

Machiavellian *virtù*

A revolution in political morality





*Allegory of Fortune*  
Dosso Dossi, c.1530  
The Getty Centre, LA



## Four observations of Seneca on *Fortuna*

- i) “A mistress that is changeable and passionate and neglectful of her slaves... she will be capricious in both her rewards and her punishments.”

Seneca, *To Marcia on consolation*, 10.6

# Seneca on *Fortuna*

- ii) “Death, imprisonment, burning, and all the other missiles of *Fortuna*... are not evils, but only seem to be”

Seneca, *Moral Letters*, 85.26

## Seneca on *Fortuna*

iii) ‘Unerring in judgement, unshaken, unafraid...[the wise man] may be moved but never perturbed by the use of force - a man whom Fortune, when she hurls at him with all her might the deadliest missile in her armoury, may graze, though rarely, but never wound. For Fortune’s missiles rebound from such a man’

- Seneca, *Moral Letters*, 45.9

# Seneca on *Fortuna*

IV) “A gladiator counts it a disgrace to be matched with an inferior, and knows that to win without danger is to win without glory. The same is true of *Fortuna*. She seeks out the bravest men as her equals; some she passes by with disdain. She seeks out the most stubborn and upright man against whom to direct her force: Mucius she tries by fire, Fabricius by poverty, Rutilius by exile, Regulus by torture, Socrates by poison, Cato by death. It is only evil *Fortuna* that discovers a great example.”

Seneca, *On providence*, III.4

# Petrarch on *Fortuna*

“At the moment I am suffering the frequent insults and assaults of fortune”

Petrarch, Letter to Manfredo Pio, in *Letters on Familiar Matters* (= Fam IX.1)



## More Petrarch on *Fortuna*

“Ill fortune follows me...while the good Lord offers me support. I have learnt how to tell her go hang herself...she nonetheless continues to attack me with her tricks...however much she may dash and batter this insignificant body of mine, splattering them with my blood and brains, she will...never crush my spirit...never make my mind succumb.”

Petrarch to Boccaccio, *Letters on Familiar Matters* (= *Fam.*  
XI.I)

# Petrarch on the princely republic

‘The happiest state of the *res publica* is under a single, just prince’

Petrarch, letter to Paganino da Milano, 1340s  
(= Fam.III.7)

# Why monarchy?

“Amid such an implacable discord of minds, there is absolutely no doubt remaining for us that monarchy is the best way of restoring and repairing Italy’s strength, which the madness of civil wars has long dissipated...a royal hand is needed for our diseases. ”

Petrarch, letter to Paganino da Milano, 1340s (= *Fam.III.7*)

# Petrarch and the princely mirror

From Petrarch on, humanists adopt the *speculum principis*, or ‘mirror-for-princes’, genre from Roman antiquity (particularly from Seneca’s treatise *On Mercy*, 55/56 CE)

# Seneca (c.4 BCE-65 CE) and *On Mercy* (56/55 CE)

- *De clementia* – *On Mercy* or *On Clemency* - is a theory of monarchy and a ‘mirror for the prince’:

‘I have undertaken to write on the subject of clemency, Nero Caesar, in order to act, in a certain way, in place of a mirror, and *hold forth* you to yourself as you are on the point of attaining the very greatest pleasure of all.’

- Preface, *On Mercy*

# The princely mirror

“to show what the ruler of a country should be, so that, by looking at this as though looking at yourself in the mirror, whenever you see yourself as the sort of person whom I am describing – as you will very often – you may experience joy and may become even more devoted and obedient in days to come to the dispenser of all virtues and goods, and so rise up with a huge effort through all the difficult barriers to that level where you cannot rise any higher. If you should ever feel that you are lacking anything, rub your face, so to speak, wipe clean your brow...see to it that you become more handsome, or at any rate at least more brilliant, than yourself.”

Petrarch, Letter to Francesco Carrara, 1373

# Two crucial princely virtues

- 1) *Clementia* (clemency, mercy)
- 2) *Liberalitas* (liberality, generosity – giving freely)

# Liberty under a prince

“The citizens under your leadership are free and safe  
...you have kept the fatherland flourishing in serene  
tranquillity and constant peace.”

