the result of direct appreciation. Works by Giotto (and by Donatello, mentioned later) were conspicuously present in Naples.²⁰ This was not the case with Gentile da Fabriano: but Pontano might have seen Gentile's paintings in Rome, which Bartolomeo Facio warmly praised in his *De viris illustribus*, written in Naples between 1455 and 1457.²¹ In introducing the section on painting Facio called it an art which needs a greater prudence (*majorem prudentiam desiderat*) than other handicrafts, since it represents not only the external features of a face or a body, but also «inner feelings and emotions» (*interiores motus, ac sensus*).²² A humanist like Facio was of course aware that to connect an art like painting to prudence (*prudentia*) implied a subversion of Aristotelian categories.²³ This subversion must have inspired Pontano's attempt to blur the boundaries between art and prudence. On a more obvious level, Facio's inclusion of Francesco Foscari and

¹⁸ The passage is not commented in M. SANTORO's lengthy survey "Il Pontano e l'ideale rinascimentale del 'prudente'", «Rivista italiana di filologia», XVII (1964), pp. 29-54.

¹⁹ ARISTOTLE (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 7, 1141 a 10s) mentions Phidias and Polycletus.

²⁰ See F. NICOLINI, *L'arte napoletana del Rinascimento e la lettera di F. Summonte a M.A. Michiel*, Napoli, 1925, pp. 159-160, 166, 181-190.

²¹ See P. VITI's entry 'Facio, Bartolomeo', in *DBI*.

²² B. FACIO, *De viris illustribus*, ed. M. Baxandall in the appendix of *Giotto and the Orators*, Oxford, 1971, pp. 163-168: 163-164; see also Gentile's life (pp. 164-165). Facio's section on painting is translated, and insightfully commented, on pp. 98-111. In Baxandall's translation the passage referred above reads as follows: «There is hardly one of the other handicrafts that needs greater discretion, seeing that it requires the representation not only of the face or countenance and the lineaments of the whole body, but also, and far more, of its interior feelings and emotions, so that the picture may seem to be alive and sentient and somehow move and have action» (p. 104).

²³ BAXANDALL refers to Guarino's «Aristotelian insistence on the inability of the painter to show moral quality» (*Giotto*, p. 90; see also p. 88). I am grateful to Silvia Ginzburg for having directed me to this passage.

Cosimo de' Medici among 'private citizens', as examples of prudence left a trace in Pontano's *De prudentia*.²⁴

But Pontano would have been unable to find the name of Jean of Burgundy (*Ioannem Burgundionem*) in Facio's *De viris illustribus*. 'Jean of Burgundy' is of course Jean Fouquet (born in Tours; but Facio called the Flemish Jan van Eyck 'Ioannes Gallicus'). It would be tempting to interpret Pontano's words as an echo of Fouquet's still hypothetical journey to Naples.²⁵ But, as we have guessed in the case of Gentile, Pontano might have seen Fouquet's works in Rome. In any case, Pontano's selection – Giotto, Gentile da Fabriano, Jean Fouquet, Donatello – is an eloquent testimony of his visual taste, both self-assured and wide-ranging.²⁶

4. Pontano's remarks on 'experts' (*periti*) in the third book of his treatise created a bridge – then immediately put aside – between *prudentia* and *sapientia*. Pontano developed this argument in the fourth book, in a chapter entitled «De experientibus et peritis». Focusing on experts in law (*jurisperiti*) he noted that *peritia* and *solertia* are usually synonymous. «And these words, as you know, are taken from art and then referred to actions (*ab arte primum, ut videtis, traducta, post translata sunt ad actiones*)». The role played by example (*exemplum*) in the domain of action (*in agendo*), Pontano concluded, is comparable to the role played by norm (*norma*) in the domain of art.

Once again, Pontano's argument was based on everyday language, on the practitioners's jargon: «*ea ipsa quae ab artificibus vocata est norma*».²⁷ He realized that contemporary realities did not easily fit in Aristotelian categories. Greek '*technè*' and Latin '*ars*' (a word which in Pontano's *De prudentia* barely conceals the vernacular *arte*) did not really match. Pontano subscribed the traditional view that arts (*artes*) first started from scarcity (*inopia*), and that all of them involved the use of hands. But he was aware of a distinction born from a notion of art which was then emerging, and which is still our own. Implicitly

²⁴ B. FACIO, *De viris illustribus*, ed. L. Mehus, Florentiae, 1745, p. 56: «Franciscus Foscarus Venetus, prudentia, an naturali facundia magis valeat, incertum»; p. 57: «Cosmus Medicus Florentinus prudentia in primis laudatur».

