GENDER OPEN REPOSITORIUM

Rethinking Masculinity and Femininity in Niccolò Machiavelli's Political Thought

Becker, Anna

2012

https://doi.org/10.25595/1040

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Becker, Anna: *Rethinking Masculinity and Femininity in Niccolò Machiavelli's Political Thought*, in: L' homme : Zeitschrift für feministische Geschichtswissenschaft, Jg. 23 (2012) Nr: 2, 65-78. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/1040.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.7767/lhomme.2012.23.2.65

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY 4.0 Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY 4.0 License (Attribution). For more information see:

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en

GenderOpen – Repositorium für die Geschlechterforschung: www.genderopen.de

FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

Extra

Rethinking Masculinity and Femininity in Niccolò Machiavelli's Political Thought

Anna Becker

Niccolò Machiavelli's (1469–1527) work, like that of perhaps no other political thinker of his time, has been analysed for its relevance to notions of gender.[1] Machiavelli's theory is portrayed – even by those scholars who claim to have no particular interest in the gender question – as being quintessentially masculine; his politics appear to be constructed around strict dichotomies of virtuous masculinity against the abhorrence of that which is feminine. After all, Machiavelli uses the word *effeminato* in most cases in a denigrating sense.

Machiavelli's stance on Fortuna and on women is notorious: "Fortuna is a woman and in order to keep her under it is necessary to beat and strike her."[2] This passage from the twenty-fifth chapter of "The Prince" (written around 1513, published in 1532) seems to embody Machiavelli's misogynism perfectly. In "Il Principe" Machiavelli expounds – in a way that will become synonymous with the idea of *realpolitik* – how an *uomo virtuoso* has to act in order to acquire and maintain a *stato*. For this to succeed, it is often pointed out, Machiavelli needs his protagonist to overcome the whims of fortune. The idea that *'virtù vince fortuna'* could be called "the most central *motif* of Renaissance humanism".[3] J. G. A. Pocock proposed that humanist writers "concern[] themselves ... with the ways in which a civic *virtus* or *virtù* ... might undergo exposure

1 For a representative overview cf. Maria J. Falco ed., Feminist Interpretations of Niccolò Machiavelli, University Park, PA 2004.

2 Niccolò Machiavelli, Il Principe, ed. Rinaldo Rinaldi, in: Opere di Niccolò Machiavelli, 3 vols., Torino 1999, vol. I, 384.

3 Cf. Quentin Skinner, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Cambridge 1978, 186; Eugenio Garin, Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance, Oxford 1965, 61.

Online gestellt mit finanzieller Unterstützung der Universität Basel (Lehrstuhl Prof. Dr. Claudia Opitz-Belakhal).

to, and rise triumphantly above, the insecurities of *fortuna*".[4] Pocock associated this with the bearing of arms, active citizen involvement and elite leadership – ostentatiously masculine qualities. In Machiavelli's work, the concept of the political man's battle against fortune seems to have reached its pinnacle: the quality of *virtù* is now the quintessential expression of action, the embodiment of vigorous military and genuinely political activity. Fortuna, then, seems to be constructed in strict opposition to *virtù* – an antagonistic force and a woman who needs to be dominated.

For many gender historians, the notion that *virtù* conquers, manages and wins over Fortuna forms the pretext for a gendered analysis of Machiavelli's work. Melissa Mathes writes that "for Machiavelli, men and women are natural sexual antagonists, just as are *virtù* and Fortuna. Machiavelli lists women among the state's enemies as well as likening his enemies to women."[5] Mary O'Brien calls *virtù* and Fortuna "opposing forces" and subsequently even proposes to translate the term *virtù* as "manliness", constructed in strict opposition to "femininity": "The negative, bad acts which boys must be taught to abhor are those acts repeatedly characterized by Machiavelli as 'effeminate'."[6] Some authors choose a biographical approach to the topic, concentrating on the fact that Machiavelli, in the wake of the Medici's return to Florence in 1512, had lost all political offices. Hanna Pitkin writes that "personally as well as politically, practically as well as symbolically, Machiavelli has been unmanned" and claims that from this arose the need to concoct an especially masculine theory; "he began to rebuild in theory what had collapsed in practice".[7] Therefore, for Pitkin, fortune in Machiavelli is "... part of a vision of human reality that underlies the entire body of his thought, a vision of embattled men struggling to preserve themselves, their masculinity, their autonomy, and the achievements of civilizations, against almost overwhelming odds".[8] Pitkin interprets masculinity and femininity in Machiavelli's work as existing strictly in terms of contest and competition. "The feminine constitutes the other for Machiavelli, opposed to manhood and autonomy in all their senses: to maleness, to adulthood, to humanness, and to politics."[9] Harvey Mansfield, one of the most unapologetic advocates of the merits of 'manliness' in Machiavelli, sees Machiavelli's theory as a battle against effeminacy and femaleness. "Certain it is that Machiavelli makes painfully evident the contrast between virtue as he sees it and effeminacy" and "effeminacy is what virtue is seen to be not".[10] Machiavelli, the paramount thinker at the beginning of the modern state,

