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Seeking Real Truths

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Seeking Real Truths

Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Machiavelli

Edited by

Patricia Vilches and Gerald Seaman



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LEIDEN • BOSTON
2007

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MACHIAVELLI AND WOMEN

Jo Ann Cavallo

“...a lover of all women”

Francesco Guicciardini of Niccolò Machiavelli (1525)

With so much else to draw our attention when reading Machiavelli's opus, not much space was devoted to his views on women until relatively recently. The first sustained consideration of the issue, Hanna Pitkin's *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (1984), presented a mostly negative judgment, attributing Machiavelli's supposed misogyny to a fear of women.¹ In the wake of Pitkin's groundbreaking monograph, subsequent studies have paid greater attention to gender-related issues, giving rise to a spectrum of positions.² Maria J. Falco's recent *Feminist Interpretations of Niccolò Machiavelli* (2004) sets out to offer a range of essays representing “every major strand of feminist thought on *la questione di Machiavelli*.”³ While most contributors to the volume continue to highlight Machiavelli's anti-feminist attitudes, a significant minority credits him with a positive characterization of women in specific works, especially his comedies. In her essay “Rethinking Machiavelli: Feminism and Citizenship,” Jane Jaquette writes: “it is time to recover Machiavelli as an interlocutor rather than a foil for feminist theory” (338).

It is perhaps not surprising that the recent focus on Machiavelli and women has engendered a diversity of views considering that discussion of the topic which has fascinated his readers for centuries, viz., his political views, has itself hardly led to a consensus. In both cases,

¹ Pitkin speaks of Machiavelli's “misogynistic fear of women and his projection of that fear upon *Fortuna*,” *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 14.

² Most critics, however, have been reluctant to credit Machiavelli for positive portrayals of women. Wayne Rebhorn, for example, writes: “A few positive images of women can be found in Machiavelli's works, but upon close inspection, even these admirable women turn out to pose a threat to men,” *Foxes and Lions: Machiavelli's Confidence Men* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 172.

³ *Feminist Interpretations of Machiavelli* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 2. Falco's introduction provides a concise history of gender-related studies of Machiavelli (see especially 12–21). Machiavelli's recent biographers (De Grazia, Viroli, White) also devote attention to Machiavelli's views on women.



some of the divergence in interpretation can be attributed to ambiguity or inconsistency in the author himself. On the issue of women, there is plenty in Machiavelli's writing to support the view of him as a misogynist. At the same time, however, the negative attitude toward women that can be found in some of his writings was commonplace and reflects a society in which women were thought of and legally treated as secondary citizens if not outright property, lacking access to the same education or rights as men.⁴ In the following pages, then, I leave aside what Machiavelli says about women in general in order to focus on the individual females that populate his writing: real-life love interests in his personal letters, political figures in his non-fictional writings, imaginary characters in his fiction, and personifications across various genres. While women within Machiavelli's opus are my primary focus, I occasionally take a comparative look at the wider literary context. What I believe emerges is not only a positive characterization of Machiavelli's various women, but essential similarities among them that offer a model for human action—whether male or female.

In the humanist tradition, literary and historical characters are understood to represent models of behavior to imitate or avoid. Machiavelli does not depart from the practice of presenting role models; rather, he challenges the validity of traditional norms found in manuals for rulers. In reformulating the definition of liberality and stinginess in princes, for example, he decries the kind of munificence which financially burdens many subjects in order to favor a privileged few (*The Prince*, chap. 16).⁵ On the issue of gender, I would argue that Machiavelli likewise redefines virtue based on real-life experience rather than on handbooks prescribing female behavior. The "ideal" traditionally imposed on women consisted in the specifically "feminine" virtues of chastity, silence, and obedience to male authority. Although Machiavelli does not directly outline a new set of virtues for women the way that he does for rulers in *The Prince*, in my view he consistently depicts female figures—both real and imaginary—in ways that counter misogynist stereotypes and chauvinistic ideals.⁶

⁴ Much has been written in recent decades about the question of women's status during the Renaissance. See, most recently, Stephen Kolsky, *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005).

⁵ References to *The Prince* are from volume 1 of *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, ed. and trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1958).

⁶ I agree with Arlene Saxonhouse that Machiavelli "revolutionized political thought by calling into question the traditional virtues, and the virtues and vices of women



In treating together historical and fictional female figures, I follow Machiavelli's own lead, since his letters indicate repeatedly that he saw life and literature as a continuum. In a letter describing how he passes his time in exile, Machiavelli refers not only to evenings spent communing with statesmen of antiquity, but mornings in the company of love poets: "I have a book under my arm: Dante, Petrarch, or one of the minor poets like Tibullus, Ovid, or some such. I read about their amorous passions and their loves, remember my own, and these reflections make me happy for a while" (December 10, 1513; Letter 224).⁷ By linking his own amorous passions to those described in poetry, Machiavelli treats the latter as manifestations of a reality on a par with his personal experience. Moreover, Machiavelli groups together ancient Roman "pagan" poets who celebrated requited sexual love and medieval Christian poets whose love stories recount a trajectory of unconsummated desire. Thus, by stating that the loves recounted by these four poets remind him of his own, Machiavelli is bringing his fellow Florentines into the orbit of profane love expressed by the ancient Romans and at the same time validating passionate love as worthy of being experienced and recorded by great poets in both antiquity and his own time.

Personal Letters

Although Machiavelli does not name anyone in particular in the above-cited letter, he openly refers to actual women in his correspondence with friends. His extramarital affairs are not exceptional in themselves given that, as Pitkin notes, marriage was generally arranged by the families and considered incompatible with romantic love,⁸ and thus marital fidelity was not expected of husbands.⁹ What is of interest in

needed to be as thoroughly transformed as those of the men," *Women in the History of Political Thought: Ancient Greece to Machiavelli* (New York: Praeger, 1985), 154. However, whereas Saxonhouse writes that Machiavelli "makes the differences between what had been opposites so ambiguous that we can no longer tell good from bad or women from men" (151), I would argue that the transformation is not due to ambiguity, but to a new formulation of virtue along non-gendered lines.

⁷ All references to Machiavelli's correspondence are from *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence*, trans. and ed. James B. Atkinson and David Sices (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996).

⁸ *Fortune is a Woman*, 209–10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.



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this context are Machiavelli's views on women and gender expressed through references to real-life lovers. The most important of these are La Riccia, a Florentine courtesan mentioned in letters between 1510 and 1520, La Tafani, who appears in letters of 1514 and 1515, and the actress Barbera Raffacani Salutati, whom he meets in 1524 and to whom he remains attached until his death in 1527.

