Machiavelli's New Prince Caught in Drag[1]

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ABSTRACT: This article offers a critical reconsideration of the gendered relation between *virtù* and fortune in Machiavelli's principal political texts. In the current feminist studies on Machiavelli, this relation is perceived in either antagonistic or mimetic terms. In dialogue with both strands of feminist readings and with special attention to Pitkin's interpretation of Machiavelli, this paper seeks to bridge the democratic and feminist face(s) of Machiavelli. From a feminist and gender-dissidence perspective, it then provides an alternative view of the new prince as a man in drag and examines his role in the regulation of social conflict.

KEY WORDS: Drag prince, feminism, fortune, gender, Machiavelli, Pitkin, *virtù*.

Introduction

From a feminist perspective, Machiavelli's political vision as found in his principle political texts rests on a profoundly gendered understanding of politics.[2] The relation between *virtù* and fortune inscribed at the heart of Machiavelli's political teaching can be represented as a struggle between masculine and feminine forces.[3] Depending on the interpretative lens one adopts, that struggle takes one of two principal forms: oppositional and inimical, or mimetic and interactive.

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[2] Machiavelli's *The Prince*, *Discourses* and *Florentine Histories* are referred to by the capital letters P, D and FH followed where applicable by the book number, then the chapter number.

[3] On the conflict between *virtù* and fortune in Machiavelli, see especially Falco (2004). A valuable overview of the Italian discussions around Machiavelli's images of fortune as a woman and fortune as "a friend of the young" (P, 25) can be found in Quaglio (1988).

The first part of the paper discusses the antagonistic representation of the *virtù*-fortune dyad, which predominately portrays Machiavelli in a negative light. According to this line of interpretation, Machiavelli advances an essentially masculine conception of politics associated with power and domination purportedly derived from a misogynism central in his political teaching. Hanna Pitkin's groundbreaking, nuanced interpretation of Machiavelli's politics from a gender perspective represents the most subtle defense of that position. At the same time, Pitkin offers a highly original, meticulous interpretation of Machiavelli often overlooked from a political-theoretical perspective. As such, her study deserves special attention. Although she is attentive to different possible configurations of the relation between *virtù* and fortune, Pitkin still ascribes to Machiavelli the image of politics as a "battle of the sexes" (1984: 232).

The second part of the paper traces an alternative understanding of the struggle between *virtù* and fortune as intertwined, harmonious, cooperative, and (mutually) adaptable. Such a dialectical relationality between fortune and *virtù* presents readers with an unexpectedly women-friendly Machiavelli.

Finally, the third part of the paper builds on this discussion of Machiavelli and women to develop a postmodern feminist-queer perspective. This section shows how women are connected with the figure of the plebeians in Machiavelli, while fortune arises from the insurmountable conflict between the great, who command and oppress the people, and the people, who desire not to be commanded and oppressed by the great. To address gender dissidence, this section relates feminist insights on the androgynous, flexible nature of the prince to his task of regulating ineradicable social division. In doing so, the article expands the existing spectrum of representations of the new prince with a novel image, that of a man in drag.

Gender as an Instrument of Domination Underlying a Politics of Submission

In secondary scholarship on Machiavelli, Hanna Pitkin's reading stands out as an ambitious and complex *political-theoretical* reading highly attentive to the, ultimately irresolvable, internal contradictions stemming from Machiavelli's understanding of human autonomy in gendered terms associated with *manhood* and *manliness*. Pitkin (1984) explicitly claims that Machiavelli aims at confronting a concrete, practical political

problem: how to cure a weak and corrupted Florence (48, 76) wracked by destructive conflicts and a limitless, self-defeating factionalism leading Florentines to destroy one another (313). To that end, she maintains, Machiavelli writes not as a philosopher (167, 287–288) captivated by perennial, universal problems of human existence as such, but instead as a "political theorist" (3), a "bridge builder" (308) whose desire to acquire the knowledge of "the whole" is inextricably associated with the desire to examine concrete types of political action capable of effectuating *change* in the here and now (289–290). As a political theorist, Machiavelli offers both a novel, coherent, penetrating vision of the world and a practical political teaching that aspires to guide Florentines towards *autonomy*, the central concern of Machiavelli's entire endeavor (Pitkin 1984: 7, 10, 142, 324).

To achieve autonomy, which Machiavelli links "to maleness, to adulthood, to humanness and to politics," men must approach the world *as if* commanded by an overwhelming, powerful, dangerous, female person: fortune, who is a woman (Pitkin 1984: 109, 165; P, 25). Comprehensively understood, fortune includes an entire cohort of threatening feminine figures or attributes, such as nature, opportunity, chance, ingratitude, ambition, avarice, necessity, the Church of Machiavelli's time, and female humans. Such a greater "constellation of fortune" represents a malicious, active, inimical, terrifying *feminine power* that threatens to engulf the human, masculine, political world (Pitkin 1999: 167–169). As female principle, fortune figures as everything that is "other" to being a "real man": childishness, corruption, domination, bestiality, dependence, nature, and the body and its needs (Pitkin 1984: 230). It is thereby opposed to *virtù*, masculinity, maturity, individuation, mutuality, humanness, politics (laws and institutions), action, freedom, history, culture, and mind/thought (Pitkin 1984: 109, 130, 136, 165, 230, 232).

This anthropomorphized metaphor of fortune as a capricious woman (P, 25) inscribed at the very center of Machiavelli's political vision, serves to encourage men to stand up to fortune like "real men" and prove their manliness. Bold, determined, manly proceeding is Machiavelli's preferred "way of *virtù*" (Pitkin 1984: 155, n. 90), by which he means, ideally, a collective effort of men to "hold her [fortune] under," by actively and violently "beat[ing]" and "strik[ing] her down" (P, 25). Although the gendered personification of fortune as woman is part of an established tradition reaching back to ancient Rome times, according to Pitkin, Machiavelli was the first to use this metaphor with clear sexual connotations (1984: 144). Fortune, in Machiavelli, is the object of male sexual

desire; it is there to be seized by those who are sufficiently masculine. It is the sexual confrontation between fortune (female) and *virtù* (male) that determines the outcome of political action (Pitkin 1984: 292–293). In this struggle, fortune's power can be reduced, challenged, and disciplined through a joint effort of "real men." However, complete autonomy (independence from fortune) is impossible. Powerful, ever-present, and overwhelming, the feminine force that fortune represents constantly looms in Machiavelli's texts, haunting men (Pitkin 1984: 109).

Pitkin herself points out the inextricable *relationship* between *virtù* and fortune in Machiavelli, one constitutive of the "human condition" (1984: 138, 292). Politics (and men) always need to deal with the possibility of the unexpected and unpredictable; "the *interaction* between *virtù* and fortune *is inevitable* just like struggle between men and women" (164–165, 292, my emphasis). Still, according to Pitkin (1984), Machiavelli's main point is that men must act *as if* the conquest of fortune were possible. An active stance and collective manly effort in *endlessly* challenging fortune is the *condicio sine qua non* of the free way of life (156, 236).