4 J. G. A. Pocock, The Machiavellian Moment, Princeton 2003², 86.

5 Melissa M. Matthes, The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics, University Park, PA 2000, 159.

6 Mary O'Brien, The Root of the Mandrake: Machiavelli and Manliness, in: id. ed., Reproducing the World: Essays in Feminist Theory, Boulder, CO 1989, 103–127, 109.

7 Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, Fortune is a Woman, Chicago/London 1999², 29.

8 Pitkin, Fortune, see note 7, 169.

9 Cf. Pitkin, Fortune, see note 7, 109f

10 Harvey C. Mansfield, Machiavelli's Virtue, Chicago 1996, 31.

seems to extoll an understanding of politics that is deeply masculine. In consequence there is thus the idea that the early modern state is a masculine entity, both advocated and criticised by feminist political theorists and stated as a fact by political historians.[11]

In what follows I seek to offer a re-evaluation of these gendered analyses by focusing not on fortune alone, but also on the nature (and thus the gender) of the prince in order to examine how rigid Machiavelli's concept of masculinity and femininity really is. What role do gender ascriptions really play in Machiavelli's work? How effeminate is a woman and how masculine is a man? If Fortuna is a woman, is she weak and in need of a beating? Does masculine *virtù* always fight against feminine Fortuna? There are further reasons to talk about Fortuna and *virtù*, as part of a set of topics which demonstrate how early political thought is pervaded by a wide range of diverse issues connected to gender. Machiavelli's treatment of Fortuna demonstrates that alternative male-female relationships were taken into account in Renaissance political thinking, which differed from the classical model of the conjugal relationship in the family.[12] Reconstructing the relationship of fortune and *virtù* can lead to a re-evaluation of the question of Machiavelli's misogynism and can contribute to an understanding of the gender of politics at the beginning of the modern state.

1. Fortune, Power and the Prince

A thorough reading of "Il Principe" reveals that Fortuna is not a woman who can be mastered easily. In the very chapter that is now famous for its call to subdue fortune in her role as woman, Machiavelli also states that "fortune is the arbiter of half our actions, but ... she lets us control roughly the other half".[13] Here Machiavelli expresses decidedly that it is Fortuna herself who *grants* human beings control over their lives (and insofar controls masculine attempts to control Fortuna); she is therefore involved in the part of human life which most men claim belongs solely to their own

11 Cf. Wendy Brown, Finding the Man in the State, in: Feminist Studies, 18 (1992), 7–34; Wolfgang Reinhardt, Geschichte der Staatsgewalt: Eine vergleichende Verfassungsgeschichte Europas von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart, München 1999.

12 Cf. Charles D. Tarlton, Fortune's Circle: A Biographical Interpretation of Machiavelli, Chicago 1970, 130. After all, Fortuna was personified as a woman, and consistently treated as such both in literature and in iconography. But so is *virtù*, for example in Boethius. For the iconography of fortune cf. F. P. Pickering, Literature and Art in the Middle Ages, London 1970, 213. Cf. also Alexander Murray, Reason and Society in the Middle Ages, Oxford 1978, 99 and Plate III (a); Allan H. Gilbert, Machiavelli's *Prince* and its Forerunners. The *Prince* as a Typical Book *de Regimine Principum*, Durham, NC 1938, 203–206.

13 Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince, ed. Quentin Skinner, Cambridge 1988, chapter XXV, 85.

free will and virtuous self: for Machiavelli, fortune herself assigns us our freedom.[14] The immense power that Machiavelli ascribes to Fortuna becomes apparent when the following quotation is considered:

> For when [Fortuna] wants a man to take the lead in doing great things, she chooses a man of high spirits and great virtue who will seize the occasion she offers him. And in like manner, when she wants a man to bring about a great disaster, she gives precedence to men who will help to promote it; and, if anyone gets in the way, she either kills him off or deprives him of all power of doing good.[15]

