Abstract: While scholars commonly consider Jonathan Swift’s Directions to Servants (1745) either a set of detailed observations of duplicity or a mixture of low content and uneven humor, two modern critics briefly compare Direction to Servants and Machiavelli’s The Prince, observing that both texts promote a governing principle: for a prince, the interest of the state, and for servants, collective security. Swift’s narrator refers repeatedly to the need for a “general confederacy of all the servants in every family for the public good,” where the public good is a Machiavellian euphemism for self-interest. Since neither critic extends this comparison, we lack a broader description of the relationship between eighteenth-century Machiavellian thinking and Directions to Servants. I place Swift’s treatise in the context of four core ideas important in Machiavelli’s writings: economy, expediency, propriety, and justice. Concerned with the acquisition, maintenance, and corruption of power, Swift uses Machiavellian thought to demonstrate how factions threaten disruption of political systems; like Machiavelli, he conveys his point through a practical demonstration rather than through theory. By mockingly recommending servants’ faults and duplicity, Directions to Servants uses Machiavellian thought on corrupt human nature to satirize the disorder, unclear class distinctions, and instability that result from factions.

On June 12th, 1732, Jonathan Swift told Alexander Pope that he had begun writing Directions to Servants, a mock instruction manual for servants, “about twenty-eight years ago” and that it
Directions to Servants would “require a long time to perfect” (Correspondence 4:31-32). Swift’s persona, a former footman, organizes practical advice and rules in a manual subdivided by job title, providing specific, concrete rules and warnings to each member of the household staff. Still unfinished at the time of his death, Swift’s Directions to Servants was published posthumously and simultaneously in London and Dublin.

Despite Swift’s investment of time in Directions to Servants (1745), scholars commonly overlook this mock treatise and consider it either a set of detailed observations of duplicity or a mixture of low content and uneven humor. However, two critics who have recently examined this treatise, David Nokes and Shirshendu Chakrabarti, briefly compare Direction to Servants and Machiavelli’s The Prince. Nokes argues that both texts promote a principle that should govern activities: for a prince, the interest of the state, and for servants, collective security. Swift’s narrator refers several times to the need for a “general confederacy of all the servants in every family for the public good” (Swift, Directions 761), where the notion of the public good is a Machiavellian euphemism for self-interest.

Building on Nokes’s argument, Chakrabarti compares Swift’s approach in this piece to Machiavelli’s, stating that they both chose the “vantage-point of actual practice to expose from within the bookish obsolescence of concepts and categories” (112). Chakrabarti argues that the “growth of credit, speculation, and stock-jobbing acquired the contingent force of Fortuna as defined by Machiavelli” (119). Accordingly, the bond between master and

“Jonathan Swift” by Charles Jervas, 1739
servant becomes concerned with profitability.

However, neither extends this comparison. Instead, they follow these initial observations with different examinations: Nokes, a psychoanalytical view of the anarchy contained in the ambiguity between master and servant; and Chakrabarti, Swift’s “radical reorganization of the master-servant relationship in the eighteenth century” (112). As a result, we lack a broader description of the relationship between Machiavellian thinking and Directions to Servants. While I will examine the possible influence of Machiavelli on Swift as far as I am able, my purpose in this essay is to place Swift’s treatise in the context of Machiavellian ideas. I intend to consider Swift’s engagement with four core ideas important in Machiavelli’s writings: economy, expediency, propriety, and justice.

According to his “Catalogue of Books, Aug. 19. 1715,” Swift owned and annotated a copy of Niccolò Machiavelli’s The Works, translated by Henry Neville and published in London by R. Clavel in 1695 (LeFanu 23). In Swift’s “Project for the Advancement of Religion” (1709), he references Machiavelli’s Discourses (III.i), one of the texts in The Works, in order to argue that “there must always of Necessity be some Corruptions; so in a well-instituted State, the executive Power will be always contending against them, by reducing Things (as Machiavel speaks) to their first Principles” (Swift, Basic 219-20). While it is impossible to determine exactly how much influence Machiavelli had on Swift, it does seem reasonable to assume that his Works, particularly as they were interpreted in the eighteenth century, might have had some small influence.

