

# Machiavelli as Misogynist: The Masculinization of Fortuna and Virtù

Written by Sarah Clifford and Scott N. Romaniuk

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Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, although revolutionary in the field of political theory due to its construction of Realist thinking, carries inherently problematic elements that are based principally on Machiavelli's misogynistic tendencies. Accordingly, Machiavelli's misogynistic tonality culminates in a deeply gendered usage of *virtù* (virtue) and *fortuna* (fortune). His dichotomized portrayal of *virtù*, described as masculine and dominating, and *fortuna*, as feminine and weak, does much to fortify sexist intonations and an androcentric modality of thinking that ultimately results in Machiavelli's work being quintessentially misogynistic. In this paper, we seek to extrapolate how Machiavelli's usage of *virtù* and *fortuna* are intrinsically gendered, and how his projected bias is problematic in contemporary times. This analysis is divided into three main parts. We begin by highlighting the application of the gender lens in the following analysis and its value. The first section provides a theoretical overview of *virtù* and *fortuna*. The second section presents a textual analysis of the interplay of these two concepts. In the final section, we discuss why Machiavelli's portrayal of these concepts are irrelevant to contemporary society due to the changing political framework that seeks to denounce gendered stereotypes and biases.

### Using a Gender Lens

A gender lens helps make visible and subsequently articulate the concealed nuances of gender within politics and moreover society, while providing a way to apply and embrace the meaning and impact of the highly ubiquitous gendering of society (see Krook & Mackay, 2011). We contend that a gendered lens is essential for unearthing the pervasive gendered aspects of the composition of Machiavelli's intra-state politics and the practice of state management. While such a composition can have a direct and palpable impact on politics, the gendered lens reveals the 'exclusionary and demarcationary' (see Witz, 1990) effects that Machiavelli's political elements have on the establishment of politics as practice, models through which men govern, and the natural and legitimized male occupation of power positions. With this, the gendered lens and the analysis that it facilitates points directly to features of masculine institutionalism that rejects the potentiality of restructuring gendered role and relations while fortifying the supposed strengths and weaknesses of men and women, respectively. Adherence to this line of reasoning works against any attempt to overcome gendered priorities in political practice and processes. At the same time, the gender lens reveals mechanisms of gendered institutionalism that favor the male and that could reinforce and normalize gender apartheid.

### *Virtù* and *Fortuna*

Machiavelli crafted *The Prince* after facing much turbulence in his life due to the unstable governing structures and more importantly, incapable rulers of the Florentine State. Machiavelli questioned how one could become a Prince, but more so pontificated how he should maintain control of his state. He thus constructed his piece to outline how a Prince ought to act and how rule should be upheld. He argued in favor of rule that espoused the idea of power being a zero-sum game, asserting that, '[a]nd he who does not properly manage this business will soon lose what he has acquired, and whilst he does hold it he will have endless difficulties and troubles' (Machiavelli 2014, 27). He contended the ability of man reigning over that of the ability of the female; that they serve as role models, smart and abled beings that can rule modernly. 'Men', Machiavelli (2014, 36) states:

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[walk] almost always in paths beaten by others, and following by imitation their deeds, are yet unable to keep entirely to the ways of others or attain to the power of those they imitate. A wise man ought always to follow the paths beaten by great men, and to imitate those who have been supreme, so that if his ability does not equal theirs, at least he will savour of it.

His reading of man and man in power establishes a model by which all men aspiring to lead can attempt to do so in the image of those who hold a natural position of leadership and greatness. A ruler who overlooks man's greatness and acclaimed accomplishment can therefore never attain a similar level of success.

Machiavelli illustrates that the true purpose of a Prince is to defend the state from threats, be they internal or external, to stabilize his rule, and to promote peace within the region (Machiavelli 2014). To do so, he is required to maintain a sufficient reputation amongst his people while being able to cunningly manage those around him. This led Machiavelli to state that, in order to achieve this, Princes must make use of their *virtù* to gain and maintain their power. This concept projects the evocation of *goodness*, a facet of the idea of *virtù* that brings it into odds with itself. '[I]t cannot be called talent to slay fellow-citizens, to deceive friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; such methods may gain empire, but not glory' (Ibid., 46). Accordingly, *virtù's* fusing with power and power's acquisition yields attitudes of amorality – the means justify the ends. A good prince, in this sense, must overstep the realm of goodness to achieve those ends that make him wise and to rule from the throne in a manner that brings security and success to the kingdom.