In a manner reminiscent of the second wave feminists, Pitkin (1984) turns to analysis of family structure, child-rearing practices, and gender relations in Machiavelli's Florence to make sense of his novel theoretical vision. As she reminds us, Renaissance Florence was an utterly patriarchal society. Women were gaining literacy and sometimes even becoming successful in fields traditionally reserved for men, yet were ever more subordinated to men politically, legally, and economically, a situation they likely resented. Marriages were arranged, and in the nuclear family that had then newly emerged in Florence, husbands were typically much older than their wives and exerted complete authority over them. Wives were expected to be obedient and chaste. Whereas men inhabited the world of politics and the market, women were confined to the domestic realm. In the context of broader dissolution of the medieval vision of a fixed, hierarchical society and the establishment of a new, market society that allowed for social mobility, men themselves were enormously anxious to validate their masculinity and provide for their families by competing in the market as real men were supposed to. Under such circumstances, vigorous antagonism between resentful women and anxious men could be expected to develop (Pitkin 1984: 206–208, 212, 218–220, 230).

Pitkin maintains that the resulting "family drama" taking place in Florentine society can be grasped in psychoanalytic terms. Generally, the household was ruled by wives/mothers, and early childcare was exclusively women's responsibility. In a context where the father was relatively

absent and older, the infant's relationship with the mother was apt to be particularly intense. For the male child, especially, that relationship was potentially complicating his assuming the expected gender role and establishing autonomy from his mother. Paradoxically, although both the mother and society expected the son to develop into an autonomous man and therefore become unlike his (effeminate) mother, that same mother resented masculinity and its valorization for degrading her. Yet she was the only available model of identification for the infant (Pitkin 1984: 136, 181, 198, 216, 230, 235, 198, 223, 301).

Such conflicting demands may have resulted in tensions in sons' efforts to assume autonomy and made them ambivalent and suspicious towards their unreliable mothers. Male subjectivity therefore generally developed in fierce opposition to mothers, with repercussions for men's stance towards women in general. The (feminine) parts that did not fit the emerging, overly pronounced, unitary (masculine) self were likely to be projected onto the external, dangerous, fundamentally different "other"—that is, women—who continuously threatened the integrity and confidence of the male self. To escape the devouring, all-powerful mother and prove and secure their masculinity, male children were then apt to project an idealistic image of a strong, heroic, rescuing father (Pitkin 1984: 136, 181, 198, 216, 223, 235, 301).

Pitkin's main idea behind that psychoanalytic analysis is that basic psychic attitudes developed in childhood were woven into the social-cultural fabric of Renaissance Florence and therefore influenced and limited Machiavelli's own political vision and ideas. Machiavelli's efforts to envisage a way of securing a free way of life for his beloved Florence, turned on—and to a certain extent unconsciously instrumentalized—men's fear of women and dependence. For Pitkin (1984), such a political vision is deficient because it stems from a projection of the anxieties that characterize men's private relations with women into the political sphere. By appealing to men's fear of women, Machiavelli entraps adult men in infantile fantasies, paradoxically leading them ultimately to succumb to patriarchal domination and filial obedience (281, 294, 305, 323).

To confront the dangerous, enfeebling power of the feminine best exemplified in the hopelessly corrupted Florence and Italy more generally, Pitkin (1984) argues, Machiavelli resorts to a fantasy solution. He envisions an external support figure: the omnipotent, rescuing, solitary, superhuman, and super-masculine mythical Father/Founder. He figures as a virtuous new prince singularly fit to oppose a terrifying, consuming feminine power (52, 104, 294). The imagined Founder represents a

patriarchal and paternal vision of manhood and autonomy. His *virtù* is understood in terms of "singularity," being and acting alone in "radical isolation from the entire populace" (83) without needing ties with others (55, 58, 75, 81). The Founder thereby acts from above and outside of society. In this top-bottom model of *virtù*, the Founder is the only person, the singular free agent among others who are seen as merely inert objects; he is a craftsman, whereas others are the material on which he works. He thereby appears as a sort of *deus ex machina*, an "unmoved mover" (Pitkin 1984: 53, 63, 79, 84, 324). The Founder is also a *father* who *gives birth* to a new city or renovates it—that is, "returns to the beginnings" (D, III. 1)—the existing corrupted society (Pitkin 1984: 241). His rule takes the form of ruthless power over objects. He shapes and transforms matter through discipline, control, and terror to achieve his highest priority: generating internal unanimity, uniformity, unity, and harmony (Pitkin 1984: 51). The Father/Founder therefore exerts an authoritarian, even "*protofascist*" form of rule (Pitkin 1984: 4).[4] For Pitkin, the Founder image of autonomy (and manhood) is "non-political" and "even antipolitical" because it reduces politics to mere domination (1984: 83).[5]

However, at the same time, Pitkin recognizes that the Father/Founder must rely not only on terror and fear; he also needs to stimulate, educate, and inspire subjects by serving as model to be imitated if effectual change of their character is to take place; only then can heroic, virtuous citizens capable of action be produced (1984: 75–78, 276). Given Machiavelli's continuous insistence on activism, Pitkin invites readers to reach beyond the singularity and uniqueness of the Founder/Father and recognize a *relationship* that is established between political authority and the (initially) corrupted men that the Founder/Father seeks to politicize. After all, in Machiavelli's political teaching, the Father/Founder plays a transitional role that helps effect a shift towards an uncorrupted state and genuine, Citizen autonomy. Machiavelli's ultimate goal, then, is self-government based on mutuality among peers, a vision developed primarily in *Discourses*.

Nevertheless, Pitkin (1984) still considers that, overall, the Founder/Father is ultimately an inherent threat to the project of (human) autonomy; the subjects that he is supposed to create are in fact wholly

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[4] Cf. Pitkin 1984: 327.

[5] This point has been further developed and radicalized by Wendy Brown who considers "the war between the sexes" (1988: 86, 115) as the paradigm of Machiavellian "politics of manhood" (181), primarily conceived as the fight against the feminine that aims at "absolute control" (112) over women and conquest of them (88).

dependent on the Father/Founder and therefore unfit for self-rule (98). Moreover, if Citizens were fully alive and autonomous, the Founder would no longer be needed; paradoxically, the Father/Founder therefore needs to kill his own sons (55, 79). Machiavelli's misogynist conception of autonomy is therefore detrimental for men themselves; their struggle for autonomy leads them to submit to a tyrannical, paternal (political) figure (281, 302, 305–306, 323). At least as envisaged from the perspective of a profoundly corrupted society like Florence, the transition from autocratic rule to a more promising Citizen vision of autonomy and manhood remains a mere utopian fantasy, one that Machiavelli himself proves unable to escape (294).