Nothing more is known about Machiavelli's ten-year relationship with La Riccia than what is stated in his correspondence, where she emerges as an autonomous woman not afraid to speak her mind. He remarks in a letter to his friend Francesco Vettori that when in Florence he visits her so often that she calls him a "house pest" (February 4, 1514; Letter 229). He then goes on to note how she chided him for his presumed wisdom while pretending to talk to a maid: "Wise men, oh these wise men, I don't know what they have upstairs; it seems to me they turn everything topsy-turvy." Yet Machiavelli's portrait of La Riccia goes beyond that of a self-assured woman prone to witty remarks. Even after initiating a relationship with La Tafani, he continues to share his trials and tribulations with La Riccia. Vettori recalls that Machiavelli had described her faithfulness and compassion (January 16, 1515; Letter 246). In this context 'faithfulness' does not refer to sexual exclusivity (La Riccia had other lovers as well), but rather to her steadfastness in sticking by Machiavelli throughout his political ordeals when many of his male companions had deserted him. This is the faithfulness that characterizes true friendship according to Machiavelli's contemporary Lodovico Ariosto, as expressed in his epic published the following year: "A man riding high on Fortune's wheel cannot tell who really loves him, for his true and his spurious friends stand side by side and show him equal devotion. But should he fall upon hard times, his crowd of flatterers will slip away. Only the friend who loves from his heart will stand by his lord and love him when he is dead" (*Orlando Furioso* 19.1). Machiavelli was not quite dead, but he had indubitably fallen upon hard times, crushed under the weight of exile following false accusations of conspiracy against the Medici. In another letter to Vettori, Machiavelli describes the consolation he derived from telling his troubles to La Riccia and a mutual friend who are referred to as his "sole havens and refuges for my skiff bereft of rudder and sail because of the unending tempest" (January 31, 1515; Letter 247). Through Machiavelli's expressions of appreciation for La Riccia's friendship and constancy, she emerges as a loyal, intelligent, and compassionate individual.



While in exile in the countryside outside Florence, Machiavelli met La Tafani, a woman about whom little is known. In a letter to Vettori, Machiavelli describes his new beloved as “a creature so gracious, so refined, so noble—both in nature and in circumstance—that never could either my praise or my love for her be as much as she deserves” (August 3, 1514; Letter 238). He goes on to describe his enamorment in a scene that imagines the workings of Cupid and Venus: “I ought to tell you [...] how this love began, how Love ensnared me with his nets, where he spread them, and what they were like; [...] these were nets of gold woven by Venus, so soft and gentle that even though an insensitive heart could have severed them, nevertheless I declined to do so.” Not only does Machiavelli refrain from referring to his relationship with La Tafani as a conquest, but he depicts himself as under her power: “Everything seems easy to me: I adapt to her every whim, even to those that seem different from and contrary to what my own ought to be.” His state of enamorment, however, is not seen as a mere pastime, but as a vital consolation that gives him a reprieve from suffering inflicted in the public sphere and releases his mind from thinking about political matters:

And even though I may now seem to have entered into great travail, I nevertheless feel so great a sweetness in it, both because of the delight that rare and gentle countenance brings me and because I have laid aside all memory of my sorrows, that not for anything in the world would I desire freedom—even if I could have it. I have renounced, then, thoughts about matters great and grave. No longer do I delight in reading about the deeds of the ancients or in discussing those of the moderns: everything has been transformed into tender thoughts, for which I thank Venus and all of Cyprus.¹⁰

While earlier in his letter Machiavelli privileged the role played by the God of Love in his enamorment, in this expression of gratitude he singles out Venus and her mythical birthplace. He then goes on to contrast his blissful state under the aegis of the female goddess with the pain caused by male-dominated power politics: “I have discovered nothing but harm in these other [political] matters, but in matters of love there are always good things and pleasures.”

¹⁰ See also his January 31, 1515, letter in which he expresses his personal experience of passionate love through language and images drawn from classical mythology and medieval love poetry: the “youthful archer” shot an arrow “with such great force [...] that I feel its painful wound still; thus I confess and recognize his power (letter 247).



We know somewhat more about Barbera Rafficani Salutati, the actress whom Machiavelli met in 1524. Although he is not her only lover, nor is she his, he is often seen in public with her and his letters suggest a serious relationship that lasts until his death. Francesco Guicciardini, in a letter criticizing Machiavelli's behavior, expresses his sense of a superiority of cultured men over actresses and courtesans that he finds completely lacking in his friend: "[you] have gotten into such bad habits that their corrupt manners seem good to you and worthy of such as us" (August 7, 1525; Letter 294). Machiavelli's letters would indicate that he did not in fact place himself above his female companions in either goodness or worthiness.

Machiavelli wrote both *Clizia* and *La Mandragola* for Barbera Salutati. In a letter to Guicciardini, he notes that she offered to sing the intermezzi for the latter play (October 16–20, 1525; Letter 299). Machiavelli subsequently commends Barbera to Guicciardini when she is in Rome, adding: "she gives me far more concern than does the emperor" (March 15, 1526; Letter 305). Even as the war with Charles V looms, he is nevertheless still able to focus on his private relationship with Barbera in his correspondence (August 5, 1526; Letter 315).

The other important female presence in Machiavelli's life is of course his wife Marietta Corsini, whom he married in 1501. Although the marriage was arranged by his family and not a love match, references in his personal correspondence to friends and relatives attest to their reciprocal affection and concern. Marietta's only extant letter, written two years after their marriage, is playful, caring, and practical:

You make fun of me, but you are not right to, for I would be flourishing more if you were here. You know very well how happy I am when you are not down there [i.e., Rome]; and all the more so now that I have been told that there is so much disease down there, just think how glad I must be, for I find no rest either day or night. That is the happiness I get from the baby. So I pray you to send me letters a little more often than you do [...]. Do not be surprised if I have not written you, because I have not been able to, since I had a fever up to now; I am not angry. For now the baby is well, he looks like you [...]. Since he looks like you, he seems beautiful to me. [...] Remember to come back home. [...] I am sending you a doublet and two shirts and two kerchiefs and a towel, which I am sewing for you (November 24, 1503; Letter 83).

A letter to Machiavelli from his son Guido twenty-four years later reveals a continued bond of affection between husband and wife: "We learn from your letter to Madonna Marietta that you have bought



such a beautiful chain for Baccina [...]. We are not worrying about the lansquenets anymore because you have promised us to try and be with us if anything should happen. And so Madonna Marietta is no longer worried. [...] Madonna Marietta gives you her regards and sends you two shirts, two towels, two caps, three pairs of hose, and four handkerchiefs. She prays you to come back soon" (April 17, 1527; Letter 332). Although Machiavelli did not express the same romantic sentiments toward his wife as toward the women discussed above—at least not in his extant letters to his friends—Marietta nevertheless emerges as a sustained presence with a distinct personality.

