

Virtu and fortuna



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Virtu and Fortuna Virtu and Fortuna Under close scrutiny, *The Prince* by Niccolò Machiavelli is seen to be a mind-baffling construct of many levels of meaning, and, many might say, enigmatically so. It is hard to determine where Machiavelli is writing in earnest and where in sarcasm or self-condemnation. As John Plamenatz says, the perverse Machiavelli "likes to make himself out worse than he is. He likes at times to shock his contemporaries.." No doubt he succeeds. The important message here, though, is that the reader can never be positive of Machiavelli's real views. The same is true in considering the significance of the terms *virtu* and *fortuna* (and their several translations), so often used by Machiavelli to drive home his points.

But by looking at many possibilities for their frequent and seemingly suggestive usages, and at some of the ancient thought with which Machiavelli was supremely familiar, we can arrive at a satisfactory speculation, we can discuss the web weaved by Machiavelli in his professions. The first, most obvious purpose of *The Prince* is stated by the author himself, addressing Lorenzo de' Medici: If you will read [this book] over and study it carefully, you will recognize in it my most earnest desire that you may achieve that summit of grandeur to which your happy destiny and your other capacities predestine you. And if from that summit Your Magnificence will occasionally glance down at these humble places, you will recognize how unjustly I suffer the bitter and sustained malignity of fortune. Clearly there is a sizeable amount of cajolery occurring here (and also foreshadows the following discussion of fortune and virtue), and this same stroking of Lorenzo's ego continues through the book, with slight references to how fit to

rule this prince is, how "virtuous," how fated to be the incredible Prince for whom Machiavelli writes. It could easily be said that with this book the author may have been trying to ingratiate himself to all the local nobility; on the other hand, knowing what follows might also suggest that Machiavelli was really attempting to play off the nobility's fears of chaos and insecurity, guaranteeing safety if they read his short piece.

The second possible purpose--definitely an outcome--is the creation of a learned historical discourse. I will leave out examples; it suffices to say that *The Prince* encompasses many centuries of human history, many deeply researched examples of politico-military events, and so on. True, they serve to enforce his ideas on "virtuous government," but they also serve the modern historian in his search for original sources. A third possible purpose of *The Prince* might be to outline the ideal government or, if not the ideal, the most virtuous or the best possible. It is in this purpose, the same goal pursued by countless political thinkers in history, that we extract much of what the current age considers Machiavellian.

The lord most would consider ruthless and cold, but whom Machiavelli names a virtuoso, is but one (probably Cesare Borgia, son of Sixtus IV) character in the book. The author's supposedly cruel way of equating bad with good is traditionally what has gotten him into hot water. The fact is, however, that Machiavelli never truly addresses the issues of bad and good, right and wrong, these absolute judgments most people would, I think, claim him to make. Machiavelli, in laying out the "best" government, does so from a completely political and pragmatic point of view, by what works, what is possible, and, really, what for his prince results in the most power and

security. The author carries out this investigation using two parameters in particular, the Italian *virtu* and *fortuna*. They can be translated in many ways (Robert M.

Adams has done it very nicely so I shall not repeat them here) which is part of what gives the book its depth. In general, though, the spirit Machiavelli attaches to these two crucial words resembles the following. *Virtu* embodies a paragon or paradigm; the virtuous man takes action, he anticipates and exhibits resolve, shrewdness and aptitude. Above all, he commits himself to politically sound, whole-hearted efforts. Politics here reign supreme; while he does acknowledge that there are ideals in the world, he asserts that it is futile to discuss them because in real-world situations they are never applied.

Only what is practical, what is tangible and real--these are his subjects. Virtuous action, Machiavelli implies, is directly opposed to *fortuna*, which can be translated as luck, destiny and of course fortune. To Machiavelli, *fortuna* always exists in our lives as a constant yet changing force. It governs our actions--lest we apply *virtu*. The influence of *fortuna* comes through passivity, like the current in a river. It is surmountable, but can always affect us.