In opposition to Founder's image of autonomy, Pitkin (1984) claims that in *Discourses* Machiavelli offers an alternative understanding of *virtù* as collective, relational, and egalitarian; it is generated from below through a web of relationships created through (male) citizens' ongoing interactions (82). Machiavellian republic is characterized by tempered and controlled, healthy, open conflicts (90) expressed in the form of greats' and the plebs' distinctive, socio-economic, class perspectives, which Machiavelli also understands more broadly as distinct desires or ways of life (85). However, whereas a healthy republic, for Machiavelli, needs to make room for both of these groups (84–85) this is possible *only* if men recognize their real enemy: threatening feminine power. Given that Machiavelli's republican image of Citizen autonomy is built on a gendered understanding of politics based on the ideal of masculinity and manhood,[6] it cannot result in *genuine* mutuality; political membership and fraternal mutuality only applied among men. In other words, in Machiavelli's republic, politics is an exclusively male enterprise, whereas women are relegated to the private sphere. Moreover, the possibility of mutuality among men internally within the city depends on a joint effort of armed men, who aggressively act as brothers in arms to secure internal autonomy from external, feminine threats.[7] Aggressive, exploitive, foreign

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[6] On Pitkin's reading (1984), ancient Rome for Machiavelli figures as "the very model of masculinity and autonomy" (48), "the very essence of patriarchy" (49), and "the most masculine … enterprise ever achieved by human beings" (241).

[7] Initially, the ethos of the great is best described in terms of ambition, desire for glory, and pursuit of domination over others, whereas the plebs primarily long for security in their private lives. However, through political interaction, both perspectives can be transformed and brought in relation with the ideal of the common good. The great need to learn to turn their desire for domination away from pursuing internal domination of the plebeians, instead redirecting it towards foreign enemies and new military acquisitions. The plebeians, for their part, need to understand that their own private security is dependent on their vigorous public

politics (e.g. D, I. 6; D, II. 19) is a masculine response to the consuming, feminine power that engenders Citizen autonomy from without.

Such imperialistic politics is self-destructive in the long run. It violently destroys freedom and *virtù* in the world, resulting in a lack of productive, pluralistic competition with others. It thereby ultimately destroys the imperial power itself, as happened with Rome (Pitkin 1984: 68, 262, 305; see especially D, II. 2). Considering the interdependent relation between internal freedom and external domination, Rome itself, which initially appears as a positive alternative to Florence, ultimately proves self-destructive.

The misogynism centrally inscribed in Machiavelli's republicanism, fueling and facilitating it, simultaneously presents the greatest obstacle to Machiavelli's republican politics of freedom. His definition of *human* autonomy in gendered, misogynistic terms results in unresolvable ambiguities, tensions, and an endless circling between the Founder and the Citizen as the two principle, mutually conflicting, political visions of manhood and autonomy (Pitkin 1984: 105, 181, 229, 231, 236, 294).[8]

Ultimately, the project of forcing fortune into submission necessarily fails. According to Pitkin's reading, instead of marginalizing the feminine, Machiavelli actually ascribes too much power to it; she is the one who rules the world. From the psychoanalytic perspective favored by Pitkin, the resulting reliance on a fierce machismo to prove independence from the feminine in fact just represses and denies the feared, feminine power. In a Freudian spirit, that power then therefore continuously surges forth, ruling over men.

Adaptation to Fortune and Gender Trouble in Machiavelli

Contrary to Pitkin's antagonistic interpretation of the relation between *virtù* and fortune in Machiavelli, others have instead proposed an alternative reading. On that view, there exists a more dialogical, intertwined relation and partnership between the two.[9] I call this line of interpretation "mimetic" (e.g. Marcina 2004: 312) because it insists on men's need to

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commitment to actively protecting a life of freedom by serving in the military (Pitkin 1984: 84–86, 93, 95–96, 299, 324).

   [8] From a political-theoretical point of view, as opposed to a psychoanalytic perspective equally cherished by Pitkin, the image of the fox as a model of manhood is subordinated to the two principles models discussed in this paper.

   [9] E.g., in P, 25 Machiavelli writes that in order for "our free will not [to]be eliminated, I judge that it might be true that fortune is arbiter of half of our actions, but also that she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern" (132).

imitate and adapt to female fortune. Such readings cast serious doubts on Machiavelli's alleged straightforward misogyny. Rather than considering it a threat, this strand of literature emphasizes the importance and indispensability of female qualities for a truly virtuous prince.

Just a year after Pitkin's pioneering interpretation, in the last chapter of her penetrating study on women in the history of political thought, Arlene Saxonhouse (1985) turned the tables of the feminist debate on Machiavelli. In contrast to Pitkin, she presented the relation between *virtù* and fortune as one of fertile interaction and exchange. Rather than conflating female with the feminine as traditionally associated with being effeminate, weak, passive, good, or submissive, on this view, Machiavelli portrays the female force of fortune as vibrant, vigorous, dominant, active, subversive, variable, and strong. Such an image of fortune represents an alternative model of womanhood, one that critically interrogates what it means to be female since fortune acts precisely as real men should. Weak, passive, and effeminate men infected by Christian dogma have been molded according to a mistaken model of womanhood. To be cured of that, Machiavelli is in fact suggesting they should adapt to, assimilate, and learn from fortune, a masculine, mannish woman summoning them to action so they might "become men" at last. To confront fortune efficaciously, men must "become like her." They must acknowledge the feminine in themselves, appropriating and employing female power through imitation of both fortune's fickleness and her boldness.[10] Unmitigated opposition between male and female leads to ruin; in contrast, their productive intertwinement is liberating (Saxonhouse 1985: 153–160).

On this reading, Machiavelli's project aims at a wholesale "transformation of values," one that radically questions established hierarchical relationships and clear-cut polarities. Certainties—such as male and female, or virtue and vice—are made uncertain, opening up radically new possibilities needed to permit the foundation and sustaining of "order" in a world of flux, ambiguity, and fluidity (Saxonhouse 1985: 153).

Following Saxonhouse's lead, Anna Becker's recent contribution to the study of gender and politics in the Renaissance argues that Machiavelli's project rests on an "intricately balanced interaction between fortune and *virtù*" (2020: 94). Rather than being utterly opposed to the

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[10] For example, Machiavelli likens fortune "to … violent rivers which, when they become enraged, flood the plains, ruin the trees and the buildings, lift earth from this part, drop in another; each person flees before them" (P, 25: 132).

feminine, Becker claims, Machiavelli in fact understands the female figure of fortune as representing the power to which a man displaying *virtù* must appeal (2020: 93). Fortune provides the occasion that a virtuous actor needs to recognize and seize (P, 6; D, II. 29), and a mixture between *virtù* and fortune was decisive for Rome's success (D, II. 1). Most importantly, the success of the new prince in establishing "new modes and orders" (P, 6) depends on his ability constantly to change his nature—that is, to re-create and adapt his conduct in response to the "winds of fortune" and "variation of things" (P, 18). Princely *virtù* is therefore not a natural, fixed quality. Instead, it is the result of incessant self-transformation, self-fashioning, and self-creation; *virtù* requires a continuous overcoming of one's own nature (Becker 2020: 95, 101–102).