Machiavelli shows that it is fortune who is in charge; if she wishes a man to excel, she 'chooses' him: she both creates and destroys according to her own will. This description of the female Fortuna calls to mind passages in "Il Principe" in which Machiavelli describes none other than the *uomo virtuoso*, who is characterised by his ability to do everything necessary to achieve his goals. Quentin Skinner writes: "To be a truly *virtuoso* prince is to be willing and able to do whatever is necessary for the preservation of one's government. Machiavellian *virtù* consists in a willingness to follow the virtues when possible and an equal willingness to disregard them when necessary."[16] It is not least these ascriptions of decisive and in some way "immoral" action that characterise interpretations of *virtù* as a masculine force. Machiavelli's Fortuna, however, as can be seen clearly here, acts in a way not dissimilar from the ideal man of *virtù.*

But not only does Fortuna act like an *uomo virtuoso*; Machiavelli also shows that there is a productive interplay between Fortuna and *virtù*: it is explicit in the "Discorsi" that striving for the *grandezza* of a republic is a formative act in which both Fortuna and the man of *virtù* participate. For a man of *virtù* who wishes to achieve success it is essential to recognise favourable occasions and to be able to seize them and adapt to them. Creative behaviour can thus attract Fortuna, who might decide to act in favour of the virtuous man. Machiavelli's fortune – and in this Machiavelli differs from his contemporaries – is hence not the force that must be battled against, but the power to which the *uomo virtuoso* must *appeal*. Machiavelli even explains the success that allowed Rome to expand with the very powers of fortune: "[I]t will be seen that mixed with fortune was virtue and prudence of a high order".[17] The key word is *mescolare*, 'to mix': Fortuna is thus necessary for the honour and glory of a city. She is not *virtù's* plain adversary; on the contrary, her contribution is essential. One could, with Quentin Skinner, say that "the arrival on the political scene of a truly *virtuoso* leader is always a

14 Machiavelli presents this theme in more detail in his "Tercets on Fortuna", cf. Niccolò Machiavelli, Tercets on Fortune, in: Allan Gilbert trans., Machiavelli. The Chief Works and Others, 3 vols., Durham, NC 1965, III.

15 Niccolò Machiavelli, The Discourses, ed. Bernard Crick, London 2003, vol. 2, 29, 371.

16 Quentin Skinner, Introduction, in: Machiavelli, Prince, see note 13, IX–XXIV, XX.

17 Machiavelli, Discourses, II, see note 15, 1, 272.

gift of fortune",[18] and it would be equally possible to call the *uomo nuovo* a child of Fortuna.[19] Civic greatness, therefore, is attained by a combination of *virtù* and Fortuna; both are necessary for the maintenance of the *vivere civile*, and the right mixture of the two is required for the glory of a republic. Neither Fortuna nor *virtù* can exist without the other. Fortune is a force as powerful as *virtù*, and an *uomo virtuoso* has to rely on fortune's help.

There is no single, easy way to attract fortune's favour. Fortuna is a force in her own right, and she is free to favour whomever she chooses, even if this person does not fit into general conceptions of masculine excellence, as Machiavelli's discussion of the fate of Fabius Maximus shows. Fabius' nature was decidedly different from the "impetuosity and boldness characteristic of the Romans", and he thus bore the *agnomen* Cunctator, 'the hesitant'. But in the course of the fight against Hannibal, who is described as "young and accompanied by a *Fortuna fresca*", fortune decides to favour precisely Fabius' caution – and thereby a quality that is not easily connected with the stereotype of a Roman warrior. It is this caution that leads to a Roman victory, "and good fortune made that this fitted well within the times". Fortuna and the circumstances favour Fabius, precisely because of his relatively 'unmanly' nature. Since the decision of who rises to glory is hers alone, fortune can choose to promote 'female' attributes just as much as 'male' ones. Even an allegedly effeminate man like Fabius – whose description itself gives rise to questions about the categories and boundaries of gender in Machiavelli's work – can be a favourite of Fortuna and become a man of *virtù*. Machiavelli thus operates with far less rigid categories than is often assumed. Fortune does not emerge as a purely antagonistic force to *virtù*. On the contrary, Machiavelli shows that an intricately balanced interaction of fortune and virtue enables cities to flourish. Fortuna is an active and creative force, who, while a woman, does not act effeminately. The way in which Machiavelli portrays Fortuna suggests that she is less an object of male violence and arbitrariness than a powerful female figure who is equal in power to the force of a virtuous man.