The actual women in Machiavelli's life, as presented in his letters to friends, are portrayed positively as capable and strong-minded individuals. Machiavelli depicts himself not as a conqueror of his female companions, but as a willing subject under the power of love. Moreover, his relationship with them includes friendship and cultural collaborations. In the public war of life, these women are his allies, a private source of joy and consolation in the face of repeated disappointments and injustices suffered at the hands of his fellow men.

Political History

It is not surprising that women are scarce in Machiavelli's historical writings since female rulers were the rare exception in both the histories that served as his models and in his own experience. On the few occasions in which women do appear in this context, he treats them with respect and admiration for the princely qualities they display. With reference to his treatment of Dido, Caterina Sforza, Queen Rosamunda, and Joanna I of Naples, Sebastian De Grazia writes that Machiavelli "recognizes without prejudice the merit in women as rulers, never imputing sexual differences in political capacity" (134). Of these, the figure that most captured Machiavelli's attention is Caterina Sforza, who in 1488 successfully defended Forlì against conspirators who had just murdered her husband and who were holding her children hostage. She entered the town's citadel ostensibly in order to negotiate a surrender, but once inside she refused to yield, asserting either that she had the means to bear more children or that she was already pregnant, depending upon the source recording the event.

In *Discourses* 3.6, Machiavelli imagines Sforza accompanying her claim of procreative potential with a highly provocative gesture: "And



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to show that she did not care about her children, she uncovered to them her genital members, saying she still had means for producing more children" (1:444).¹¹ The way we interpret Machiavelli's striking anecdote has some bearing on how we see his relation to women. The most useful and thorough discussion of the matter is Julia Hairston's essay "Skirting the Issue: Machiavelli's Caterina Sforza."¹² By placing Machiavelli's rendition of the Lady of Forlì in the context of various contemporary accounts of the event, she is able to show how Machiavelli reworked the material that was available to him. However, whereas Hairston goes on to conclude that Machiavelli diminished Sforza's historical persona, faulting his depiction of her as a ruler, a mother, and a woman, I would like to offer a more positive reading of Machiavelli's representation of her on all three scores.

Regarding Sforza's political skills, Hairston takes Machiavelli to task for not choosing the more reliable version of the story in which she claims to be pregnant, since this ploy also most clearly demonstrates her political astuteness: "Machiavelli takes a perspicacious political move on Sforza's part and turns it into an empty, histrionic gesture—one that intrinsically does not function politically."¹³ In my view, however, there is more to Machiavelli's account than its theatricality. While it is true, as Hairston states, that only Caterina's bluff of pregnancy could claim a legitimate heir to the city's deceased ruler, Machiavelli's choice to project Caterina's child-bearing capabilities into the indefinite future gives her instead an aura of invincibility by suggesting an unlimited ability to engender offspring. While the conspirators' threat of death to her children is specific to the moment, her asserted power to repeatedly generate new life makes her seem virtually indestructible. Nor does this version depict Caterina as less politically astute, since in fact her ploy is shown to have had the desired effect. Machiavelli's early readers would have known, moreover, that she not only thwarted the coup and went on to govern Imola and Forlì for several years, but also that after having been subsequently forced to yield her territory to Cesare Borgia, she moved to Florence and married Giovanni di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, bearing a son who would become the famous *condottiero* Giovanni

¹¹ References to the *Discourses* are from volume 1 of *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, ed. and trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1958).

¹² Julia L. Hairston, "Skirting the Issue: Machiavelli's Caterina Sforza," *Renaissance Quarterly* 53 (2000): 687–712.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 709.



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delle Bande Nere. Rather than making a false claim of pregnancy, Machiavelli's Caterina almost prophesies the future fruit of her womb, a military captain famed in turn for his courage and cunning.

According to Hairston, Machiavelli's version of the event includes a "brazen, even malicious description" (691) of Sforza as an uncaring mother: "Sforza's behavior is represented as highly atypical both for a mother because of its lack of maternal sentiment and for a woman because of its audacity and immodesty" (708). Yet Machiavelli never states that Sforza does not really care about her children; rather, her gesture is intended to convince the conspirators that she does not. The point for Machiavelli is thus not her degree of maternal sentiment, but her ability to persuade her enemies of the validity of her words in order to save her state. In Machiavelli's depiction of the scene, moreover, Caterina astutely plays with the nature of the proof: she lays bare what is discernible underneath her skirt as evidence of what is indiscernible within her heart. By substituting her visible body for her invisible emotion, she leads the conspirators to accept a false sign as concrete evidence of an otherwise improbable claim of maternal indifference. In order to prove to the conspirators that she is an unnatural (i.e., uncaring) mother, she demonstrates that she is an unconventional (i.e., immodest) woman. It is precisely the shock value of the gesture in the latter sphere that supports the efficacy of her claim in the former.

On the issue of gender, I would also venture a more positive assessment than the following one offered by Hairston: "Yet at the same time Machiavelli re-genders Caterina Sforza as masculine, he also surreptitiously 'disarms' her, paradoxically using the female body and maternity as his weapons. Sforza's *anasyrmos* serves as a reminder to his readers and to himself that she is, after all, 'just' a woman even though she behaves like a man" (708). First of all, the cunning and courage that Caterina employs to save her state are not necessarily gender-specific to males in Machiavelli's estimation. In *The Prince*, he uses Virgil's Dido as an example of a ruler who understands that drastic measures are called for to protect a newborn state from peril (1:62). Moreover, it seems to me that rather than disarming Caterina, Machiavelli empowers her by depicting a woman who in a critical moment of great vulnerability is capable of combining the fox's cunning (maneuvering to get into the citadel) and the lion's courage (confronting the conspirators) to regain the state.

Consistent with his attitude toward women in his personal correspondence, Machiavelli's version of this event shows his appreciation of



Caterina's iconoclastic behavior and disregard of conventional mores. Indeed, Machiavelli's admiring narrative of Caterina's gesture is brought into greater relief if compared to an episode of the *Orlando Furioso* in which women's garments are forcibly removed from the waist down in adherence to a cruel law (*Orlando Furioso* 37). The female warriors Bradamante and Marfisa encounter a group of ladies thus exposed who, overcome by shame, sit passively on the ground attempting to conceal their private parts. In Machiavelli, on the contrary, Sforza does not consider her body a locus of vulnerability, but one of pride and power. By exposing her genitalia—the opposite of what the demure female should do—and by demonstrating to her enemies a lack of concern for her children—the opposite of what the typical mother should do—Caterina saves both her family and her state. She thus turns the power of women to produce children (the female's biological and private role) into a tool to save her city (traditionally the male's public role). In knowing how to exploit her gender-specific capabilities, Caterina is shown to have a presence of mind and quickness of wit that is exceptional in either gender and worthy of a ruler.

