

## LAW 41

### AVOID STEPPING INTO A GREAT MAN'S SHOES

#### JUDGMENT

*What happens first always appears better and more original than what comes after. If you succeed a great man or have a famous parent, you will have to accomplish double their achievements to outshine them. Do not get lost in their shadow, or stuck in a past not of your own making: Establish your own name and identity by changing course. Slay the overbearing father, disparage his legacy, and gain power by shining in your own way.*

#### THE EXCELLENCE OF BEING FIRST

*Many would have shone like the very phoenix in their occupations if others had not preceded them. Being first is a great advantage; with eminence, twice as good. Deal the first hand and you will win the upper ground.... Those who go first win fame by right of birth, and those who follow are like second sons, contenting themselves with meager portions.... Solomon opted wisely for pacifism, yielding warlike things to his father. By changing course he found it easier to become a hero.... And our great Philip II governed the entire world from the throne of his prudence, astonishing the ages. If his unconquered father was a model of energy, Philip was a paradigm of prudence.... This sort of novelty has helped the well-advised win a place in the roll of the great. Without leaving their own art, the ingenious leave the common path and take, even in professions gray with age, new steps toward eminence. Horace yielded epic poetry to Virgil, and Martial the lyric to Horace. Terence opted for comedy, Persius for satire, each hoping to be first in his genre. Bold fancy never succumbed to facile imitation.*

A POCKET MIRROR FOR HEROES, BALTASAR GRACIÁN,  
TRANSLATED BY CHRISTOPHER MAURER, 1996

## TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

When Louis XIV died, in 1715, after a glorious fifty-five-year reign, all eyes focused on his great-grandson and chosen successor, the future Louis XV. Would the boy, only five at the time, prove as great a leader as the Sun King? Louis XIV had transformed a country on the verge of civil war into the preeminent power in Europe. The last years of his reign had been difficult—he had been old and tired—but it was hoped that the child would develop into the kind of strong ruler who would reinvigorate the land and add to the firm foundation that Louis XIV had laid.

To this end the child was given the best minds of France as his tutors, men who would instruct him in the arts of statecraft, in the methods that the Sun King had perfected. Nothing was neglected in his education. But when Louis XV came to the throne, in 1726, a sudden change came over him: He no longer had to study or please others or prove himself. He stood alone at the top of a great country, with wealth and power at his command. He could do as he wished.

In the first years of his reign, Louis gave himself over to pleasure, leaving the government in the hands of a trusted minister, André-Hercule de Fleury. This caused little concern, for he was a young man who needed to sow his wild oats, and de Fleury was a good minister. But it slowly became clear that this was more than a passing phase. Louis had no interest in governing. His main worry was not France's finances, or a possible war with Spain, but boredom. He could not stand being bored, and when he was not hunting deer, or chasing young girls, he whiled away his time at the gambling tables, losing huge sums in a single night.

The court, as usual, reflected the tastes of the ruler. Gambling and lavish parties became the obsession. The courtiers had no concern with the future of France—they poured their energies into charming the king, angling for titles that would bring them life pensions, and for cabinet positions demanding little work but paying huge salaries. Parasites flocked to the court, and the state's debts swelled.

In 1745 Louis fell in love with Madame de Pompadour, a woman of middle-class origin who had managed to rise through her charms, her

intelligence, and a good marriage. Madame de Pompadour became the official royal mistress; she also became France's arbiter of taste and fashion. But the Madame had political ambitions as well, and she eventually emerged as the country's unofficial prime minister—it was she, not Louis, who wielded hiring-and-firing power over France's most important ministers.

As he grew older Louis only needed more diversion. On the grounds of Versailles he built a brothel, Parc aux Cerfs, which housed some of the prettiest young girls of France. Underground passages and hidden staircases gave Louis access at all hours. After Madame de Pompadour died, in 1764, she was succeeded as royal mistress by Madame du Barry, who soon came to dominate the court, and who, like de Pompadour before her, began to meddle in affairs of state. If a minister did not please her he would find himself fired. All of Europe was aghast when du Barry, the daughter of a baker, managed to arrange the firing of Étienne de Choiseul, the foreign minister and France's most able diplomat. He had shown her too little respect. As time went by, swindlers and charlatans made their nests in Versailles, and enticed Louis's interest in astrology, the occult, and fraudulent business deals. The young and pampered teenager who had taken over France years before had only grown worse with age.

