

Interpretation

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Belfagor: Machiavelli's Short Story

THEODORE A. SUMBERG

"Your letter was short and in rereading it I made it long." Thus Machiavelli to a friend (*Opere a cura di Franco Gaeta* [Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961] VI:228). The meeting of minds that is friendship helps in making letters long, but unstated meanings are hard to come upon with friendship absent. They will be sought, however, if believed of value. Hence our effort to enlarge upon the central meaning of Machiavelli's short story (some eight pages) on how a devil, Belfagor, took a wife. What appears merely as a comic trifle recalls upon rereading several important themes in *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy*.

The story begins in hell. Its ruler, Pluto, sends a fellow-devil to earth to investigate the complaints of the many men descending among them that their wives are at fault. The devil chosen, instructed to live as a man among men, settles in Florence, where he marries the beautiful daughter of a poor nobleman. Very much in love, the devil-man indulges his extravagant wife in her every whim, soon using up the large sum given him for his earthly mission. Forced into debt he cannot pay off, he flees Florence, coming upon a farm laborer near by who, under promise of a rich reward, protects him from his creditors in hot pursuit.

Narrating his mission to the peasant, the devil-man out of gratitude makes a pact with him. Reassuming diabolic powers, the devil will take possession of the souls of the daughters of rich men who will pay the peasant handsomely when he calls out the cooperating devil. After two lucrative exorcisms, the devil, feeling that his debt of gratitude is paid up, threatens the peasant with death if he importunes him again. Pockets full, the peasant is content.

Later, however, the same devil enters a daughter of the King of France. Mindful of the devil's threat, the peasant, now famous for his exploits, refuses the royal request for aid, but the king also threatens death. Much troubled, the peasant devises a clever scheme carried out in Paris. While speaking into the ear of the possessed girl, he parries the menacing anger of the devil by warning him that his abandoned wife is coming after him. In a panic the devil leaves the girl. Free at last of the "marriage yoke," the devil returns to the peace and security of hell. His abrupt return, while confirming men's complaints about their wives, yet cuts short a mission planned for ten years. Meanwhile, with his daughter healed by the hoax, the French king rewards the peasant generously. Laden with gold, the peasant returns home "entirely happy," to quote the last words of the ingenious comedy.¹

I

At the outset Pluto delivers an important address to the “*infernali principi*.” “I alone possess this realm and I can rule it as I wish. I choose to rule it under law and in consultation with fellow-devils.” True to his word, Pluto calls them together, and after open discussion, in which different views are freely expressed, they decide to send earthward one of their own. The devil chosen, though unwilling at first, consents to go in a spirit of civic sacrifice typical of a political regime that is broadly based. Machiavelli notes the longstanding political stability of the nether world. In fact he pays more attention to the political arrangements of hell than the logic of the plot requires. Why? Where is good government to be found? In hell. His readers know well enough that it is not found on earth. He wants them to share his joke about the political superiority of the imagined kingdom of hell.

Machiavelli even claims for hell a concern for truth and justice. Assembled for consultation, the devils hold that they would show little love for justice were they to fail to investigate men’s complaints. It is this alleged love of justice that pushes them to seek the truth. Where on earth are truth and justice found?

The storyteller carefully sketches the limited monarchy of hell. Now, limited monarchy is superior to absolute monarchy according to his tracts. But absolute monarchy prevails in heaven, as everybody knows, so the story suggests hell’s superiority over heaven as well as over the earth. It may well be that Satan, having made good his revolt against God, has set up a better regime than the one he rebelled against. The story quietly leads the reader to such insidious thoughts.

For centuries man has been urged to look to the heavens (or the divine) for guidance and inspiration. Machiavelli challenges this tradition in offering the advice, advanced between jest and earnest, to look down, not up. Especially when he prettifies hell, he slyly carries out his apparent aim to undo popular veneration for heaven. There may be a prudential law of opposites at work here. You weaken the hold of heaven on men’s minds when you exalt its opposite. The safest way to attack Caesar, Machiavelli has pointed out, is not to attack Caesar but to praise Brutus (*Discourses*, I:10, in *Opere a cura di Mario Bonfantini* [Milan, Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1963], p. 120).