Petrarch, Letter to Francesco Carrara, 1373



## Petrarch, Letter to Francesco da Carrara, 1373

- ‘You were able to learn both by instruction and by example... under your glorious and magnanimous father’
- ‘Neighbouring peoples long to be subject to you...they envy your subjects’
- Francesco is ‘addicted neither to presumptuous insolence nor to idle pleasure’...‘extremely vigilant’ ...‘tranquil, but not inactive, glorious but not arrogant’...his ‘modesty’ rivals his ‘magnanimity’
- He shows ‘unbelievable humaneness’ even to ‘the most humble’ of his people.
- ‘True virtue does not reject deserved glory, and glory likes to follow it, as a shadow follows the body, even when virtue does not want it’

# Concept of liberty in humanist princely thought

- a) Freedom means freedom from enslaving passions, and so freedom to act according to reason
- b) Freedom means freedom from obligation to govern, and so freedom to pursue one's own affairs unhindered

# Niccolò Machiavelli's early life and times

- Born in Florence in 1469
- Receives humanist education
- May have followed lectures on classical literature in the University of Florence given by his immediate boss, First Chancellor of the Republic, Marcello Virgilio Adriani
- Spends youth immersing himself in the works of Livy, Lucretius, Cicero and other Roman authors.

# Machiavelli's early career

- 1494: French invasion of Italy. Expulsion of Medici from Florence and restitution of republican constitution
- 1498: (June) Machiavelli appointed secretary in the Second Chancery of the Florentine Republic
- 1512: Return of Medici - Machiavelli sacked.
- 1513: (February) Machiavelli imprisoned and tortured for conspiracy. Released and exiled (internally) for a year
- 1513: (April – December) Writes *The Prince* in San Casciano, south of Florence







IL PRINCIPE

TOSCANA

*Il Principe è un libro di Niccolò Machiavelli, scritto nel 1513, che tratta di politica e di come ottenere e mantenere il potere. È considerato uno dei libri più influenti della storia della politica.*

BOTTEGA MACHIAVELLI  
MACHIAVELLI

# The text formerly known as...

- *On Principalities*
- It is about a type of *stato* – a state



# Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter I

“All states (*stati*), all dominions that have held and hold power over men have been, and are, either republics or principalities. Principalities are either hereditary (their ruler having been for a long time from the same family) or they are new...either used to living under a prince or used to being free; and they are acquired either with the arms of others or with one’s own, either through *fortuna* or else through *virtù*.”

# *Lo stato* in Machiavelli

*Lo stato* (the state): a civil body over which sovereign power (*imperio*) is exercised.

# *Virtù* in Machiavelli

*Virtù* (virtue): that ability (or set of abilities) which helps you acquire and ‘*mantenere lo stato*’- ‘maintain the state’

# On imaginary republics and principalities...

“Since I am well aware that many people have written about this subject, I fear I may be thought presumptuous, for what I have to say differs from the precepts offered by others, especially on this matter. But because I want to write what will be useful to anyone who understands, it seems to me better to concentrate on what really happens rather than on theories or speculations. For many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist.”

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch.XV

# Machiavelli on *Fortuna*

“I am not unaware that many have thought, and many still think, that the affairs of the world are so ruled by *Fortuna* and God that the ability of men cannot control them. Rather, they think that we have no remedy at all... it is useless to sweat much over things, but let them be governed by fate.... I am sometimes inclined to share this opinion. Nevertheless, so as not to eliminate human freedom, I am disposed to hold that *Fortuna* is the arbiter of half our actions, but that she lets us control roughly the other half.”

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. XXV

# Machiavelli on war

- “A ruler, then, should have no other objective and no other concern... with anything else except war and its methods and practices.”

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch.XIV

## Machiavelli on *Fortuna*:

“Since circumstances vary and men when acting lack flexibility, they are successful if their methods match the circumstances and unsuccessful if they do not. I certainly think it is better to be impetuous than cautious because *Fortuna* is a woman, and if you want to control her, it is necessary to treat her roughly...she is more inclined to men who are impetuous...she is always well disposed towards young men, because they are less cautious and more aggressive, and treat her more boldly.”

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch.XXV

# Machiavelli on changeable political weather:

“These princes of ours who had been settled for years in their principalities and then lost them should not blame *Fortuna*... For in quiet times they never thought that things could change (it is a common defect of men not to reckon on storms when the weather is fine).”