The concept of *virtù* first appeared in Chapter IV and is a quality comprised of wisdom, strategy, bravery, strength, and if necessary, ruthlessness (Ibid.). It is a talent or drive that is directed towards a goal and gives a Prince the ability to acquire opportunities by mastering and forcing himself upon them. Thus, *virtù* is the most vital quality of a Prince. By contrast, Machiavelli constructs the concept of *fortuna*, which in our modern conception, is similar to luck, though it is much less advantageous for a Prince to have and therefore should not be relied upon given its untrustworthy and deceitful content. Machiavelli utilized these concepts for two reasons: first to display the unpredictable nature of politics, and second, to illustrate the threatening nature of women and the threat they exhibit towards politics that must be quelled. His use of *virtù*, as compared to *fortuna*, throughout his discussion of the creation of new principalities and the changing ease in which a prince retains control over his principality further showcases both Machiavelli's disdain at *fortuna* because of her adversarial role towards the civil order but also *virtù's* vitalness to the Princedom. According to Machiavelli (2014, 36):

[...] as the fact of becoming a prince from a private station presupposes either ability or fortune, it is clear that one or other of these things will mitigate in some degrees many difficulties. Nevertheless, he who has relied least on fortune is established the strongest.

By emphasizing the lack of need for *fortuna* in the establishment of a state, Machiavelli dichotomizes *fortuna* and *virtù* by comparatively stating that, 'one of these things will mitigate in some degree many difficulties' (Ibid.). Thus, if *fortuna* does not aid in the creation of a state, *virtù* is therefore responsible for reliving problems that may arise for a Prince. To prevent *fortuna* from becoming involved in a Prince's affairs, a Prince must subdue *fortuna* whenever possible through the logic that his luck may change when he least expects it, resulting in him potentially losing his power and subsequently his state. *Virtù*, in comparison, allows a Prince both the ability to mitigate *fortuna's* potentially damaging results but also enables a Prince to capitalize on any opportunity *fortuna* may offer.

Although Machiavelli portrays *fortuna* as something that needs to be silenced if a Prince is to fully secure power, he acknowledges that, 'fortune is an arbiter of one-half of our actions, but that she still leaves us to direct the other half, or perhaps a little less' (Ibid., 98). Although Machiavelli's analysis lacks concrete examples of how he presupposes *fortuna* to control 'half' of all human actions, his acknowledgement of *fortuna* solidifies the concept that luck does play a role in a Prince's actions. More importantly, a Prince's success is weighed by how he attacks – or handles, *fortuna*, for 'the prince who leans entirely on his fortune comes to ruin as it varies' (Ibid., 99). A Prince's prosperity comes most when he is prepared for his luck to change, as when he is not, 'everyone yields to their impetus without being able to hinder them in any regard,' like a violent river that is uncontrollable (Ibid., 98).

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By describing the river, Machiavelli likens its unpredictable and destructive nature whose will cannot be contained to characteristics that *fortuna* possesses, who is waiting to destroy the Prince when he least expects it. *Fortuna*, reasons Machiavelli also 'shows her power when valour has not prepared to resist her, and thither she turns her forces where she knows that barriers and defences have not been raised to constrain her' (Ibid., 99). As a consequence, one of the resurging qualities of a Prince must be for him to constantly be prepared for *fortuna* to strike and to subjugate 'her' with his virtuousness, as she will expose herself when the Prince is not prepared.

## Gendered Analysis

Prior to conducting a textual analysis of *virtù* and *fortuna*, it is important to recognize the more nuanced and pervasive gendered language within Machiavelli's popular work. Machiavelli, similar to such philosophers as Plato and Thomas Hobbes, never referred to human nature or to a future theoretical ruler as female and unabashedly refused to acknowledge women's potential as rulers but moreover, their integral nature in society. In Chapter VI he writes, 'a wise man ought always to follow the paths beaten by great men', and that, 'like these men, those who become princes by reason of their *virtù* acquire a principedom with difficulty, but hold it with ease [...]' (Ibid., 36). Machiavelli's weakness in conceptualizing the potential of women to rule a principality, let alone a state, displays the inherent problem with *The Prince* due to its androcentric mode of thinking. As one finds in Chapter XVII, Machiavelli grapples with the question of whether it is better to be feared or loved, and determines that:

[N]evertheless a prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred; because he can endure very well being feared whilst he is not hated, which will always be as long as he abstains from property of his citizens and subjects and from *their* women (Ibid., 72) [emphasis added].