Given the great variety of situations he confronts, a truly virtuous prince must acquire even some feminine-coded qualities. It is necessary for him to adopt and act in both masculine and feminine ways, depending on the situation. The kind of "protean-self" (Smith 2016: 43) that defines a truly virtuous man or prince thereby involves the capacity for "gender-bending" (Marcina 2004: 310). According to Honig (1993, 16), rather than figuring as a thoroughly masculinized man, Machiavelli's prince demonstrates that true *virtù* requires a willingness to cross dress. Understood in contemporary terms, Machiavelli's thought is characterized by a "'fluidity' of gender" (Becker 2020: 52).

Claire Snyder (2004) explicitly ascribes to Machiavelli a "performative understanding of gender and civic identity" (232). She emphasizes the importance of participation in a civic militia, which leads to "*creation* of masculine citizen-soldiers out of male individuals" (223). That process implies a politically and "*socially constructed* 'masculinity'" (226, my emphasis). Gender, in this view, is not rooted in nature; it can be changed through action and practice. Furthermore, acquisition of "men's 'second nature'" (231)— an "*armed masculine virtù*" (225) —in turn enacts civic virtues such as public engagement and respect for the law, thereby producing citizens dedicated to the defense of civic good. *Becoming* a citizen is a permanent process; the citizen is continually re-produced through both soldering in a civic militia and participation in republican self-rule (232).

It is further worth noting the anti-essentialist shift "from being to becoming" that Esposito (2012) detects in Italian humanism (41), one associated primarily with a Florentine just a few years older than Machiavelli, Pico della Mirandola. In his *Oration on the Dignity of Men* (1486), Pico's key idea is that the human being has an endless,

chameleon-like capacity for self-creation. In an intriguing reading of Machiavelli highlighting his efforts to affirm the human capacity for creative innovation, Holman has recently argued that Machiavelli is "an exceptional contributor" to this *anti-essentialist* tradition (2018: 77). Similarly, Rebhorn (1988) links Machiavelli's works to "an emergent ideology of self-fashioning" that is opposed to "the dominant ideology of fixed selves" and "fixed social order" (10).

The interpretations discussed in this section have a radical implication: that in Machiavelli gender is not understood in an essential, pre-political, universal, naturalized, fixed, and determined sense. Rather, on this reading, Machiavelli's work instead implies that gender is a product of doing, appearing, performing, becoming, and constructing (Spackman 2010: 236).

Certainly, as this paper has argued, Pitkin (1984) insists that Machiavelli seeks to produce and construct *new* masculine *men* of *virtù* out of Florence's existing weak, passive, and dependent men.[11] However, according to such "antagonistic readings", the construction of true manhood is dependent on the construction of a foreign, infantile, female "Other" who stands as the enemy against which "real men" need to display their newly recovered manliness. According to this line of interpretation, a *hierarchical, binary view of gender* is, therefore, inscribed at the very heart of Machiavelli's political vision. In contrast, others including Saxonhouse, Snyder, and Becker, have argued that Machiavelli eradicates fixed, binary notions of femininity and masculinity, opening the way to a performative understanding of gender in a postmodern, queer-feminist fashion (Butler 1990). Butler famously claims that, rather than assigned, gender is culturally and historically produced by a certain reiterative type of acting, speaking, and appearing within the highly regulatory framework that makes it seem "natural." Crucially, this also implies that it can also be contested, troubled, remade, enacted, performed, and experimented with in multiple ways (Butler 1990: 43–44).

To support the idea that Machiavelli's work questions a binary understanding of gender, the paper now turns to analyzing Caterina Sforza, a memorable Renaissance *virago*, mannish woman warrior, and virtuous ruler of Forlì whom Machiavelli admired and who appears in all his principal political-historical works.[12] After her husband, the lord of Forlì, was killed in a conspiracy, Madonna Caterina was taken prisoner by the

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[11] See also Brown 1988: 71–123.
[12] See P, 20; FH, VIII. 34; and especially D, III. 6.

Orsi while the well-fortified city stood firm and resisted. Sforza craftily took advantage of her captors' desperation and, in a counter-conspiracy of her own, offered to enter the city and persuade her compatriots to surrender. To convince her captors, she offered her children as hostages, and the Orsi conspirators agreed to her plan. But as soon as she stepped into Forlì, instead of keeping her promise, she unexpectedly climbed the city walls, raised her skirt, exposed her genitals, and declared that she had the means to produce more children. She then proceeded to execute the supporters of the conspirators inside the city walls, while her captors ran away terrified and returned her children.

For some interpreters, such as Marcina, Machiavelli re-genders—that is, transgenders—Sforza into a masculine figure able to act in virile and bold ways and thereby to compete with men on equal terms (2004: 314–16). However, Freccero (2015: 162, 167) and Becker (2020: 103–105) argue that Sforza's story demonstrates the effectual force of *female* reproductive power and generativity. Caterina's political *virtù* is manifested through her audacious, innovative usage of her particular (feminine) capability to give birth, one that serves as a source of power crucial for her political success.

Indeed, as depicted by Machiavelli, Caterina Sforza resists reduction to either the masculine or feminine ideal; instead, she represents an example of "masculine women" who display "female masculinity" (see especially Halberstam 1998). As a female-bodied subject who displays masculinity, Sforza demonstrates that the latter is constructed and not necessarily identical with maleness. It could be said that Sforza re-genders herself by adopting the model of manhood and using it as a politically virile means to discourage the conspirators and save both the state and her family; however, she does not renounce womanhood or femaleness as such.[13] Instead, her controversial, immodest display of her genitalia functions politically (*pace* Hairston 2000: 709) by questioning the naturalized concept of womanhood and traditional feminine virtues like chastity and submission to male command.[14] Moreover, Caterina Sforza's alternative, female form or construction of masculinity questions *both* "feminine" *and* "masculine" as static, inherently opposed categories. As a masculine woman, Caterina inhabits what today might be termed a queer subject position that challenges the hegemonic model of gender conformity.

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[13] Cf. Clarke 2005: 251–252.
[14] Cf. Cavallo 2007: 131.

"Gender trouble" in Machiavelli can be further substantiated by another masculine woman, a terrifying, mannish damsel and enchantress who is Circe's servant. This character figures in Machiavelli's unfinished poem "The Golden Ass." The damsel is depicted as a herdswoman "of utmost beauty, but breezy and brash," who operates in a dark, savage forest, where she is in charge of innumerable animals and beasts, including lions, bears, and wolves. As an exemplar of female masculinity, she combines both remarkable boldness, courage, vigor, strength, and promiscuous sexuality with incredible beauty, gentleness, graciousness, kindness, and tenderness (Gilbert 1989: 750–772). She thereby represents an experiment with combining "masculine" and "feminine" qualities, making distinctions between "masculine" and "feminine" less clear.