The meat of Machiavelli's ideas arise from a number of ideas about government. The application of *virtu* by any leader--any prince--presents the road to political health; a strong active ruler who is deft and crafty will probably, according to Machiavelli, always gain a respectable amount of power. And by doing so will be circumventing *fortuna* as well. Other virtuous

actions include obtaining the support of the people, but perhaps through swift brutality, raising a military to defend oneself and live in whatever land you have conquered. It is germane here to bring up the ancient thinker Plato.

In the Republic, Plato outlines many ideas which parallel Machiavelli's. Both support this converted form of fascism, a celebration of governing power. Plato advocates a true aristocracy, or rule by the best philosopher-kings, and Machiavelli essentially advocates rule by the best man--"best" as evidenced by who can get to the top. Both agree on the idea of the Noble Lie, or lie told by the leader to the believing masses for their own good. As there is a definite separation in Plato's thought between the classes of society, so does Machiavelli advocate a definite division. And as Plato asserts the "tripartite soul" with distinct separations (both in the individual and the society), so does Machiavelli assert, in my own words, the separation of the prince into three certain realms: the person (of the prince), his persona, and his policy.

(The first holds the actual character, personality, beliefs of the prince;! the second, how his subjects see him as; the third, what is accepted to be his official consequences for certain "bad" acts performed.) These latter points bring up the fact that virtu and fortuna can certainly apply to Man in general. One of Machiavelli's ultimate statements thus is that men and women are inherently political animals, not necessarily adhering to standards of good and evil, right and wrong, but apparently doing so because it is convenient. When, say in the case of a "prince," it becomes necessary to step outside the regular life of Man functioning and into the unusual life of Man governing, these standards become truly meaningless, and only practicalities and

realities remain; all idealized systems become burdensome at best. It might be good to note the slightly chauvanistic temper to *The Prince*. It appeals to the male; it definitely would have appealed to Lorenzo, who may have been anxious to posit his masculinity. So Machiavelli equates his prescriptions with such.

First, in Italian, *virtu* is masculine and *fortuna* is feminine. Thus opportunities are represented as female, and action as male. Additionally (and this comes straight from the Republic; the idea of a coupling, a marriage, inherent both in Plato's words and his way of presenting the ideal society, which exists between the governor and the governed), there are the gender assignments female and male to the people and prince, respectively. As well, Machiavelli presents the people waiting to be ruled as material, and the rule spread by the prince as structure; in Renaissance Italy, "material" and "structure" possessed traditional gender traits. What we get from all of this is that, to Lorenzo, in order to assert his masculinity and seize fate (*fortuna*) by the throat (we are reminded of Machiavelli's comment that, since it is a Woman, Fortune must be beaten into submission--she will appreciate the one beats her all the more!), he must obey Machiavelli. Now, historically, Machiavelli lived in and lived for his beloved republic of Florence his whole life. It was only in 1512 when France, to whom Florence had professed the traditional allegiance, left Italy and Spain reentered that the republic was totally lost, and Machiavelli expelled to the country by the incoming Medici, and Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* while in exile.

I believe that he really wished Lorenzo to treat Florence with great care--his dear home--and wrote his book to persuade Lorenzo to do just that. We are

reminded of Machiavelli's frequent comment that the prince MUST gain the favor of the people, that he should raise an army of those he just conquered to induce the feeling of membership in a group, that he should entertain the people and reward them for good things done, that a new prince should not touch the women or any property or local customs. And, of course, most frequent of all was Machiavelli's emphatic comment that a new prince could only manage ! to survive in a newly conquered republic by living in it, among his new subjects. This is so important--and virtuous--because it would keep the prince from fouling his residence (and thus from fouling Florence) and it would tend to make him a Florentine, the best thing for a prince of Florence to be. In the final analysis, virtu and fortuna come screaming out from the pages of *The Prince* itself. Indeed, Machiavelli is subscribing to his own prescription.

It is finally Machiavelli who is being political with Lorenzo, it is Machiavelli who is taking action and trying to influence both his new prince AND fortuna. He is taking a stand against destiny by manipulating the world, by trying to convince Lorenzo--for the sake of both masculinity and personal virtue--that the best, the cruelest prince is the kindest one. Machiavelli's own virtu clashing with his fortuna are what have produced the immortal Prince; it is only fitting that these ideas also fill its pages.