While Machiavelli outlines Fortuna's contribution to civic *grandezza* in the "Discorsi", in "Il Principe" the author stresses Fortuna's ability to dethrone the prince. For Machiavelli, Fortuna favours republics over principalities because a republic is "better able to adapt itself to diverse circumstances owing to the diversity among its citizens than a prince".[20] By contrast, a prince carries the burden of glory of his *stato* and the effort to maintain it – which is borne by many in a republic – on his shoulders alone. Compared to a citizen in a republic, there is therefore a greater need for the prince to transform himself into a man of *virtù* and to always be prepared to act according to the necessities

18 Quentin Skinner, Machiavelli on *virtù* and the Maintenance of Liberty, in: idem, Visions of Politics, 3 vols., Cambridge 2002, vol. 2, 160–185, 170.

19 Cf. Pocock, Machiavellian Moment, see note 4, 159.

20 Machiavelli, Discourses, III, see note 15, 9, 431.

of the situation.[21] For this reason, Machiavelli urges the ruler to try to attain the state by his *virtù* alone, and not to rely too much on fortune, because "a ruler who trusts entirely on *fortuna* comes to grief when she changes".[22] If fortune abandons a single *uomo virtuoso* in a city, this will not lead to the republic's downfall as a whole; it is rather an expression of the natural cycle of events in a political community. If fortune abandons the prince, however, he will lose his *stato*.[23] But for a prince to maintain his *virtù*, the capacity for constant change is required. "If it were possible to change one's character to suit the times and the circumstances, one would always be successful."[24] Republics represent this ability for constant change because they have a range of different men at their disposal and thus promise continuous variety. The individual man's nature, however, largely forbids incessant change "either because our natural inclinations are too strong to permit us to change or because having always fared well by acting in a certain way, we do not think it a good idea to change our methods".[25] Here Machiavelli's subversion once again comes to the fore. In traditional mirror-for-princes, a ruler's consistency was praised; for Machiavelli, consistency, i.e. the failure to change his ways, would mean the loss of his state. If he were able to vary his conduct continuously, a prince could stay in fortune's favour for a long time. It is therefore not fortune whom the ruler has to fear, but the inflexibility of his own *nature.* And it is this nature, and not fortune, which he has to 'overcome' in order to maintain his principate. The prince needs to be aware of his own nature, and we shall see in the following that what is needed is far more an act of understanding and of learning so that he may adapt to the requirements of diverse situations than an act of overcoming and suppressing (female) forces.

2. Nature, Fortune and the Prince

The term nature pervades "Il Principe" almost as much as fortune does. By taking a closer look at Machiavelli's use of the word we can understand the similarities and the differences between the two concepts, and this might lead to an interpretation of the term nature in political thought that is different from the simple notion that nature has no place in politics.

Machiavelli, using a Ciceronian *motif*, emphasises that the purpose of learning to understand nature is to be able to anticipate future uncertainties and to respond to

21 Cf. Machiavelli, Prince, XVIII, see note 13.

22 Cf. Machiavelli, Prince, XXV, see note 13, 85.

23 This is of some importance, since for Machiavelli the state and the person of the ruler are not easily distinguishable. Cf. Quentin Skinner, From the State of Princes to the Person of State, in: idem, Visions, see note 18, vol. 2, 368–413, 378.

24 Machiavelli, Prince, XXV, see note 13, 86.

25 Machiavelli, Prince, XXV, see note 13, 86.

them.[26] Otherwise men have to live with grave consequences: "a man who does not lay his foundations at first may be able to do so later, if he possesses great *virtù*, although he creates difficulties for the builder and the edifice itself may well prove unstable".[27] Learning to understand and protect oneself is also central to Machiavelli's teaching about Fortuna. In the twenty-fifth chapter of "Il Principe" Machiavelli compares fortune to a wild and enraged river, a *fiume rovinoso,* which overflows natural dams and man-made edifices alike.[28] It is sometimes suggested that fortune and nature are here equated,[29] so that Machiavelli's allusion to nature is decisive for an understanding of both Fortuna and the woman question in Machiavelli's thought. Given the long tradition of equating nature with femininity,[30] some have interpreted Machiavelli as expressing the view that, in taming the female force Fortuna, man tames the female nature in himself.[31] One could read the passage as an expression of the struggle between untamed female nature and politically civilised man. However, Machiavelli does not use nature as a metaphor for Fortuna, but as a point of comparison. Fortune, who is a pagan goddess, is anthropomorphised; nature is not. Fortune has the capability to control and to create, whereas nature just *is*. While fortune is a force which acts independently, nature is both inherent in the prince and in the realm in which he must act. Both Fortuna and nature, however, are similar insofar as they are only at their most destructive as a result of man's negligence. Man needs to be actively aware of this, and part of the quality of *virtù* is to take precautions in quieter times: Italy, argues Machiavelli, is troubled, because unlike France or Germany it did not concern itself with constructing satisfactory defences. Not being favoured by Fortuna or being overwhelmed by the forces of nature is, hence, for the most part, the prince's own doing. "Therefore, those of our rulers who lost their principalities, after having ruled them for many years, should not lament their Fortuna, but should blame their own indolence. For in quiet times they never thought that things could change (it is a common human failing when the weather is fine not to reckon on storms)."[32]

