**Machiavelli and “The Prince”**

In the late medieval period and the early Renaissance, Italy was in a bad situation. The country was being invaded by powerful foreign nation states such as France and Spain. In Rome, the corrupt Alexander Borgia won the Papal election through bribery, and he rapidly appropriated the church's wealth for his own family's benefit. In Florence, the once-powerful Medici family, patron of the arts and civic projects, was in decline, rapidly losing and gaining power in alternate decades. Parts of Italy became Republics such as Genoa, but other cities like Venice fell to dictators. There was no hereditary monarchy to rule the country and no centralized government existed. Each Italian city was like a little nation unto itself, ruled by oligarchic families who viciously eliminated business competitors in a manner that would make the modern Mafia turn pale. Italy was literally tearing itself apart, and it couldn't unify itself or defend the peninsula against aggressors. It was a bad time to be an Italian.

Niccolò Machiavelli was born into this unstable time of shifting fortunes in the year 1469. He served in a number of minor government positions, and was banished or imprisoned at various points of his career. One of his most notable positions was serving as a sort of political advisor to the Borgia family. The head of the family, Alexander Borgia, was Pope; the eldest son was Cesare Borgia, a bloodthirsty young warlord; the younger daughter Lucrezia was rumored to have poisoned her way through several husbands in order to stuff the Borgia coffers with golden inheritances. The name "Borgia" was synonymous with betrayal, murder, and power mongering.

Machiavelli, disillusioned with the ineffectual bickering and infighting among the Italian cities, saw the effectiveness of the Borgia family members in seizing and maintaining their power. He formulated his own theory of effective government in a treatise known as "The Prince," and he based his ideal "Prince" on Cesare Borgia's life. He famously asserted that **good rulers sometimes have to learn "not to be good," they have to be willing to set aside ethical concerns of justice, honesty, and kindness in order to maintain the stability of the state.** The idea was shocking to contemporaries, who had inherited medieval ideas about divine kingship, in which the king was appointed by God for the express purpose of serving as a sort of celestial deputy on earth, upholding law and justice. In popular medieval belief, the king was thought to be a "primate," an avatar of human virtue with innate authority over lesser beings in the cosmological hierarchy. In contrast, Machiavelli argued that **the most successful kings were not the ones who acted according to dictates of law, or justice, or conscience, but those willing to do whatever was necessary to preserve their own power--and thus indirectly preserve the order of the state.** His title, "The Prince," in fact, is a subtle mockery of the idea that rulers should be noble in their character. The implication of his title is that the idealized Prince Charming is a mere fairy tale. Machiavelli was excommunicated for espousing his views, but his arguments had a profound effect on Renaissance attitudes toward government. In literature such as Renaissance drama, the "machiavelle," or machiavellian villain, became a moustache-twirling stereotypical villain--the bad guy who appears to be good in front of all his companions in order to betray them all the more effectively. "Machiavellian" became a by-word for treachery, sneakiness, ambition, and ruthlessness.

For Machiavelli, **the end always justifies the means**. Among his most famous dictates are that **"it is better to be feared than loved"** and that **"the appearance of virtue" is more important than virtue itself.** He also advocates that preparations for war should be the foremost occupation of a leader, and that constant, preemptive action is necessary to prevent others from seizing control.