Fiction

De Grazia finds a sympathetic portrayal of women in Machiavelli's poetry and comedies: "In his verses and plays, mean or stupid or unsympathetic women rarely appear, and never as the heroine" (138). Yet he immediately goes on to say that "the heroine is so good she hardly has more than three lines to utter." This qualifier, which places the attribute of goodness within the framework of conventional behavior, hardly does justice to the range of Machiavelli's fictional women. In my view, Machiavelli does not ascribe to conventional mores in his fiction any more than he does in his personal letters or historical works. This section examines the female characters who emerge from the pages of the satirical allegory *The Golden Ass*, the novella *Belfagor*, the comedies *La Mandragola* and *Clizia*, as well as some lesser-known works of prose and poetry.¹⁴

¹⁴ References to the fictional works in this section are from volume 2 of *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*.



The Golden Ass is set on an island in which the enchantress Circe presides over the men she has transformed into animals. The work, like Apuleius's eponymous narrative, is related as an autobiography. In an opening scene reminiscent of *Inferno* 1, a "terror-stricken" Niccolò is rescued not by an elderly gentleman the likes of Virgil but rather by "a woman of the utmost beauty, but breezy and brash [...] with locks blonde and disheveled" (2:754). The damsel, a servant of Circe, figures as a guide who will lead him from a frightening dark woods to the safety of her chamber. The reader may interpret the details of this transitional scene as replete with either philosophical or sexual allusions, since in the ensuing narrative Machiavelli will presume a perfect harmony between the two spheres.¹⁵ The damsel leads him to "a huge edifice of wondrous height" which they reach only after passing "through the water of [a] ditch by fording" (2:756). After crossing the moat, his "beautiful, tall and kindly" lady takes him by the hand "with utmost grace," leads him into a chamber "where with her own hands she kindled a great fire," and then proceeds to dry him. Machiavelli, recognizing her as a savior figure, tells her: "I had come to the end of my life, in a dark, cloudy and sunless place, when I was overtaken by the night. You led me with you, to save me" (2:757).

Machiavelli's new guide recalls not only Dante's Virgil but also Boethius's Lady Philosophy (*Consolation of Philosophy*), instructing and advising him in strategies for facing the injustices that fortune has sent (and will continue to send) his way. Acknowledging that "never has anyone borne more ingratitude or greater toil," she urges him to accept his situation with stoic fortitude (2:757). Unlike her lofty literary predecessors, however, the damsel also takes on the role of lover. After briefing Machiavelli in metaphysics and moral philosophy, she moves on to more pleasurable matters and invites him to join her under the covers. And just as in his personal letter discussed above where Machiavelli includes Petrarch and Dante in his list of passionate lovers, here he appropriates features of their poetry expressing unrequited and spiritual love respectively to recount a scene that is instead both fully requited and explicitly sexual. Whereas Petrarch, in his love for the unreachable

¹⁵ Michael Harvey notes, for example, that the term *virtù* occurs eleven times in the poem "in a bundle of erotic, political, and moral senses." "Lost in the Wilderness: Love and Longing in L'Asino," *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli: Essays on the Literary Works*, ed. Vickie B. Sullivan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 121.



Laura, had opened a sonnet blessing “the day and the month and the year and the season and the time and the hour and the instant and the beautiful countryside and the place where I was struck by the two lovely eyes that have bound me” (#61), Machiavelli puts the matter more succinctly, exclaiming to the naked woman beside him: “Blessed be your beauties! [Blessed] the hour when I set foot in the forest, and [if ever] things I have done or written touched your heart” (2:761). Although it is not clear what deeds or writings could have touched the heart of Machiavelli’s new beloved, the phrase suggests a continued link to Petrarch’s sonnet which concludes by blessing his “many words” and “all the pages” devoted to his lady. In his ensuing love scene, Machiavelli playfully incorporates language that suggests the Sweet New Style of Dante’s *Vita Nuova*. However, whereas in Dante’s case “sweetness to the heart” is based on sight, in Machiavelli’s description it is derived from the sense of touch: “And when I touched her body, a sweetness came to my heart so pleasing that I do not believe I shall ever taste greater” (2:761). Machiavelli continues to appropriate the terminology of the love lyric as he describes his sexual climax: “enfolded in those angelic beauties that made me forgetful of human things, I felt at my heart so many joys with such sweetness that I swooned in tasting the utmost of all sweets, all prostrate on her sweet bosom” (2:761).

In addition to taking on the multiple roles of guide, mentor, and lover, Machiavelli’s “lady” also acts as a friend. He describes their conversation the following day after she has returned from her shepherding duties: “she and I talked together of many things, as one friend speaks with another” (2:764). Machiavelli’s depiction of women in the dual role of lover and friend was discussed above in the context of his personal letters describing the consolation he derived from his relationship with La Riccia and La Tafani. Yet Niccolò’s fictional lover-friend is not just any woman, but a handmaiden of the enchantress Circe. In line with a long tradition of allegorical narrative and commentary, writers of the period would typically portray Circe and her cohorts as temptations luring the hero away from his public duty.¹⁶ The Circe-like Alcina, for

¹⁶ For representations of Circe from classical to Renaissance literature, see Judith Yarnall, *Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994). For the episode of the hero drawn away from public duty by a seductive enchantress in the Italian Renaissance epic, see Jo Ann Cavallo, *The Romance Epics of Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso: From Public Duty to Private Pleasure* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).



example, seduces first Astolfo in the *Orlando Innamorato* (2.13.54–66) and then Ruggiero in the *Orlando Furioso* (7.9–31). The heroes finally escape and go on to fulfill their political destinies only thanks to external support from higher forces. Machiavelli, far from warning against the private pursuit of pleasure as a distraction from a higher public calling, celebrates the bond between Niccolò (the author himself) and Circe's maiden as a remedy against the suffering caused by the evils and injustices of the political sphere. As if to show that the lovely damsel does not lead him to a state of oblivion, Niccolò uses the time that he spends alone to reflect on the problems of mankind. The greatest threat to the wellbeing of the world is not the passionate love which leads the hero to neglect his civic duty, as in the romance epic, but the unbridled appetite for power that causes rulers to destroy their state: "That which more than anything else throws kingdoms down from the highest hills is this: that the powerful with their power are never sated."¹⁷

Further, in the course of the narrative even Circe herself loses her traditional negative connotations as dangerous enchantress. Initially she is presented as a fearsome figure who deprives men of their humanity by transforming them into various animals that correspond to their character. Subsequently, we learn that Machiavelli's foretold transformation into an ass will actually help him gain insight and acquire the necessary wisdom to face future hardships. Finally, near the end of the unfinished poem, a pig fashioned after Plutarch's Gryllus disdains the prospect of reacquiring his humanity, arguing that other animals are superior to the human species. Circe's infamous transformation of men into animals thereby comes to be viewed—against tradition—as a protective, benevolent measure that grants privileged individuals a higher form of existence.