Fortune and nature are also linked by the fact that the virtuous man ought to study to understand both, and act wisely according to his knowledge. Learning, studying and understanding fortune differs profoundly from fiercely fighting *against* fortune. Fortuna and *virtù* are again not presented as relentless enemies. Nature shows the prince the imponderables of his everyday life and reminds him of the fact that *virtù* has little to do with imprudent and unrestrained action. Since nature also refers to the nature of

26 Cf. Cicero, On Duties, ed. M. T. Griffin and E. M. Atkins, Cambridge 1991, I, 11, 6.

27 Machiavelli, Prince, VII, see note 13, 23.

28 Machiavelli, Prince, XXV, see note 13, 85.

29 Cf. Mansfield, Machiavelli's Virtue, see note 10, 129.

30 Cf. Carolyn Merchant, The Death of Nature, London 1982.

31 Cf. Brigitte Rauschenbach, Politische Philosophie und Geschlechterordnung, Frankfurt a. M. 1998, 78.

32 Machiavelli, Prince, XXIV, see note 13, 84.

the prince himself, it is his own nature that forbids him to change with the times and that inevitably leads him into conflict with fortune. While nature can thus be the weakness of the prince, in Machiavelli we see that there is no abhorrence for nature. Nature is not something that needs to be overcome, or rendered obsolete by political actions. Nature is therefore, even in Machiavelli, a decisive part of political life.

3. The Nature of the Prince

There is, however, another sense of nature in Machiavelli's work. Machiavelli, it is generally agreed, admires the *uomo nuovo*.[33] This goes hand in hand with his disdain for the hereditary prince, the *principe naturale*. Machiavelli therefore strongly contrasts the conceptions of *naturale* and *nuovo.* The new man is not 'naturally' a ruler, but is a product of self-creation. In "Il Principe" Machiavelli expresses his disregard for the natural prince by stating that to maintain a hereditary *regimen* only moderate talent is needed. For a *principe naturale* it is "sufficient not to change the order of those born before and to deal with any unforeseen events *(accidenti)*". The hereditary ruler does not have to display any art of state. As long as he does not upset the order instituted by those before him, he is even protected from a confrontation with fortune; he merely has to deal with *accidenti*. Even a prince of nothing more than "ordinary industry" is able to maintain his state easily; he can rely on the fact that the citizens are used to his family's bloodline ("assuefatti al sangue del lore principe"). It needs an "extraordinary and excessive force" to take away the principate, and even then with the first misdeed of the conqueror the natural prince will be able to "reacquire" *(reaquista)*.[34]

Machiavelli thus turns upside down the arguments that we usually find in the advice for princes books. Franciscus Patricius in "De regno" (written in 1492, first published in 1519) wrote regarding the hereditary ruler: "A ruler will desire the offspring he begets to be like himself not merely in appearance but also in virtue and habits, in order that the king may seem not to have died but to have been made younger. For the son reigns without peril who treads exactly in the footsteps of the parent who preceded him."[35] Only brutality, bestiality and cruelty can make these *principi naturali* hated by the people.[36] Hence Machiavelli does not regard highly hereditary princes who have nothing else to do than "follow in the footsteps of their fathers".[37] Machiavelli repeats here the *motif* of the "footsteps", related to the famous "path yet untrodden by anyone" of Machiavelli's preface, with which he wished to draw attention to the novelty of his

33 Cf. Pocock, Machiavellian Moment, see note 4, especially 156–162.

34 Machiavelli, Prince, II, see note 13, 6.

35 Franciscus Patricius Senensis, De regno et regis institutione, Paris 1531, 9, 22, cited in: Gilbert, Machiavelli's *Prince*, see note 12, 22.

36 Cf. Machiavelli, Prince, XIX, see note 13, 70.

37 Machiavelli, Prince, XIX, see note 13, 70.

political vision. He thereby evokes the discovery of new paths, the stepping on new soil and the creation from nothing. Machiavelli is consequently fascinated by those princes from "nowhere", who have to make use of their creativity and intelligence. Accordingly, Machiavelli has a diametrically opposed understanding of the value of habit and customs compared to other mirror-for-princes writers. In the thirteenth century, Egidio Colonna declared that the natural prince enjoyed many advantages.