The law-loving noble regime of hell is not the only invention of Machiavelli. Hell cares for men; after all, lacking sympathy it would not heed their complaints. This view is the very opposite of the conventional one. Hell is where demons torture the damned in dread punishment. Classical mythology also pictures hell as a dark, gloomy place inhabited by pitiless devils (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 455). It seems that Machiavelli wants it understood that it is not God alone who loves man. If hell’s residents also love man, then the traditional

belief in the uniqueness of divine love is called into question. Apparently Machiavelli wants his readers to entertain such subversive thoughts even if he does not state them openly. You will reach your goal, he notes in the *Discourses*, by hiding your intention (I:44 in *Opere*, Bonfantini ed., p. 185).

II

On earth—the middle regime—nothing seems to work out well for its “*miseri mortali*.” Once in Florence, for example, the devil-man becomes vulnerable to all its evils, listed as poverty, jails, sickness and many others. The city’s evil is so entrenched that it seems to defeat the compassionate intervention of heaven and hell alike.

As a woman ruined Paradise for the first man, so a woman ruins the earth for the devil-man. Knowing Lucifer, he finds his wife more prideful. She is also insolent, capricious, ungrateful, querulous, foul-mouthed, deceitful, demanding and wasteful. Her only art lies in quickly separating her husband from his money. Her servants too find her insupportable; the little devils accompanying the devil-man to earth as servants soon return to hell “to be in the fire rather than live in the world” under the wife’s rule. Happiness seems to lie in successful flight from woman. Most comedies end with the lovers marrying and living happily ever after. This one ends in the escape of the husband from the “vexations of matrimony.” Marriage is no panacea.

The wife’s name is Onesta, which means decency. She was probably chaste before marriage, but afterwards she practices a sort of cuckoldry on her husband in loving him little, if at all, in favor of her family. She persuades her husband to pay for the dowries of her three sisters and the business enterprises (all failures) of her three brothers. Love of family, not only marriage, appears in a poor light in this story. Even chastity itself lacks the radiance of virtue because it does not carry over into decent dealings of the wife with people outside her consanguineous family. The traditional view that chastity is the glory of woman may be misguided. Machiavelli may also be insinuating that women with virtue do no less harm than women without virtue. The impish storyteller is all smiles throughout.

The evils of the earth’s “*tumultuosa e inquieta vita*” arise not from natural defects but from society’s corruption. It is respect for public opinion in particular that ruins the earthly career of the devil-man. Once on earth he seeks praise from fellow Florentines, and in fact he forms himself in their image. Machiavelli specifies that the devil-man soon “takes pleasure in the honors and pomp of the world.” Prompted by his wife, he even surpasses other Florentines in festivals and other conspicuous signs of lavish living. Amour propre defeats him.

Entering the world, the devil was instructed to submit to “all the human

passions.” He took a wife? No—the wife took him and without “mercy and concern.” The passion of love took him. Love is the demon that overpowers even demons. The devil-man’s name of Belfagor merits a word here. According to Saint Jerome, its origin is traceable to the Hebrew equivalent of Priapus (*Opere*, Bonfantini ed., p. 1036, n. 7). So what stands for man’s strength is his weakness. Machiavellian irony is endless, and he laughs at men as well as at women.

III

Fortune is an active player in the story. By lot Belfagor was chosen over other devils for the earthly mission. By luck the peasant gained his chance to help the devil-man when in flight. What counts, however, is not luck alone but the bold seizure of opportunities that come along. Chance well used leads to comedy, while chance overwhelming inept man leads to failure.

Machiavelli reports that although the devil’s ally in the hoaxes is only a peasant, he is a “*uomo animoso*.” He is spirited, resourceful, clever and strong-willed. Advancing from success to success, he embodies that “*astuzia fortunata*” that his creator calls for at the start of *Prince* 9. Machiavelli even specifies in the story that one cannot liberate oneself of earthly evils except with deceit or astuteness (“*inganno o astuzia*”). If the earth is not made for man, it can yet be made a suitable place for human enterprises to prosper.

The storyteller also notes that the peasant works on a farm owned by another. Farm tenancy is not the theme here; Machiavelli wants to show rather that one can rise high from a very low rung on the ladder, with good lineage, moreover, not counting at all. In his three adroitly managed exorcisms, the peasant outfoxes a rich merchant, the King of Naples and even the King of France. An unarmed man, if clever, can win over armed men. Fraud is enough to prevail over force. Such thoughts come easily to the wideawake reader.