The motto that became attached to Louis's reign was "*Après moi, le déluge*"—"After me the flood," or, Let France rot after I am gone. And indeed when Louis did go, in 1774, worn out by debauchery, his country and his own finances were in horrible disarray. His grandson Louis XVI inherited a realm in desperate need of reform and a strong leader. But Louis XVI was even weaker than his grandfather, and could only watch as the country descended into revolution. In 1792 the republic introduced by the French Revolution declared the end of the monarchy, and gave the king a new name, "Louis the Last." A few months later he knelt on the guillotine, his about-to-be-severed head stripped of all the radiance and power that the Sun King had invested in the crown.

## Interpretation

From a country that had descended into civil war in the late 1640s, Louis XIV forged the mightiest realm in Europe. Great generals would tremble in his presence. A cook once made a mistake in preparing a dish and committed suicide rather than face the king's wrath. Louis XIV had many mistresses, but their power ended in the bedroom. He filled his court with the most brilliant minds of the age. The symbol of his power was Versailles: Refusing to accept the palace of his forefathers, the Louvre, he built his own palace in what was then the middle of nowhere, symbolizing that this was a new order he had founded, one without precedent. He made Versailles the centerpiece of his reign, a place that all the powerful of Europe envied and visited with a sense of awe. In essence, Louis took a great void—the decaying monarchy of France—and filled it with his own symbols and radiant power.

Louis XV, on the other hand, symbolizes the fate of all those who inherit something large or who follow in a great man's footsteps. It would seem easy for a son or successor to build on the grand foundation left for them, but in the realm of power the opposite is true. The pampered, indulged son almost always squanders the inheritance, for he does not start with the father's need to fill a void. As Machiavelli states, necessity is what impels men to take action, and once the necessity is gone, only rot and decay are left. Having no need to increase his store of power, Louis XV inevitably succumbed to inertia. Under him, Versailles, the symbol of the Sun King's authority, became a pleasure palace of incomparable banality, a kind of Las Vegas of the Bourbon monarchy. It came to represent all that the oppressed peasantry of France hated about their king, and during the Revolution they looted it with glee.

## LIFE OF PERICLES

*As a young man Pericles was inclined to shrink from facing the people. One reason for this was that he was considered to bear a distinct resemblance to the tyrant Pisistratus, and when men who were well on in years remarked on the charm of Pericles' voice and the smoothness and fluency of his*

*speech, they were astonished at the resemblance between the two. The fact that he was rich and that he came of a distinguished family and possessed exceedingly powerful friends made the fear of ostracism very real to him, and at the beginning of his career he took no part in politics but devoted himself to soldiering, in which he showed great daring and enterprise. However, the time came when Aristides was dead. Themistocles in exile, and Cimon frequently absent on distant campaigns. Then at last Pericles decided to attach himself to the people's party and to take up the cause of the poor and the many instead of that of the rich and the few, in spite of the fact that this was quite contrary to his own temperament, which was thoroughly aristocratic. He was afraid, apparently, of being suspected of aiming at a dictatorship: so that when he saw that Cimon's sympathies were strongly with the nobles and that Cimon was the idol of the aristocratic party, Pericles began to ingratiate himself with the people, partly for self-preservation and partly by way of securing power against his rival. He now entered upon a new mode of life. He was never to be seen walking in any street except the one which led to the market-place and the council chamber.*

#### THE LIFE OF PERICLES, PLUTARCH, c. A.D. 46-120

Louis XV had only one way out of the trap awaiting the son or successor of a man like the Sun King: to psychologically begin from nothing, to denigrate the past and his inheritance, and to move in a totally new direction, creating his own world. Assuming you have the choice, it would be better to avoid the situation altogether, to place yourself where there is a vacuum of power, where you can be the one to bring order out of chaos without having to compete with another star in the sky. Power depends on appearing larger than other people, and when you are lost in the shadow of the father, the king, the great predecessor, you cannot possibly project such a presence.