> Habit is as it were another nature: hence by custom various kinds of government are made as it were natural. Therefore if through daily habit the people has obeyed fathers, sons, and the sons of sons, it is as though by nature inclined to voluntary obedience. Hence since anything voluntary is less onerous and difficult, if the people is to obey freely and easily the commands of the king, it is expedient that successions to the kingly dignity should be hereditary.[38]

Machiavelli, although he agrees with the gist of the argument, reverses Colonna's conclusion. Both the concept of habit and the reliance on natural rule are, for Machiavelli, connected to weakness. The hereditary ruler is distinguished as the one person who is still able to rule even if weak. But Machiavelli, who, to borrow the words of Hörnqvist, writes in favour of "strong actions over weak and adaptive policies", is not writing for a weak ruler.[39] In the mirror-for-princes literature, the strength and boldness of the prince was not considered important.[40] Egidio Colonna declares in his *proemium* that he is concerned with the perpetual principate,[41] a concern that Machiavelli, for whom the world is constantly in flux, obviously does not share.

Furthermore, for Machiavelli, the hereditary ruler and his family are – in contrast to tradition – always linked to *corruzione*. This is especially evident in the "Discorsi" (written in 1513–1517, published in 1531).[42] In the third chapter of the third book, Machiavelli advises in the case that a tyrannical regime changes into a republic that one should "kill the sons of Brutus" (and if a republic changes to a tyranny, kill Brutus). "Brutus" here refers to Junius Brutus, a decisive character, as Livy tells us, during the expulsion of the Tarquins. When he is consul, his own children stage an attempt to overthrow him: they do not feel sufficiently supplied with important positions which they believe they are entitled to because of their *status*. When their conspiracy is discovered, Brutus not only orders his sons' deaths, but even watches their execution. In order to maintain a regime, Machiavelli argues, the rulers have to ensure that every threat to the *vivere civile* is eliminated. Accordingly, Machiavelli criticises Soderini for not having

38 Egidio Colonna ("De regimine", 3.2.5), cited and translated in: Gilbert, Machiavelli's *Prince*, see note 12, 20f.

39 Mikael Hörnqvist, Machiavelli and Empire, Cambridge 2004, 265.

40 Cf. Gilbert, Machiavelli's *Prince*, see note 12, 23.

41 Egidio Colonna, Preface, cited and translated in: Gilbert, Machiavelli's *Prince*, see note 12, 20.

42 Machiavelli, Discourses, I, 2; I, 16 and III, 3, see note 15; cf. also id., Principe, see note 2, XIX.

acted more decisively against the adversaries of the newly re-installed republican regime in Florence after the expulsion of the Medici and the short-lived rule of Girolamo Savonarola. Soderini had not been willing to compromise liberty and to "introduce laws that distorted civic equality". Although Machiavelli concedes that this was "wise and good", it nevertheless contributed to Soderini's – and the republic's – fall. "Through his inability to emulate Brutus, he lost both his position and his reputation, a loss in which his country shared."[43] Brutus' actions – sentencing to death his own children – were extreme. But throughout the "Discorsi" Machiavelli emphasises that for both the new prince and the new city-government danger emanates from the scions of the formerly powerful or aristocratic families, who feel that their personal inheritance of parts of the *stato* has been stolen from them. Machiavelli takes the lesson of Junius Brutus to heart and repeats that there is a serious threat in the *giovani nobili* with their ambitions and anti-republican understanding transmitted in their families. Relying on one's blood, on one's heritage and on one's family is equal to corruption for Machiavelli – this will lead not to *innovazione*, but, in the worst case, to the downfall of both a republic and a principate.

Accordingly, *virtù*, in Machiavelli's understanding, does not spring 'naturally' from man's immediate nature, from his family, or from his upbringing. *Virtù* is not a quality that a man simply possesses, but a quality upon which a man has to actively work. In other words, *virtù* is constructed. "Il Principe" is a book of advice; it seeks to show how one becomes a truly virtuous leader who knows how to maintain his government.[44] As we have seen above, this requires constant change, which means that "Il Principe" is a book about creation and transformation, in which, crucially, fortune can be described as the "mother of many mutations".[45] Although the basic elements of each man's nature remain the same, a truly virtuous prince must be "prepared to vary his conduct as the winds of fortune and changing circumstances constrain him".[46] Not surprisingly, in "Il Principe" terms that denote action and active management of affairs are emphasised, such as *azione, acquistare* and *mantenere.* Striving for glory and honour is a dynamic process for the man of *virtù*, who needs certain but ever-changing qualities. Machiavelli emphasises the creativity that lies in this act. The transforming moment, when the man becomes truly *virtuoso*, is what Pocock rightly calls the "initial self-fashioning of the hero".[47]

