PREFACE

THE ESSAY offered in these pages combines a reading of Machiavelli's correspondence with Francesco Vettori in 1513–15 with an attempt to set this famous epistolary dialogue in the context of Machiavelli's emergence and transformation as a writer and political theorist. Some potential readers may wonder about the decision to devote this much attention to several dozen reasonably well known and much-published letters, especially as I have no discoveries to report from the archives or manuscripts. Machiavelli specialists have labored with skill and patience to improve the accuracy of the texts, to clarify the dating of the letters, and to identify the references or allusions to persons, events, and texts. And some of the letters, most notably that of 10 December 1513, have received a considerable amount of critical analysis and interpretation. Yet, despite all this work and the illuminating treatments of specific passages, individual letters, and particular themes, the correspondence as a whole has by and large eluded interpretation. The chief purposes of this essay will be, first, to show why and in what sense the Machiavelli-Vettori letters of 1513–15 can be thought of—indeed, how Machiavelli and Vettori themselves gradually came to think of them—as a whole that invites interpretation, and, second, to suggest how a reading of the letters can contribute to the larger project of interpreting Machiavelli's major works.

Various reasons can be adduced to account for the lack of comprehensive treatments of this correspondence. First and perhaps most obvious is that these letters do not constitute a single text in the ordinary sense of the term. Machiavelli and Vettori had almost certainly exchanged letters on occasion before 1513 (as a 1510 letter from Vettori suggests), and in the 1520s they again wrote to each other fairly regularly. In a correspondence whose limits extend to almost two decades, there is at first glance nothing self-evident about why a particular two-year phase can or should be treated as a discrete unit. Another reason has to do not merely with the fact of two authors, but with the (understandably) very different assumptions and expectations with which almost all readers approach them. Everyone knows Machiavelli (in one fashion or another), while only specialists in Italian Renaissance history and literature have even heard of Francesco Vettori, and even many of these know him only as Machiavelli's friend and correspondent. To many this has seemed a joint authorship of such obvious inequality that there has been little incentive to take Vettori and his letters seriously, or even to consider the possibility that Machiavelli did so. A further purpose of these pages will be to show how insufficient attention to Vettori's letters severely restricts

the understanding not only of Machiavelli's letters but of certain crucial aspects of *The Prince* as well.

Still another reason for the persistence of limited and fragmented readings of the letters lies in one of their most frequently acknowledged but least-studied features: the curious unpredictability with which they alternate between "serious" discussions of political and diplomatic issues and "frivolous" banter on love and the foibles of eros. Machiavelli and Vettori did not explain or justify these disruptions and changes of direction, and the resulting range of moods, themes, and language has left many readers with the uncomfortable feeling that the two *discorsi* have little or nothing to do with each other. Despite a few noteworthy attempts to uncover possible connections between the letters on politics and those on love, the general tendency has been to prefer one theme to the other. Predictably enough, historians have devoted most of their attention to the political letters, while literary critics have explored the connections between the letters on love and Machiavelli's plays. Each set of letters has been used to illuminate different major works, and this too has inhibited the inclination to ask why Machiavelli and Vettori interrupted their discussions of politics to engage in an apparently whimsical exchange on love, then returned to politics and yet again to love. The dynamic of this alternation and the ways in which Machiavelli and Vettori contributed to it will be a principal focus of my analysis of the letters.

It may also be the case that, with one or two notable exceptions, even Machiavelli's letters have suffered, by assumed or implicit comparison with the "major" works, from a certain tendency to relegate letters to a secondary (and sometimes lower) status in the hierarchy of literary genres.[1] As the first chapter will attempt to show, one form of this attitude of condescension toward letters, particularly influential in the Renaissance itself, derives from a classical topos according to which letters are and should be nothing more

[1] Recently, however, the history of letter writing and the study of epistolarity have emerged as fields of significant critical inquiry. For an introduction to epistolarity in the culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, see Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter Collections*, fasc. 17 of *Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1976). On epistolarity in early modern and modern literature, see Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity, Approaches to a Form* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1982); also the volume *L'épistolarité à travers les siècles: Geste de communication et/ou d'écriture*, papers of the 1987 conference at the Centre Culturel International de Cerisy La Salle organized by Mireille Bossis and Charles A. Porter (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1990); and, for epistolarity in Italian culture, *La correspondance [édition, fonctions, significations]*, vol. 1, Actes du colloque franco-italien, Aix-en-Provence, October 1983 (Aix-en-Provence: Centre Aixois de Recherches Italiennes, 1984), and vol. 2, Actes du colloque international, Aix-en-Provence, October 1984 (Aix-en-Provence: Centre Aixois de Recherches Italiennes, 1985). An important contribution to the critical understanding of epistolarity in Renaissance humanism is the very recent book (which appeared after I completed the present essay) by Nancy S. Struever, *Theory as Practice: Ethical Inquiry in the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), esp. chapters 1 and 2.