*But when they began to make sovereignty hereditary, the children quickly degenerated from their fathers; and, so far from trying to equal their father's virtues, they considered that a prince had nothing else to do than to excel all the rest in idleness, indulgence, and every other variety of pleasure.*

Niccolò Machiavelli, 1469-1527

THE LIFE OF PIETRO PERUGINO, PAINTER, c.1450-1523

*How beneficial poverty may sometimes be to those with talent, and how it may serve as a powerful goad to make them perfect or excellent in whatever occupation they might choose, can be seen very clearly in the actions of Pietro Perugino. Wishing by means of his ability to attain some respectable rank, after leaving disastrous calamities behind in Perugia and coming to Florence, he remained there many months in poverty, sleeping in a chest, since he had no other bed; he turned night into day, and with the greatest zeal continually applied himself to the study of his profession. After painting had become second nature to him, Pietro's only pleasure was always to be working in his craft and constantly to be painting. And because he always had the dread of poverty before his eyes, he did things to make money which he probably would not have bothered to do had he not been forced to support himself. Perhaps wealth would have closed to him and his talent the path to excellence just as poverty had opened it up to him, but need spurred him on since he desired to rise from such a miserable and lowly position—if not perhaps to the summit and supreme height of excellence, then at least to a point where he could have enough to live on. For this reason, he took no notice of cold, hunger, discomfort, inconvenience, toil or shame if he could only live one day in ease and repose; and he would always say—and as if it were a proverb—that after bad weather, good weather must follow, and that during the good weather houses must be built for shelter in times of need.*

LIVES OF THE ARTISTS, GIORGIO VASARI, 1511-1574

## OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

Alexander the Great had a dominant passion as a young man—an intense dislike for his father, King Philip of Macedonia. He hated Philip’s cunning, cautious style of ruling, his bombastic speeches, his drinking and whoring, and his love of wrestling and of other wastes of time. Alexander knew he had to make himself the very opposite of his domineering father: He would force himself to be bold and reckless, he would control his tongue and be a man of few words, and he would not lose precious time in pursuit of pleasures that brought no glory. Alexander also resented the fact that Philip had conquered most of Greece: “My father will go on conquering till there is nothing extraordinary left for me to do,” he once complained. While other sons of powerful men were content to inherit wealth and live a life of leisure, Alexander wanted only to outdo his father, to obliterate Philip’s name from history by surpassing his accomplishments.

Alexander itched to show others how superior he was to his father. A Thessalian horse-dealer once brought a prize horse named Bucephalus to sell to Philip. None of the king’s grooms could get near the horse—it was far too savage—and Philip berated the merchant for bringing him such a useless beast. Watching the whole affair, Alexander scowled and commented, “What a horse they are losing for want of skill and spirit to manage him!” When he had said this several times, Philip had finally had enough, and challenged him to take on the horse. He called the merchant back, secretly hoping his son would have a nasty fall and learn a bitter lesson. But Alexander was the one to teach the lesson: Not only did he mount Bucephalus, he managed to ride him at full gallop, taming the horse that would later carry him all the way to India. The courtiers applauded wildly, but Philip seethed inside, seeing not a son but a rival to his power.

Alexander’s defiance of his father grew bolder. One day the two men had a heated argument before the entire court, and Philip drew his sword as if to strike his son; having drunk too much wine, however, the king stumbled. Alexander pointed at his father and jeered, “Men of Macedonia, see there the man who is preparing to pass from Europe to Asia. He cannot pass from one table to another without falling.”

When Alexander was eighteen, a disgruntled courtier murdered Philip. As word of the regicide spread through Greece, city after city rose up in rebellion against their Macedonian rulers. Philip's advisers counseled Alexander, now the king, to proceed cautiously, to do as Philip had done and conquer through cunning. But Alexander would do things his way: He marched to the furthest reaches of the kingdom, suppressed the rebellious towns, and reunited the empire with brutal efficiency.