Machiavelli's portrayal of women as mere objects for which men control and protect from the male-centric power of others reveals the nuanced gendered language that not only personifies women as incapable of becoming rulers of a state, but also likens women to property that ultimately fall under the ownership of their superior counterparts. Machiavelli, therefore, solidifies a gendered hierarchy of power in *The Prince* that he exemplifies through the use of *virtù* and *fortuna*.

The competing forces within Machiavelli's construction of *virtù* and *fortuna*, displayed through the theme of *virtù* conquering and oppressing *fortuna*, form the basis of this gendered analysis of *The Prince*. Although Machiavelli's piece is heavily gendered throughout, the inherently sexualized dichotomy between *virtù* and *fortuna* calls for particular attention to tease out the underlying and deeply masculine themes Machiavelli intended with his gendering of these concepts. Machiavelli constructed *virtù* and *fortuna* in direct opposition of one another, with *virtù* symbolizing the masculine and domineering ruler who does not fear to utilize his brute strength to oppress that of *fortuna*. *Fortuna* in comparison, displays inherently *feminine* qualities as she is unpredictable, yet occasionally manageable, though concurrently antagonistic towards all men. Machiavelli's creation of an 'Us' versus 'Them' binary equates *fortuna* to the 'Other' in society where she is marginalized and dominated by the controller, or the masculine *virtù* (Falco 2004). Through relating *fortuna* to the 'Other,' Machiavelli forges not only a power structure of preferred characteristics within his political state, but also ideal genders where those who are masculine are intended to rule and those who are feminine are relegated to the service of the ruler at times when he sees fit to employ her.

Machiavelli introduces the necessity of 'beating' and 'ill-using' *fortuna* to solidify a state's stability with the aim of preventing her unpredictable nature from foiling the Prince. He states:

[F]or my part I consider that it is better to be adventurous than cautious, because fortune is a *woman*, and if you wish to keep her under it is necessary to *beat* and *ill-use* her; and it is seen that she allows herself to be mastered by the adventurous rather than by those who go to work more coldly (Ibid., 100) [emphasis added].

Furthermore, he equates *fortuna* merely to a 'lover' to any man *willing* to take her, who is at his disposal as he sees fit as 'she is, therefore, always, like a woman, a lover of young men because they are less cautious, more violent, and command her with more boldness' (Ibid.). The deeply sexualized notion of 'a woman, a lover of young men' connotes an acutely gendered assumption whereby women lack sexual and moral standards, and struggle to

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function in life devoid of the requisite strength to overcome their sexual urges (Ibid.). This unflattering image of the woman is juxtaposed by the splendid man, able to woo their older lover and to fool her, thus displaying her naivete and solidifying her positionality as a second-class citizen who is weak comparatively to that of *virtù*.

## Relevance, or Lack Thereof?

Although Machiavelli recognizes *fortuna's* role in assessing a ruler's freedom and her ability to remove the Prince from power, he again asserts that it is up to *virtù* to overcome her and seize the opportunities for which to adapt towards *fortuna* and restrain her if necessary (Ibid). In essence, Machiavelli portrays *fortuna* as an untamed animal who, although may be difficult to handle, can be manipulated by the controlling masculine figure if he interprets her actions correctly. The deep-seated gender bias Machiavelli presents serves to detract substantially from his overarching argument about the unpredictable nature of politics and instead emphasizes the lack of equality and freedom present in his society. Today, *The Prince* is inherently problematic due to both its objectionable gender stereotypes in addition to its promotion of violence. Machiavelli's emphasis on military prowess and strength is a direct exclusionary practice perpetuated to solely focus on masculine aspects of society while denigrating both women and 'femininity' (Falco, 2004, 41).

The gendered rhetoric Machiavelli utilized raises problems towards the accuracy of his philosophy as he failed to account for the potential of women acquiring leadership roles over a state, and for how the changing nature of society and gendered expectations would influence politics in the future. Although Machiavelli's founding of Realist thought and subsequent analysis of the changing nature of power in politics was revolutionary and is partially responsible for the framing of contemporary political science, one must consider the nuanced misogynistic intonations he utilized throughout his piece for his literature to be more relevant for contemporary society.

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