



On the expression «*Li òmini in universali iudicano più alli occhi che alle mani*»:
an Alternative Reading of Chapter 18 in *The Prince*

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Abstract

This article clarifies the meaning of a key passage contained in Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513), chapter 18: «*li òmini in universali iudicano più alli occhi che alle mani*» («Men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands») by linking it to Machiavelli's early administrative letters where the image of the eyes and hands is often employed. While most scholars and translators agree that «eyes» and «hands» refer to «men» who judge, in the letters the hands never belong to the judge but, rather, to the judged. Following this alternative interpretation, it is possible to appreciate the provoking originality showed by Machiavelli in turning upside down the context in which this image was usually employed. The Florentine secretary does not adopt the point of view of those who may be the potential victims of a deception (the judges) in order to warn them, as it used to be in the letters, but rather he writes in order to advise the deceiver (the judged). The comparison with the technical use of the image in the letters also helps to identify those few who «feel who [the prince] is». They are not the virtuous or smart men who are able to expose the prince's ruses but rather his victims.

Keywords

Prince - Machiavelli - Chapter 18 - Morgante - Bracciolini

Chapter 18 has been considered the most puzzling chapter in Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*¹. It belongs to the central section of the book dedicated to the qualities that the new prince should have in order to seize power and maintain it. Machiavelli addresses issues that had often been raised before him: if the prince should be loved or feared,

¹ «Celebre, aspro e sconcertante» (famous, rugged and baffling; Sasso 1993, 467). This article presents part of my dissertation research on Machiavelli's early administrative letters. While the responsibility for this work is only mine, I want to thank Massimo Scalabrini and Fabio Raimondi, respectively chair and precious member of my dissertation committee, for their guidance and patience: grazie, miei cari maestri!

should be considered generous or parsimonious, merciful or cruel². Chapter 18 discusses «quomodo» (in what manner) a prince should keep his word. At the beginning of the chapter, Machiavelli compares an ideal world prizing integrity and honesty with sheer contemporary historical experience, concluding that a ruler is more successful when unfaithful (2006, 234-5). He then illustrates the two ways men have at their disposal to compete: the way of the law, proper to men, and the way of the force, proper to beasts. The way of the law is not sufficient to succeed; therefore, in competing with other men, the new prince should be able to resort to two beastly qualities: the cunning intelligence and the strength, respectively represented by the fox and the lion. Success depends on the ability to use both natures, man and beast, symbolized by the centaur Chiron, half man, half horse: «l'una [natura] senza l'altra non è durabile» (236)³. After analyzing the reasons why it is not wise to keep your own word in any circumstances, Machiavelli moves on to discuss how the prince can resort to cunning intelligence (and strength) without harming his own reputation. At the end of the chapter, Machiavelli writes in a well-known passage:

[§ 16] Debbe adunque avere uno principe grande cura che non li esca mai di bocca una cosa che non sia piena delle soprascritte qualità, e paia a vederlo e udirlo tutto pietà, tutto fede, tutto integrità, tutto religione; e non è cosa più necessaria a parere di avere che questa ultima qualità; [§ 17] *e li òmini in universali iudicano più alli occhi che alle mani, perché tocca a vedere a ognuno, a sentire a pochi: ognuno vede quello che tu pari, pochi sentono quello che tu se', e quelli pochi non ardiscono opporsi alle opinioni di molti che abbino la maestà dello stato che li difenda; e nelle azioni di tutti li òmini, e massime de' principi, dove non è iudizio da reclamare, si guarda al fine* (Machiavelli 2006, 241; italics is mine)⁴.

According to Machiavelli, a prince is successful if he knows how to cover the violence and the injustice he has to perform – whenever it is necessary – behind the veils of traditional virtues and customs. Indeed, before the prince there are two groups of

² For an overview on the genre *specula principum* (mirrors for princes) see De Benedictis and Pisapia (1999); more specifically, for the *Quattrocento* and Machiavelli, see Gilbert (1939), Skinner (1978, 118-138), and Quaglioni (1987).

³ «The one without the other is not lasting» (Mansfield 1998, 69).

⁴ «[§ 16] 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. [§ 17] *Men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands, because seeing is given 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*» (Mansfield 1998, 70-1; italics is mine).

people: men in general who «iudicano più alli occhi», judge by the eyes (i.e., by appearances), and a small group of people, the few, the only ones to *feel* who the prince really is. The general meaning of this passage is clear: in political competition there is a fundamental distinction between how the prince should present himself and what he actually has to do in order to gain and maintain power; however, the expression «iudic[are] più alli occhi che alle mani» requires a further discussion.