The queer dimension in Machiavelli's understanding of gender can be further extended to his understanding of sexuality. From a queer perspective, the sexual confrontation between fortune and *virtù* described in P, 25 can be approached as a sadomasochistic scene (see also Žagar 2024: 72).[15] Machiavelli initially represents fortune as a capricious woman that audacious young men are willing to "beat" and "strike" to hold down. But, in a sudden twist of discourse, Machiavelli immediately adds that such erotic torment actually leads fortune to *befriend* the young (P, 25: 101). Similarly, in "Tercets on Fortune" Machiavelli recommends that men "push," "jostle," and "shove" fortune because such an approach "pleases" her (Gilbert 1989: 748–49). (Female) fortune is therefore not in fact transformed into a mere sexual object by a masculine force. The "passive" female figure is instead the one who is actually dominant in the whole sexual scene. She favors the young, who are more audacious and bolder, because their erotic torment pleases and excites her. Her willingness to let herself be mastered for the sake of pleasure implies the absurdity of the idea of sexually possessing, subduing, or ruling over her. Notice that by mocking (princely) phallic power, Machiavelli criticizes conservative, patriarchal and phallocentric politics.

Fortune as a woman is best understood as a non-compliant mistress, one whom lovers cannot ever subdue. The more "domination" is implied, the more masochistic pleasure is provoked and the less control the "master" has over his partner, who in turn calibrates his own sadistic desire.

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[15] The famous passage reads as follows: "I judge this indeed, that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman; and it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her down. And one sees that she lets herself be won more by the impetuous than by those who proceed coldly. And so always, like a woman, she is the friend of the young, because they are less cautious, more ferocious, and command her with more audacity" (P, 25: 135).

Rather than interpreting the sexual encounter between *virtù* (male) and fortune (female) in the form of either rape (e.g. Brown 1988: 88; Rebhorn 1988: 181) or sexism/misogynism/machismo (e.g. Pitkin 1984: 292; McIntosh 1984: 194), a sadomasochistic perspective underscores their mutual interdependence. Moreover, such a sadomasochistic reading of P, 25 sheds a different light on the intersection between sexuality and gender. It suggests that a passive, "womanly" role can actually function as an active, "masculine" source of power and strength and *vice versa*, thereby complicating dominant gender dynamics and socially prescribed active, male and passive, female roles.

In an amusing, short letter to Luigi Guiccardini from December 1509, Machiavelli replays the erotic encounter with fortune much more explicitly. In this letter, fortune is represented as an old hag, while the man displaying sexual prowess is Machiavelli himself (Atkinson and Sices 1996: 190–191). Read from a sadomasochistic perspective, the scene begins with a horny Machiavelli having a "good hump" [*la fotte' un colpo*] with an anonymous woman in a dark room.[16] However, by the end of the scene, with light creeping in, Machiavelli discovers that he was the one taken by his mistress. As the light reveals the horrendous female figure, Machiavelli is made to "appreciate" and closely examine a repulsive woman with a bald top or crown. Elsewhere in his work, Machiavelli likewise depicts fortune as bald, in keeping with her traditional portrayal (e.g. Pitkin 1984: 147). Pointing out bald top of the repulsive woman his story therefore associates her with fortune. The repulsive woman resembling fortune then sarcastically asks a disgusted Machiavelli, "What is the matter, sir?" As a result, he throws up, effectively losing control of his body. Rather than conquering the "submissive" woman resembling fortune, she proves to be the one who has had the upper hand and gotten her way with him.

Interpretations highlighting the permeation of *virtù* and fortune like those considered in this section allow for identifying some unexpectedly radical aspects of Machiavelli's understanding of gender (and sexuality). The next section investigates the underexplored effects of such insights on Machiavelli's understanding of the function of the prince and, more generally, the task of politics, especially in the context of the ineradicable social division between the great and the plebs within every city.

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[16] My translation.

Machiavelli's Popular Prince through a Feminist-Queer Lens

In the final lines dedicated to Machiavelli in *Manhood and Politics*, Brown considers different strategic options available to men in their struggle against fortune/women (1988: 118). Both Brown's and Pitkin's interpretations insist that any strategy that treats women as an enemy ultimately subverts men's own quest for freedom. Brown (1988) therefore suggests that what might in fact be needed is to choose or create another, more realistic, and less elusive enemy. Indeed, from the standpoint of feminist interpretations that emphasize the dialogical relationship between *virtù* and fortune, Machiavelli's manly citizens' choice of a threatening female force as their main enemy—a choice emphasized in the dominant line of feminist interpretation of Machiavelli—proves altogether arbitrary. From the alternative, queer perspective, men must actually learn from women; in fact, mixing "feminine" with "masculine" powers is decisive for the success of the new prince. From this latter perspective, if released from the struggle with women, men could then use female power in their struggle with the "new enemy." Brown remains silent on the figure of the "new enemy." However, the recent, burgeoning, democratic scholarship on Machiavelli associates such an enemy with the great, thus making Machiavelli himself the tribune of the people.[17]

For purposes of this paper, one possible starting point for reorienting Machiavelli's thought towards the "new enemy" can be found in the chapter paradoxically entitled "How a State is Ruined Because of Women" (D, III. 26). In a characteristically subversive, Machiavellian fashion, the examples mentioned in the text of the chapter actually demystify women as the actors behind the ruin of the state. At the same time, those examples underscore the fundamental political problem originally motivating Machiavelli's theoretical intervention: that of social division (Lefort 2012).

Both the case of Ardea and that of Lucretia follow this same logic. The ruin of the city of Ardea that opens the chapter is not actually caused by the dispute over the appropriate marriage partner for a young, parentless woman as initially appears to be the case. Rather, as the text goes on

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[17] Lefort's meticulous study *Le travail de l'œuvre Machiavel* (1972) represents the groundbreaking democratic interpretation on which this paper continues to build. The anti-aristocratic, plebeian studies that followed in Lefort's footsteps include, e.g., Vatter (2000); Holman (2018); Winter (2018); McCormick (2018); Pedullà (2018). Notice that Pitkin, who is well-acquainted with Strauss's Machiavelli (1958), is silent on Lefort's interpretation.

to explicate, the ruin was caused by *internal conflict* between the great and the plebs (see also Saxonhouse 1985: 163–64). Similarly, the rape of Lucrezia by Tarquin the Proud is again *not* the true *cause* of Brutus's conspiracy, which led to the ruin of monarchy and the establishment of Roman Republic. Rather, as Machiavelli claims in an earlier chapter (D, III. 5), Lucrezia's rape was symptomatic of a deeper political problem: Tarquin the Proud's tyrannical rule had corrupted the regime and excited both the plebs and the Senate against him. The key message conveyed via the examples in the chapter capture Machiavelli's underlying political message: an appropriate regulation of social conflict is key to securing freedom for the political community as a whole.

In both *The Prince* (P, 9) and *Discourses* (D, I. 4), Machiavelli claims that every city is marked by conflict between the great and the people. Everywhere the great are motivated by a boundless drive for acquisition and having and seek to command and oppress, whereas the people simply do not want to be commanded and oppressed by the great.[18] At the heart of society, one therefore finds an inexhaustible conflict between two qualitatively different desires "to have" and "to be" that constantly cofound each other through their mutual, antagonistic opposition (Lefort 2012: 141).