²⁵ *Quattrocento Aragonese. La pittura a Napoli al tempo di Alfonso e Ferrante d'Aragona*, a cura di P. Leone de Castris, Napoli, 1997, pp. 36-48; G. TOSCANO, in *El Renacimiento Mediterráneo*, sotto la direzione di M. Natale, Madrid, 2001, pp. 353-356.

²⁶ Fouquet's name is not mentioned in the letter on the arts in Naples addressed to Marcantonio Michiel by Pietro Summonte, Pontano's follower and literary executor: see F. NICOLINI, *L'arte napoletana*.

²⁷ PONTANO, *De prudentia*, cc. LXXXVIIIv-LXXXIXv.

relying on Alberti, Pontano noted that a statue is not praised for its matter, like bronze or marble, but for «the artist's work» (*artificis opera*). Perfection comes from the individual who gives the form (*ab informante*). In the same way, Homer's poetry is praised for its form, not for its subject: the account of Trojan war is full of fabulous details, and the war itself perhaps never took place. On the contrary, the subject of Lucan's poem is excellent; but the execution is uneven.²⁸

Pontano's transfer of the idea of expertise from the domain of art into the domain of action was rooted in Facio's idea of painting being informed by prudence, as well as by Alberti's emphasis on the crucial role of *disegno*. But Pontano's (and Alberti's) reflections should not be looked at in isolation. They must be replaced in a long, subterranean, mostly unrecorded history, located in streets and workshops, whose traces (as Pontano understood) can be retrieved in language. An intricate network, made of linguistic innovations, vetoes, and compromises, created thought constraints and opened up thought possibilities. A word like 'design', with its manifold meanings (artistic, political) is a case in point.²⁹

5. For Aristotle, prudence was an ethical virtue; Aquinas regarded prudence and politics as synonymous. Aristotle, followed by Aquinas, pointed out that 'art' had no moral connotations. Pontano silently subverted these distinctions, emphasizing the contiguity between art and politics, *sapientia* and *prudentia*. Moreover, he pointed out, mentioning ancient writers like Sallust or Livy, that the word 'arts' (*artes*) was morally ambivalent, since it could indicate either frauds or good deeds. The fact that art can be referred to actions and customs, he noted, has become nearly a proverb.³⁰

An example will suffice to unfold the implications of these remarks. In commenting upon the rape of the Sabine women, Pontano recalled that his disciple Pietro Summonte wondered whether Romulus's decision could be ascribed to prudence. Did it not seem to be an evil gesture, since it violated the laws of hospitality? Pontano came to a different conclusion:

²⁸ *Ivi*, c. XVIIv.

²⁹ See D. SUMMERS, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, Princeton, 1981, pp. 250-261; M. BAX-ANDALL, *English Disegno*, in ID., *Word for Pictures. Seven Papers on Renaissance Art and Criticism*, New Haven and London, 2003, pp. 83-97. Some of the issues pointed at in the passage above will be developed elsewhere.

³⁰ PONTANO, *De prudentia*, c. LXv (references to Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, I, 34; LIVY, *Ab urbe condita*, II, ii, 20): «cum historici alii dixerunt artes Hannibalis et comici, servorum artes et lenonum. Itaque ad actiones referri artes ipsas etiam videntur ac mores, unde in proverbii fere loco concessit».

if Romulus played art with art (*si artem arte lusit*), he does not need to be excused from a crime [...]. The prudence of his plan and action are shown by its outcome as well as by the greatness of such a great empire.³¹

This remark was echoed by Machiavelli, in a passage of *Discorsi* (I, 9) devoted to Romulus's murders of Remus and Titus Tatius: «conviene bene che, accusandolo il fatto, lo effetto lo scusi; e quando sia buono come quello di Romolo, sempre lo scuserà» (It is very suitable that when the deed accuses him, the effect excuses him; and when the effect is good, as was that of Romulus, it will always excuse the deed).³²

The two passages, as Brian Richardson pointed out, are, if not «identical», very similar.³³ But this specific convergence must be replaced in the larger framework of Pontano's argument, based on the shift of prudence, intrinsically related to good, to the morally neutral domain of art.

