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Narrativizing the Self: Niccolò Machiavelli's use of Cesare Borgia in *The Prince*

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Introduction

When Niccolò Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in 1513 it was as a professional diplomat who had not only been fired, but also imprisoned and tortured after a political reversal brought a sudden downturn to his fortunes. While he had never managed to achieve high rank, he had made a career out of representing his beloved Florence beyond its borders and sending back information to his superiors from as far away as Spain. Machiavelli had even briefly served Florence as a military commander, although he is best remembered today as a political theorist and author.¹ *The Prince* was influenced by his work experience and was intended to bolster his chances at finding employment under a new patron. Within its pages, Machiavelli set himself up as an authoritative figure, capable of offering military and governmental advice to a ruler through his analysis of other historical commanders, most famously Cesare Borgia.

Machiavelli had been working as a Florentine diplomat during Borgia's Italian military campaigns and had spoken with him several times, both then as well as later during Borgia's imprisonment in Rome.² Thus, it is not surprising that Niccolò Machiavelli recounted Cesare Borgia's successful campaigns in the Italian Romagna starting in 1499 or his fall from power after his father's death in 1503. These were prominent political events that he had observed firsthand and as part of his professional career. Historians have long considered Machiavelli's description of Borgia in *The Prince* valuable because of his professional insight and because he penned it only a few years after Borgia's death in 1507.³

Machiavelli's narrative description of Borgia is less straightforwardly historical than it has often been treated, however, even within texts that analyze Machiavelli's outside influences and choices as the author.⁴ As this article will argue, when his examples and vignettes are pieced together into chronological order (from chapters three, eleven, thirteen, seven, seventeen, and seven once again), it becomes apparent that Machiavelli has deliberately framed his discussion of Borgia within the narrative of a Greek tragedy, one hidden within the larger text. This creative and literary turn is not inconsistent with Machiavelli's other work [*The Mandrake*], and recent scholarship has declared that "One need no longer apologize for thinking of [him] as preeminently a writer."⁵ Machiavelli was not acting solely as a "coolly analytical theorist" when writing *The Prince*, but rather was "a man of fertile imagination" who took creative liberties with even his more serious works.⁶ The main point of *The Prince* was not to demonstrate Machiavelli's ability to craft a piece of historical fiction. He instead chose to use examples from Cesare's life where thematically relevant. Even so, as an imaginative and often playful writer, he addressed them with an eye to the literary narrative they told as a whole.

Machiavelli's *The Prince* has greatly influenced historians' characterization of Borgia over the centuries, as his rendering of him within a tragic narrative structure has been replicated by modern writers who use his work as a near-primary source. It is a compelling narrative arc and biographers, such as Sarah Bradford, have used it to frame Borgia's life. Bradford is typical in acknowledging Machiavelli's analysis of Borgia in *The Prince*.⁷ In the final chapter of her 1976 text, she pointed to Machiavelli and summarized her own work, writing that "Cesare fought back with all his resources against these blows of fate, confident that he could once again master Fortune, but in the end it was his own character which was principally responsible for his downfall in 1503."⁸ While she disagreed with Machiavelli over the precise circumstances that led to Borgia's loss of power, she, like other scholars, made use of his narrative and structure.⁹ In turning to Machiavelli the diplomat or political theorist for a description of Borgia and his military campaigns, scholars in more recent centuries have also drawn upon Machiavelli as a creative author and incorporated his literary framework into their analysis.

Machiavelli's description of Borgia in *The Prince* is much more expansive than the other examples he gave his readers. He named several other historical military leaders of far greater stature than Borgia, such as Alexander the Great and Scipio Africanus, but did not engage with them in the same manner.¹⁰ Furthermore, a close reading of the text shows that Machiavelli identified himself with Borgia and with his situation and framed him to be his literary and historical double.¹¹ As this paper will explore, this self-identification with the fictional Borgia in *The Prince* becomes more apparent in light of how Machiavelli discussed his own contemporary fall from grace. Machiavelli implicitly compared Borgia's handling of fortune's whims with his own behavior in the face

of difficulty. In this, Machiavelli argued that he behaved not just appropriately, but actually in a superior fashion to someone whom he had admired when at the height of his power and whom he still held up as worthy of emulation. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli used Borgia as a mirror to his own frustrations.