The peasant even outwits the devil-man. This one, knowing both heavenly pomp and infernal fury, according to Machiavelli, knows less than the peasant. What the peasant knows—how to make his way on earth—counts for more than the sum of the knowledge of heaven and hell. So the earth, miserable abode that it has been, can yet be an arena of success once energy, courage and intelligence are mobilized properly. One can add that if the past is a mistake, there is yet no room for despair were vigorous new leadership to arise.

The peasant is very ordinary in one sense—he seeks wealth. Why? To buy land, not pleasures, according to Machiavelli. Indifference to pleasures is extraordinary in all classes of men. Yet it may be needed, the story suggests, to favor those seeking economic advance. The pleasure of love, on the other hand, is in particular to be avoided because it is the element in man’s life that escapes his control. So attests not only the unhappy experience of the devil-

man but also the absence of women, family and marriage in the peasant's success.

Machiavelli's two chief tracts tell the new prince how to act. This story tells the nonpolitical man how to act. It therefore appears that Machiavelli is engaging in the kind of moralizing exhortation that he disavowed openly in *Prince* 15. But he can defend himself from the charge of inconsistency by claiming that he is not urging noble or high goals, as was the custom of past philosophers and theologians. The modest one of economic success is certainly open to all, even to a farm laborer, without great strain.

IV

With his first words Machiavelli states that he plucked his story from the oral tradition of ancient Florence, specifically from the report of a "*santissimo uomo*" lost in prayers. Can one imagine a more pious beginning? That such a man is held responsible for narrating all the outrages in *Belfagor* is the greatest outrage of all. For example, such a man allegedly reports that resort to holy relics fails to carry out exorcisms that are arranged easily by the devil openly amused by that failure. Machiavelli also attributes to that very saintly man the view that the devil is made flesh, lives among us, suffers tortures on earth and then returns to his point of origin, hell. All too clear is the blasphemous parallelism between the devil-man and the God-man. One must not overlook that Machiavelli wrote for people who saw things through the prism of the Bible. Literate or not, the people's imagination was made up of scriptural stories, ideas and so on. He could therefore trust some of his readers to understand his story in the blasphemous way that he apparently intended. Open blasphemy would of course have outraged his readers excessively.

There is nothing pious about the exemplary peasant save his name: John Matthew. Mammon, not God, is the motor of his energy. Even worse is his shameless use of religion to advance his avarice. He insists in carrying out the three sham exorcisms amidst elaborate religious ceremony, especially the third one that he stages before Notre Dame in Paris in the company of the king, barons and bishops. The most solemn moment in the story is the biggest hoax. If religious ceremonies in the past have been tricks played upon the common mind by prince and priest—well, they will now be turned against them, as *Belfagor* illustrates.

Machiavelli is carrying out an exorcism of his own. He wants to cast out of the souls of his readers the respect for rituals, relics, miracles and mysteries—the whole farrago of man's religious life of past centuries.² Folly as catharsis of folly is his tactic. Half-gentle, half-malicious irony will empty minds of the awe nurtured on blind and terrified credulity. The process will of course take time, so *Belfagor* may be considered part of Machiavelli's long-range plan. The

plan itself is entirely political, for once you change people's imagination, you change the political order in which they live. A change in mentality is the change that lasts the longest. With playfulness and gravity the storyteller therefore works for the political philosopher.

John Matthew takes hold of the chances that come his way; why should his creator be less opportunist? With self-confidence Machiavelli will insert serious thoughts in his little comedy. Why indeed should anything less be expected of a writer having strong convictions that are at war with those dominant in his time? Also not to be overlooked is the oft-repeated goal of Machiavelli to be useful—indeed he is the first philosopher dedicated to utility. The reformist and imagination-dissolving character of *Belfagor* is no surprise.

V

The quickest way to open the eyes of the people, Machiavelli claims, is to descend to particulars (*Discourses*, I:47 in *Opere*, Bonfantini ed., p. 191). This is the game he is playing here, where this descent has special resonance because the reader is asked to look down, not up. As to particulars, a story is a string of them that are made attractive to simple souls by plot and characters. Machiavelli probably wrote his story for the ever-expanding number of people learning to read Italian in cheap editions rolling off newly installed printing shops. He would certainly not give them the technical generalities common to scholastic treatises in wide circulation in schools and monasteries.

