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Katherine Paton

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Machiavelli At Wits End: Virtue, Fortune and the Purpose of Comedy

KATHERINE PATON



Katherine Paton is a political science major, studying political theory. She began research on this project

in the Fall semester of 09-10 with an ATP semester grant. She continued research with the ATP summer grant during the summer of 2010, and will be presenting the entire work at the Midwest Political Science Association conference in April 2011. This part of her research is part of her honors thesis, which will be completed and defending during Spring 2011. Katherine will be attending graduate school in the fall to pursue her Ph.D. in political theory.

The scholarly ambiguity over the proper understanding of Machiavelli's political thought characterizes the scholarship in his literary works as well. The tragic interpretation of Machiavelli's literary works posits that Machiavelli's understanding of virtue fails to provide humanity the means by which fortune can be overcome. In contrast, the comic interpretation argues that man is virtuous and prudent enough to conquer fortune. To accomplish this, one must only follow Machiavelli's political teaching. I address this tension through analysis of conspiracy in Machiavelli's *Clizia*. Sofronia's successful conspiracy attests to the utility of Machiavelli's account of virtue in overcoming fortune and speaks to the comic quality of Machiavelli's political and literary works. The argument advanced here also speaks to the conspiratorial quality of Machiavelli's political and philosophic enterprise.

Considerable controversy exists over Machiavelli's treatment of comedy and tragedy. In one school of thought, the dark quality of Machiavelli's political writings encourages a tragic interpretation of his plays, letters, and other various works (Jacobitti 2000, Pitkin 1999). His political teaching of virtue, especially in regards to the abilities of a prince to overcome fortune, allows the dismissal of tragedy as an aspect of his intention within his teaching (Strauss 1958, Mansfield 2000). Central to this controversy is the concept of fortune and whether or not Machiavellian virtue is strong enough to overcome this powerful force.¹ Machiavelli's ideal man is virtuous and prudent enough to conquer fortune; the man that succumbs to a tragic fate has only his own lack of these qualities to blame (*Prince* 138).² If Machiavelli's thought is solely comic, his prince will always be able to find a way around fortune or chance. If it is tragic, these and other forces will always be able to triumph due to human weakness.

Here I evaluate Machiavelli's play *Clizia* as it relates to his political works. First, I provide an overview of the existing scholarly debate over his treatment of comedy and tragedy. The next section provides an analysis of conspiracy as developed in Machiavelli's *Discourses* and *Prince*. Having laid this foundation for Machiavelli's politics, I then assess his play, *Clizia*, as it relates to Machiavelli's teaching regarding conspiracy. I focus on Sofronia's successful conspiracy as the best demonstration of Machiavellian politics. From here, I am able to conclude that Sofronia embodies Machiavellian virtue and that *Clizia* is properly understood as a comedy.

Machiavelli's Literary Works: Tragic and Comic Evaluations

Machiavelli's plays have been evaluated by most scholars as either works of comedy or tragedy. Michael Harvey (2000) considers Machiavelli's works to be tragic. While Machiavelli suggests that the most virtuous prince is capable of subduing anything in his path, Harvey does not believe such a man exists. In a similar interpretation, Franco Fido's (2000) analysis of Machiavelli's work as a whole concludes that Machiavelli resigns himself to the weakness of humanity and the triumph of fortune. Hanna Pitkin (1999) similarly sees Machiavelli's prince as virtuous but in only one way. As she considers the manly virtue given by Machiavelli to be his most necessary and therefore most emphasized quality, the prince is not correctly prepared to overcome fortune. Instead, Machiavelli's prince is inflexible and therefore will fall to fortune and other powerful forces. For tragedians, while Machiavelli's prince is a man who could conquer all, Machiavelli is ambiguous or even critical of the actual possibility of such a man existing. Thus, while he spells out what is necessary in order to escape tragedy, his lack of confidence in the actuality of such a man leads his thought to a tragic conclusion.