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch.XXIV



# Machiavellian variations

A prince “must be prepared to vary his conduct as the winds of fortune and changing circumstances constrain him... he cannot act in ways that are considered good because, in order to maintain the state, he is often forced to act treacherously, ruthlessly or inhumanely, and disregard the precepts of religion”. A prince must “know how to enter upon the path of wrongdoing when this becomes necessary”.

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch.XVIII

# Don't be fooled by (moral) appearances...

- “I know that everyone will acknowledge that it would be most praiseworthy for a ruler to have all the above-mentioned qualities that are *held* to be good...
- ...If one considers everything carefully, doing some things that seem virtuous may result in one's ruin, whereas doing other things that seem vicious may strengthen one's position and cause one to flourish.”

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch.XV

# Machiavelli on cruelty and mercy:

‘Every ruler should want to be *thought* merciful, not cruel; nevertheless, one should take care not to be merciful in an inappropriate way. Cesare Borgia was considered cruel, yet his harsh measures restored order to the Romagna, unifying it, and rendering it peaceful and loyal. If his conduct is properly considered, he will be judged to have *been* much more merciful than the Florentine people, who let Pistoia be torn apart, in order to avoid acquiring a reputation for cruelty. Therefore if a ruler can keep his subjects united and loyal, he should not worry about incurring a reputation for cruelty, for by punishing a very few, he will *really be* more merciful than those who over-indulgently permit disorders to develop, with resultant killings and plunderings.’

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch.XVII

# Machiavelli on good and bad deeds:

“Cruel deeds are committed well or badly. They may be called well committed (if one may use the word ‘well’ of that which is evil) when they are committed all at once, because they are necessary for establishing one’s power, and are not persisted in afterwards, but changed for measures as beneficial as possible to one’s subjects. Badly committed are those that at first are few in number, but increase with time rather than diminish”.

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch.VIII

# On Cesare Borgia (Ch. VII)

- Borgia ‘won over Romagna and her inhabitants’, and under him, they ‘began to taste prosperity.’
- Borgia ‘found her (i.e. Romagna) at the command of impotent *signori* who had been quicker to despoil their subjects than rule them correctly’
- Romagna had provided ‘material for disorder rather than order’, and had become ‘full of thefts, quarrels and outrages of every kind’.
- In order to make it ‘obedient to the royal arm’, Borgia uses Remirro de Orco, a ‘cruel man’ who succeeds in the task of pacification but who incurs the hatred of its inhabitants
- Borgia has Remirro ‘placed in the piazza at Cesena, cut in two’, along with ‘a wooden block and a bloody knife’.
- ‘The ferocity of such a spectacle left that populace satisfied and dumbstruck.’

## Machiavelli on beastliness:

‘You should know, then, that there are two ways of contending: one by using laws, the other, force. The first is appropriate for men, the second for animals; but because the former is often ineffective, one must have recourse to the latter. A ruler must know how to imitate beasts as well as employing properly human means. This policy was taught to rulers allegorically by ancient writers: they tell how Achilles and many other ancient rulers were entrusted to Chiron the centaur to be raised carefully by him. Having a mentor who was half-beast and half-man signifies that a ruler needs to use both natures, and that one, without the other is ineffective...he should imitate the lion and the fox...to be a fox to recognise traps and a lion to frighten away wolves.’

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. XVIII

# Machiavelli on deception and manipulating appearances

- ‘A prudent ruler cannot keep his word, nor should he, when such fidelity would damage him.’
- A ruler need not actually possess all the above-mentioned qualities, but he must certainly *seem* to...having and always cultivating them is harmful, whereas seeming to have them is useful; for instance, to seem merciful, trustworthy, humane, upright and devout, and also to be so. But if it becomes necessary to refrain, you must be prepared to act in the opposite way, and be capable of doing so.
- ‘Most men judge more by their eyes than by their hands. For everyone is capable of seeing you, but few can touch you...everyone can see what you appear to be, whereas few have direct experience of what you really are.’
- ‘Those few’ who do know what you are really like ‘will not dare to challenge the popular view, sustained as it is by the majesty of the ruler’s position’.

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. XVIII