Commentators and translators usually attribute eyes and hands to those who have to judge, namely: «li òmini in generale» base their judgment on what *they see* (eyes), while only few base their own judgment on what *they touch* (hands). This interpretation, pointing out the reliability of touch over sight, is authorized by how Machiavelli phrases the whole sentence, «*tocca* [...] a *sentire* a pochi: [...] pochi *sentono* quello che tu se'». Indeed, one of the meanings of the verb *sentire* (to feel, to sense) refers to the consequence of touching: the few «sentono» (feel) because they touch. Moreover, even though the verb «*tocca*» is impersonal and, therefore, means *to be given*, its first meaning is still *to touch*⁵. In this sense, the expression «iudic[are] alle mani» echoes a popular episode in the Gospels, the story of Doubting Thomas, who had to *touch* Jesus' wounds to believe in his resurrection (John 20, 24-29).⁶ This episode was very popular in the Renaissance to the point that the areas dedicated to the administration of justice in Tuscan town halls were usually decorated with artistic representations of the «incredulità di San Tommaso» (Parenti 2013, 198). Consequently, we should not be surprised to find a reference to Doubting Thomas in a chapter devoted to justice.

In sum, according to the most common interpretation, the few understand who the prince really is because they *touch* his real nature firsthand, like Doubting Thomas. It remains, however, unclear who the few are and what Machiavelli actually means when he writes they «feel» who the prince is. Francesco Bausi argued that while the majority of people base their own judgment on what they see, only a few are allowed to be that close to the prince to verify firsthand, to tangibly prove, «concretamente

⁵ A literal translation for this passage would be: “sensing touches few; [...] few sense that which you are”.

⁶ De Alvarez traces back the preference for touch over sight, conveyed by the expression «iudicare alle mani», to the well known experiment according to which a straight stick looks bent if immersed in water (De Alvarez 2008, 87-8). De Alvarez mentions an episode from Rousseau's *Emile* to describe the experiment, but it was already in book X of Plato's *Republic*. However, in the *Republic*, Plato's reasoning focuses only on the sight (602c) and not the touch. In this sense, Dotti (2013) interprets more correctly this derivation when, in his commentary on *The Prince*, he explains in a note that *sentire* in the sentence «pochi sentono quello che tu se'» means: «vedere con gli occhi della mente; penetrare al di là delle apparenze esterne» (179n46). However, I doubt this derivation for the expression «iudicare alle mani» is correct because, in the second part of *Quattrocento*, Plato's *Republic* was not as popular as the evangelical episode of Doubting Thomas or the other sources we will discuss in this article.

constatare», who he really is (2002, 383). Maurizio Viroli shared the idea of proximity included in the expression but tried to be more specific. «Judging by hands» -he wrote- means «to be able to understand [the prince's] passions and humors», since passions and humors guide his conduct. While the many base their own judgment on what they see and hear, only the few have the ability to *touch* the prince, i.e., to identify the particular passion (revenge, hatred, lust, fear, etc.) that moves the prince's actions. It goes without saying that only the prudent men possess such a skill (2014, 86-7). More complex is Erika Benner's interpretation. While she identified the few in the «other Machiavellian foxes, who know how to recognize snares», she believed Machiavelli's real intention in this chapter was to «exercise readers' skills at seeing through [the prince's] appearances», warning the reader against the princes' general faithlessness, rather than instructing the prince in the art of deception (2013, 213-24). Despite the obvious differences, all these interpretations share the same idea: the image of «iudic[are] alle mani» stands for the *active ability* possessed only by a few to unveil the prince's ruses.

The image of the eyes and hands in Machiavelli's early correspondence

I argue that it is possible to offer a different interpretation of this crucial passage of chapter 18 by analyzing the use of the image of the eyes and hands in the administrative letters Machiavelli wrote at the beginning of his career, as secretary of the Second Chancery and the *Dieci di Pace e Libertà* (Ten of Peace and Liberty)⁷. Even though Machiavelli's early correspondence might appear to be of lower quality and significance in comparison with his main writings, it represents a direct and, sometimes, even a day-by-day account of Machiavelli's activity as secretary as well as of the environment from which he absorbed the political terminology in use at that