Historiography

For centuries Cesare Borgia has been written into different roles.¹² While historical and literary scholars no longer seriously argue over whether or not *The Prince* should be condemned as immoral, how Machiavelli intended it to be read continues to attract debate. Some scholars stress *The Prince* as fundamentally a historically grounded and pragmatic text, regardless of what rhetorical flourishes Machiavelli might use when describing Borgia.¹³ In this interpretation, it matters little how Machiavelli chose to fictionalize Borgia. His authorial decisions were made with an eye to explaining the political situation as it was unfolding, not to crafting a deeper narrative, or even comparably important secondary one. If Borgia stands for anything, it is as shorthand for Machiavelli's practical political arguments. Others call Machiavelli's account of Borgia an idealization.¹⁴ In this interpretation, Borgia is presented as larger than life through his actions in the Romagna. Some write that Machiavelli discussed Borgia primarily as a negative example, not as someone to emulate.¹⁵ In both of these explanations Machiavelli was not just writing a history in which Borgia featured. Rather, he used Borgia himself as a tool to elaborate upon certain points, whether or not they were immediately relevant to the politics of early sixteenth-century Italy. Which points, and to what end, are the subjects under debate.

Within the historiography on Borgia more broadly, Machiavelli's *The Prince* is often taken as fundamentally an account of Machiavelli's real interactions with Borgia and is analyzed as a wholly factual account, not as something closer to historical fiction. This is similar to how Johann Burchard's account of Alexander VI's court, translated as *At the Court of the Borgia*, is repeatedly cited as the papal master of ceremony's private diary in which he detailed his observations of Alexander VI's court.¹⁶ Burchard, who died in 1506, wrote about debauchery, incest, and satanic rites, and while his writings provide valuable insight into the comings and goings at court, he was also publishing during the reign of Julius II, Alexander VI's political rival. Parts of Burchard's account even directly referenced *Malleus Maleficarum*, *The Hammer of Witches*, with whose authors he was on friendly terms.¹⁷ Although Burchard was present when many of the events in mention took place, he was also seeking to advance his career by writing about them in a certain light. Machiavelli was influenced as well by his damaged personal status and honor and, therefore, his manipulation of Borgia was not solely to show mastery of the peninsula's political and military history. Borgia was an idealization of a kind and he did ultimately come to failure, but his history in *The Prince* is also a fictionalization of his downfall as it relates to Machiavelli's own life.¹⁸

Part One: The Intentional Fictionalization of Cesare Borgia

Machiavelli intentionally fictionalized his account of Borgia in *The Prince* by taking real events from Borgia's life and framing them in the style of a Greek tragedy, a literary form of enduring cultural prestige.¹⁹ He was familiar with the formal structure of tragedies and made deliberate choices in his writing to craft that narrative, which he then obscured and subsumed within the larger text.²⁰ Although he chose this particular narrative structure, it was certainly not the only one available to him. Other authors, even other contemporaneous ones, framed Borgia's life differently.²¹ Machiavelli was aware of his role as author and therefore of the decisions he made in *The Prince*, as he made clear when he discussed writing it.²² His choice of narrative was deliberate and intentional and the text is, in fact, one of the earliest works of historical fiction printed and published about Borgia, and certainly the first one to achieve such influential distribution.

The story of Borgia's rise and fall is broken up in *The Prince* between five chapters. In brief, the narrative can be read chronologically by looking at sections of chapters three, eleven, thirteen, seven, seventeen, and seven once again. Borgia is introduced in chapter three as already occupying the lands of the Romagna as a strong young man in the prime of life.²³ His father, Pope Alexander VI, is wealthy and militant and at the height of power, and his new patron is the King of France, as described in chapters eleven and thirteen.²⁴ Alexander VI himself is depicted as an economic and political backer and does not appear in a particularly personal role. There is also no indication that Borgia was once a Cardinal or that he had any ties to the Church except as the son of the Pope. Continuing in chapter thirteen, Borgia sets about strengthening his position by subduing the various petty lords of the Romagna in three carefully delineated steps.²⁵ First he uses French troops, then he realizes these are not loyal to him. Then he uses Italian mercenaries but is dissatisfied with them, as well, and still feels that he cannot trust them. Finally, he decides to rely upon only himself and his own men, whose loyalty to him grows over time. Returning to chapter seven, Machiavelli explains that even as Borgia moves towards increased independence, however, he is still reliant upon his father.²⁶ Borgia kills any local threats to his position, including his own generals who were plotting against him, and wins their friends to his side.²⁷ Borgia grows in popularity among the common people, who initially see him as cruel, but then experience stability and increased prosperity under him, as explained in chapters seven and seventeen.²⁸ Borgia experiences good reputation and fame and depends less upon his father for support. He will soon be in a strong enough position to stand on his own, having already accomplished all but one of the things Machiavelli argues he needs to fully consolidate power in chapter seven.