One part of Machiavelli’s legacy in eighteenth-century England is a revision of the concept of virtù, originally the skills, abilities, or prowess that allows rulers to anticipate and respond successfully to changes in fortune. Augustan Machiavellianism incorporates the equation of change with degeneration, thus rather than fortune being antithetical to virtù, corruption now opposes virtù. Furthermore, a fundamental debate in England considered the integration of the two conceptual schemes of ascending and descending power. The ascending scheme includes “customs, jurisdictions, and liberties” ensuring that rights affecting tenures of land are preserved for individuals possessing rights and property (Pocock, Machiavellian 335). The descending power promotes the continu-
ance of the political system and enforcement of power from the monarch down. Accordingly, relationships among land, trade, and credit become the source of public wealth, political stability, and virtù (426). Since virtù defines power within and without the republic, trade develops into the modality of power outside the commonwealth: it contributes materially, but not morally. Political stability is a precondition of individual morality; therefore, in Machiavellian thought, “corruption is a moral as well as a political phenomenon” (Pocock, Politics 129).

Since both Machiavelli’s Works and Swift’s Directions to Servants are concerned with corruption as well as acquiring and maintaining power, there are parallels that make a comparison useful, especially in light of eighteenth-century Machiavellian opposition of virtù and corruption. Both texts pit self-interest against the good of others. By analyzing contemporary society, both authors conclude that humanity is corrupt and wicked. In Machiavelli’s words, men are generally “ungrateful, fickle, hypocrites and dissemblers, avoiders of dangers, greedy for gain” (Machiavelli 72). Lock states that Machiavelli’s sense of the “almost irredeemable corruption of contemporary Italy” and his belief that it “could only be reformed by drastic measures” would have appealed to Swift (41).

Machiavelli directs The Prince to the person who would actually rule, as an instance of the humanist advice-to-princes genre. Directions to Servants also advises those who would rule, although the addressees are not the typical rulers of the household and satire often inverts the advice. Both convey their overarching purpose, maintaining power, through a practical demonstration, not through theory. Machiavelli distinguishes The Prince from pure theory with the use of the effectual truth, a truth “about politics as well as about human nature...that has an effect on the real world, rather than something more purely speculative or contemplative” (xxiii). Directions to Servants combines practical tips with a philosophy of advancement in service through unity of purpose. It documents a household system of servants with corrupt versions of economy, expediency, propriety, and justice, using a smaller, relatively contained system to investigate these factors.

The first factor, economy, ranges from recommendations for personal economy to systemic considerations. Machiavelli argues that, while it is necessary for a prince to appear generous, liberality
is harmful, for there “is nothing that consumes itself so much as liberality: while you are using it, you are losing the possibility of using it, and you are becoming either poor and contemptible, or, to escape poverty, rapacious and hated.” Further, he states that “the prince may either spend his own wealth and that of his subjects, or the wealth of others; in the first case he must be frugal; in the second, he must not omit any aspect of liberality” (69).

Similarly, Swift’s narrator instructs servants how to spend their master’s money or use his goods to save their own. Rather than securing a kingdom or maintaining rule, this frugality helps servants obtain or save money or rise professionally. Swift repeats the phrase “Service is no Inheritance” twice, placing it in the mouth of the pregnant maid (Swift, Directions 765) and the groom (754). Accordingly, the narrator outlines detailed recommendations for getting money or perquisites. In order to elicit vales, or tips, from a houseguest, always “stand Rank and File when a Stranger is taking his Leave; so that he must of Necessity pass between you; and he must have more Confidence, or less Money than usual, if any of you let him escape” (725-26). More detailed instructions for extracting money from dinner guests include physical directions “to stand full in his View, and follow him to the Door, and as you have Opportunity look full in his Face, perhaps it may bring you a Shilling” (734). Servants can make deals with others if they benefit financially, as in the coachman who negotiates a horse sale for a fee by persuading his master that the horse is vicious and foundered (752); or the groom purchasing hay from “those who will be the most liberal” (754). A butler can earn perquisites by taking advantage of his mistress’s gambling problems, and resale of bottles and glasses (735-36).

