

3.24. Niccolò Machiavelli: The controversial Secretary ▶

## Machiavelli's letter to Francesco Vettori of 10 December 1513



<http://www.jpost.com/>

Niccolò Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori  
Florence, 10 December 1513

To the Magnificent Francesco Vettori, His Patron and Benefactor,  
Florentine Ambassador to the Supreme Pontiff.  
In Rome.

Magnificent Ambassador. "Divine favors were never late." I say this because it seemed to me that I had lost - no, rather, strayed from - your favor; it has been a long time since you wrote me, and I was unclear about what the reason might be. And I paid little attention to all those reasons that came to mind except for one: I was afraid that you might have ceased writing to me because someone had written you that I was not a good steward of your letters, I knew that, except for Filippo and Paolo, no one else had seen them through my doing. I am reassured by your recent letter of the 23rd of last month, from which I am extremely pleased to see how methodically and calmly you fulfill your public duties. I exhort you to continue in this manner, because whoever forgoes his own interests for those of others sacrifices his own and gets no gratitude from them. And since Fortune is eager to shape everything, she wants people to let her do so, to be still, not to trouble her, and to await the moment when she will let men do something. That will be the moment for you to persevere more unflinchingly, to be more alert about matters, and for me to leave my farm and announce, "Here I am." Since I want to repay you in the same coin, therefore, I can tell you nothing else in this letter except what my life is like. If you decide you would like to swap it for yours, I shall be happy to make the exchange.

I am living on my farm, and since my latest disasters, I have not spent a total of twenty days in Florence. Until now, I have been catching thrushes with my own hands. I would get up before daybreak, prepare the birdlime, and go out with such a bundle of birdcages on my back that I looked like Geta when he came back from the harbor with Amphitryon's books. I would catch at least two, at most six, thrushes. And thus I passed the entire month of November. Eventually this diversion, albeit contemptible and foreign to me, petered out - to my regret. I shall tell you about my life. I get up in the morning with the sun and go into one of my woods that I am having cut down; there I spend a couple of hours inspecting the work of the previous day and kill some time with the woodsmen who always have some dispute on their hands either among themselves or with their neighbors. I could tell you a thousand good stories about these woods and my experiences with them, and about Frosino da Panzano and other men who wanted some of this firewood. In particular, Frosino sent for some loads of wood without saying a word to me; when it came time to settle, he wanted to withhold ten lire that he said he had won off me four years ago when he had beaten me at cricca at Antonio Guicciardini's house. I started to raise hell: I was going to call the



Guicciardini's house. I started to raise them, I was going to call the wagoner who had come for the wood a thief, but Giovanni Machiavelli eventually stepped in and got us to agree. Once the north wind started blowing, Battista Guicciardini, Filippo Ginori, Tomaso del Bene, and some other citizens all ordered a load from me. I promised some to each one; I sent Tommaso a load, which turned into half a load in Florence because he, his wife, his children, and the servants were all there to stack it - they looked like Gaburra on Thursdays when he and his crew flay an ox. Consequently, once I realized who was profiting, I told the others that I had no more wood; all of them were angry about it, especially Battista, who includes this among the other calamities of Prato.

Upon leaving the woods, I go to a spring; from there, to one of the places where I hang my birdnets. I have a book under my arm: Dante, Petrarch, or one of the minor poets like Tibullus, Ovid, or some such. I read about their amorous passions and their loves, remember my own, and these reflections make me happy for a while. Then I make my way along the road toward the inn, I chat with passersby, I ask news of their regions, I learn about various matters, I observe mankind: the variety of its tastes, the diversity of its fancies. By then it is time to eat; with my household I eat what food this poor farm and my minuscule patrimony yield. When I have finished eating, I return to the inn, where there usually are the innkeeper, a butcher, a miller, and a couple of kilnworkers. I slum around with them for the rest of the day playing *cricca* and backgammon: these games lead to thousands of squabbles and endless abuses and vituperations. More often than not we are wrangling over a penny; be that as it may, people can hear us yelling even in San Casciano. Thus, having been cooped up among these lice, I get the mold out of my brain and let out the malice of my fate, content to be ridden over roughshod in this fashion if only to discover whether or not my fate is ashamed of treating me so.

When evening comes, I return home and enter my study; on the threshold I take off my workday clothes, covered with mud and dirt, and put on the garments of court and palace. Fitted out appropriately, I step inside the venerable courts of the ancients, where, solicitously received by them, I nourish myself on that food that alone is mine and for which I was born; where I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about the motives for their actions, and they, out of their human kindness, answer me. And for four hours at a time I feel no boredom, I forget all my troubles, I do not dread poverty, and I am not terrified by death. I absorb myself into them completely. And because Dante says that no one understands anything unless he retains what he has understood, I have jotted down what I have profited from in their conversation and composed a short study, *De principatibus*, in which I delve as deeply as I can into the ideas concerning this topic, discussing the definition of a principedom, the categories of principedoms, how they are acquired, how they are retained, and why they are lost. And if ever any whimsy of mine has given you pleasure, this one should not displease you. It ought to be welcomed by a prince, and especially by a new prince; therefore I am dedicating it to His Magnificence Giuliano. Filippo da Casavecchia has seen it. He will be able to give you some account of both the work itself and the discussions I have had with him about it, although I am continually fattening and currying it.

Magnificent Ambassador, you would like me to abandon this life and come and enjoy yours with you. I shall do so in any case. but

and come and enjoy yours with you. I shall do so in any case, but

I am kept here by certain commitments that I shall attend to within six weeks. What makes me hesitate is that those Soderinis are in Rome; were I to come there, I would be obliged to visit and to talk with them. I am afraid upon my return that I might not count on dismounting at home but rather that I should dismount at the Bargello. For although this regime has extremely strong foundations and great security, it is still new and, consequently, suspicious. There are plenty of rogues like Paolo Bertini who, in order to be impressive, would order a meal for others and leave the tab for me to pick up. I beg you to make this fear evaporate, and then, come what may, I shall come and see you in any case at the time mentioned.

I have discussed this little study of mine with Filippo and whether or not it would be a good idea to present it [to Giuliano], and if it were a good idea, whether I should take it myself or should send it to you. Against presenting it would be my suspicion that he might not even read it and that that person Ardinghelli might take the credit for this most recent of my endeavors. In favor of presenting it would be the necessity that hounds me, because I am wasting away and cannot continue on like this much longer without becoming contemptible because of my poverty. Besides, there is my desire that these Medici princes should begin to engage my services, even if they should start out by having me roll along a stone. For then, if I could not win them over, I should have only myself to blame. And through this study of mine, were it to be read, it would be evident that during the fifteen years I have been studying the art of the state I have neither slept nor fooled around, and anybody ought to be happy to utilize someone who has had so much experience at the expense of others. There should be no doubt about my word; for, since I have always kept it, I should not start learning how to break it now. Whoever has been honest and faithful for forty-three years, as I have, is unable to change his nature; my poverty is a witness to my loyalty and honesty.

So I should like you, too, to write me what your opinion is about all this. I commend myself to you. Be happy.

10 December 1513.  
Niccolò Machiavelli, in Florence.

Transl. J.B Atkinson and David Sices

*Machiavelli and his friends: Their Personal Correspondence*, Northern Illinois UP, 1996, pp. 262-65.