⁷ The Second Chancery of the Republic of Florence was in charge of the correspondence for the internal affairs of the Republic, and in particular the management of the Florentine domains. Machiavelli was elected secretary of the Second Chancery on June 19, 1498 and held the position until November 7, 1512. Because of the delicate political situation the Republic had to face right after his election, Machiavelli was also appointed secretary for the *Dieci di Pace e Libertà*, an executive board responsible in exceptional times for the control of the countryside and the various centers of the Florentine domains. On Machiavelli's early life and administrative career, see Bausi (2005, 27-73); and for a brief overview of his early works, Cadoni (2006). For a description of the main duties covered by the *Dieci*, see Guidi (1992, 2: 787ff.).

time.⁸ Furthermore, due to their practical goal, the letters had to convey orders and suggestions, issued by the executive boards of the Republic, to the Florentine officers without any ambiguity or misunderstanding. Consequently, the language used in the letters was as clear and concise as possible while expressions and words commonly used in Florence at that time tended to acquire a technical meaning (Guidi 2009, 251n63)⁹. This is the case of *le qualità dei tempi* (the qualities of time), an expression heavily employed by Machiavelli in his major works. In the administrative letters, *le qualità dei tempi* is the technical expression used to recommend extra caution in certain circumstances or to justify decisions and conduct in contrast with ethical principles and values (243-260).

The image of the eyes and hands, rather than being just a colloquial phrase, represents another example of such a tendency to give a technical slant to common words and expressions. Here I report seven occurrences of this image taken from Machiavelli's early letters (1498-1503):

- (1) avendo l'occhio loro alle mani (by keeping your eye on their hands) [I, 8, 4];¹⁰
- (2) si vuole in questi tempi avere cura loro alle mani e non agli occhi (In these times it is necessary to pay attention to their hands and not to the eyes) [I, 30, 5];
- (3) avendo destramente cura alle mani a coloro di chi tu giudicassi non si potere fidare (And carefully keeping an eye on those you believe cannot be trusted) [II, 5, 4];
- (4) arai li occhi alle mani al Marchese Gabbriello e t'ingegnerai intendere sue pratiche (you will have your eyes on Marquis Gabbriello's hands and use your ingenuity to find out what he is doing) [II, 75, 6];

⁸ The publisher Salerno recently finished printing the "Legazioni. Commissarie. Scritti di governo." for the Edizione nazionale delle opere di Niccolò Machiavelli (2012). This new publication covers, for the first time, Machiavelli's last years at the Chancery (1505-12) and also includes writings never published before (Machiavelli, 2002-2012). For a detailed description of the differences between this very recent publication and the previous ones, in particular those by Chiappelli and Marchand (1971-85), see Machiavelli (2002, 548-50).

It can be reasonably argued that, in the earlier years of his political and diplomatic activity, the relatively young and inexperienced Machiavelli first grasped the common ideas and practices in use at that time by the officers of the Florentine institutions, then he re-elaborated them in an original way and, finally, he systematized them in his main writings. It is Machiavelli himself who says that *The Prince* stems from his fifteen-year experience in «studio all'arte dello stato» (in the apprenticeship in the art of state). See his letter to Francesco Vettori on December 10, 1513 (Gaeta 1961, 304-05).

⁹ In his fundamental study of the political language in *The Prince*, Fredi Chiappelli (1952, 9 and 57ff) extended this «tendenza a tecnicizzare» (tendency to apply a technical meaning to) common expressions and words to *The Prince* itself, however there is no general agreement on that; see for example Fournel and Zancarini (2000, 551-3).

¹⁰ The Roman numeral (e.g., I) refers to the volume from the critical edition of the letters, and the two following Arabic numerals refer to the number of the letter and paragraph. The English translation is mine.

(5) E fatto questo, gli arai gli occhi alle mani (Once you have done that, you will keep your eyes on his hands) [II, 391, 5];

(6) a' quali arai gli occhi alle mani (You will keep your eyes on their hands) [II, 392, 5];

(7) avere li occhi alle mani (To keep your eyes on [their] hands) [II, 368, 4].