As a young rebel grows older, his struggle against the father often wanes, and he gradually comes to resemble the very man he had wanted to defy. But Alexander's loathing of his father did not end with Philip's death. Once he had consolidated Greece, he set his eyes on Persia, the prize that had eluded his father, who had dreamed of conquering Asia. If he defeated the Persians, Alexander would finally surpass Philip in glory and fame.

Alexander crossed into Asia with an army of 35,000 to face a Persian force numbering over a million. Before engaging the Persians in battle he passed through the town of Gordium. Here, in the town's main temple, there stood an ancient chariot tied with cords made of the rind of the cornel tree. Legend had it that any man who could undo these cords—the Gordian knot—would rule the world. Many had tried to untie the enormous and intricate knot, but none had succeeded. Alexander, seeing he could not possibly untie the knot with his bare hands, took out his sword and with one slash cut it in half. This symbolic gesture showed the world that he would not do as others, but would blaze his own path.

Against astounding odds, Alexander conquered the Persians. Most expected him to stop there—it was a great triumph, enough to secure his fame for eternity. But Alexander had the same relationship to his own deeds as he had to his father: His conquest of Persia represented the past, and he wanted never to rest on past triumphs, or to allow the past to outshine the present. He moved on to India, extending his empire beyond all known limits. Only his disgruntled and weary soldiers prevented him from going farther.

## Interpretation

Alexander represents an extremely uncommon type in history: the son of a famous and successful man who manages to surpass the father in glory and power. The reason this type is uncommon is simple: The father most often manages to amass his fortune, his kingdom, because he begins with little or nothing. A desperate urge impels him to succeed—he has nothing to lose by cunning and impetuosity, and has no famous father of his own to compete against. This kind of man has reason to believe in himself—to believe that his way of doing things is the best, because, after all, it worked for him.

When a man like this has a son, he becomes domineering and oppressive, imposing his lessons on the son, who is starting off life in circumstances totally different from those in which the father himself began. Instead of allowing the son to go in a new direction, the father will try to put him in his own shoes, perhaps secretly wishing the boy will fail, as Philip half wanted to see Alexander thrown from Bucephalus. Fathers envy their sons' youth and vigor, after all, and their desire is to control and dominate. The sons of such men tend to become cowed and cautious, terrified of losing what their fathers have gained.

The son will never step out of his father's shadow unless he adopts the ruthless strategy of Alexander: disparage the past, create your own kingdom, put the father in the shadows instead of letting him do the same to you. If you cannot materially start from ground zero—it would be foolish to renounce an inheritance—you can at least begin from ground zero psychologically, by throwing off the weight of the past and charting a new direction. Alexander instinctively recognized that privileges of birth are impediments to power. Be merciless with the past, then—not only with your father and his father but with your own earlier achievements. Only the weak rest on their laurels and dote on past triumphs; in the game of power there is never time to rest.

## THE PROBLEM OF PAUL MORPHY

*The slightest acquaintance with chess shows one that it is a play-substitute for the art of war and indeed it has been a favorite recreation of some of the greatest military leaders, from William the Conqueror to Napoleon. In the contest between the opposing armies the same principles of both strategy and tactics are displayed as in actual war, the same foresight and powers of calculation are necessary, the same capacity for divining the plans of the opponent, and the rigor with which decisions are followed by their consequences is, if anything, even more ruthless. More than that, it is plain that the unconscious motive actuating the players is not the mere love of pugnacity characteristic of all competitive games, but the grimmer one of father-murder. It is true that the original goal of capturing the king has been given up, but from the point of view of motive there is, except in respect of crudity, not appreciable change in the present goal of sterilizing him in immobility.... "Checkmate" means literally "the king is dead." ... Our knowledge of the unconscious motivation of chess-playing tells us that what it represented could only have been the wish to overcome the father in an acceptable way.... It is no doubt significant that [nineteenth-century chess champion Paul] Morphy's soaring odyssey into the higher realms of chess began just a year after the unexpectedly sudden death of his father, which had been a great shock to him, and we may surmise that his brilliant effort of sublimation was, like Shakespeare's Hamlet and Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams, a reaction to this critical event....*