For Machiavelli, conflict, much like fortune, is constitutive of the human condition, and it likewise needs to be treated appropriately to produce a powerful and free society. As he tellingly comments concerning Rome, "the disunion of the plebs and the Roman senate made that [Roman] republic free and powerful" (D, I. 4). In fact, that conflict between the great and the plebs represents another way of understanding fortune.[19] From a Lefortian perspective, good or bad fortune depends on the way social division is expressed, which in turn depends on the type of princely intervention, that is on the form of political regulation; fortune thus essentially depends on politics. Given the qualitative difference between the great's desire to have and the people's desire to be (Lefort 2012), Machiavelli urges the prince to choose the side of the people (the plebeians or plebs), who seek his protection in their struggle against the great's oppression (P, 9). Of course, Machiavelli's estimation of the people is far from idealistic. He is well aware that, as a result of

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[18] On the greats' drive for having, cf. the end of D, I. 5.

[19] Throughout Machiavelli's works, whether represented as changing times and circumstances; the turning of wheels; unruly rivers; or capricious women, fortune is for Machiavelli clearly associated with instability, contingency, variability, changeability, and unpredictability. One must therefore include internal social conflicts high on the list of fortune's manifestations.

the great's domination, the people can start to behave in the image of the great (e.g. D, I. 40; D, I. 46). Alternatively, the politics of the plebs can assume the form of a mere negativity manifested as a wholesale refusal and disruption of the established order (e.g. D, I. 7; D, I. 44). Or, seduced by the prospect of security, they can become passive and give up on freedom (e.g. D, I. 16; D, I. 17). In all three cases, the people themselves become corrupt.[20]

Social conflicts are therefore not good *per se*. Whether they are productive or destructive essentially depends on the ability of the people to freely vent their authentic desire for freedom (D, I. 4). The prince's task consists in inspiring, energizing, and providing for appropriate expression of the plebs' (authentic) desire to be and to live. Their desire for the new and different can then be manifest as a freedom and creativity that helps to curb the great's domination. Where the prince succeeds in doing that, the ensuing conflicts challenge the *status quo* associated with the *libido dominandi*, thereby empowering and broadening the political freedom of entire community. Machiavelli thereby argues, "When a prince who founds on the people … is a man full of heart … and with his spirit and his orders keeps the generality of people inspired, he will never find himself deceived by them"; "for the end of the people is more decent than that of the great" (P, 9). Due to the nature of their authentic desire, the people are the true "guard[ians] of freedom" (D, I. 5).

It is important to notice that, contrary to what Pitkin (1984) and Brown (1988: 87–88, 90–91, 108, 117) claim, by the ninth chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli abandons the form-matter paradigm of politics by acknowledging the principle of difference. He recognizes social division as inscribed in the very being of every society. That division defines the prince's task and obliges him to support the people. Power in Machiavelli is thereby shown to hinge primarily on a *relationship* rather than consisting of mere domination. It is significant to note that ascending to the position of prince with the support of the citizens, as occurs with a "civil principality," is characterized as a case of "a fortunate astuteness (*una astuzia fortunata*)," one that entails a type of productive intermingling between *virtù* and fortune.[21] The encounter between *virtù* (prince) and fortune (social division) is mediated by *occasion*, the space of action offered by fortune (e.g. P, 6). Fortune opens that space of action to a prince who

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[20] For a detailed discussion of the first two aforementioned cases see, Žagar 2020: 16–18.

[21] Pitkin herself observes this alternative to the *virtù*-fortune dyad, but surprisingly claims that it is *not* further developed in any of Machiavelli's texts (1984: 155–156, n. 90).

takes the fundamental difference between the desires of the two groups that constitute society into account and consequently opts to support the people in their struggle against the great's domination as the only viable way of allowing a durable order to emerge from disorder (Lefort 2012). In the long run, it is impossible to sustain an order founded on the basis of the great's support because they "consider themselves to be his [the prince's] equals" and seek to "vent their appetite under his [the prince's] shadow" (P, 9).

Regarding the nature of the social conflict, the dominant position perceives it as a socio-economic, class conflict. For instance, Freccero (2015: 154–155) argues that Machiavelli's aggressive sexual politics is not directed against women as such, but at a specific type of courtly women, as suggested by Machiavelli's usage of the term "*donna*," or "lady," for fortune, instead of "*femmina*," or "woman," in chapter 25 of *The Prince*. On this reading, Machiavelli's enmity towards Lady Fortune (and courtly conventions) in fact implies an audacious attack on the established oppressive class structure.

In fact, however, the conflict between the great and the plebs goes beyond mere economic struggle. Understood in more general terms, the category of plebs encompasses varied groups of social outlaws. Thus broadly understood, it comprises various kinds of subjugated Others excluded from power (Žagar 2023: 246). As Clarke also maintains, the plebs therefore include women (2005: 253–254). Machiavelli himself, of course, was not specifically concerned with improving the position of women in his society. Nonetheless, it is worth reconsidering his political teaching on ways of resisting oppression from a feminist and gender-identity perspective. The prince's gender hybridity is particularly instructive when it comes to gender dissidence.

Rather than figuring as the main enemy of Machiavelli's entire political project, women's political position can thus instead be understood through the figure of the plebeians and the joint political struggle of the oppressed to resist the great's domination. Machiavelli's depiction of women as being unruly, changeable, and constantly exceeding boundaries like raging rivers (P, 25) then takes on a different meaning. If the plebs is understood less socio-economically, as a category encompassing diverse oppressed groups excluded from power, female power then symbolizes the possibility of change in the here and now and the capacity of seemingly weak social outsiders successfully to resist.

Insofar as breaking with the established order(s) is concerned, Machiavelli the conspirator (e.g., Strauss 1958: 168–169) could actu-

ally be said to be inspired by women (see Saxonhouse 1985: 165–166). Machiavelli passionately admires conspiracies as *the most* "dangerous" and "bold" political enterprises, ones that require acting in the most contingent circumstances and outside formal institutions, thereby requiring extraordinary *virtù* (D, III. 6). From a feminist perspective, Machiavelli's inclusion of several examples of capable women conspirators (Epicharis, Marcia, Caterina Sforza) in the chapter of *Discourses* on conspiracies is significant (see also Clarke 2005: 241–244). Nowhere else in his texts are so many women present in a single chapter. Tellingly, *Discourses* as a whole ends with a successful poisoning conspiracy brought about by women (D, III. 49; Pitkin 1984: 121-122). It is also worth noting that the chapter on conspiracies is presented from the conspirators' point of view (D, III. 6; Lefort 2012: 358). Under the cover of guarding princes against conspiracy, Machiavelli thereby in fact confronts his reader with the following question: under what conditions could the struggles of those excluded from power succeed?