Practical economic advice also incorporates the contemporary view of women or more specifically, women’s sexuality, as a commodity. The narrator advises the waiting maid in management of her wealthy young lady with a detailed scenario manipulating, through action and language, the lady’s courtship with eligible gentlemen. The maid gains the power in the relationship, as she negotiates for her lady and determines who is “handsomest,” based on who pays her most handsomely with each delivered letter. Even mutual exploitation of master and servant transpires in financial terms when the footman recommends that the lady’s maid makes certain that she is compensated appropriately for any liberties the
lord takes with her person (Swift, *Directions* 762-63). All these “customs” and “liberties,” from tips to pandering, critique the maintenance of ascending power; that is, they critique the preservation of the rights and property of those who possess them and illustrate their potential for creating and maintaining a corrupting self interest.

The conflict between service and self-interest also occurs in Machiavelli’s recommendations for choosing ministers, where he cautions that if a minister

> thinks more of himself than of you, and that in all his actions he pursues his own self-interest, a man such as that will never be a good minister, nor will you ever be able to trust yourself to him. For the man who has the state of another in his hands must never think of himself but always of his prince and must never think about anything except what concerns his prince. (99-100)

Swift mocks both the advice and human nature with multiple examples depicting an ostensible motive of preserving the master’s honor, money, or effort, but real intent for self-service. Anything done for the master’s honor or to do him credit can be financially rewarding, like extensively whetting the knives so that they wear out, which “doth Credit to your Master, for it shews good Housekeeping, and the Goldsmith may one Day make you a Present.” Biased cost-benefit analyses assign more importance to reductions in the servants’ work, compared to potential household expenses. Instead of replacing the peg in the vent of the small-beer or ale vessel a “Dozen Times a Day, which is not to be born by a good Servant,” leaving the spigot half out at night will only lose two or three quarts, which is negligible (Swift, *Directions* 736-37). Personal economic concerns outweigh considerations of larger systems.

Because financial self-interest seems to be the goal of Swift’s servants, behavior and circumstances useful for achieving this goal become increasingly important. Both authors incorporate the second factor, expediency, in their texts, examining how and when individuals should act when circumstances are conducive to present advantage or self-interest. Machiavelli’s historical assessments demonstrate that only ineffectiveness is the reason to condemn a choice or action. Some failures arise from an inability to modify behavior according to necessity or from an overreliance on
fortune, a highly unreliable force.

Swift also targets expediency through instructions for servants, who desiring to attain or maintain control, need to be prepared ahead of time with excuses and techniques for dodging work or blame. *Directions to Servants* outlines ways in which servants can take advantage of convenient situations, providing copious, specific examples illustrating how to delay or avoid work to gain more control, money, or rank, and to annoy their employer.

The footman narrator outlines for the butler an "excellent invention...in the Management of Ale and Small-beer at the Sideboard" resembling a shell game, which "answer[s] three great Ends": first, it saves effort in washing glasses and reduces the likeness of breaking them; second, the butler is "sure not to be mistaken in giving Gentlemen the Liquor they call for"; and third, nothing will be lost (Swift, *Directions* 730). The speaker instructs the butler to "take all possible Care to save your own Trouble, and your Master's Drink and Glasses" through reusing glasses and refilling glasses only after multiple requests to save the butler's effort and his master's liquor (729).

Recommendations for dealing with broken candlesticks connect economy and expediency:

But, you may find out many Expedients: You may conveniently stick your Candle in a Bottle, or with a Lump of Butter against the Wainscot, in a Powder-horn, or in an old Shoe, or in a cleft Stick, or in the Barrel of a Pistol, or upon its own Grease on a Table, in a Coffee Cup or a Drinking Glass, a Horn Can, a Tea Pot, a twisted Napkin, a Mustard Pot, an Ink-horn, a Marrowbone, a Piece of Dough, or you may cut a Hole in a Loaf, and stick it there. (726-27)

Similarly, rather than leaving work undone because of a lack of proper instruments, servants should “use all Expedients [they] can invent.” Swift incorporates other lists of expedients, including extinguishing candles, using makeshift equipment (727), revenging yourself on a tattletale (728), showing displeasure at not being tipped (735), managing a mistress who becomes interested in extramarital affairs (763), and convincing your master to use a lantern-boy to light his way (746).

Expediency can also result in some social mobility; for example, the chambermaid may be able to make a favorable match for herself: “[y]our usual Lover, as I take it, is the Coachman; but, if
you are under Twenty, and tolerably handsome, perhaps a Footman may cast his Eyes on you” (758). However, these opportunities may be limited, as in the footman’s warning for the waiting maid about advancement through marriage to the master’s son: “I must caution you particularly against my Lord’s eldest Son: If you are dextrous enough, it is odds that you may draw him in to marry you, and make you a Lady.” However, if he is a rake, avoid him, since he has nothing to fear, as “he stands in less Awe of a Mother, than my Lord doth of a Wife” (762).