In all these examples, while «occhio/occhi» (eye/eyes) can refer to either party according to the context, «mani» (hands) always belong to the one being judged and never to the one doing the judging. In this sense, the image of the eyes and hands in the administrative letters seems to have more in common with the thrush's tale than Doubting Thomas.¹¹ Here is how Poggio Bracciolini records this story in his *Facetiae*, a very popular collection of witty anecdotes and tales:

Quidam aviculas capiens in cavea reclusas, stricto manibus capite interficiebat. Interim casu lachrymas coepit emittere. Tum una ex reclusis ait reliquis: «Bono sitis animo, nam ut video lachrymantem nostri miscret.» Hic senior ex eis: «O fili - inquit - non *ad oculos* respice, sed *ad manus*,» non ad verba, sed opera monstrans esse a nobis respiciendum (Bracciolini 1964, 486)¹².

The moral of this tale is clear: the anecdote tells us that we should base our judgment on «opera», the actual deeds of the person we have to judge (judging by the hands), and not on «verba», his external manifestations (judging by the eyes). Between the thrush's tale and Doubting Thomas there is an important difference: the hands belong to the judged (the hunter) and not to the judge (the apostle Thomas).

¹¹ Bardazzi (1975, 1486) was the first to notice the connection between the image «iudic[are] alle mani» in chapter 18 and the thrush's tale. Few years later, Bausi made the same connection. For both of them, this connection has been made possible through Luigi Pulci, who uses the same image in his *Morgante* (later discussed in this article). In her commentary on Pulci's masterpiece, Franca Ageno identified the thrush's tale as the source for the image of the eyes and hands (Bardazzi 1975, n80; Bausi 2002, 383). However, Bausi, who does not seem to be familiar with Bardazzi's publication, argues that Machiavelli took this image from Pulci («Machiavelli, se – come credo – era memore, attraverso il citato luogo pulciano, di questa favoletta»). We can now conclude that Machiavelli was already familiar with it and used it several times from the very beginning of his career.

¹² «On a very cold day a man took some birds out of a cage and killed them by crushing their heads with his fingers. While he was doing this, it so happened that tears began flowing from his eyes. Then one of the birds in the cage said to the others: "Take heart. I see that now he is weeping, and I am sure he will have mercy on us." The oldest bird replied: "My son, *do not look at his eyes, look at his hands*"» (Speroni 1964, 57-8; italics is mine).

The link between the image of the eyes and hands and the virtue of prudence

The technical use of this image in the administrative letters is not limited to the specific attribution of the hands to the subject that has to be judged but is also reinforced by its association with *prudenzia* (prudence), a crucial term of contemporary political language. Today, prudence mainly means caution, the avoidance of unnecessary risks and, generally speaking, its use is not common anymore. On the contrary, in the 16th century, prudence was considered a virtue and played a pivotal role in political literature.¹³ As Albert Russell Ascoli reminds us, the concept of prudence has three meanings according to the basic temporal divisions: «it is memory as regards the past; it is understanding as regards the present; and it is foresight as regards the future.» In other words, prudence is the ability to learn from your own past, the ability to understand the surrounding reality, and finally the ability to foresee future dangers and opportunities. Moreover, the virtue of prudence as a whole (past, present, and future) takes its name from its third part, as its etymology suggests: prudence derives from the Latin *providere*, to foresee (234).

It is, therefore, not surprising to notice that the image of the eyes and hands is often associated with *prudenzia* in the administrative letters¹⁴. For example, in a letter written in July 1498, at the very beginning of his career, Machiavelli addresses Agnolo Pandolfini, representative of the Republic in charge of the district of Barga, an area close to the city of Lucca. At this time, Florence is at war with Pisa, which rebelled against the Florentines in 1494. This is a very serious issue for the city of Florence since Pisa is its harbor, and it will take 10 long and expensive years of intermittent war to regain control over the rebelling city. The Florentine government is hoping that the city of Lucca will not take the side of Pisa. In the letter, Machiavelli prizes Pandolfini's decision to give back to the subjects of Lucca their belongings that had been stolen by mercenary troops paid by Florence. Pandolfini's gesture might lessen the tension between the two cities. However, despite the gratitude expressed by the ambassador of Lucca to Pandolfini, Machiavelli warns the officer to stay alert, «avendo l'occhio loro alle mani» (by keeping your eye on their hands), in order to detect any sign of

¹³ As for an analysis of the term prudence in Machiavelli's major writings, the most important work is still Chiappelli (1977). He not only thoroughly analyzed all its instances but also identified the words, verbs, and expressions that Machiavelli links to prudence such as *conoscere*, *vedere*, and *pigliar partito* or *modo* (to know, to see, to deliberate) (194-95, 205). For a comparison of Machiavelli's notion of prudence with Aristotle, see Garver (1987); with Aquinas, see Lazzeri (1995) and Ascoli (1993); with Pontano, see Santoro (1967, 23-65, 179-231). On the relationship between *prudenzia* and *sapientia* before and in Machiavelli, see De Mattei (1976), Lazzeri (1995), and, more recently, Ginzburg (2009) and Frosini (2013).