than written familiar speech—the setting down in writing, in Cicero's famous version of the topos, of "whatever comes to your mouth [quod in buccam venerit]." The popularity of this convention in humanist epistolography makes it certain that Machiavelli knew of it, and it seems more than likely that he meant to allude to it in the great letter of 10 December 1513 when he told Vettori that *The Prince* was the notation ("io ho notato") of what he found useful in the conversation ("conversatione") of the ancients, written down for the benefit of those who had not been present at the occasion.

But, as I will also suggest, Machiavelli must have been aware as well of the critique to which this traditional notion of epistolarity had been subjected by a number of prominent humanists from Petrarch to Poliziano and Erasmus. The plan of this book is thus as follows: after an introduction to the main lines of inquiry and interpretation in scholarship on the Machiavelli-Vettori letters and a brief preliminary description (and defense) of my own approach and method, the first chapter examines some of the literary and theoretical dilemmas that stood behind the enormous popularity of letter writing in the Renaissance—the relationship of writing and speech; the status of language in relation to thought, intention, voice, and persuasion; and the connection between these questions and the humanist emphases on dialogue, friendship, and politics. The second chapter supplies the more immediate background of the Machiavelli-Vettori correspondence, not only in the history of their friendship and of their association in political life, but also in the actual letter-writing practices that were Machiavelli's daily work in the chancery for over fourteen years, and in which Vettori too had some experience. Indeed, one of the overarching arguments of the subsequent chapters on the correspondence is that Francesco Vettori quite strategically made use of the epistolary genre and the potential offered by its unresolved dilemmas to encourage Machiavelli to rethink the assumptions about language and writing that he brought to the practice of political discourse both in the letters of 1513 and in *The Prince*—assumptions that had important connections to those fourteen years of daily letter writing. In this way, Vettori led Machiavelli to confront some of the critical issues concerning language and discourse embedded in the practices and paradoxes of humanist epistolography.

The origins of this project go back to an essay, never published but cited in one or two places (and entitled, with an allusion to Machiavelli's meditation on Dante's poet exile of *Paradiso* 17, "*Per miei carmi*: Machiavelli's Discourses of Exile"), that I wrote years ago as a faculty fellow at Cornell's Society for the Humanities. I thank the Society for providing me with the freedom in which to steal time away from my official project of that year in order to read and think about Machiavelli's letters in the fertile and happy

company of a remarkable group of fellows and friends. The essay was my contribution to the in-house seminar among the fellows and formed part of the offerings at the seminar's festive last meeting. I thank this long-dispersed band of friends for the good year we spent together, and for their generous and animated responses to pages they have no doubt long since forgotten.

Only some years later did I think to attempt a more serious and expanded version of that original essay written for pleasure and friends. I so decided, in part because of encouraging and critical responses to the essay from a number of excellent readers including Salvatore Camporeale, Laurel Carrington, Werner Gundersheimer, Lynn Gunzberg, Dale Kent, Claudia Lazzaro, Anthony Molho, Jennifer Rondeau, Elissa Weaver, and especially Quentin Skinner and Ted Morris, who persuaded me that there was much more one could do with these rich texts. None of them, of course, should be held accountable for the use I have made of their advice. In the course of writing I received generous help and valuable suggestions from Albert Ascoli, Laura De Angelis, Filippo Grazzini, Rachel Jacoff, Dennis Looney, Paolo Pirillo, and Antonio and Marina Reina. I am especially grateful to Myra Best for many illuminating conversations about Machiavelli, for her detailed critical reading of the draft version of chapters 3 through 8, and her assistance in numerous aspects of the project, and to Robert Black, Alison Brown, William Connell, and Michael Kammen for their kindness in carefully reading and copiously commenting on the manuscript. Each saved me from numerous errors and infelicities and helped in the solution of textual and historical questions. I am also happy to thank Lauren Osborne for the warm and efficient welcome my manuscript received at Princeton University Press, and Gavin Lewis for expert and learned copyediting that improved it in innumerable ways. Finally, to Patricia Pelley, who helped me think through many a puzzle, listened patiently to more than a few confused hypotheses, and read sections of the draft with her customary but uncommonly sharp insight, I offer my warmest thanks.

I dedicate this essay to the memory of two unforgettable and much-missed friends to whom I had particularly looked forward to presenting these pages. The pleasure I feel in concluding this book is not a little diminished by the impossibility of talking it over with each of them.

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