In addition to determining when conditions are best suited for acting in one’s own interest, an awareness of what behaviors best fit those conditions is also rewarding. As a result, both authors address both meanings of the third factor, propriety: appropriateness to the circumstances or conditions, or socially acceptable behavior or morals.

Machiavelli demonstrates the power of self-interest and circumstance over obligation or conscience: “it is necessary in a prince, if he wants to preserve himself, to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge and not use it as necessity dictates” (66). He states that it is better to appear moral than to be moral: someone who wants to maintain power cannot afford to be moral, because the rest of the world is corrupt. Appearances are vital because “ordinary people will always be taken by appearances and by the outcome of an action” (77). For example, Machiavelli recommends that the prince be a “great hypocrite and dissembler,” because “men are so simple and so obedient to present necessities, that he who deceives will always find someone who will let himself be deceived” (76). Since men are wicked, and will not keep their word, a ruler does not have to keep a reciprocal promise.

For a servant, appearances are also more important than the truth. As the footman states, “[t]here is nothing wherein the Skill of a Butler more appears, than the Management of Candles.” The twelve references for handling candles in the “Directions to Butlers” mostly favor appearance over utility: placing candles on top of built-up grease, which “may endanger their falling, but the Candles will appear so much the longer and handsomer before Company,” or for variety, placing the candles loose in the sockets, to “shew they are clean to the Bottom” (Swift, Directions 731). Similarly, if the chambermaid is in a hurry, she can sweep the dust into
a corner as long as she leaves her brush on the pile, so “that it may not be seen, for that would disgrace [her]” (760).

Proper behavior also includes demonstrating to the elite that servants are fulfilling their stations, either by slamming doors, leaving cleaning solutions on dishes or silver (731), leaving the chimney cleaning rags on the parlor chairs, leaving fingerprints on brass locks (765), scouring marks around the wainscoting (766), or displaying battered, worn-out, or blackened cooking ware (741). Demonstrating personal cleanliness is also important, as the butler should “wipe the Mouth of the Bottle with the Palm of your Hand, to shew your Cleanliness” before serving bottled ale (729), and the chambermaid should leave the mark of her thumb “only upon one End of every Slice, to shew your Cleanliness” (761).

Sometimes descriptions of proper behavior contain advice for expediency:

I could never endure to see Maid-Servants so ungenteel as to walk the Streets with their Pettycoats pinned up; it is a foolish Excuse to alledge, their Pettycoats will be dirty, when they have so easy a Remedy as to walk three or four Times down a clean Pair of Stairs after they come home. (724)

In the same way, chamber pots are to be emptied out of the window rather than carried down, as “it is highly improper for Men Servants to know that fine Ladies have Occasion for such Utensils” (758). The cook should leave the roasting and boiling to the kitchen wench, for these activities are “below the Dignity of [her] Office,” and might disgrace the family (738).

The right appearance can sometimes lead to a change in fortune. Swift’s narrator recommends that the footman choose his service based on livery colors, since the right colored uniform, along with “a borrowed Sword, a borrowed Air, [his] Master’s Linen, and a natural and improved Confidence” will provide, where he is unknown, whatever title is desired. Further, when walking with his master or mistress, he should pretend to be their equal as much as possible. The narrator provides three examples of footmen who rose relatively successfully: one married a court lady because of his politeness and gracefulness, another gained money through gambling and a lawsuit, and the third acted “pert and sawcy to all Mankind,” for “insolence will at last turn to good account” (749-50). These examples correspond to Machiavelli’s use
Directions to Servants of historical and contemporary events.

However, Swift’s idea of fortune in this text is subservient to the theme of order (Pocock, *Machiavellian* 349). *Directions to Servants* warns about ambition leading individuals out of their appropriate place, as with the footman’s rise and fall, which, as Chakabarti notes, “almost inevitably overreaches into ruin and collapse” (Chakabarti 115). The narrator warns “[b]e not proud in Prosperity: You have heard that Fortune turns on a Wheel; if you have a good Place, you are at the Top of the Wheel” (Swift, *Directions* 750). Swift catalogues concrete examples of downfalls for the footman to remember in his “flourishing Condition” (750-51).