Machiavelli's comedy *La Mandragola*, according to its prologue, is about how an enamored young man (Callimaco) tricked a prudent young woman (Lucrezia). The extramarital encounter resulting from this trick is so much to Lucrezia's liking that she dictates the conditions for its continual reenactment. The play has given rise to conflicting interpretations, depending in part on whether the conclusion is seen

¹⁷ That is not to say that this theme is missing from the epic, but that it is not developed in the hero-seductress episode. On the insatiability of rulers, Boiardo writes: "And as it happens to great lords/Who only want what they can't have,/The greater obstacles there are/To reaching what they would obtain/The more they jeopardize their realms,/And what they want, they cannot gain" (*Orlando Innamorato* 1.1.5).



as bemoaning Lucrezia's loss of chastity or as celebrating her plan for future happiness. In the first case, critics have generally used traditional morality in order to question Lucrezia's character in comparison with the Roman Lucretia. Yet Machiavelli himself flouts conventional mores in the play's prologue, in which he expresses his wish that the audience may share Lucrezia's good fortune: "I hope you'll be tricked as she was" (2:777).

From the outset Lucrezia is established as a model individual for her many positive qualities. She is not only credited with controlling her husband—Callimaco says that Nicia "lets her rule him completely" (2:780)—but she is recognized as capable of governing a state—the confidence-man Ligurio believes that Lucrezia is "fit to rule a kingdom" (2:783). By the play's conclusion, Lucrezia emerges as a wise ruler who will determine the course of events in the future. Callimaco quotes her plan of action:

I take you then for lord, master, guide; you are my father, you are my defender; I want you as my chief good; and what my husband has asked for one night, I intend him to have always. You'll make yourself his best friend; you'll go to the church this morning, and from there you'll come to have dinner with us; after that your comings and stayings'll be as you like, and we can be together at any time without suspicion. (2:819)

Although the opening of her speech appears to give Callimaco authority over her, she is actually the one who has taken charge of the situation, first by appointing Callimaco to various roles and then by instructing him on what actions to take to ensure their continued bliss. Her increased assertiveness is noticed by her husband as well, who complains that "she acts like a fighting cock" and admits to her that "this morning it's exactly as though you were born a second time" (2:819).

Lucrezia's figurative rebirth reinforces the opposition vis-à-vis her Roman namesake, who committed suicide after having been coerced into an extramarital sexual encounter. Yet perhaps Tarquinius's virtuous wife was not the only Lucrezia that Machiavelli had in mind. Noting that Lucrezia was also the actual name of La Riccia, De Grazia suggests that Machiavelli's lover provides "one more possible source for the choice [of names] by an association of opposites" (140). Whether or not Machiavelli's personal life played a part in the naming of his heroine, the connection between the fictional and the real-life Lucrezia need not be viewed as an opposition: indeed, there is no essential incompatibility between the character that emerges at the end of the play and



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the woman that emerges from the pages of Machiavelli's letters. The conclusion of the play thus also disparages society's double-standard by which it was acceptable for men but not for women to take a lover.

In addition to arguing in favor of the natural rights of women, the play also draws attention to the question of their legal rights. Through the speech of Lucrezia's mother, Sostrata, Machiavelli criticizes laws that treated women as property rather than as citizens: "Don't you see that a woman who doesn't have any children doesn't have any home? When her husband dies, she is left wretched, deserted by everybody?" (2:802). Although the play's conclusion does not lead to a change in the law offering greater protection to widows, it does vouchsafe Lucrezia's future security by promising her in time both children and a more desirable husband. At the conclusion of the play, Callimaco informs Ligurio of the promise he made to Lucrezia "that when God removed [Nicia], I'd take her as my wife" (2.818).¹⁸

Machiavelli's comedy *Clizia*, based on the *Casina* by Plautus, features an astute wife who manages to save her family from disgrace by shaming her husband out of a misplaced passion for their adopted daughter. Although this resolution differs from that of *La Mandragola*, both comedies conclude with a state in which a very capable woman has set new rules for her personal satisfaction and for the benefit of all those involved. Like Lucrezia, Sofronia also proves to be superior in judgment to those around her and exhibits qualities that make her a most efficient and prudent prince. After she has brought events to a successful conclusion, even fighting against Fortune at one point, her husband Nicomaco cedes to her all authority over himself, their son Cleander, and the girl Clizia (2:861). Sofronia confirms that his declaration applies to the future as well as the present: "He's given me a blank check, and in the future wants me to run everything according to my own notions," and she shows that she fully intends to exercise her authority starting with the future of Clizia: "She'll come back, or she'll not come back, just as I decide" (2:862). Catherine H. Zuckert writes that Machiavelli portrays Sofronia not only as the "rightful ruler

¹⁸ For a more extended positive reading of Lucrezia's story, see in particular Joseph A. Barber, "The Irony of Lucrezia: Machiavelli's Donna di virtù," *Studies in Philology* (1985 Fall) 82 (4): 450–459, and Maristella de Panizza Lorch, "Women in the Context of Machiavelli's Mandragola," in *Donna: Women in Italian Culture*, ed. Ada Testaferrri (Ottawa: Dovehouse; 1989), 253–271.



of the household,” but as the “embodiment of *virtù*,” concluding that “there is no essential difference between the sexes with regard to their potential for achieving human excellence.”¹⁹

Given that *Clizia*, first performed in January 1525, depicts an older married man infatuated with a beautiful young woman, it has often been pointed out that Nicomaco’s amorous folly parallels Machiavelli’s own enamoration of the much younger Barbera Salutati. I would argue, however, that Machiavelli did not intend that his play closely mirror his personal situation. Whereas Nicomaco is suddenly transformed from a faithful and civic-minded husband to a dotting idiot, Machiavelli had fallen in love with a number of women during the course of his marriage to Marietta. Nicomaco, moreover, is shamed by his wife into coming to his senses before he ruins his reputation, whereas the incorrigible Machiavelli flouts social convention by appearing frequently with Barbera in public even when this draws censure from his brother-in-law (March 1, 1525; Letter 286). *Clizia* is a secluded virgin who is not even seen on stage; Barbera Salutati, on the other hand, had concurrent lovers in addition to Machiavelli and acted on stage by profession. Finally, Sofronia successfully orchestrates a plan to bring Nicomaco under her governance; by contrast, Marietta’s repeated pleas to her husband to return home soon never seem to have any effect on his actual whereabouts.