Others deny the existence of a tragic element in Machiavelli's political thought (Strauss 1958, Mansfield 2000). Strauss considers Machiavelli's use of literature as a representation of his own comic nature; not as a tragic element to his politics. Machiavelli's overall goal is to introduce new modes and orders into Italy, political philosophy and politics in general. By introducing these new modes and orders, Machiavelli advises men on how to become great and powerful. Machiavelli writes, "the most excellent men will have a proper estimate of their worth and of the conduct becoming to them, and they will not be shaken in their opinion and their conduct by the whims of fortune" (Strauss 1958, 192). The successful prince will not succumb to tragedy – if he follows the counsel of Machiavelli, fortune will be defeated. A true prince, being of the highest prudence and virtue, "is then subject to nature and necessity in such a way that by virtue of nature's gift of 'brain' and through knowledge of nature and necessity he is enabled to use necessity and to transform matter" (Strauss 1958, 253).³ Strauss argues that Machiavelli creates a man of such virtue and strength that no tragedy will force itself upon him. Instead, that man will be able to flexibly use his ability to combat and conquer fortune.⁴ In Strauss' view, Machiavelli's examples that do succumb to fortune do so not because of her superior strength, but because they failed in judging the most prudent actions based on the time and situation. Thus, "in Machiavelli we find comedies, parodies, and satires but nothing reminding of tragedy. One half of humanity remains outside of his thought. There is no tragedy in Machiavelli" (Strauss 1958, 292). The faults and

failures of imprudent men cannot be judged as tragedy, as their downfall was preventable had errors not been made.

Conspiracy in Machiavelli's Literary Works

Machiavelli's use of conspiracy can be linked to the debate between the comic and tragic interpretations of Machiavelli. Though conspiracy is clearly a crime, as it is planned by one or more men against the current modes and orders, conspiracy can be beneficial, and thus less reprehensible when compared to other serious crimes. In the event that a conspiracy is successful, and new modes and orders are in fact put in place, the intensity of the crime is actually lessened (Strauss 1958). The new modes and orders are by necessity stronger and more virtuous than the existing ones, and thus become a common benefit. Deriving power from a successful conspiracy, the prince who establishes these new modes enables himself to overcome fortune and tragedy.

This is evident in Machiavelli's analysis of conspiracies. While he begins with advice on how to avoid being conspired against, he ultimately points to what one needs to do in order to successfully conspire (Strauss 1958). Before the conspiracy begins, danger is found in preparing to attack. Successful conspirators will keep their plot to themselves, only sharing with one person when absolutely necessary. To be free with one's plans is to essentially foil an attempt before it can begin (*Discourses* III.6.3). The danger of a conspiracy being uncovered is also found in conjecture, where a schemer is unable to prevent clues of his plot from being revealed. In this case, while the plot itself is not told to the wrong person, certain hints allow a conclusion to be drawn that also leads to a ruined conspiracy (*Discourses* III.6.3). When others are involved in the plot, the leader of the rebellion must also be prepared for the possibility of another member leaking the plot, whether by mistake, on purpose or by force. The danger found in the next step of the conspiracy, the execution, is obvious – the risk of something going wrong is high. Thus, Machiavelli warns that such dangers "arise either from varying the order, or from spirit lacking in him who executes, or from an error that the executor makes through lack of prudence or through not bringing the thing to perfection by leaving alive part of those who were planned to be killed" (*Discourses* III.6.12). Here, it falls on the conspirator to look to his manliness and prudence to follow through with his plot; without doing this he risks his own life. He must have a plan and be willing to adhere to it, as the plotter who is prevented from achieving his goal by a guilty conscience risks the chance of death. However, accident can lead to a change of plan, which the conspirator must not let affect his final goal. He must prudently revise the plan in light of these changes. After the conspiracy has been performed, the final danger is assessed in a manner similar to the middle stage. If there

has been someone left alive who now has a serious grievance against the conspirator, he has put himself in further danger by not eliminating every threat against him (*Discourses* III.6.12). When someone has been left alive, the danger actually escalates from that during the execution. Thus, it is absolutely necessary to execute the sons of Brutus (see *Discourses* III.6).