Machiavelli states that wise princes “have to look not only to present dangers but also to future ones, and make every effort to forestall them” (13). Further, while appearing moral and virtuous is useful, it also important “to have your mind disposed so that, when it is necessary not to be that way, you will be ready and able to change to the opposite” (76). Success is dependent on adaptation of methods to suit time and circumstances, for reliance on the same methods will eventually result in failure:

[A] prince who relies entirely on Fortune comes to ruin as she changes. I also believe that the man who adapts his mode of proceeding to the nature of the times will prosper, and similarly, that the man whose mode of proceeding is not in accord with the times will not prosper. (106)

A wise ruler must know his country, as well as military and political history to be prepared, and must be industrious even in peacetime to “avail himself of [knowledge] in times of adversity, so that when Fortune changes, she may find him prepared to resist her” (65).

Similarly, servants should take advantage of situations and prepare for possible changes in circumstance. Swift lists examples of the servants’ opportunities, including designating one person to stay at home to cover for the rest when the master and lady “go abroad together, to Dinner, or on a Visit for the Evening” (Directions 725). Additionally, when the lady forgets that there is cold meat available, the cook should plan ahead and “dispose of it with the Butler, or any other Crony” to be able to tell her tomorrow that it is “spent” (737). As the footman points out, these “Opportunities must never be missed, because they come but
Part of preparation is having ready excuses: “I must inform you, as well as your fellow Servants, that you ought never to be without an Excuse; it doth no Harm to your Master, and it lessens your Fault” (760). The narrator prepares the groom with a “reasonable Excuse” for meeting his friends at the tavern by suggesting that he carry some old tack to appear as though he were going to or coming from the Saddler’s, so that if he is “met by his Master, [he] will have the Reputation of a careful Servant” (757). Like Machiavelli’s historically based examples, the narrator reports on the practical success of this gambit.

The ultimate model of preparedness and successful exploitation of circumstances is in the “Directions to the Nurse”: “If you happen to let the Child fall, and lame it, be sure never confess it; and, if it dies, all is safe. Contrive to be with Child, as soon as you can, while you are giving Suck, that you may be ready for another Service, when the Child you nurse dies, or is weaned” (767). This vivid image has an effect similar to Machiavelli’s concrete example of a conqueror, who misdirected the people’s hatred of him and his cruel minister by having the two pieces of the minister’s body placed in the piazza along with a piece of wood and a bloody knife (33).

Machiavelli provides direct advice to those who would rule about what type of justice they should employ and why. A ruler can and should use cruelty, but by considering all the cruelties “he has to do and do them all at one stroke so as not to have to renew them every day, and to be able, by not repeating them, to reassure men and win them over by benefitting them” (39). A ruler who dispenses justice must be consistent, firm, bold, and realistic, for “he who abandons what is done for what ought to be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation” (66). His concept is pragmatic and contextually based.

In a similar way, Swift’s text provides practical advice on how to deal with an existing justice system. The contemporary atmosphere is unfavorable for servants, as the “antient and constant practice” of three-legged chairs demonstrates, as it is “founded upon two Reasons; first, to shew that Servants are ever in a tottering Condition; secondly, it was thought a Point of Humility, that the Servants Chairs and Tables should have at least one Leg fewer than those of their Masters” (Directions 724). The cur-
rent system works against servants: the normalizing of footmen being hung (748), the recommending of action in response to chiding or punishing, and the assumptions of conflict between servants and master. In the butler’s directions, the footman notes that it “is the office of a good Servant to discompose his Master and his Lady as seldom as he can” (736). In the servants’ world, justice is not conceptual, but tangible. Because his fate will be the same another day, the last advice for the footman details how to behave when he is going to be hanged (751).

Accordingly, much of the advice centers on avoiding punishment, and expediency and propriety are significant. Swift’s narrator describes excuses as “lawful” (742): in the cook’s directions alone, a reader will find “lawfully lay the fault on your Lady” (741), “fairly lay the Fault” (740), and may “safely swear” (738). If a chambermaid breaks china, she should place the fragments behind the rest of the ornaments, so when they are discovered she may claim that they were broken before she entered service, saving her mistress “many an Hour’s Vexation” (758).