This is not to be, however, and only five years from his initial entry into the peninsula with French troops, both Borgia and his father become gravely ill and his father dies.²⁹ This marks the moment in the narrative where fortune turns against him. He is too sick to properly manage the political vacuum that opens up

and by the time he is able to act again the political situation is fraught. When he tries to influence the election of the next Pope, he is shaken and makes a crucial mistake, allowing his father's old rival to be elected in the hope that he will gain favor for backing him.³⁰ Machiavelli speaks with him in Rome on the day of the election and pitifully tells the reader that Borgia had thought of and prepared for all events, except for one that saw him incapacitated at the same time as his father's death.³¹ Machiavelli in denouement informs his audience that Borgia had a lofty spirit and grand intentions and that he could not blame him for anything other than this last fatal error; the cause, he says, of his ultimate ruin. Machiavelli explicitly concludes in chapter seven that "it was not his fault, but it was due to the extraordinary and extreme malignity of fortune [*fortuna*]."³²

According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, which Machiavelli would have been familiar with due to his position as a member of the intelligentsia, there are several crucial features to a tragedy.³³ The main character in this tradition should be "the sort of man who is not of outstanding virtue and judgement and who comes upon disaster not through wickedness or depravity but because of some mistake."³⁴ Borgia, as Machiavelli depicts him in *The Prince*, is a talented and capable military leader. Even so, he errs in a very human way, misjudging the political situation before him while under stress and allowing Julius II to be elected, thus causing his own ruin. The plot itself of a tragedy, according to Aristotle, is the driving force of a tragedy and it should be "well-constructed" and intentional.³⁵ It must "neither begin at an accidental starting-point nor come to an accidental conclusion," but instead have a strong emphasis on causality.³⁶ Machiavelli makes it clear that Borgia did not come to an incidental end. Rather, a stroke of fortune outside of his control took away his source of support and his poor reaction to that event lost him everything that he had gained. This framing underscores the greater than human forces at play and de-emphasizes Borgia's agency as tragic hero, allowing him to fit into the literary structure while also providing Machiavelli room for political theorizing.

Other authors framed Borgia's life according to different structures. Burchard wrote a narrative in the style of a demonology or account of the Antichrist, which featured Borgia as subordinate to the greater evil of his father, Alexander VI.³⁷ Francesco Guicciardini, a friend of Machiavelli's, relied upon the Cain and Abel narrative in Borgia's life, casting him as fratricidal Cain in his younger brother's murder and using that reading to impart meaning to his history.³⁸ Unlike these other contemporaneous authors, Machiavelli made the choice to limit his narrative to Borgia's military career, and within that time to the five years of his Italian campaigns. Borgia does not die at the end of Machiavelli's rendition, and he could have expanded his analysis to his imprisonment or escape in Spain, or to his final military position and death. He does not do so, even though it is still relevant to his political theorizing and even though he does not limit all of his other examples to the Italian peninsula. Borgia at the end of Machiavelli's narrative of him was removed from power and politically "dead." This symbolic death

can be contested by situating Borgia more broadly and considering the still-active connections he had to other family members or allies, including, significantly, his royal in-laws in Navarre and their ties to Philip I of Castile and the Holy Roman Emperor.³⁹ Machiavelli kept his analysis of Borgia limited and narrow, only discussing his connections to a handful of other key players in the politics of the Italian Peninsula, such as Alexander VI and Louis XII. This limited view served Machiavelli's purposes in writing a didactic treatise and tragic narrative.