Virtue is essential in executing a successful conspiracy. Machiavelli writes that a city is “more or less difficult to keep according to whether the one who has acquired them is more or less virtuous” (*Prince* 32). He who expects to be successful in his conspiracy must be truly virtuous in Machiavellian terms. For a private man to become a prince, he must follow the modes of others, where “fortune provided them with nothing other than the occasion which gave them the matter into which they could introduce whatever form they pleased” (*Prince* 33). Not only must he have virtue to conspire, he must only use fortune in respect to the time and place, using his own strength and not fortune to achieve his ends. This virtue and lack of reliance on fortune allows him to overcome his opponent. Even against a strong enemy, his virtue gives him the ability to weaken their forces. Machiavelli identifies the Romans as strong conspirators, as they “sent colonies, kept and provided for the less powerful without increasing their power, put down the powers and never let powerful foreigners gain a reputation” (*Prince* 15). Like the Romans, a private man who aims to conquer must utilize conspiracy as he is incapable of engaging in war.

As a new prince, the successful conspirator must balance his own desires and that which he must implement for “states and security” (*Prince* 34). This task is far from simple, as “nothing is more difficult to deal with nor more dubious of success nor more dangerous to manage than making oneself the head in the introduction of new orders” (*Prince* 34). The successful conspirator must rely on his virtue and his ability to deceive. Deception is necessary to achieve the end goal of a conspiracy, as he who becomes the new prince must work around his lack of arms. In order to have the best chance at being successful, both with the original conspiracy and with keeping his state, the prince must realize that “he who lets go that which is done for that which ought to be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation – for a man who wishes to profess the good in everything needs must fall among the many who are not good” (*Prince* 93). While he would be wise to have the appearance of accord with that which ought to be done, he must not lose sight of that which needs to be done. The cunning, foxy side of the prince allows this, as it is necessary “to be a great hypocrite and deceiver . . . that he who deceives will always find one who will let himself be deceived” (*Prince* 108). To have the foxy nature is important for a private man who intends to become a

prince; along with his virtue, prudent use of deception allows him to successfully conspire.

Sofronia’s Successful Conspiracy

Sofronia’s conspiracy is successful and is true to the Machiavellian teaching on conspiracies. In order for a conspiracy to be justified or have the possibility of success, the injuries done to those who conspire must be “in property, in blood, or in honor” (*Discourses* III.6.2). Honor is where Sofronia feels that she has felt injury. Nicomaco’s desire for Clizia causes him to become consumed with her. Consequently, “his business was neglected, his farms were laid waste, his business dealings went to ruin . . . the servants, seeing this, made fun of him, and his son cast aside his reverence . . . this poor household will come to ruin” (*Clizia* II.4.22). Sofronia feels that her family, which was once respected by others, has been lead down a path to disrepute due to the actions of Nicomaco that are fueled directly from his desire. Sofronia, as she is determined to stop the plot of Nicomaco to sleep with Clizia, which will lead to the ruin of her family, embodies the virtuous conspirator most likely to achieve success. Her drive, along with her position in relation to her opposing force, her husband, are advantageous as “weak men and those not familiar to the prince lack all those hopes and all those occasions that are required for execution of a conspiracy” (*Discourses* III.6.3).

In returning her household to the status that it once enjoyed, Sofronia acquires the authority once belonging to Nicomaco as the head of the family. Cleandro is aware that his mother is unwilling to let Nicomaco’s servant Pirro marry Clizia, and Sofronia is aware of the bargain that has been struck between master and servant (*Clizia* V.3.57). However, while Cleandro believes that his mother is free from suspicion of his own designs on Clizia, she slides into conversation with Cleandro that: “if I believed that I’d be taking her out of Nicomaco’s hands just to put her into yours, I wouldn’t intervene in this” (*Clizia* III.3.30). Here she reveals to him that not only is she keeping Clizia from Nicomaco, but she has no intention of Cleandro having her either. In this conversation, she also eludes to her many plans, saying “I have so many things revolving in my head, and I believe that there’s one to spoil his every plan” (*Clizia* III.3.30). From managing this, and preventing Nicomaco from achieving his final goal, she accomplishes her main goal of becoming the prudent head of the family. Her co-conspirators are likely not aware that Nicomaco would only be the visual head of the family, with Sofronia holding the reins behind the scenes. In this way Sofronia is prudent, as Machiavelli states that “if indeed you communicate it [the conspiracy], not to pass beyond one individual,” thus that if it must be spoken of, to choose only one to confide in (*Discourses* III.6.9). The most prudent action is to keep the conspiracy

limited to only oneself, as Sofronia is able to do by keeping the most significant end a secret.