Machiavelli gives us a different view of the wife figure in the novella *Belfagor: The Devil Who Married*. After countless men have arrived in Hell lamenting that “they were brought to such great misfortune by nothing else than by getting married” (2:869), Pluto sends the devil Belfagor to earth to investigate this claim. Following various vicissitudes, Belfagor returns to Pluto’s realm giving confirmation “about the ills that a wife can bring into a house” (2:877). Moreover, it is precisely the (false) news of his wife’s approach that frightens Belfagor into leaving the earthly realm and fleeing to the underworld: “He preferred to return to Hell to give an accounting for his deeds rather than again with such great annoyance, anxiety and danger to put his neck under the marriage yoke” (2:877).

Although one would expect a generalized criticism of the female sex in an anti-uxorial tale, Machiavelli focuses less on gender than on

¹⁹ Zuckert, “Fortune is a Woman—But So Is Prudence: Machiavelli’s *Clizia*,” *Feminist Interpretations of Machiavelli* (University Park, PA; Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 199.



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class distinctions. Under the name of Roderigo of Castile, Belfagor demonstrates his wealth and largesse as soon as he arrives in Florence, and as a result “many noble citizens who had plenty of daughters and little money made proposals to him” (2:871). Roderigo chooses the daughter of a nobleman who was “of a very important family and greatly respected in Florence” and at the same time “very poor” (2:871). If Belfagor’s first mistake was to attempt to buy love from a member of the impoverished nobility, his second mistake was to think that his acquiescence to his wife’s demands could achieve peace in the household. On the contrary:

[Onesta’s pride] became loftier as soon as she realized her husband’s love for her, and since she felt she could in every way lord it over him, she gave him orders without any mercy or consideration and did not hesitate, when he denied her anything, to sting him with rude and offensive words. (2:872).

The situation goes beyond a critique of social class since Machiavelli depicts her as a tyrant within her own household: “even those devils [Belfagor] had brought with him to act as servants chose to go back to Hell and live in the fire rather than stay in the world under her rule” (2:872). Onesta thus also serves as an example of the kind of ruler decried in *The Golden Ass*, whose unlimited power and insatiable desires lead to the ruin of the social order.

Atypical of works in the anti-uxorial tradition, Machiavelli does not extend his negative depiction to all women. In Onesta’s own family, her mother is absent from the narrative, while her greedy father dominates and her brothers are good for nothing but wasting Roderigo’s money. Further, Roderigo’s aversion to his wife does not prevent him from later entering the bodies of innocent women as a devil who must then be exorcised. In fact, he is so much at home in the body of the daughter of King Louis VII of France that he plans to reside there indefinitely rather than returning to Hell. He only finally leaves the girl alone when the peasant Gianmatteo tricks him into thinking that his wife is nearby.

Even in this conclusion, Machiavelli seems less interested in reinforcing gender stereotypes than in overturning assumptions about social class. It is not a coincidence that it is a peasant rather than a member of the upper classes who has the intelligence to outwit Belfagor. Yet Gianmatteo is not only smarter than the devil, he is also the only character in the novella who exercises true moral virtue. While members



of the nobility shamelessly attempt to exploit Roderigo in order to increase their wealth, the peasant is simply interested in regaining a peaceful existence on his farm.

Machiavelli wrote other brief works of prose and poetry that may give further indication of his views on women. An autograph manuscript entitled “Articles for a Pleasure Company” offers a set of tongue-in-cheek rules for establishing a company whose goal is to imagine—and then to do—things that give delight to men and women. Veering away from either a male-dominated hierarchy or a “women on top” reversal, Machiavelli specifies that men and women will alternately rule the group. His rules are clearly meant to be in jest, yet what is striking is how consistently he assumes that women are equal partners with men. Even Castiglione’s early sixteenth-century manual for court behavior, *The Book of the Courtier*, which portrays an ideal gathering of educated men and women at the Court of Urbino presided over by a female, nevertheless relegates women to the role of silent witnesses while the male courtiers debate models of male and female behavior. Machiavelli not only grants men and women equal rights and capabilities, but also assumes they share the same sexual desires. He proclaims, for example, that “each man and each woman shall sleep the one without his wife and the other without her husband, at least fifteen days every month, under the penalty that husband and wife shall sleep together two months without intermission” (2:867). Wives may also remove their husbands from the premises by giving them purgatives if they do not perform their marital duty.

Machiavelli treats conventional social mores as a hypocritical restriction that not only leads to unhappiness on earth, but that also causes damnation in the afterlife. In the anti-Dantesque carnival song “By Lovers and Ladies Without Hope,” both unrequited lovers and their unresponsive ladies find themselves “in the deep center of Hell” (2:879). The ladies confess that they had equally loved the men, but had refrained from showing their true feelings out of a concern for their reputation: “However great has been your love, just as great ours too has been, but not having displayed it as you have, for the sake of our honor it has remained unspoken” (2:879). Machiavelli’s “ladies without hope” thus are guilty not of cruelty, but of capitulation to conventional mores at the expense of their sentiments.²⁰ The lovers find them

²⁰ Boccaccio’s memorable tale of Nastagio degli Onesti (*Decameron* 5.8) and Ariosto’s



blameworthy nonetheless, and their affirmation of the need to seize the moment echoes a sentiment expressed elsewhere in Machiavelli's opus with regard to Fortune: "he who does not act when he has time, then repents and prays in vain" (2:879). The poem concludes with a warning delivered from the enlightened ladies to female readers: "Therefore, ladies, when you have bound some lover to your love, in order not to be wanderers like us, avoid all bashfulness; do not send them to the cursed kingdom, because one who brings damnation on another is to like pain condemned by Heaven" (2:879).