This was precisely the point made a long time ago by Charles Singleton in a splendid, largely unnoticed essay on Machiavelli.³⁴ Singleton began his compressed, elegant, almost reticent demonstration by quoting Aquinas's definition of prudence: *recta ratio rerum agibilium*. Singleton did not even care to mention that Machiavelli was (at least indirectly) familiar with that definition, since he had heard it in a sermon delivered by Savonarola which he recounted for the benefit of Ricciardo Becchi, in a letter dated 9 March 1498.³⁵

As is well known, this is one of the earliest among Machiavelli's extant letters. The trajectory that led Machiavelli to a deliberate distancing from Aristotle's (and Aquinas's) notion of prudence can be only partially reconstructed.

³¹ PONTANO, *De prudentia*, cc. CIIv-CIIIr: «si artem arte lusit Romulus, non iniuria quidem videtur excusandus [...] Quae vero prudenter ab illo [Romulo] excogitatum sit et actum, exitus ipse ac tanti magnitudo imperii declaravit».

³² NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, ed. C. Vivanti, Torino, 1997, p. 223 (*Opere*, I) (= *Discourses on Livy*, trans. H.C. Mansfield and N. Tarcov, Chicago and London, 1998, p. 29).

³³ B. RICHARDSON, *Pontano's De Prudentia*, says «identical» (p. 355). He quotes from Pontano's relevant passage only the passage I omitted [...]: see above, note 31.

³⁴ Ch. S. SINGLETON, *The Perspective of Art*, «The Kenyon Review», XV (1953), pp. 169-189. My debt toward this essay (and a conjecture on its genesis) can be found in two papers of mine: *Machiavelli, l'eccezione e la regola. Linee di una ricerca in corso*, «Quaderni storici», 112, 2003, pp. 195-213; *Diventare Machiavelli. Per una nuova lettura dei "Ghiribizzi al Soderini"*, «Quaderni storici», 121, 2006, pp. 151-164.

³⁵ «Prudentia est recta cognitio [recte: ratio] agibilium» (N. MACHIAVELLI, *Lettere, Opere*, II, ed. C. Vivanti, Torino, 1999, pp. 6, 1457). Ch. LAZZERI, *Prudence, éthique et politique de Thomas d'Aquin à Machiavel*, in *De la prudence des anciens comparée à celle des modernes. Sémantique d'un concept, déplacement des problématiques*, sous la direction d'A. Tosel, Paris, 1995, pp. 79-128: 105, note 2, mentions the letter, but fails to mention that Machiavelli is quoting from Savonarola's sermon.

But Pontano's *De prudentia* must have played an important role in Machiavelli's development, at a stage which preceded the *Discorsi*. It will suffice to recall that, in the letters to Francesco Vettori which punctuate the conception and writing of *De principatibus*, Machiavelli referred to his own approach to politics as *arte dello stato*.³⁶

³⁶ E. GARIN (ed.), *Prosatori latini del Quattrocento*, Milano-Napoli, 1952, p. 1021: «Meno originale e meno fresco del poeta, il [Pontano] prosatore ci dà tuttavia, nei suoi tratti come nei suoi dialoghi, un'ampia esposizione di caratteristici motivi della cultura contemporanea [...]. Una morale della misura, ove l'aristotelismo si colloca perfettamente nel gusto rinascimentale, domina i trattati *De oboedientia*, *De prudentia*, *De fortitudine*, *De liberalitate*, *De beneficentia*, *De magnificentia*, *De splendore*, *De convenientia*, *De magnanimitate*, *De immanitate*. Nessuno di questi scritti ha pregi singolari di robustezza e originalità di pensiero; ma in tutti si esprime con garbo una meditazione consapevole di un tempo e di un costume. Così il *Principe*, pur nel suo tono semplice di consigli a un giovane principe, manifesta già concetti e spunti cui Machiavelli darà un rigore ineguagliabile». On *arte dello stato* see C. GINZBURG, *Diventare Machiavelli*, «Quaderni storici», 1, 2006, p. 159.