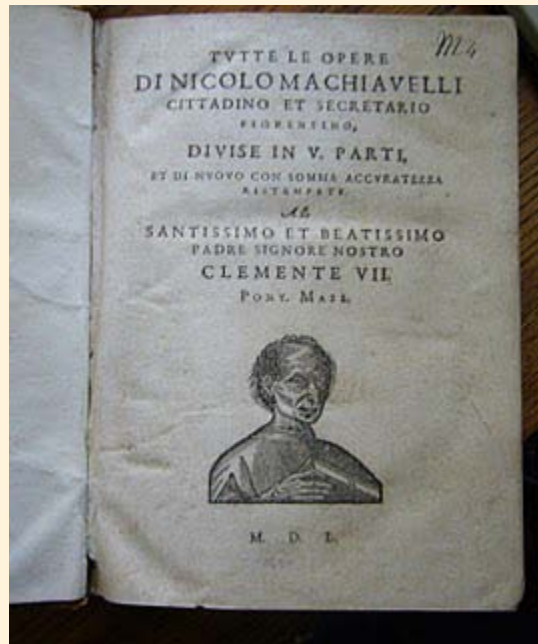


## Tutte le Opere di Nicolo Machiavelli



Recently I've been cataloging some very valuable books, unusual ones for me in that they are not Judaica. Every once in a while the bookseller I work for, Dan Wyman, will acquire an interesting lot which falls outside his specialty. One time it was gay and lesbian comics from the '60s. Another time it was material related to the water industry in New York state (sounds boring, I know, but would you believe a post-war propagandist romance, in which the heroine's fiancé tries to sabotage a dam in upstate New York, nearly taking her life in the process, but she--and the dam--are narrowly saved by a brave civil engineer, with whom she falls in love and lives happily ever after?)

This week it's a miscellany of rather old, very collectible books. Lots of vellum, rag paper, raised bands on the spine, all edges gold, and so on. This particular volume is the complete works of Machiavelli, with no publisher's name or location, but a date at the bottom: MDL. (For those whose knowledge of Roman numerals is rusty, that's 1550.)

Or is it? In fact, this book was probably printed by Pierre Aubert in Geneva around 1640 or 1645. Aubert was responsible for several editions around that time, and used the same imprint--1550--as an earlier edition. And left off any mention of his publishing house or its location.

So how on earth are you supposed to know this? Experience. Famous works like this one have entire volumes devoted to research on the various printings and the provenance of extant copies. Pagination errors, blank leaves, and variations in signatures (letters, numbers, or symbols at the bottom of the first page on each sheet of printed pages of a book as a guide to the proper sequence of the sheets in binding) are used to distinguish otherwise identical editions.

My kids find my predilection for cataloging hilarious. To them, it's an activity of mind-numbing drudgery. I prefer to think of it as detective work, without emphasis on the sordid side of human nature. Detective work I can do in my bathrobe, if I so choose.

This edition of Machiavelli will probably fetch \$2000 to \$4000. It's centuries old, and has probably been to more--and to more interesting--places than I have. What I do know about this object is tantalizing, and not a drop in the bucket of the whole history with which it is imbued.