The footman relates the “particulars” of the hard treatment of the chambermaid who broke a looking glass, which cannot be concealed, “to shew the Ingenuity of the poor Chambermaid on so sudden and dreadful an emergency, which perhaps may help to sharpen [the readers’] invention” in a similar situation. He considers her dismissal “hard Treatment, considering her ingenuity,” so uses her failure to promote contriving stories that “will better hang together,” and provides two such expedients out of a desire to defend the innocent (759).

To achieve justice and avoid punishment, Swift’s footman narrator describes shaping his targets: “When you have done a Fault, be always pert and insolent, and behave your self as if you were the injured Person; this will immediately put your Master or Lady off their Mettle” (721), which can include muttering loudly when exiting to appear innocent (725). Further, if “chid before Company,” and if a visitor defends the servant, then the servant has a “good Title to justify your self, and may rightly conclude, that whenever he chides you afterwards on other Occasions, he may be in the wrong” (721-22). This mirrors the prince’s technique for building a foundation with his subjects through creating an image that inspires fear, reverence, and awe. The prince shapes them and their responses, in part by maintaining “such a reputation
that no one would think to deceive him or try to get around him” (Machiavelli 79).

Some recommendations for justice provide possible financial reward and directly attack the gentry of the household. The coachman should arrange to have a new set of wheels purchased as often as possible, for if he is allowed the old as a perquisite, then he collects the income, or if he is not, it is a “just Punishment on your Master’s Covetousness; and almost as an afterthought, perhaps the coachmaker will give him a reward” (Swift, Directions 752). If employers do not reward servants, the ensuing justice seems punitive and corrective: “If your mistress allows you the Kitchen-stuff, in return of her Generosity, take care to boil and roast your Meat sufficient. If she keeps it for her own profit, do her Justice; and rather than let a good fire be wanting, enliven it now and then with the Dripping and the Butter that happens to turn to oil” (739).

In these two texts, one method of obtaining justice is through conspiracies or confederacies. Overall, Machiavelli disapproves of conspiracy; however, he does approve of the aims: “There is another reason, and a very great one, that makes men conspire against a prince, and that is the desire to liberate their country which he has taken full possession of” (197). Swift apparently believes that the people have the right to displace a monarch, as “the publick good will justify such Revolution; and this I took to have been the Case in the Prince of Orange’s expedition, although in the consequences it produced some very bad effects, which are likely to stick long enough by us” (Works 353).

In Directions to Servants, confederacies help avoid punishment, aid expediency, and grant some economic benefits. In a confederacy of servants against their master “[y]ou may quarrel with each other as much as you please, only bear in mind that you have a common enemy, which is your master and lady, and you have a common cause to defend” (Swift 724). Similarly, servants should act for the good of the confederacy if a situation warrants. If the footman suspects that his employers are talking about something of interest to the servants, he should “listen at the Door for the publick Good of all the Servants, and join all to take proper Measures for preventing any Innovations that may hurt the Community” (750).

Mutual benefits also unite servants. The narrator directs the footman to teach other messengers how to appear in order to be
tipped, “for Brother Servants should assist one another, since it is all for your Master’s Honour, which is the chief Point to be consulted by every good Servant, and of which he is the best judge” (747). The footman counsels the groom, for “Brotherservants must always befriend one another, and this also concerns your Master’s Honour; because he cannot do less than give a Piece of Money to him who holds his Horse,” and requires the groom to help fellow servants receive tips (755). Swift places the butler and the cook together at the top of the servants’ hierarchy for shared advantage, for it is in both their “Interests to be united,” as each has something tangible to offer: the cook, food, and the butler, drink. However, even in conditions favorable for mutual benefit, prudence is necessary. The footman cautions the cook to be wary of her ally, for “he is sometimes an inconstant Lover, because he hath great Advantage to allure the Maids with a Glass of Sack, or White Wine and Sugar” (741). A resulting difference is dangerous, for a “Quarrel between you...will probably end in one of you being turned off; in which fatal Case, perhaps, it will not be so easy in some Time to cotton with another” (737).