*Something should now be said about the reception Morphy's successes met with, for they were of such a kind as to raise the question whether his subsequent collapse may not have been influenced through his perhaps belonging to the type that Freud has described under the name of Die am Erfolge scheitern ("Those wrecked by success").... Couched in more psychological language, was Morphy affrighted at his own presumptuousness when the light of publicity was thrown on [his great success?] Freud has pointed out that the people who break under the strain of too great success do so because they can endure it only in imagination, not in reality. To castrate the father in a dream is a very different matter from doing it in reality. The real situation provokes the unconscious guilt in its full force, and the penalty may be mental collapse.*

THE PROBLEM OF PAUL MORPHY, ERNEST JONES, 1951

## KEYS TO POWER

In many ancient kingdoms, for example Bengal and Sumatra, after the king had ruled for several years his subjects would execute him. This was done partly as a ritual of renewal, but also to prevent him from growing too powerful—for the king would generally try to establish a permanent order, at the expense of other families and of his own sons. Instead of protecting the tribe and leading it in times of war, he would attempt to dominate it. And so he would be beaten to death, or executed in an elaborate ritual. Now that he was no longer around for his honors to go to his head, he could be worshipped as a god. Meanwhile the field had been cleared for a new and youthful order to establish itself.

The ambivalent, hostile attitude towards the king or father figure also finds expression in legends of heroes who do not know their father. Moses, the archetypal man of power, was found abandoned among the bulrushes and never knew his parents; without a father to compete with him or limit him, he could attain the heights of power. Hercules had no earthly father—he was the son of the god Zeus. Later in his life Alexander the Great spread the story that the god Jupiter Ammon had sired him, not Philip of Macedon. Legends and rituals like these eliminate the human father because he symbolizes the destructive power of the past.

The past prevents the young hero from creating his own world—he must do as his father did, even after that father is dead or powerless. The hero must bow and scrape before his predecessor and yield to tradition and precedent. What had success in the past must be carried over to the present, even though circumstances have greatly changed. The past also weighs the hero down with an inheritance that he is terrified of losing, making him timid and cautious.

Power depends on the ability to fill a void, to occupy a field that has been cleared of the dead weight of the past. Only after the father figure has been properly done away with will you have the necessary space to create and establish a new order. There are several strategies you can adopt to accomplish this—variations on the execution of the king that disguise the violence of the impulse by channeling it in socially acceptable forms.

Perhaps the simplest way to escape the shadow of the past is simply to belittle it, playing on the timeless antagonism between the generations, stirring up the young against the old. For this you need a convenient older figure to pillory. Mao Tse-tung, confronting a culture that fiercely resisted change, played on the suppressed resentment against the overbearing presence of the venerable Confucius in Chinese culture. John F. Kennedy knew the dangers of getting lost in the past; he radically distinguished his presidency from that of his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and also from the preceding decade, the 1950s, which Eisenhower personified. Kennedy, for instance, would not play the dull and fatherly game of golf—a symbol of retirement and privilege, and Eisenhower’s passion. Instead he played football on the White House lawn. In every aspect his administration represented vigor and youth, as opposed to the stodgy Eisenhower. Kennedy had discovered an old truth: The young are easily set against the old, since they yearn to make their own place in the world and resent the shadow of their fathers.

The distance you establish from your predecessor often demands some symbolism, a way of advertising itself publicly. Louis XIV, for example, created such symbolism when he rejected the traditional palace of the French kings and built his own palace of Versailles. King Philip II of Spain did the same when he created his center of power, the palace of El Escorial, in what was then the middle of nowhere. But Louis carried the game further: He would not be a king like his father or earlier ancestors, he would not wear a crown or carry a scepter or sit on a throne, he would establish a new kind of imposing authority with symbols and rituals of its own. Louis made his ancestors’ rituals into laughable relics of the past. Follow his example: Never let yourself be seen as following your predecessor’s path. If you do you will never surpass him. You must physically demonstrate your difference, by establishing a style and symbolism that sets you apart.