Even when Machiavelli does adopt a tale of female cruelty, its meaning is circumscribed by its function as a negative exemplum within a more positive model of male-female relations. The narrative poem "Serenade," written possibly between 1514 and 1515 (2:1016), begins with the poet's exhortation to his lady to return his love. The first strategy that he uses to persuade her is his warning of the wrath of Venus and Amor toward those who do not yield to them:

It does not avail to be of great and lofty ability, it does not avail to have power, to have valor, if one does not yield to the noble kingdom of Venus the fair and of her son Amor. Of them alone the ire is to be feared, and the anger and implacable rage, because one is a woman, the other young and agile, and they have taken from many their individual being (2:1016).²¹

Machiavelli goes on to explain to the unnamed addressee of the poem that the ensuing tale is meant to be read as "an example, in order that you may learn to flee the cruel net wherein Anaxarete was taken." As in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the story of Anaxarete's cruelty toward her suitor and eventual punishment is used as an exemplum by the suitor Vertumnus in wooing his beloved Pomona. After hearing the story of Anaxarete's sorry end, Pomona is persuaded to not make the same mistake and to return Vertumnus's love. In this way, Anaxarete's negative example produces a positive effect first of all within the narrative itself. With the hope that the lesson will not be lost on the poem's addressee, Machiavelli concludes by reminding her which is the behavior to follow

tale of Lydia (*Orlando Furioso* 34.44–67) also represent infernal punishment for an unresponsive woman. In both these cases, however, the woman is condemned to suffer for cruelty and ingratitude toward her suitor.

²¹ While Machiavelli singles out Amor for his age and Venus for her gender, he treats them as equally powerful, giving a sense of love as a force that can be conceived of interchangeably as masculine or feminine.



and which to avoid: “imitate Pomona’s example and not Anaxarete’s cruelty” (2:1020).

The fictional female characters that Machiavelli offers as positive models take on various roles and demonstrate a range of capabilities. Circe’s damsel offers philosophical guidance, passion, and friendship; Lucrezia capitalizes on fortuitous circumstances for the benefit of all involved; Sofronia manipulates events in order to achieve her goal. Machiavelli assumes that women are as ready to fulfill their emotional and sexual desires as are men, and he refuses to pay lip service to the double-standard promulgated in his day under the cover of gender-specific rules for behavior. Those women depicted more negatively in his fictional works are either products of a spoiled social class (Onesta), slaves to conventional mores (the ladies without hope), or unnaturally heartless (Anaxarete). As a rule, just as Machiavelli assumes the equal rights of women and men in the fictional spaces he envisions, he endows his female characters with an equal capacity for rational thought, human emotion and desire, and resolute action.

Personification

The concept most frequently personified as a woman by Machiavelli is that of fortune. He clearly did not invent the connection: for centuries writers in Latin and the Romance languages had exploited the feminine noun to elaborate the characteristics of *Fortuna*.²² In his “Tercets On Fortune,” Machiavelli draws heavily on this tradition, imagining “Occasione” as a supreme ruler who sits on a high throne in a palace. Although her power is superhuman, Machiavelli allows for the possibility that she can be defeated by those who face her with sufficient valor: “Her natural power for all men is too strong and her reign is always violent if prowess still greater than hers does not vanquish her” (2:745). He recognizes, however, that in the end Fortune’s negative force is overwhelming and inevitable: “you cannot therefore trust yourself to her nor hope to escape her hard bite, her hard blows, violent and cruel.”

Machiavelli expresses a similar ambivalence between hoping that Fortune will favor the intrepid and acknowledging that she will eventually

²² See Howard Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Mediaeval Literature* (1927; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1974).



crush her victims when he cites Alexander of Macedonia and Julius Caesar as the two most famous men to challenge *Fortuna*. He initially uses them as examples that prove “how much he pleases Fortune and how acceptable he is who pushes her, who shoves her, who jostles her” (2:748–9). Machiavelli does not conclude his example with their victories, however, but rather with their final defeat: “Yet nevertheless the coveted harbor one of the two failed to reach, and the other, covered with wounds, in his enemy’s shadow was slain” (2:749). Machiavelli’s tercets thus depict Fortune as a force one must confront aggressively in order to have any momentary hope of success, and yet which is ultimately indomitable.

Machiavelli describes Fortune’s realm as a site from which there may be no escape: “Over a palace open on every side she reigns, and she deprives no one of entering, but the getting out is not sure” (2:746). Among her servants is Penitence, who is also depicted as Fortune’s companion in the poem “On Occasion.”²³ Penitence as punishment for having failed to seize an opportunity was part of the iconography traditionally associated with *Fortuna* since the classical period. Such a scenario, for example, is literally acted out in an extended episode that Boiardo had published a few decades earlier in his *Orlando Innamorato* (2.7.31–2.9.48, 2.12.23–2.13.30). As the knight Orlando makes his way through Morgana/Ventura’s labyrinthine cave, he passes carved letters with the following warning:

Damsel or knight, you who’ve arrived,
Know that you enter easily,
But you won’t reascend so fast
Unless you catch that able fay
Who always flees, who never stays,
Her head of hair is bald behind. (2.8.39)

The hesitant Orlando, however, misses the opportunity to seize Morgana while she is sleeping, and thus is forced to pursue her aggressively through impossible terrain and foul weather. To make matters worse, Penitence further perturbs the knight by relentlessly striking him from behind with her whip and continues to molest him until he finally succeeds in grabbing Morgana by the forelock. Even after Orlando has taken hold of her, he remains apprehensive about his future success in the adventure since “he knew, and properly,/That few are found

²³ Machiavelli, *Capitoli*, ed. Giorgio Inglese (Rome: Bulzoni, 1981), 157.



beneath the moon/Able to handle Fortune's key" (2.9.25). Although Machiavelli does not develop such an elaborate scenario for Fortune and Penitence, his poem focuses on the same problematics of seizing and handling such a superhuman force.

Throughout his works, Machiavelli depicts himself as a victim of Fortune. For example, he ends the dedicatory letter of *The Prince* lamenting "how long I continue without desert to bear the burden of Fortune's great and steady malice" (11). In the *Golden Ass*, Circe's maiden blames Fortune for all his woes ("chance was opposed to your good conduct"), yet urges him not to break down under her blows: "Because weeping has always been shameful to a man, he should turn to the blows of Fortune a face unstained with tears" (2:757). Recognizing that Fortune is too strong an opponent, Machiavelli agrees to accept his fate with forbearance: "Fortune, then, may make of my life all that she must and all that she chooses, for well I know that for me she never will grieve" (2:759).