Sofronia's ability to maintain the requisite secrecy speaks to her ability to properly deceive. High on her list of concerns is maintaining the reputation of the family, and Sofronia considers her religious piety an integral part of this status. Sofronia's concern with piety is a quintessential Machiavellian trait, as he writes "nothing is more necessary than to have this last quality [religion]. For men, universally, judge more by the eyes than by the hands" (*Prince* 109). Machiavelli does not actually require piety. He only counsels the appearance of piety as this is more than enough to satisfy the people. Thus, when Nicomaco asks Sofronia why she is attending church during Carnival, a festival similar to Mardi Gras, she retorts that "one ought to do good all the time, and it's so much more welcome for it to be done on those occasions when others are doing evil" (*Clizia* II.3.17). Sofronia knows that she will be viewed well for attending church on any given day, but will be viewed in an even fonder light for attending on a day where indulge in irreligious activities. Thus, she is able to use the appearance of piety to her own advantage in a Machiavellian way.

When Pirro wins the lottery that is to determine who will be the rightful husband of Clizia, Nicomaco thinks that he has solved his problem with Sofronia and Eustachio. He is blinded and unable to see that the prudent Sofronia has already begun to plan for this exact event (see *Clizia* III.7.36). Speaking to Pirro, Nicomaco says "did you see how sad the whole crowd was, and how my wife despaired" (*Clizia* IV.2.41)? He goes on to say how excited he is for the events that he expects to transpire that night – without ever considering that he might in fact be thwarted. Thus, when Nicomaco enters the bed of Clizia on the night she has wed Pirro, he is caught entirely unaware by what is waiting for him there. Upon attempting to bed Clizia, he finds himself aggressively rejected: "I went to kiss her, and with her other hand she pushed my face away, I went to throw myself all over her, and she gave me a shot with her knee, so hard that she broke one of my ribs" (*Clizia* V.2.54). After multiple attempts, his beloved turns onto her frontside, where she/he "held herself tight with her breast on the mattress, so that all the winches in the Opera couldn't have turned her over" (*Clizia* V.2.55). The next morning, Nicomaco is greeted by "being stabbed in the flank and being given five or six accursed shots under the rump" eventually seeing "instead of Clizia, Siro, my servant, upright on the bed, entirely naked" (*Clizia* V.2.55-56). Sofronia's conspiracy leaves her husband emasculated, and he proclaims he is "disgraced for eternity, I have no further remedy, and I can't ever again face my wife, my children, my relatives, my servants" (*Clizia* V.2.53). Nicomaco is completely unsuspecting of his wife's plot, which has lead him

to total humiliation and defeat. She has been successful enough to deprive him of the goal he has been working towards; second of all she has played him the fool in an extremely indecent way.

Nicomaco's fate, created at Sofronia's hands, is to become the less powerful member of the household. During the scene of his self wallowing, Sofronia appears and states "you're the one who's tormenting me, because, while you ought to be comforting me, I have to comfort you, and while you ought to be providing for them, it falls to me to do so" (*Clizia* V.3.57). Sofronia has taken the role that Nicomaco once played for the household, as he has been too consumed by his desires to provide for his family and act in the ways he should act. Nicomaco fully gives up his position of authority when he tells Sofronia to "do as you wish. I'm prepared not to go outside your arrangements, provided that the matter isn't made known" (*Clizia* V.3.58). The decision over the fate of Clizia has been made not by Nicomaco, but by Sofronia, and he has been forced to relinquish the remainder of his authority to her. Similar to a prince that is able to wrest power from past leaders, Sofronia has not only determined the fate of Clizia, but has usurped control of the family. The reversal of roles between the two main characters can be seen as a gender role reversal, where the female comes out as more powerful than the male. In Machiavellian terms, Sofronia emerges as the princelier of the two characters, which allows her to overcome fortune but also initiates the comic interpretation of the play. As Sofronia assumes a powerful, previously male role, the gender role reversal can be seen as a comic device. The woman has become more powerful, while the male head of the household has been stripped of his virtue, masculinity and authority.