The Roman emperor Augustus, successor to Julius Caesar, understood this thoroughly. Caesar had been a great general, a theatrical figure whose spectacles kept the Romans entertained, an international emissary seduced by the charms of Cleopatra—a larger-than-life figure. So Augustus, despite his own theatrical tendencies, competed with Caesar not by trying to outdo him but by differentiating himself from him: He based his power on a return to Roman simplicity, an austerity of both style and substance. Against the

memory of Caesar's sweeping presence Augustus posed a quiet and manly dignity.

The problem with the overbearing predecessor is that he fills the vistas before you with symbols of the past. You have no room to create your own name. To deal with this situation you need to hunt out the vacuums—those areas in culture that have been left vacant and in which you can become the first and principal figure to shine.

When Pericles of Athens was about to launch a career as a statesman, he looked for the one thing that was missing in Athenian politics. Most of the great politicians of his time had allied themselves with the aristocracy; indeed Pericles himself had aristocratic tendencies. Yet he decided to throw in his hat with the city's democratic elements. The choice had nothing to do with his personal beliefs, but it launched him on a brilliant career. Out of necessity he became a man of the people. Instead of competing in an arena filled with great leaders both past and present, he would make a name for himself where no shadows could obscure his presence.

When the painter Diego de Velázquez began his career, he knew he could not compete in refinement and technique with the great Renaissance painters who had come before him. Instead he chose to work in a style that by the standards of the time seemed coarse and rough, in a way that had never been seen before. And in this style he excelled. There were members of the Spanish court who wanted to demonstrate their own break with the past; the newness of Velázquez's style thrilled them. Most people are afraid to break so boldly with tradition, but they secretly admire those who can break up the old forms and reinvigorate the culture. This is why there is so much power to be gained from entering vacuums and voids.

There is a kind of stubborn stupidity that recurs throughout history, and is a strong impediment to power: The superstitious belief that if the person before you succeeded by doing A, B, and C, you can re-create their success by doing the same thing. This cookie-cutter approach will seduce the uncreative, for it is easy, and appeals to their timidity and their laziness. But circumstances never repeat themselves exactly.

When General Douglas MacArthur assumed command of American forces in the Philippines during World War II, an assistant handed him a book containing the various precedents established by the commanders before him, the methods that had been successful for them. MacArthur asked the assistant how many copies there were of this book. Six, the

assistant answered. “Well,” the general replied, “you get all those six copies together and burn them—every one of them. I’ll not be bound by precedents. Any time a problem comes up, I’ll make the decision at once—immediately.” Adopt this ruthless strategy toward the past: Burn all the books, and train yourself to react to circumstances as they happen.

You may believe that you have separated yourself from the predecessor or father figure, but as you grow older you must be eternally vigilant lest you become the father you had rebelled against. As a young man, Mao Tse-tung disliked his father and in the struggle against him found his own identity and a new set of values. But as he aged, his father’s ways crept back in. Mao’s father had valued manual work over intellect; Mao had scoffed at this as a young man, but as he grew older he unconsciously returned to his father’s views and echoed such outdated ideas by forcing a whole generation of Chinese intellectuals into manual labor, a nightmarish mistake that cost his regime dearly. Remember: You are your own father. Do not let yourself spend years creating yourself only to let your guard down and allow the ghost of the past—father, habit, history—to sneak back in.