Although Machiavelli notes that Fortune has two sides—"this aged witch has two faces, one of them fierce and the other mild"—given his persistent references to the calamities rained upon him by "the cruel goddess," it is perhaps not surprising to find a greater attention to the goddess in her negative guise.²⁴ His much-cited letter to Luigi Guicciardini about his encounter with an ugly prostitute has often been viewed as an example of novelistic realism, yet it can just as easily be read as a satirical depiction of a tryst with *Fortuna*—or rather *Sfortuna* (misfortune). Despite the graphic language of Machiavelli's opening remarks, his attention is focused as much on Fortune as it is on sex: "Hell's Bells, Luigi, see how Fortune hands out to mankind different results under similar circumstances. Why, you had hardly finished fucking your woman before you wanted another fuck, and you want to take another turn at it. But, as for me, why, I had been here three days, losing my discrimination because of conjugal famine. . . ." (December 8, 1509; Letter 178).²⁵ Machiavelli thus opens the letter identifying himself as a victim of bad fortune.

²⁴ "Tercets on Fortune," 2: 746.

²⁵ Wayne Rebhorn notes that Machiavelli's ambiguous wording suggestively merges his friend's unnamed woman and Fortune: "Thus Machiavelli presents his friend as a master of Fortuna, identifying that mastery with the sexual dominance of a woman, and implying, as he goes on to describe his degrading experience, that his own situation is just the reverse" (243).



Machiavelli then goes on to recount the details of his purported sexual relations with a prostitute in the underground shop of his laundress. Whether or not the story is based on an actual occurrence, the scene is described in a way that associates the woman with personifications of Fortune. Initially Machiavelli cannot see whom he is embracing in the dark, but afterwards he lights a lamp and sees the woman clearly. His description of her features playfully alludes to Fortune's physical attributes, most notably the unmistakable detail of a tuft of hair on the forehead of her otherwise bald head: "The first thing I noticed about her was a tuft of hair, part white, part black—in other words, sort of whitish; although the crown of her head was bald."²⁶ As he goes on to record his revulsion at her unsightly features, Machiavelli seems to suggest that while he blindly moved forward thinking he was taking advantage of a fortuitous occasion, he was instead ingenuously "had" ("naïve prick that I am") by Fortune's negative side. In fact, the vulgar expression that Machiavelli uses ("I fucked her one") can be used to refer to both sexual relations and trickery. Through this anecdote, Machiavelli comments wryly on the unpredictability and duality of Fortune as well as on his own lack of foresight.

Machiavelli's best known and most controversial treatment of *Fortuna* occurs near the conclusion of *The Prince*. He first imagines fortune as an uncontrollable flood that can only be partially countered by preventive measures such as dikes. As he continues to develop the theme, however, he switches metaphors from a natural disaster that knows no limits to a human female who can be subdued: "Fortune is a woman and it is necessary, in order to keep her under, to cuff and maul her" (1:92). The violence of Machiavelli's language has understandably led to readings of this passage as a wish-fulfillment fantasy of male dominance. Taken within the context of the chapter, however, this expression of aggressivity is not linked to hostility against women, but is rather directed against the overwhelming power of Fortune and, more concretely, against the foreign troops that—like the uncontrollable flood just evoked—had in recent years repeatedly invaded and violated a defenseless Italy.

When in his "Tercets on Fortune" Machiavelli put forth the idea of treating Lady Fortune aggressively, he immediately stepped back to

²⁶ Atkinson and Sices remark that "elements of her description might remind a Renaissance reader of a grotesquely ironic play on standard iconographic images associated with occasio, opportunity, or Fortuna. Few people, however, would want to seize this opportunity by the forelock" (488n).



recall Fortune's ultimate triumph over the audacious conquerors. In this passage, however, his need to reassert human agency leads him to turn to a metaphor that can give him a fighting chance in the battle against fortune. The all-powerful Lady Fortune momentarily leaves her throne to take on the guise of a human woman who "lets herself be overcome" by the man who can subdue her. The continuation of the metaphor goes on to describe a relationship that is not in the end an antagonistic one. In fact, the final sentence of the chapter refers to Fortune not as the enemy but as the *friend* of her youthful male partner: "she is a friend of young men, because they are less cautious, more spirited, and with more boldness master her" (1:92). Thus, even in this ambiguous and contradictory image, Machiavelli's association of Fortune with a female includes connotations of feminine agency and friendship.

In conclusion, Machiavelli offers a vision of women that challenges widely accepted gender-specific restrictions in both the private and the public sphere. Regarding the former, writings on women in Machiavelli's day attempted to confine and control female behavior through prescriptive censorship, categorizing women as "good" or "bad" according to their degree of sexual purity.²⁷ As Kolsky points out, even those writers who set out to argue against the inferiority of women, such as Agostino Strozzi in his "Defensio mulierum," praise only those women who allow themselves to be restricted to the most traditional roles: cloistered women, chaste women living at home, and mothers (167). Challenging such double-standards, Machiavelli's fictional and non-fictional writings offer a positive portrayal of women in multiple roles, including that of mentor, lover, and friend.

Turning our attention to the public sphere, we find that women of the time were excluded from playing any role in political life in both theory and practice. Exceptions to this rule occurred principally in the Northern courts where high-ranking noblewomen such as Isabella d'Este encouraged writers to legitimize female agency through acknowledging the capabilities of women for public service. This minority of 'pro-woman' texts, most notably Mario Equicola's *De mulieribus*, served an encomiastic purpose, intending to advance the status of both the author and contemporary noblewomen.²⁸ Machiavelli, on the other hand, was

²⁷ See Kolsky on Bisticci, *The Ghost of Boccaccio*, 37–41.

²⁸ Kolsky, *The Ghost of Boccaccio*, 148.



not courting the patronage of highly-placed women through his positive portrayals of historical and fictional females. Moreover, the encomiastic texts coming out of court society did not seek to extend female freedom into social life. Indeed, Kolksey points out how even Equicola's proto-feminist *De mulieribus* was careful to show that "women can play a crucial role in the state without being accused of acting in ways unbecoming to traditional concepts of womanhood" (156). Machiavelli, in contrast, treating those same concepts as part of a repressive social structure that stifled women's freedom, opens up possibilities for their agency and expression on all fronts. Far from compartmentalizing women into prescriptive categories, Machiavelli shows them interacting on a par with men at a political, intellectual, emotional, and sexual level, in relationships that embrace all these spheres simultaneously. In my view, therefore, it is not that Machiavelli's female characters lead to an ambiguity between the sexes or an outright role reversal, as has been suggested in prior criticism that recognized his unconventional depiction of women. It seems to me rather that the women he portrays positively in his letters, historical writings, comedies, and fictional prose and poetry are presumed to be just as capable as men in any branch of activity—if not more so. They thus provide models of behavior for either sex.²⁹

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