¹⁴ It is not surprising also because the term prudence is generally linked to the metaphor of *seeing* (Dini and Stabile 1983, 71), precisely as in both the thrush's tale, «*look at his hands*,» and the image of the eyes and hands, «*keep [...] your eye on their hands*» (italics is mine).

deception behind those manifestations of gratitude: «[per fuggire] qualche macchinazione d'inganno che potessi sotto tali velami nascere». Machiavelli concludes: «il che, perché *se' prudentissimo*, sappiamo non bisogna ti sia ricordato» (Machiavelli 2002, 22; italics is mine)¹⁵. In this letter, prudence is explicitly linked to the ability to distinguish between appearance and reality, between the gratitude expressed by the ambassador of Lucca and the deception that might be hidden behind «tali velami» (those veils). More precisely, prudence refers to the ability to detect the first signs of deception; in other words, to foresee the danger, as the etymology of prudence suggests. That is the reason why Machiavelli does not recommend that Pandolfini simply use caution (as the modern meaning of prudence would suggest) in keeping his eye on the hands of the Lucchesi but prudence, the only virtue that can guarantee a full understanding of the present situation thanks to the ability to detect the sprouts of deception, to use Machiavelli's metaphor.

In conclusion, the image of the eyes and hands was already popular in the *Quattrocento* thanks to the thrush's tale, and that is the first reason why we find it in Machiavelli's correspondence: it is an expression everybody understands. However, as we have seen, in the administrative letters the use of this image goes beyond the obvious reference to a Florentine popular tale since it assumes a technical meaning. Rather than conveying a generic warning, the use of this image suggests a specific course of action and warns against a specific risk: it urges the Florentine officers to always exercise prudence in distinguishing what is said (appearance, words, external manifestations) from what is done (reality, deeds, actual agenda), and to base their own judgment on the latter; otherwise, the risk is to become the victim of a potential deception, like the poor thrush¹⁶.

The image of the eyes and hands between Doubting Thomas and the thrush's tale

Before going back to Chapter 18, it is worth analyzing two literary sources in which the attribution of the hands to the judged appears more ambiguous than in the administrative letters. The first source is Luigi Pulci's *Morgante*. In the *cantare* 28, stanza 45, the author warns his audience by writing:

¹⁵ (Since you are *so prudent*, we do not have to remind you of that; translation is mine). In this letter, the term prudence is explicitly mentioned next to the image of the eyes and hands; however, that is not always the case. When the word *prudence* is not mentioned explicitly, there are other terms that replace it, such as *conoscere*, *vedere*, and *pigliar partito* or *modo* (to know, to see, to deliberate), see Chiappelli (1977, 194-95, 205).

¹⁶ In the letters, the image of the eyes and hands is often accompanied by expressions, such as *addormentare* (literary, to make somebody sleep), to indicate the act of deceiving.

e s'alcun susurrone è che v'imbocchi,
 palpate come Tomma, vi ricordo,
 e giudicate alle man, non agli occhi,
 come dice la favola del tordo (Pulci 2007, 53)¹⁷.

Pulci urges the readers not to follow what some «susurron[i]» (literaly whispers, carpers) say against him but to verify their opinions by touching, like Doubting Thomas, and judging by «the hands,» like the «old fable of the thrush» suggests. It is, however, unclear to whom we should attribute the hands: do they belong to the readers, as clearly stated by the verb *palpare* and the allusion to doubting Thomas, or to the judged, as is implied in the reference to the thrush's tale?

According to Bausi, who has analyzed this source in comparison to Machiavelli's use of the image in chapter 18, Pulci implicitly authorizes the attribution of the hands to the readers because, by placing the reference to Doubting Thomas *before* that of the thrush's tale, he encourages the reader to *palpare* with the hand before actually judging («un'esortazione a “palpare” con mano prima di giudicare», 383). Following this interpretation, Bausi concludes that Machiavelli, who remembers Pulci's passage, employs the image of the eyes and hands in chapter 18 to convey the same preference for touch over sight. Contrary to Bausi, I believe that, rather than prioritizing one source over the other, Pulci first urges the readers to verify reality, like Doubting Thomas, and then, by alluding to the thrush's tale and its tragic end, he warns everybody against following those fools who criticize him – a threat that becomes more explicit in the following verses:

E non sia ignun più ardito che *mi tocchi* (touches me),
 Ch'io *toccherò* (I will touch) poi forse un monacordo
 Ch'io troverò la solfa e' suoi vestigi:
 Io dico tanto a' neri quanto a' bigi (Pulci 2007, 53)¹⁸.