Sofronia: The Embodiment of Machiavellian Virtue

The conspiratorial side of Sofronia enables her to be considered a fox, as her wit and cunning help her to become successful. But in the true sense of Machiavellian virtue, her strength is shown in taking power away from her husband. This duality is found first in the *Prince*, where it is said that "there are two kinds of fighting: one with the laws, the other with force. The first one is proper to man; the second to the beasts; but because the first proves many times to be insufficient, one needs must resort to the second" (*Prince* 107). In order to be considered a virtuous leader, one must employ both, as "the lion cannot defend himself from snares, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves" (*Prince* 108). Just like Machiavelli's ideal prince, Sofronia uses her fox-like wit alongside her ability to terrify Nicomaco. Her virtue leads her conspiracy to a successful end and increases her power by returning her household to first principles.

Even a virtuous man must have the opportunity to act if he is to be successful; the difference is the source of the opportunity. For the weaker man, this opportunity is found in fortune. On the contrary, “in the highest case, the case of the founder, this opportunity consists in the necessity inherent in his matter” (Strauss 1958, 252). Necessity is the prince’s motivation, as “the hands and the tongue of men . . . would not have worked perfectly nor led human works to the height they are seen to be led to had they not been driven by necessity” (*Discourses* III.12.1). Without necessity, the prince is unlikely to find the opportunity needed to achieve his goals. For the same reason, “a captain ought to contrive with all diligence to lift such necessity from its defenders” (*Discourses* III.12.2). This removes both opportunity and motivation from those he is up against, a tactic that enables him to strengthen himself against a weakened opponent. In the example of Gaius Manilius against the Veientians, Manilius manages to block the Veientians in his stockade. Once they realize what has happened, “the Veientes began to combat with so much rage that they killed Manilius” and manage to escape (*Discourses* III.12.2). Thus, necessity is important for he who is attempting a conspiracy, both to have himself but also to take away from another.

Sofronia is able to do this through her appropriate use and manipulation of necessity as recommended by Machiavelli. In considering the family structure as parallel to that of the political structure, it can be said that “all the beginning of sects, republics, and kingdoms must have some goodness in them, by means of which they may gain their first reputation and their first increase” (*Discourses* III.1.1). Throughout the duration of a sect, republic or even family, corruption begins to grow within the ranks, and can eventually cause a decline in virtue. Thus, as Sofronia sees her family rapidly veering off the path from the level of virtue had at its founding, she only has recourse to a return to first principles. For any of these political or private bodies “this return toward the beginning is done through either extrinsic accident or intrinsic prudence” (*Discourses* III.1.1). Sofronia represents intrinsic prudence, as she is a member of the household who employs measures that are calculated in such a way as to achieve a specific end which is in accord with the common good. Such intrinsic measures are “from the simple virtue of one man, without depending on any law that stimulates you to any execution . . . they are of such reputation and so much example that good men desire to imitate them and the wicked are ashamed to hold to a life contrary to them” (*Discourses* III.1.3). The virtue which is capable of returning a corrupt regime back to its ancient virtue and goodness is represented by Sofronia. Just as the Machiavellian character is strong and able to stage a return to these principles, Sofronia prevents Nicomaco from an action that would be imprudent and lead to disrespect for the household. Upon the success of

her plot, she also convinces Nicomaco to return to the man he once was, and to perform his duties as such, though without the authority that she has now assumed.

Part of Sofronia’s ability to accomplish her goals is due to her being an autonomous individual. Virtue, as found in Machiavellian political writings, posits that man is autonomous (Strauss 1958, 244). Machiavelli rejects the proposition that virtue and prudence are compatible with the idea that chance or God govern the actions of man (Strauss 1958). Instead, when men properly utilize virtue and prudence, they limit the ability for chance or fortune to undermine their desires. Machiavelli says of his prince that he must not let chance govern his actions, as “that prince who depends wholly upon fortune falls when she changes” (*Prince* 147). Sofronia is successful due to her autonomy. Sofronia is capable of not only playing a part in the conspiracy, but in orchestrating the entire plot. Her use of others to help her achieve her ends is exactly that – her assessing the utility of others to reach her goal. This autonomy allows her to mastermind the plot with no other source of intellectual input; she only needs help from others to assist her in more laborious aspects of the part. Sofronia’s autonomy allows her to dismiss traditional morality. She transcends the traditional role of wife by doing away with the limitation inherent in this role. Sofronia convinces Siro to lie in bed with her husband and be sexually assaulted, boldly using a lewd scheme instead of choosing a less profane path.

