

## Of Those Whom Princes Have as Secretaries

The choice of ministers is of no small importance to a prince; they are good or not according to the prudence of the prince. And the first conjecture that is to be made of the brain of a lord is to see the men he has around him; and when they are capable and faithful, he can always be reputed wise because he has known how to recognize them as capable and to maintain them as faithful. But if they are otherwise, one can always pass unfavorable judgment on him, because the first error he makes, he makes in this choice.

There was no one who knew Messer Antonio da Venafro<sup>1</sup> as minister of Pandolfo Petrucci, prince of Siena,<sup>2</sup> who did not judge Pandolfo to be a most worthy man, since he had Antonio as his minister. And since there are three kinds of brains: one that understands by itself, another that discerns what others understand, the third that understands neither by itself nor through others; the first is most excellent, the second excellent, and the third useless—it follows, therefore, of necessity that, if Pandolfo was not in the first rank, he was in the second. For every time that one has the judgment to recognize the good or evil that someone does or says, although he does not have the inventiveness by himself, he knows the bad deeds and the good of his minister and extols<sup>3</sup> the one and corrects the other; and the minister cannot hope to deceive him and remains good himself.

1. Antonio Giordani da Venafro (1459-1530), professor of law at the Studio of Siena.

2. This is the second time Petrucci has been called "prince of Siena" (cf. Chapter 20); in *Discourses on Livy* III 6 he is called "tyrant of Siena."

3. lit.: exalts.

But as to how a prince can know his minister, here is a mode that never fails. When you see a minister thinking more of himself than of you, and in all actions looking for something useful to himself, one so made will never be a good minister; never will you be able to trust him, because he who has someone's state in his hands should never think of himself but always of the prince, and he should never remember anything that does not pertain to the prince. And on the other side, the prince should think of the minister so as to keep him good—honoring him, making him rich, obligating him to himself, sharing honors and burdens with him so that he sees he cannot stand without the prince and so that many honors do not make him desire more honors, much wealth does not make him desire more wealth, and many burdens make him fear changes. When, therefore, ministers and princes in relation to ministers are so constituted, they can trust one another; when it is otherwise, the end is always damaging either for one or the other.

## In What Mode Flatterers Are to Be Avoided

I do not want to leave out an important point and an error from which princes defend themselves with difficulty, unless they are very prudent or make good choices. And these are the flatterers of whom courts are full; for men take such pleasure in their own affairs and so deceive themselves there that they defend themselves with difficulty from this plague, and in trying to defend oneself from it one risks the danger of becoming contemptible. For there is no other way to guard oneself from flattery unless men understand

that they do not offend you in telling you the truth; but when everyone can tell you the truth, they lack reverence for you. Therefore, a prudent prince must hold to a third mode, choosing wise men in his state; and only to these should he give freedom<sup>1</sup> to speak the truth to him, and of those things only that he asks about and nothing else. But he should ask them about everything and listen to their opinions; then he should decide by himself, in his own mode; and with these councils and with each member of them he should behave in such a mode that everyone knows that the more freely he speaks, the more he will be accepted. Aside from these, he should not want to hear anyone; he should move directly to the thing that was decided and be obstinate in his decisions. Whoever does otherwise either falls headlong because of flatterers or changes often because of the variability of views, from which a low estimation of him arises.

I want to bring up a modern example in this regard. Father Luca, a man of the present emperor Maximilian,<sup>2</sup> speaking of his majesty, told how he did not take advice from anyone and never did anything in his own mode; this arose from holding to a policy contrary to that given above. For the emperor is a secretive man who does not communicate his plans to anyone, nor seek their views; but as in putting them into effect they begin to be known and disclosed, they begin to be contradicted by those whom he has around him, and he, an agreeable<sup>3</sup> person, is dissuaded from them.<sup>4</sup> From this it arises that the things he does on one day he destroys on another, that no one ever understands what

1. lit.: free will.

2. Luca Rinaldi, a bishop and ambassador of Emperor Maximilian I (1459-1519), with whom NM became acquainted during his embassy to the emperor in 1508.

3. lit.: easy; see Chapter 15.

4. See NM's similar description of Maximilian, in his *Rapporto delle cose della Magna* (1508).

he wants or plans to do, and that one cannot found oneself on his decisions.

A prince, therefore, should always take counsel, but when he wants, and not when others want it; on the contrary, he should discourage everyone from counseling him about anything unless he asks it of them. But he should be a very broad questioner, and then, in regard to the things he asked about, a patient listener to the truth; indeed, he should become angry when he learns that anyone has any hesitation to speak it to him. And since many esteem that any prince who establishes an opinion of himself as prudent is so considered not because of his nature but because of the good counsel he has around him, without doubt they are deceived. For this is a general rule that never fails: that a prince who is not wise by himself cannot be counseled well, unless indeed by chance he should submit himself to one person alone to govern him in everything, who is a very prudent man. In this case he could well be, but it would not last long because that governor would in a short time take away his state. But by taking counsel from more than one, a prince who is not wise will never have united counsel, nor know by himself how to unite them. Each one of his counselors will think of his own interest; he will not know how to correct them or understand them. And they cannot be found otherwise, because men will always turn out bad for you unless they have been made good by a necessity. So one concludes that good counsel, from wherever it comes, must arise from the prudence of the prince, and not the prudence of the prince from good counsel.