The most important thing a new ruler can do in order to transform himself is *imitare.* "Since it is not always possible to follow in the footsteps of others, or to equal the ability of those whom you imitate, a prudent man will always follow the methods of

43 Machiavelli, Discourses, III, see note 15, 3, 393.
44 Cf. Skinner, Introduction, see note 16, XX.
45 Gilbert, Machiavelli's *Prince*, see note 12, 206.
46 Machiavelli, Prince, XVIII, see note 13, 62.
47 Pocock, Afterword, in: Machiavellian Moment, see note 4, 558.

remarkable men, and imitate those who have been outstanding, so that, even if he does not succeed in matching their ability, at least will get within sniffing distance of it."[48] In order for a ruler to achieve this, Machiavelli once again emphasises the value of physical and particularly mental exercise for mastering the art of military affairs: "A ruler should therefore always be concerned with military matters, and in peacetime he should be even more taken up with them than in war. There are two ways of doing this: one is by going on exercises; the other by study."[49] The *esercizio della mente*, mental exercise, should take the form of reading historical works, "and above all to imitate some eminent man, who himself set out to imitate some predecessor of his who was considered to be worthy of praise and glory".[50] In contrast to how it is often perceived, turning into a man of *virtù* is an active process which requires considerable effort. A man of *virtù* must undergo a great amount of "self-construction", so that finally there might emerge a person with qualities very different from those originally given to him by nature. Because Machiavelli is adamant that origins are not important, the act of self-creation becomes absolute. *Virtù* is therefore not a fixed quality which a person simply possesses. Rather, it is a quality which can only be acquired through hard work and self-fashioning. *Virtù* is the attempt to overcome and transcend one's own nature, in order to become more powerful, clever, cunning and wise, so that it is possible to adapt to the times and identify opportunities. As we have seen, Machiavelli admires leaders who are "innovators", who acquire political dominion by the sole means of their own ability. It should come as little surprise, then, that since *virtù* for Machiavelli is not restricted to boundaries of heritage and birth rights, it should equally not be restricted to boundaries of gender.

4. The Self-Fashioning of a Prince: the Example of Caterina Sforza

It is well known that Machiavelli regards with disapproval "those who imagine principalities and republics that never have seen nor known reality".[51] Concentrating on the realities of power enables Machiavelli to consider the rule of women. Women rulers were a matter of course in the political landscape of Italy, and they are treated matter-of-factly by Machiavelli. The most famous woman in his work is Caterina Sforza, whom he had met as Florentine ambassador to her court from 1499 to 1500.[52] Machiavelli finds her to be so powerful a negotiator that he was forced to write back to Florence and confess his impotence: "I replied to the best of my ability, but could not

48 Machiavelli, Prince, VI, see note 13, 19.
49 Machiavelli, Prince, XIV, see note 13, 52.
50 Machiavelli, Prince, XIV, see note 13, 53.
51 Machiavelli, Prince, XV, see note 13, 54.
52 Cf. J. R. Hale, Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy, London 1961, 9; Pier Desiderio Pasolini, Caterina Sforza, 3 vols., Roma 1893.

help observing that mere words and arguments will not go far in satisfying her Excellency, unless backed up, in part at least, by deeds".[53] John Hale compares Caterina in terms of her importance for Machiavelli to one of the most prominent figures of the time. "After Savonarola, she was probably the strongest character Machiavelli had yet encountered".[54] Machiavelli talks about Sforza in "Il Principe", in the "Arte della Guerra" and in the "Discorsi". In all three instances her famous encounter with Cesare Borgia is extensively treated and Machiavelli describes her as an able opponent of this paradigmatic *uomo nuovo*. The most interesting aspect, however, is the manner in which Machiavelli narrates and evaluates Sforza's reaction to an act of conspiracy against her principality in 1488. Machiavelli relates her story in the very long sixth chapter of the third book of the "Discorsi". Several citizens of Forlì, Caterina's city, had managed to take hold of the city, to kill Sforza's husband, and to expel Caterina, her children, and her remaining family from the city. Caterina gains access again to the city by giving the invaders her children as hostages. Once inside the city, she confronts the conspirators: she climbs on the city walls, "reproache[s] them with killing her husband, and threaten[s] them with vengeance in every shape and form". Finally, as her greatest manoeuvre, she exposes her sexual parts and lets the conspirators and the people know that she "did not mind about her children" and that "she was still capable of bearing more".[55] Caterina succeeds: the conspirators are banished from the city and she continues to rule. Machiavelli's account does not entail a moral judgment about either the conspirators or the ruling family. It is not improbable that Machiavelli was actually sympathetic to the cause of the conspirators. After all, Caterina's husband Girolamo Riario was regularly described as a tyrant,[56] and Machiavelli narrates the story to illustrate that for a conspiracy to succeed it is of the utmost importance to kill everybody connected to the original ruling dynasty, so that they are not able to take revenge. This, however, does not affect the way Machiavelli views Caterina Sforza's actions. Machiavelli depicts her as a very able ruler. Caterina manages to turn an unfavourable situation to her advantage. It is precisely her sex which enables her to commit this transformational deed. By showing her ability to give birth, she makes it clear that she has a weapon which no man can possess. Caterina succeeds in her situation, because she acts with courage and intelligence, and transcends every possible boundary that custom or habit could impose upon her. She does not deny her gender, but uses it to her profit. For Machiavelli, women are thus clearly able to manage the art of self-fashioning.

