

3. Power, *Virtù*, and Fortune

Machiavelli presents to his readers a vision of political rule allegedly purged of extraneous moralizing influences and fully aware of the foundations of politics in the effective exercise of power. The term that best captures Machiavelli's vision of the requirements of power politics is *virtù*. While the Italian word would normally be translated into English as “virtue”, and would ordinarily convey the conventional connotation of moral goodness, Machiavelli obviously means something very different when he refers to the *virtù* of the prince. In particular, Machiavelli employs the concept of *virtù* to refer to the range of personal qualities that the prince will find it necessary to acquire in order to “maintain his state” and to “achieve great things”, the two standard markers of power for him. This makes it brutally clear there can be no equivalence between the conventional virtues and Machiavellian *virtù*. Machiavelli's sense of what it is to be a person of *virtù* can thus be summarized by his recommendation that the prince above all else must possess a “flexible disposition”. That ruler is best suited for office, on Machiavelli's account, who is capable of varying her/his conduct from good to evil and back again “as fortune and circumstances dictate” (*Prince* CW 66; see Nederman and Bogiaris 2018).

Not coincidentally, Machiavelli also uses the term *virtù* in his book *The Art of War* in order to describe the strategic prowess of the general who adapts to different battlefield conditions as the situation dictates. Machiavelli sees politics to be a sort of a battlefield on a different scale. Hence, the prince just like the general needs to be in possession of *virtù*, that is, to know which strategies and techniques are appropriate to what particular circumstances (Wood 1967). Thus, *virtù* winds up being closely connected to Machiavelli's notion of the power. The ruler of *virtù* is bound to be competent in the application of power; to possess *virtù* is indeed to have mastered all the rules connected with the effective application of

power. *Virtù* is to power politics what conventional virtue is to those thinkers who suppose that moral goodness is sufficient to be a legitimate ruler: it is the touchstone of political success.

What is the conceptual link between *virtù* and the effective exercise of power for Machiavelli? The answer lies with another central Machiavellian concept, *Fortuna* (usually translated as “fortune”). *Fortuna* is the enemy of political order, the ultimate threat to the safety and security of the state. Machiavelli's use of the concept has been widely debated without a very satisfactory resolution. Suffice it to say that, as with *virtù*, *Fortuna* is employed by him in a distinctive way. Where conventional representations treated *Fortuna* as a mostly benign, if fickle, goddess, who is the source of human goods as well as evils, Machiavelli's fortune is a malevolent and uncompromising fount of human misery, affliction, and disaster. While human *Fortuna* may be responsible for such success as human beings achieve, no man can act effectively when directly opposed by the goddess (*Discourses* CW 407–408).

Machiavelli's most famous discussion of *Fortuna* occurs in Chapter 25 of *The Prince*, in which he proposes two analogies for understanding the human situation in the face of events. Initially, he asserts that fortune resembles

one of our destructive rivers which, when it is angry, turns the plains into lakes, throws down the trees and buildings, takes earth from one spot, puts it in another; everyone flees before the flood; everyone yields to its fury and nowhere can repel it.

Yet the furor of a raging river does not mean that its depredations are beyond human control: before the rains come, it is possible to take precautions to divert the worst consequences of the natural elements. “The same things happen about *Fortuna*”, Machiavelli observes,

She shows her power where *virtù* and wisdom do not prepare to resist her, and directs her fury where she knows that no dykes or embankments are ready to hold her. (*Prince* CW 90)

Fortune may be resisted by human beings, but only in those circumstances where “*virtù* and wisdom” have already prepared for her inevitable arrival.

Machiavelli reinforces the association of *Fortuna* with the blind strength of nature by explaining that political success depends upon appreciation of the operational principles of *Fortuna*. His own experience has taught him that

it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because *Fortuna* is a woman and it is necessary, in order to keep her under, to beat and maul her.

In other words, *Fortuna* demands a violent response of those who would control her. “She more often lets herself be overcome by men using such methods than by those who proceed coldly”, Machiavelli continues, “therefore always, like a woman, she is the friend of young men, because they are less cautious, more spirited, and with more boldness master her” (*Prince* CW 92). The wanton behavior of *Fortuna* demands an aggressive, even violent response, lest she take advantage of those men who are too retiring or “effeminate” to dominate her.

Machiavelli's remarks point toward several salient conclusions about *Fortuna* and her place in his intellectual universe. Throughout his corpus, *Fortuna* is depicted as a primal source of violence (especially as directed against humanity) and as antithetical to reason. Thus, Machiavelli realizes that only preparation to pose an extreme response to the vicissitudes of *Fortuna* will ensure victory against her. This is what *virtù* provides: the ability to respond to fortune at any time and in any way that is necessary.