Machiavelli also separates himself from the humanist literature of his day. Most of it was written in Latin, a language laughed at in his story. The first girl whom the peasant exorcises, when possessed by the devil, speaks in Latin. In lucid moments, one gathers, people will avoid that language. Latin also contains the accumulated knowledge of the past. Language and knowledge both are now to be put aside.

Humanist literature is also for well-bred gentlemen of elegant tastes who affect noble sentiments. But Machiavelli calls leisured gentlemen “pernicious” (*Discourses*, I:55 in *Opere*, Bonfantini ed., p. 205). His story, on the other hand, is for hardworking people innocent of cultural and intellectual pretensions. They will have no difficulty accepting John Matthew as hero. He first appears in the story building high a dunghill before the farm in which he works. The scene will not offend new readers.

Contemporary literature was also intoxicated by love, especially Platonic and Christian love as variously interpreted. That was reason enough for a rebel to write against it. Love as *mediatrix* between God and man is also one of the ideas to be discarded. Machiavelli probably also wanted to stress the danger of love's force to the bright young men whom in his tracts he was directing toward political leadership. His new readers, mostly men, would also enjoy the

joke that women use marriage to capture and enslave them. Anyway, wives should be controlled by their husbands, not vice versa, as occurs in *Belfagor* with unhappy results. Have we stumbled upon a traditional note in Machiavelli?

The first girl, when possessed, also enters into philosophical disputes. Those avoiding demonic frenzy will stay clear of them. By this open contempt for philosophy Machiavelli will no doubt gain merit among most people who are ill at ease with philosophy, especially with its endless and allegedly useless quarrels. Machiavelli knows how to pitch his story low. It is well to remember that Machiavelli knew peasants from having lived with them when in exile from Florence.

That same first girl, when possessed, also reveals the sins of many people, including those of an unnamed monk who during four years kept in his cell a girl dressed as a boy. With this ribald anticlerical note, however, Machiavelli is no pioneer, if we remember Boccaccio. Machiavelli's originality lies elsewhere, covering more important themes that are common to tracts and story alike. One such theme comes to light, however, from a conspicuous difference of story and tract. Taking place in hell, the story's chief characters include several devils. Now, hell and the devil are absent in *The Prince* and *Discourses* (Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* [Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958], p. 31). The political comedy thus expands its author's field of observation, which may be interpreted in the following way. Plato has Socrates say that philosophers should keep company with the divine (*Republic*, 500D). Only in such company, the argument runs, will they create the best political order. Machiavelli prefers to keep company with the diabolic, also presumably to advance political understanding. The special locale of *Belfagor*, a manifest demonstration of Machiavelli's tie to the diabolic, thus fortifies the hostility of the tracts to philosophy. In the story only a woman possessed engages in philosophy.

More generally, when you keep company with the devil, you challenge the whole tradition of philosophy, classical and medieval, because it was centered on the divine. So *Belfagor* has a place in Machiavelli's animus toward past thought. Nevertheless in a manifestly popular work, Machiavelli was less concerned to speak against philosophy than against religion. And against the solemnities of religion, ridicule is a natural weapon, given the tendency of common people to fall easily into laughter, whose well-known effect is to lower defenses against welcoming disreputable ideas.

NOTES

1. For details on text and original publication see Niccolò Machiavelli, *Operette Satiriche*, edited by Luigi Foscolo Benedetto (Turin, 1920).

2. *Belfagor* is “. . . una nuova battaglia contro le superstizioni della moltitudine. . .” Luigi Russo, *Machiavelli* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 1972), p. 159. Also: “Il Machiavelli vuole sradicare

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della mente del *volgo* la millenaria credenza in forze soprannaturali continuamente intervenenti nelle cose di questo mondo.” Gilberto Paolini, “Machiavelli in *Belfagor*,” *Kentucky Foreign Language Quarterly*, 8, No. 3 (1961); 123. Machiavelli wishes to uproot from the mind of the *volgo* the centuries-old belief in supernatural forces intervening continually in the affairs of this world.