Machiavelli's 'non sexist' stance is also underlined in the twentieth chapter of "Il Principe". While analysing the actions of Caterina Sforza, Machiavelli discusses her like any other ruler – regardless of her sex. Although he considers that she made a mistake

53 Cited in: Hale, Machiavelli, see note 52, 9.

54 Hale, Machiavelli, see note 52, 38.

55 Machiavelli, Discourses, III, see note 15, 6, 419.

56 Cf. Pasolini, Caterina Sforza, vol. 3, see note 52, 111f.

by trusting in strong walls of defence rather than in the loyalty of the people, Machiavelli does not link this decision to the fact that she is a woman. He simply presents her as an example of a ruler making the wrong choice, unconnected with her sex. Machiavelli judges her as he judges every ruler.[57] The implication is not that Machiavelli is unaware of her sex or that he celebrates Sforza because she somehow manages to become like a man. Far more interestingly, she succeeds *because* she is a woman.[58] Her ability to profit from her sex "dumbfounds" the conspirators, and in consequence she retains her state. In this we see Caterina as being very similar to Machiavelli's Fortuna: bold, energetic and decisive. But she is also a *principe virtuoso*, who is able to perform an act of self-fashioning in order to seize and transform any occasion.

5. Conclusion

Despite the dominant opinion that casts Machiavelli as a misogynist, a careful reading of his work reveals that he is remarkably open to the idea of women acting politically – as long as they act like vigorous men they do not have to negate their womanhood. Subversiveness is a central feature of Machiavellian political theory; Machiavelli calls into question the rigidity of gender norms and gives a female force – Fortuna – immense powers. In its relations to political power, gender becomes a fluid category. For Machiavelli, a woman can certainly bear arms and fight, and a man can be effeminate – and this effeminacy might ultimately attract Fortuna. But Machiavelli's subversiveness is not confined to the realm of the political: he also undermines the orthodox gender relationships of the family. He thinks that if families are left to educate their children this can only produce anti-republican and pro-oligarchic sentiments. Related to this, as we have seen, is his hostility to the idea that a person is a ruler just because he shares the same family and the same blood as those before him. For Machiavelli, the family is dangerous for various reasons and he has no interest in preserving the fixed relationships of command and subordination between husband and wife.[59] His passion for subversion is hence especially acute regarding gender relationships – both in the family (whose stabilising role for the city was a very political *topos* for his forerunners) and in the political sphere. Topics of gender and of masculinity and femininity in the

57 Cf. Machiavelli, Prince, XX, see note 13, 75f.

58 Julia Hairston comes to a different conclusion. She sees Machiavelli as scolding Sforza for not having motherly feelings. What is more, Hairston produces evidence that shows that in some sources Sforza claims to be pregnant, a fact that Machiavelli leaves out. By this, Hairston argues that Machiavelli "avoids the issue of power expressed by the maternal body". My point, however, is that Machiavelli places the focus precisely on Caterina's "maternal body" and applauds her for using it to gain back political power. Julia L. Hairston, Skirting the Issue. Machiavelli's Caterina Sforza, in: Renaissance Quarterly, 53 (2000), 687–712, 709.

59 This is brilliantly brought out in his plays "Mandragola" and "Clizia".

history of political thought are thus far more complex and nuanced than some interpretations suggest. At the beginning of the modern state we have an idea of the political that is not based on the exclusion of women from politics. For Machiavelli, female rule – inside and outside the family – is possible.