Pitkin's innovative interpretation of "the return towards the beginning [*principio*]" (D, III. 1) might provide some useful answers here. According to Pitkin (1984), Machiavelli's "return toward the beginning" (D, III. 1) refers to a (re)birth of society associated with a rediscovery of human creative capacity in moments of crisis (277). The return to beginnings is therefore understood in terms of "recovery or renewed recognition of [both individual and collective] self" (278). Notably, Machiavelli explicitly speaks of men's need to "often examine (*riconoscere*) themselves" (D, III.1). According to Pitkin, the renewed "self-knowledge" (325) or "self-recognition" (275) involved in Machiavelli's return to beginnings consists (in an Arendtian spirit) of an enlarged awareness of our own shared capacity and responsibility to sustain civic order. Doing so requires a "continuous mutual co-founding," an *acting together* with and among peers that results in "a de-reification" of society and (re)creation of the community (278–279). In this sense, Pitkin argues that Machiavelli "at his best" is "*the most political of all the great political theorists*" (3, my emphasis). She especially values Machiavelli's understanding of politics as inextricable from the conflict, struggle, and vitality intrinsic to the social body.

Building on Pitkin's view of the "return toward the beginning" (D, III. 1) in conjunction with the mimetic strand of feminist literature and democratic scholarship on Machiavelli, another version of "Machiavelli at his best" can be discerned. This version addresses the question of resistance to oppression, and specifically gender dissidence, in a manner

likewise relevant for the here and now. In order to respond efficiently to the requirements of ever-changing fortune, Machiavelli's new prince has to transgress established boundaries: between right and wrong, (P, 15); man and beast (P, 17); and, especially relevant here, male and female (P, 18).

In P, 18 Machiavelli urges the prince to imitate both the lion and the fox. While on the one hand, the lion's naked force can be associated with traditionally aggressive, manly qualities, on the other hand, fox's deception symbolizes stereotypically feminine qualities (on this point see Von Vacano 2007: 137, n. 94). Machiavelli's ideal prince is thereby a generic amalgam composed of manly *and* womanly sets of qualities. Still, in the final analysis the subtle, cunning behavior is given advantage over the use of naked force. Machiavelli claims that "the one who has known best how to use fox has come out best" and adds that for the success in politics it is crucial to "color" well one's nature (P, 18: 70).

Acting, appearing, representing, imitating, (dis)simulating, seeming, manipulating is of decisive importance for the success of Machiavellian project. Appropriation of female fickleness enables the prince to play a set of different temporary and contingent roles. Machiavelli's new prince can be seen as a performer on stage (Holman 2018: 114), a "masquerader" and the "self-fashioner par excellence" (Rebhorn 1988: 25, 29), a master of the pose in constant movement, remaking and self-inventing himself before an audience in order to capture and inflame their imagination and provoke them to action. According to Winter (2018), for Machiavelli to act politically means "to be on stage, to be an actor, to play a role, to manipulate an audience" (46). Jacobson (1978) similarly claims that Machiavelli's new prince is "a man of thousand faces, a master performer" (28) who "makes himself into a mask" and becomes "a work art" (43, 48).

The success of the new prince depends on the way he presents and displays himself in the eyes of spectators.[22] Thus, the aesthetic or artistic dimension of politics (Von Vacano 2007) is essential component of princely (new) political art that primarily functions through symbols and signs (Lefort 2012: 159–169);[23] theatricality and performativity are essential to understanding of Machiavelli's politics (Minogue 1972: 156).

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[22] As a result of (corrupted) times and circumstances in which he acts, the new prince is required to engage in "improper", transgressive behavior, while his *virtù* is primarily manifested in his ability to externally *appear* "all mercy, all faith, all honesty, all humanity, all religion" (P, 18: 70).

[23] Pitkin misses this crucial point by conflating Machiavelli's image of the fox with a type of destructive *manliness* conceived in terms of pure manipulation and fraud in the service of mere private interest (1984: 34, 37, 48, 94).

Machiavelli's art of politics is best grasped as publicly staging unusual, dazzling spectacles (Winter 2018: 34–65). The effectiveness of political action is dependent on his ability to impress and shock the audience (Mansfield 1998: 18); virtue is perceived through senses (Von Vacano 2007) and showy spectacles and display of *virtù* are arranged to attract the attention of the audience, address their emotions and spark change.[24]

The virtuosity of the prince as a stage actor consists in his capacity constantly to become someone other than himself by altering and undoing his nature as varying times and circumstances require, in turn revealing prince's versatility, malleability and queerness as the basic mode of his existence. New prince's "histrionic ability" (Rebhorn 1988: 111), his plasticity, and creativity imply the mastery of the political "art of transcendence" (Saxonhouse 2000: 65), the ability to exceed the boundaries of conventional morality and dominant social norms and rules. The ability to perform variety of temporary roles, and to constantly reshape and reinvent oneself marks a birth of a new, chameleonlike type of man (Von Vacano 2007: 45), the one willing and able to continuously question the boundaries of selfhood in accordance with fundamental changeability, fluidity, ambiguity and fickleness that characterizes nature as such (see especially Machiavelli's letter to Vettori, 31 January 1515, in Atkinson and Sices 1996: 312).

These insights on selfhood as radically creative place (see especially Holman 2018) also include transgressive play with boundaries of gender. In a critical dialogue with Pitkin's (1984) pioneering gender-focused reading of Machiavelli, this article offers a contemporary, relevant approach to Machiavelli's prince that is inspired by a Muñozian (Muñoz 2009), postmodernist, feminist-queer perspective.[25] The germ of such a reading was already contained within Brown's (1988) discussion of Machiavelli. Examining different options regarding men's battle with fortune, she hints at an original, thought-provoking solution. According to this innovative proposal, a man—that is, the prince—needs to become "'self-sufficient,' or as it were homosexual." In other words, he needs to become an "independent political actor [who] is, in a sense, androgynous. He is manhood in drag—that is, clothed in his *perception*

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[24] Machiavelli writes that new prince needs to do great things which "have always kept minds of the subjects in suspense and admiration, and occupied with their outcome" and in the continuation of the same chapter concludes that the new prince needs to "keep the people occupied with festivals and *spectacles*" (P, 21: 88, 91, my emphasis).

[25] On relating Jose Muñoz to Machiavelli, see Žagar (2023).

of female garb—attempting to use both male and female powers in the struggle with other men" (118).

Remember that, according to the mimetic readings, chapter 18 of *The Prince* implies that the new prince needs to become like fortune, who is a woman; like her, he needs to be unpredictable and bold.[26] Following Brown's proposal, such unpredictability and daringness might also imply literally becoming a woman in a more theatrical sense, through the prince occasionally using female garb to stage himself in drag.[27] At the same time, keep in mind that according to democratic (Lefortian) readings of Machiavelli, the challenge faced by the prince is to regulate social division, revitalize the social body, and curb the great's domination manifested as a desire for having in the broadest sense—that is, as a craving for domination over the Other (plebeians) expressed and experienced as a comprehensive project of reification, discipline, repression of difference, and overall ossification of the social body and its reduction to hierarchical, seemingly natural fixities (Žagar 2023: 245–246).[28] From a Machiavellian standpoint, uniformity is a sign of corruption. A healthy society—one that is strong, free, and powerful—is permeated by division and thereby characterized by diversity, multiplicity or, in Pitkin's words, "mutuality across difference" (1984: 86). The prince's fundamental political task consists in inspiring and enabling an authentic expression of the plebeians' desire to be free. To do so and to inspire those who do not fit the established order to freely express their (queer) desire for the new and different, the prince needs to wear many masks and play various roles.[29]

From the perspective of gender dissidents and their experience of being and living in the world, one princely mask or role is especially

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[26] "And so he [the prince] needs to have a spirit disposed to change as the winds of fortune and variations of things command him" (P, 18: 104).