Whoever tries to slander the author, he will end up like the poor thrush *touched* by the hunter/Pulci: a threat –I imagine- that can be easily extended to those among the readers who will not «iudicare alle man» but instead back up the opinions spread by those «susurron[i]».

¹⁷ «And if some fool dares prompt you, once again / I tell you that like Thomas you must be: / judge with your hands, not merely with your eyes, / as the old fable of the thrush suggests» (Tusiani 1998, 740).

¹⁸ «And let nobody touch me anymore, / Else I will play my monochord so well / That more than sol-fa they will recognize / whether 'tis black or gray, I treat them both likewise». (Tusiani 1998, 740)

The second source where the attribution of the hands is more ambiguous is a sonnet, composed by Machiavelli himself and addressed to Giuliano de Medici, the first recipient of Machiavelli's masterpiece¹⁹. The sonnet, whose title is «lo vi mando, Giuliano, alquanti tordi» (I send you, Giuliano, a few thrushes), accompanies some game birds Machiavelli wants to donate to Giuliano, perhaps on occasion of his release from prison (March 1513)²⁰. Even though Machiavelli is well aware that this gift is not appropriate for a member of such an important family, he invites Giuliano to feed them to any slanderer to make him stop criticizing others while he is busy biting into those birds. Machiavelli anticipates Giuliano's possible objection that the thrushes are not good or fat («non buoni e non son grassi») enough to tempt anyone by offering himself as a counter example: despite the fact that he is not fat either, his own enemies «spiccon [...] di me di buon bocconi».²¹ Then, in the last stanza, Machiavelli, like Pulci, invites Giuliano to not base his own judgement on those opinions. On the contrary, Machiavelli suggests:

Lasci l'opinioni
Vostra Magnificenzia, e palpi e tocchi,
e giudichi a le mani e non agli occhi (Machiavelli 1971, 1004)²².

Machiavelli's allusion to Pulci's passage is quite clear: the invitation to not follow opinions based on appearances, the use of the verb *palpare*, and the image of the eyes and hands. The only difference regards the attribution of the hands: the ambiguity still operating in Pulci seems to be solved in favor of Doubting Thomas. Indeed, the encouragement, «e palpi e tocchi», heavily affects the expression that follows, «giudichi a le mani», especially because Pulci's explicit reference to the thrush's tale here is missing²³. In any case, as Pulci exhorts his readers to stick to reality and not to follow appearances, lest they be touched by his «monacordo», Machiavelli warns

¹⁹ In the aforementioned letter to Francesco Vettori, December 10, 1513, Machiavelli informs his friend about the completion of his masterpiece, *De Principatibus*, and the intention to offer it to Giuliano de Medici (Gaeta 1961, 304-05).

²⁰ For a discussion of the poem, see Black (2011).

²¹ «get off [me] some good mouthfuls» (Black 2013, 90).

²² «Won't Your Magnificence give up their opinions, and feel and touch / and judge with hands and not with eyes?» (Black 2013, 90).

²³ In this sense, Bausi's interpretation of Pulci's use of the image of the eyes and hands seems more suitable for Machiavelli's poem. Still, I find it difficult to dismiss as mere coincidence the fact that the gift accompanying the sonnet is actually a clutch of thrushes («alquanti tordi»); in other words, the gift itself evokes the thrush's tale!

Giuliano not to judge his gift on its appearance but trust him and use it against his own slanderers; otherwise, they will keep on biting him²⁴.