Machiavelli’s negative outlook on human nature colors his views of confederacies and conspiracies, “for love is held together by a chain of obligation which, because men are sadly wicked, is broken at every opportunity to serve their self-interest, but fear is maintained by a dread of punishment which never abandons you.” The best way to guard against conspiracy is to avoid inspiring hatred in your followers. The ideal combination, to be feared and not hated, occurs as long as a ruler does “not touch the goods and the women of his citizens and subjects.” Machiavelli warns that “reasons for taking property are never lacking, and he who begins to live by stealing always finds a reason for taking what belongs to others” (72).

Nearly the opposite occurs in Swift’s text, as the servants and the masters are overwhelmingly concerned with material possessions and sex. Both sides in this warfare are guilty: the master deprives his servants and takes advantage of the maid, while the servants connive to steal food and drink, and the footman is advised how to pursue the household women.

Conspiracy or confederacy works horizontally as well. Machiavelli describes attacks against a favored individual who has “arrived at so high a reputation by means of the credit derived
from his own prudence and other citizens’ ignorance, that he so greatly frightened the government as to make other citizens judge it dangerous to attack him and exceedingly dangerous to let him continue” (180). Likewise, Scipio’s enormous popularity became threatening, not because of envy, but because of the perception that his “virtù, feeding his ambition, might destabilize the state” (Roe 139).

The footman recommends uniting against a common foe, the favorite servant:

If you see your Master wronged by any of your Fellow-servants, be sure to conceal it, for fear of being called a Telltale: However, there is one Exception, in case of a favourite Servant, who is justly hated by the whole Family; who therefore are bound in Prudence to lay all the Faults they can upon the Favourite. (Swift, Directions 721)

A tell-tale is also an enemy: “Believe an old Practitioner; whoever out of Malice to a Fellow-servant, carries a Tale to his Master, shall be ruined by a general Confederacy against him” (724). There are repeated exhortations for not informing: “There is nothing so pernicious in a Family as a Tell-tale, against whom it must be the principal Business to unite: Whatever Office he serves in, take all Opportunities to spoil the Business he is about, and to cross him in every Thing” (727-28). This injunction is so important that the narrator then specifies several different methods of revenge for the butler, cook, footman, and waiting maid.

Laying blame is a useful tool in getting rid of friends or enemies who are no longer useful, one of Machiavelli’s most notorious ideas. Likewise, in Directions to Servants, Swift’s footman suggests that once servants have left or been “turned off,” faults can be attributed to them: “When a Servant is turned off, all his Faults must be told, although most of them were never known by his Master or Lady; and all Mischief done by others, charged to him” (725). To maximize this opportunity, a servant should show concern for their well-being by wanting to avoid angering them, and by appearing concerned about their opinion of servants’ character: “perhaps you might think it was Malice in me” (725). The latter is a preemptive strike for exactly that possibility.

Swift combines all four factors (economy, expediency, propriety, and justice), guided by self-interest, in his “Directions to the Waiting Maid”: “Two Accidents have happened to lessen the
Comforts and Profits of your Employment,” namely the recycling of old cloths into slipcovers, which deprives maids of cast-offs, and locking trunks for tea and sugar. The footman calls these “Evils,” and while he cannot prescribe perfect remedies, he does suggest a “general Confederacy of all the Servants in every Family, for the publick Good, to drive those China Hucksters from the Doors,” and obtaining a false key. Despite the danger and difficulty in getting a duplicate key, the footman justifies the action, and minimizes its immorality: “as to the Circumstances of Honesty in procuring one, I am under no Doubt, when your Mistress gives you so just a Provocation, by refusing you an ancient and legal Perquisite” (761-62).

This passage, like the rest of Swift’s treatise, is satirical, ridiculing concern over traditional rights and privileges that disguise self-interest and greed. It is also Machiavellian, as the narrator manipulates circumstances for his own uses and acts as the circumstances dictate, not as morality does. The treatise also borrows its emphasis on practical success, even at the expense of traditional values from Machiavellian thought.

In his Works, Machiavelli illustrates, with the Roman model, that uncorrected factional disputes between nobility and commoners collapsed the Republic. Swift draws on Machiavellian thought to demonstrate his belief that factions threaten to disrupt the balance of political systems. By mockingly recommending the faults and duplicity of servants, Directions to Servants combines economy, expediency, propriety, and justice, with the corrupt nature of humanity, to satirize three key targets: disorder, diffuse class distinctions, and instability resulting from factions.

Works Cited


Machiavelli, Niccolò. The Prince and Other Writings. Trans. Ed. Wayne