Human qualities, such as ambition, desire and love are all a part of Machiavelli understands of fortune. In order to rise above fortune and act with virtue, one must be flexible and prepared to handle the various obstacles thrown by fortune. These obstacles are not the only problem; time and circumstance allow fortune an even stronger grasp on human action. For humans, this is much easier said than done, as “nor can one find a man so prudent that he would know how to accommodate himself to this; that comes about because he is unable to deviate from that to which nature inclines him” (*Prince* 148). Sofronia represents the virtue that is needed to oppose her. Fortune is hard to stop, as she is one “who demonstrates her power where there is no ordered virtue to resist her” (*Prince* 147). As Sofronia embodies each virtue outlined by Machiavelli in his political works, she can couple that virtue with her prudence to overcome fortune. To an even higher extent, Sofronia represents ordered virtue because of her relation to the return to first principles. Thus, her ability to finally overcome fortune for her own benefit as well as the benefit of her family lends to the comic interpretation of Machiavelli’s literary works. She has not been thwarted by a force, her husband, that is typically considered stronger than herself. Instead, she has prudently calculated a scheme that has triumphed, allowing the conclusion that *Clizia* is a representation of the comic interpretation of Machiavelli.

Conclusion

Clizia sheds a comic light on Machiavelli's political thought. His concepts of virtue, fortune and prudence are all present in his literary works in the same forms that they are provided in his political works. Both genres speak to the necessity of virtue and prudence to overcoming fortune. Sofronia embodies the definition of Machiavellian virtue provided in his political works, and due to this she is able to turn a less than pleasant situation into a successful conspiracy. Within *Clizia*, Machiavelli proves that this advice is applicable to private matters as well. Not only is such advice applicable, but is also more accessible in a genre that is more likely to reach the multitude. As the lead conspirator and the Machiavellian character, had she been unable to triumph over Nicomaco, the play would be considered tragic. However, her success allows a comic interpretation of the play, as she overcomes her opponent at the end of the play.

Unable to employ his own virtue to become a prince, Machiavelli chooses to educate others on the proper understanding of virtue. As an educator of conspirators, Machiavelli is able to institute his own political thought (Strauss 1958). His new modes and orders are to be upheld by those whom he provides the skills to found a city. Seen as such an educator, Machiavelli can be interpreted as a conspirator himself. His writings are similar to others of his genre; he often does not say exactly what he means, choosing instead for the reader to determine his true counsel. In a correspondence, Machiavelli writes, "for a long time I have not said what I believed, nor do I ever believe what I say, and if indeed sometimes I do happen to tell the truth, I hide it among so many lies that it is hard to find" (quoted in Scott and Sullivan 1994, 888). Thus, his conspiracy can be seen as an intellectual one. Not only is he using his writings to teach others, but is also using them to hide his true meaning.

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Endnotes

- ¹Machiavelli considers fortune a force that assaults the prince who is not prepared to defend himself against her. For an excellent analysis of the nature of fortune see Pitkin (1999, 138-169).
- ² Machiavelli's texts will be referenced as follows: *Prince* with page number (s), *Discourses* with book, chapter and section (s) and *Clizia* with act, scene and page number (s).
- ³ Machiavelli identifies three types of brains, one that can understand on its own, one that can comprehend what has already been understood by others, and one that is incapable of understanding on its own or through the intelligence of others (*Prince* 138). Machiavelli's ideal prince is characterized by the first type of brain
- ⁴ The tension between the tragic and comic interpretations of Machiavelli hinges on how one interprets Machiavelli on the topic of flexibility. Pitkin (1999), for example, finds no evidence for this flexibility as Machiavelli's prince is characterized by the virtue of manliness. In addition to Strauss (1958), Mansfield (2000) argues that Machiavelli never provides an example of such a prince because Machiavelli himself represents the requisite flexibility needed to overcome fortune.