A new attribution to the hands: the competition between the prince and the nobles

As we have seen, the young Machiavelli employed the image of the eyes and hands from the very beginning of his career. This image was used due to the popularity of its sources, Bracciolini's *Facetiae* and Pulci's allusion in the *Morgante*, and, therefore, it was understandable by anybody operating in the same political environment in which the young Machiavelli served as secretary: from Machiavelli's colleagues and assistants in the Second Chancery, through the officers to whom the administrative letters were addressed, to the most influential citizens serving in the *Dieci* and the *Signoria*. Moreover, in this specific context, this image was used with a technical meaning since the goal of the letters sent to the Florentine officers in the *contado* (the territories ruled by the Republic) was to convey a message as clearly and concisely as possible. For this reason, *the hands* were consistently attributed to the judged, stressing in this way (1) the importance of basing the judgment on the actual actions of the counterpart (rather than his promises or formal gestures), and (2) the risk of being victim of a potential deception, thanks to the allusion to the thrush's tale. Finally, the ability evoked by this image to distinguish between appearance and reality was considered a sign of prudence, the most important political virtue. Therefore, this image was also a reminder for the officers, operating on behalf of the Republic, to take the situation in which they were involved as an opportunity to prove they possessed such a virtue and, consequently, deserved the position to which they were assigned²⁵.

We also remarked that the attribution of the hands to a specific subject appears more ambiguous in at least two literary sources. Indeed, in Pulci's *Morgante* and Machiavelli's sonnet, the image of «iudicare alle mani» is associated with Doubting Thomas but, at the same time, is never fully detached from the thrush's tale. Actually, the allusion to the tale – explicit in Pulci and 'tangible' in Machiavelli – works as a warning sign against the danger of becoming victims of appearances: *touched* by Pulci's «monocordo» or *bitten* by Giuliano's hungry slanderers.

As for the use of the image in chapter 18, we saw that the most common interpretation attributes both eyes and hands to those who have to judge the prince's actions, and identifies the «few» with those who are willing or able to investigate and

²⁴ Particularly interesting is Jaekel's reading of this sonnet (1988). According to him, the actual gift accompanying Machiavelli's sonnet was *The Prince/De principatibus*.

²⁵ The importance of the *reputazione* for the officers of the Republic is well explained by Connell (1988, 615-6).

recognize the truth, i.e., the virtuous men, the Machiavellian foxes, etc. By attributing the hands to those who have to judge, this interpretation -implicitly or explicitly- opts for Doubting Thomas over the thrush's tale but only because the latter has disappeared from our culture.²⁶ On the contrary, we can now say that the memory of the thrush's tale was quite lively at that time. Indeed, it is difficult to believe that Giuliano would have failed to make the connection between Machiavelli's gift, the thrushes, and the image of the eyes and hands, contained in his sonnet. It is also difficult to believe that the image used by Machiavelli in chapter 18 did not evoke in his friends and colleagues -with whom he shared the same political language and among whom *the Prince*, or parts of it, privately circulated- the technical meaning it assumed in the administrative letters they copied, wrote, or read²⁷. As for Machiavelli as well, after using this image so frequently in the administrative letters, it is difficult to believe he did not have in mind its technical use either (and, consequently, the allusion to the thrush's tale) while he was employing it – once again – in *The Prince*, in a chapter discussing deception and truth. Therefore, an alternative interpretation of the image of the eyes and hands that takes into consideration its technical use in the administrative letters and the thrush's tale is, at least, equally reasonable as the interpretation based only on Doubting Thomas. Let's now test this interpretation in the context of chapter 18.

If we follow this alternative interpretation of the sentence «[men in general] iudicano più alli occhi che alle mani», the «hands» do not refer to the people but rather to the prince. The first consequence stemming from this interpretation is that we can better understand and appreciate Machiavelli's provoking originality in turning upside down the context in which the image of the eyes and hands was usually employed in the administrative letters (but also in the literary sources we analyzed). Machiavelli does not adopt the point of view of those who may be the potential victims of a deception

²⁶ Beside Bausi, who however ends up attributing both hands and eyes to the judge, the only scholar discussing the thrush's tale in relation to the image of the eyes and hands in chapter 18 is Viroli (2013; 2014). It is interesting to note that Viroli includes the thrush's tale in his own interpretation of the passage by attributing two meanings to the expression «iudicare alle mani». According to Viroli, the hands can refer to either the people or the prince; in the former case, it invites the people to investigate the truth firsthand (to judge with their hands); in the latter, to base their judgment on the prince's hands, i.e., his actual actions. In both interpretations, Viroli assigns to «li òmini in universali» and the «pochi» the same function of judging the prince. In this article, we argue that the few are actually the victims of his hands.

²⁷ Two famous examples of friends and colleagues are Buonaccorsi and Vettori. Buonaccorsi was a close friend and collaborator of Machiavelli and he copied *The Prince*. As for Vettori, who was an aristocrat, he served the Republic, in particular in the 1507 mission to the German Imperial court with Machiavelli. On January 18, 1514, he informs Machiavelli that he really, «oltre modo», liked the chapters of *The Prince* he read, but he wants to reserve judgment until he has the whole work, «se non ho il tutto» (Inglese 2014, XXIII).