Finally, as noted in the story of Louis XV, plenitude and prosperity tend to make us lazy and inactive: When our power is secure we have no need to act. This is a serious danger, especially for those who achieve success and power at an early age. The playwright Tennessee Williams, for instance, found himself skyrocketed from obscurity to fame by the success of *The Glass Menagerie*. “The sort of life which I had had previous to this popular success,” he later wrote, “was one that required endurance, a life of clawing and scratching, but it was a good life because it was the sort of life for which the human organism is created. I was not aware of how much vital energy had gone into this struggle until the struggle was removed. This was security at last. I sat down and looked about me and was suddenly very depressed.” Williams had a nervous breakdown, which may in fact have been necessary for him: Pushed to the psychological edge, he could start writing with the old vitality again, and he produced *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, similarly, whenever he wrote a successful novel, would feel that the financial security he had gained made the act of creation unnecessary. He would take his entire savings to the casino and would not leave until he had gambled away his last penny. Once reduced to poverty he could write again.

It is not necessary to go to such extremes, but you must be prepared to return to square one psychologically rather than growing fat and lazy with prosperity. Pablo Picasso could deal with success, but only by constantly changing the style of his painting, often breaking completely with what had made him successful before. How often our early triumphs turn us into a kind of caricature of ourselves. Powerful people recognize these traps; like Alexander the Great, they struggle constantly to re-create themselves. The father must not be allowed to return; he must be slain at every step of the way.

Image: The Father. He casts a giant shadow over his children, keeping them in thrall long after he is gone by tying them to the past, squashing their youthful spirit, and forcing them down the same tired path he followed himself. His tricks are many. At every crossroads you must slay the father and step out of his shadow.

Authority: Beware of stepping into a great man's shoes—you will have to accomplish twice as much to surpass him. Those who follow are taken for imitators. No matter how much they sweat, they will never shed that burden. It is an uncommon skill to find a new path for excellence, a modern route to celebrity. There are many roads to singularity, not all of them well traveled. The newest ones can be arduous, but they are often shortcuts to greatness. (Baltasar Gracián, 1601-1658)

## REVERSAL

The shadow of a great predecessor could be used to advantage if it is chosen as a trick, a tactic that can be discarded once it has brought you power. Napoleon III used the name and legend of his illustrious grand-uncle Napoleon Bonaparte to help him become first president and then emperor of France. Once on the throne, however, he did not stay tied to the past; he quickly showed how different his reign would be, and was careful to keep the public from expecting him to attain the heights that Bonaparte had attained.

The past often has elements worth appropriating, qualities that would be foolish to reject out of a need to distinguish yourself. Even Alexander the Great recognized and was influenced by his father's skill in organizing an army. Making a display of doing things differently from your predecessor can make you seem childish and in fact out of control, unless your actions have a logic of their own.

Joseph II, son of the Austrian empress Maria Theresa, made a show of doing the exact opposite of his mother—dressing like an ordinary citizen, staying in inns instead of palaces, appearing as the “people's emperor.” Maria Theresa, on the other hand, had been regal and aristocratic. The problem was that she had also been beloved, an empress who ruled wisely after years of learning the hard way. If you have the kind of intelligence and instinct that will point you in the right direction, playing the rebel will not be dangerous. But if you are mediocre, as Joseph II was in comparison to his mother, you are better off learning from your predecessor's knowledge and experience, which are based on something real.

Finally, it is often wise to keep an eye on the young, your future rivals in power. Just as you try to rid yourself of your father, they will soon play the same trick on you, denigrating everything you have accomplished. Just as you rise by rebelling against the past, keep an eye on those rising from below, and never give them the chance to do the same to you.

The great Baroque artist and architect Pietro Bernini was a master at sniffing out younger potential rivals and keeping them in his shadow. One day a young stonemason named Francesco Borromini showed Bernini his

architectural sketches. Recognizing his talent immediately, Bernini instantly hired Borromini as his assistant, which delighted the young man but was actually only a tactic to keep him close at hand, so that he could play psychological games on him and create in him a kind of inferiority complex. And indeed, despite Borromini's brilliance, Bernini has the greater fame. His strategy with Borromini he made a lifelong practice: Fearing that the great sculptor Alessandro Algardi, for example, would eclipse him in fame, he arranged it so that Algardi could only find work as his assistant. And any assistant who rebelled against Bernini and tried to strike out on his own would find his career ruined.