Machiavelli makes other limited classical references within *The Prince* that are not immediately about Borgia since they do not fall within the scope of his biographical narrative. However, they still help to position Borgia as the most prominent of Machiavelli's examples. In chapter eighteen, Machiavelli mentions how Achilles among other ancient leaders was raised by the centaur Chiron who was "half beast and half human."⁴⁰ Machiavelli draws upon this myth to state that a prince should "know to use the both the one and the other nature and that the one without the other is not durable."⁴¹ Machiavelli famously goes on to say that when forced to act as a beast the prince should emulate the cunning of the fox and the strength of the lion. Although explicitly talking about Achilles, Machiavelli allows other rulers access to this fantastical background or prologue. By emphasizing the story as metaphor rather than strict fact, Machiavelli further opens the doors to more historically-grounded figures to claim it as their backstory as well. He implicitly gives it to Borgia, whom he praised for being cruel (like a beast) but in rational ways (like a human).⁴² This mythologized background has followed Borgia in subsequent renderings of his life through the epitaph "Prince of Foxes."⁴³ Borgia's nature was described in parallel terms to Achilles', allowing him to take up a similar literary mantle in Machiavelli's work. Borgia's role as protagonist in a tragedy has been perpetuated by those who drew upon the narrative Machiavelli deliberately framed Borgia within.

Machiavelli was aware of himself in his role as author, and therefore of the literary choices he made while writing. This comes across clearly in the best known of his letters. He wrote to his friend Francesco Vettori on 10 December 1513 and mentioned having finished a version of *The Prince*, then an essay called "On Principalities."⁴⁴ Beyond helping to date the writing of the text, the letter walks the reader through a highly stylized and self-reflective account of Machiavelli's daily life. He describes how he moves from time spent at the tavern with his friends to study in his private quarters, the scene of his writing *The Prince*. He tells Vettori that, "In the evening I return home and I go into my study; and at the threshold I take off my everyday clothes, full of mud and dirt, and I put on royal and courtly garments; and dressed appropriately I enter into the ancient courts of the old humanists, where, affectionately received by them, I nourish myself on that food, that *alone* is mine, and that I was born for [. . .]".⁴⁵ Here Machiavelli presented the role of the "old humanist" as one of the many he was capable of putting on and identified it as that which he used while writing. Machiavelli imagined himself as writing alongside the "old humanists" while he worked

on *The Prince*. It is not surprising that he described Borgia's life with a literary framework associated with these writers and recognizable to his contemporary humanist peers.

Part Two: Parallel Characterizations

Acknowledging that Machiavelli intentionally positioned Borgia within the narrative of Greek tragedy in *The Prince* raises the question of why. Machiavelli related to the fictionalized Borgia he wrote about and, unlike any of the other people he used as examples, bound himself to Borgia on multiple levels. Machiavelli used "the resources of language to forge, in one of his key words, an *ordine*, a way of understanding the world—in short, a narrative."⁴⁶ In this particular instance, Machiavelli used the narrative he crafted around Borgia to discuss and validate his own reduced circumstances. This created a subtext that told the reader subtly of Machiavelli's frustrations and, ultimately, sought his vindication. Fortune's influence over the individual, a tragic trope, was applicable to Machiavelli's own dramatic fall from grace.

Machiavelli's personal writings show his frustration with his treatment at the hands of fortune as well as an interest in Borgia that predates the writing of *The Prince*. Strikingly, in 1503, Machiavelli made a copy in his own hand of a missive by Borgia and even included an imitation of his signature at the bottom.⁴⁷ This paper caused confusion for many years; for if real, it would have indicated that Machiavelli was working alongside Borgia at a later date and in closer confidence than he actually had been. Ultimately, research indicated that Machiavelli had not written or copied it in any official capacity or with Borgia's knowledge.⁴⁸ Some scholars feel that Machiavelli copied the letter and its signature not just out of boredom or merely to demonstrate what it looked like but because he "enjoyed imagining himself as Borgia."⁴⁹ This holds with the parallels that Machiavelli drew between himself and Borgia in *The Prince*, as well as simply with the fact that Borgia was given such a prominent role in this work. No other example is made into a literary character in *The Prince* in the same way. Machiavelli does not imagine what it would be like to be anyone else in the text.