(the judges) in order to warn them, but rather that of the deceiver (the judged) in order to advise him. Indeed, he reassures the deceiver, i.e., the prince, that his wrongdoing, the necessary acts of violence and deception he has to perform, will not jeopardize his own reputation because²⁸: (1) people in general base their judgment on what they see or what the prince shows them – today we would say *his narrative* – and not on what the prince's hands actually do (his actual actions); (2) those few who actually *feel* who the prince really is are ineffective since they are too afraid to go against the popular view supporting the prince or, even if they are not, they would not find any following. As we have seen, these few are usually interpreted as a second group of judges, wiser than the majority – Viroli, for example, in a recent publication called them «i cittadini saggi»²⁹ – because they judge the prince according to reality and not appearances. However, throughout the chapter, we do not perceive any concern that the prince's real intentions or unjust actions may be exposed by such a group of people³⁰. On the contrary, the real concern is the avoidance of snares and traps deployed by others³¹. Indeed, chapter 18 is populated by all sorts of animals – foxes, lions, and wolves – competing against each other in a dangerous setting full of snares. The moral of the thrush's tale and the verb *sentire* support an alternative interpretation that better matches this competitive climate. Rather than being more virtuous or smarter than others in exposing the prince's wrongdoing, the few who feel who the prince really is are more simply those among his competitors who fall victims to his beast-like actions. They «sentono» (feel) not only because they are reached by the prince's voice and appearance, «a udirlo e vederlo», like anybody else, but also because they *are touched* by his hands. In this sense, the expression «sentono quello che tu se'» echoes the sound of the thrushes' heads crashed by their executioner.

The solution to the contradiction between hands (the prince's unjust but necessary actions against his competitors) and eyes (his good reputation among the people) passes through the verb *sentire*. What Machiavelli is saying is that the prince's appearances and his actual actions *affect* people differently. The appearances concern everybody, while the actual actions only affect those who *are touched* by the prince's «hands», i.e., the direct victims of his crimes. The trick consists of keeping these two levels apart. As stated more clearly at the beginning of chapter 19, people only want to not be harassed, «[3] qualunque volta alle universalità delli òmini non si toglie né roba

²⁸ If – of course – the prince «paia a vederlo e udirlo tutto pietà».

²⁹ (2014b, ch. 2). For this interpretation, see note 26.

³⁰ See for example pars. 9-12 but especially par. 18 (Machiavelli 2006, 236-9 and 241-2).

³¹ In paragraph 7 «[...] Bisogna adunque essere golpe a conoscere e' lacci, e lione a sbigottire e' lupi: coloro che stanno semplicemente in sul lione non se ne intendano», Benner has correctly noticed that: «The first thing to learn from these beasts [...] is their means of *self-defence*. Thus one must be a fox to 'recognize snares' and a lion to 'frighten off' wolves both defensive, not aggressive, aims» (2013, 217).

né onore, vivono contenti»³², this is the «fine» and «lo evento della cosa» at which they look and on which they build their own opinion of the prince and, consequently, his reputation. However, abstaining from their properties is not enough. The prince must know how to *colorare* (to color) the unjust but necessary actions he directs against his adversaries, especially when he has to break a promise. If he does not take these precautions, people will see «who he really is» and therein lies the problem. Indeed, following the technical use of the image of the eyes and hands, *judging only with the eyes* means that men, in general, lack the necessary prudence to distinguish between appearance and reality and, therefore, they would confuse a necessary act of violence or deception for a dangerous habit³³. Consequently, they would start to *feel* unsafe and uncertain for their properties and women and, if the prince becomes hateful and contemptible before the people, the few would finally have a place to lean on, «appoggiarsi», against him.

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³² (Machiavelli 2006, 243-44). «whenever one does not take away either property or honor from the generality of men, they live content» (Mansfield 1998, 72).

³³ This is the same problem tackled in chapter 16: people are not able to properly distinguish between appearance (generosity) and reality (lavishness) therefore «if one wants to keep up a reputation for being generous, one must spend lavishly and ostentatiously» (Skinner and Price 1988, 56). In chapter 18, Machiavelli implicitly argues that what is called *integrity* is actually *naivety*.

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