[27] Since Machiavelli is considered as one of the best Renaissance playwrights, it is worth noting that in the Italian Renaissance theater of Machiavelli's time all roles were played by young men who cross-dressed and performed as women. Giannetti (2009) reminds us that in the Renaissance Italy masculinity was not seen as a uniform, fixed category. Rather its social meaning varied in dependence with the life stages (17–18). Early male adolescence was associated with "woman-like", "androgynous", "feminine" phase which was only gradually expected to evolve into a traditional, active, phallic masculinity characteristic of the adulthood (ibid.). According to Horowitz (1991), "playing with gender" is a "renaissance pursuit" *par excellence* (xii).

[28] In the context of the proposed broader understanding of oppression in Machiavelli, Young's (1988) distinction between different faces of domination (violence, exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and powerlessness) might be fruitfully applied to the study of diverse tactics of resistance to domination identifiable in Machiavelli's texts.

[29] In the chapter 18 itself of *The Prince*, Machiavelli claims that the prince needs to be "a great pretender and dissembler," noting that "the vulgar" (the plebeians) are "taken in by the appearance," and therefore "judge more by their eyes than by their hands."

important: the one that requires the prince to act as a woman on the political stage and to engage in hope-inspiring type of spectacles. Contrary to prevailing interpretations, prince's stagecraft, his aesthetic capability, must not be reduced to violent displays of terror such as executions (e.g., P, 7) and likewise brutal acts (e.g., D, I. 15) whose theatricality produces beneficial effects for the community by invoking fear (e.g., Winter 2018: 64; Mansfield 1998: 16–19; Rahe 1988: 86–134). By taking risk and staging himself in drag, the prince engages in an entirely different kind of spectacle that sparks *hope*.[30] By questioning hegemonic understandings of gender as a static, "natural," and "objective" given, drag prince[31] inflames the desires of the audience, and particularly gender dissidents, by hinting that another reality *is* possible after all.

Machiavelli's drag prince, one of the prince's many possible self-presentations, represents an alternative way of performing the self, one that subverts the super-masculine image of the prince and, at the same time, contests prevailing, "naturalized" gender modes and orders. By embodying both masculine and feminine traits, as "a master of the extraordinary" (Rebhorn 1988: 109), Machiavelli's new prince becomes a new "man-woman", symbolically representing "third sex", *as if* he were hermaphroditic. By the arts of theater, through hyperbolic and transgressive, grotesque, provocative gender behavior, the (drag) prince instrumentalizes his own body and re-presents it as an ambivalent, "in-between" site for the sake of plebeian, emancipatory politics.

Drag spectacle associated with non-normative performance of gender has a didactic purpose. The virtuosity of a gender-hybrid prince, a masculine man who adopts feminine features on the political stage, consist in his ability to reveal to plebeian gender dissidents a horizon of futurity imbued with potentiality. Prince's appropriation of gendered performance of woman helps to shift the limits of the real and possible. The aesthetic dimension of politics is essential for engineering and the exercise of imagination (Minogue 1972: 155). Behind the theatrical performance of Machiavelli's androgynous, queer prince, audience sensitive to that aesthetic dimension is invited to recognize both a potential opening in the fixity of the present and a radical call for action. Responding to that call requires putting security of identity at risk and

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[30] For a rare example of a study that focuses on hope in Machiavelli instead of fear see, e.g., Mitchell 2024.

[31] I use the term "drag prince" as a theatrical metaphor for the ability of the masculine prince to appropriate feminine styles, behaviors, qualities and appearances.

letting go of conventional ways of being, doing, and performing for the sake of a new, alternative, less oppressive reality. The rediscovery of the capacity for "self-renewal" or "self-recovery" that Pitkin's reading of Machiavelli's return to beginnings calls for is best manifested and realized when the self is understood as a place of insurmountable creativity. In queer terms, that alterity is expressed as courageous readiness to perform "assigned" gender roles in subversive ways, putting pressure on the imposed gender binary. "Playing with gender" (Horowitz 1991: xii) is yet another manifestation of contingency inscribed at the very heart of Machiavellian, modern society.

A striking, amusing, comic role and image of a prince as "a man in a dress" transmits a profoundly serious message concerning the essential dimension of new prince's political art: the extraordinary capacity for role-playing that attracts the attention of the audience and enables change. Unlike Pitkin's Machiavelli who overwhelmed by the fear of women denies and represses the female within his psyche, the proposed transmogrified version of the prince who stages drag spectacle has emancipatory political implications. By incorporating the "politics of effeminacy" (Milligan 2006) to a reservoir of princely skills, techniques and tactics, Machiavelli's new prince in fact politicizes, complicates and questions hegemonic, traditional, unambiguous form of masculinity (and femininity). On this reading, "feminine" ways and qualities expand rather than threaten prince's "masculinity" and this in turn helps to *deideologize* hegemonic discourse around gender that rests on the premise of the categorically fixed relation between sex and gender. Prince in drag anticipates queer future and functions as a sign of gender understood as, to borrow from Giannetti, "a continuum of possibilities" (2009: 118).

Performing gender with a twist does not demolish boundaries between male and female, masculine and feminine. Instead, it alters these boundaries by recognizing a field of relationality and cohabitation between. That recognition, inspired by the exemplary transgression of gendered boundaries by a prince "founding on" the plebs, results in new possibilities, new forms of life that expand the horizon of possibilities, widen gender options, thus revitalizing society and preventing its stultification.

Conclusion

This paper examines and explores alternative ways of conceiving the relation between gender and politics in Machiavelli. Interpretations that emphasize enmity between *virtù* and fortune reinforce the dark legend concerning Machiavelli by adding misogynism to the list of vices he is accused of. In contrast, however, another strand of feminist studies has insisted on the productive intertwining of male and female power in Machiavelli, one more evident in the disposition of the new prince constantly to change his nature and learn from feminine forms of power, thereby dissociating gender from rigid social hierarchies. The article brings those later feminist insights on Machiavelli into relation with democratic studies of his thinking. The latter have stressed the centrality and unavoidability of conflict between the great and the people. This combination of feminist and democratic perspectives sheds a new light on indetermination and struggle as basic principles of Machiavelli's politics by offering a postmodernist reading of "Machiavelli at his best". The paper complicates the surface presentation of traditional masculinity in Machiavelli's texts by highlighting those parts of his work that point towards transgressive, alternative type of masculinity that is relevant for the struggles of gender dissidents in the here and now.

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