As Clifford Owen discusses, Machiavelli presents Borgia as his double.⁵⁰ Borgia and Machiavelli alone among anyone in *The Prince* experience a reversal of fortune, losing honor and status to events beyond their control after an ascending career. A reader who is aware of Machiavelli's status at the time of writing may infer this mirroring between Machiavelli and Borgia, although it is not clear without this external knowledge. Machiavelli does not directly comment on his status within the text itself, except implicitly in the fact that he is dedicating it to a potential patron.⁵¹ This is a subtle parallel that is further made opaque by how Machiavelli breaks up Borgia's narrative within *The Prince*. Even though this narrative is disjointed and out of order, Machiavelli is consistently self-referential in it in ways in which he is not in the broader text. Owen writes that Machiavelli "five times uses the emphatic personal pronoun *io* [. . .]

the greatest density of such occurrences in the work” when introducing Borgia as his case study, creating a striking structural connection between narrator and subject.⁵² *Io*, translating to “I” in English, is not grammatically necessary in Italian to indicate the subject of the action described by a first person singular verb in a sentence. It is included in writing for greater clarity of or emphasis on the speaker. Machiavelli does not write most of *The Prince* in the first person and, furthermore, does not grammatically need to use the first person pronoun *io* when he does. Machiavelli could have easily introduced Borgia without use of the first person, and he could have used the first person without the additional emphasis of *io* to underscore his presence. Doing so is a conscious stylistic choice that creates and emphasizes a connection between the two men, as it more obviously inserts himself into the text alongside Borgia.

Beyond his use of grammatical structure, Machiavelli tied himself to Borgia within the plot of the text. Borgia is the only one of the examples discussed in *The Prince* with whom Machiavelli interacts directly and the only two conversations recounted in *The Prince* are either between Machiavelli and Borgia (chapter seven) or between Machiavelli and another party in which Borgia is discussed (chapter three).⁵³ In these conversations, Machiavelli briefly writes himself more directly into *The Prince* as a character instead of just the narrator. It is noteworthy that in all of the places Machiavelli inserts himself, the text serves to tighten his connection with Borgia. In chapter three, Machiavelli speaks in France with someone else about Borgia. This conversation occurred simultaneously to Borgia’s military campaigns. While concerning Borgia rather than being with him in person, it establishes for the reader that Machiavelli is aware of Borgia’s actions in the Romagna and that he has the level of intimacy needed to interpret them for an audience.

Machiavelli draws a further general connection between himself and Borgia in the conversation. He sets both of them up as doing well in their chosen parallel careers, Borgia as a victorious military leader descending from France through the Italian peninsula and Machiavelli traveling in reverse as a diplomat from Italy to France. They are established as being successful and well-respected professionally, something that was vital to both of their identities. Once deprived of this career in the narrative, Borgia is depicted as a shell of his former self, suddenly making irrational mistakes and bemoaning his loss.⁵⁴ Machiavelli as well derived a sense of self from working for Florence, as is seen in the way he talks about his career and his eventual unemployment.⁵⁵

The reader is led to assume that the conversation in chapter seven is a private discussion between Borgia and Machiavelli. It takes place directly within the tragic narrative, as Machiavelli briefly writes himself into the text as an active character who visits Borgia in Rome after Alexander VI’s death. This is a retelling of an actual meeting between Machiavelli and Borgia that had taken place when Borgia’s fortunes had declined but Machiavelli’s had not. Machiavelli’s own position did not at that time mirror Borgia’s because he was still employed by the Florentine

government and would be for several more years, but by including this conversation within *The Prince*, Machiavelli emphasized the parallels between Borgia's fate and his own. Machiavelli would eventually face a hostile higher authority and be imprisoned, just as Borgia in this conversation found himself at a loss after Alexander VI's death and cut off from his holdings and men in the Romagna.

Machiavelli and Borgia had been in good standing before the changing political field of the Italian Peninsula ripped them from their positions. Borgia's fall was caused by his father's death and the rise of Julius II to power. This took away the financial and political support he had been relying on and revealed that he was unable to stand on his own and compel a new Pope to retain him in his military position.⁵⁶ Machiavelli simplifies this turn of events in *The Prince*, ignoring the election of another, more neutral, Cardinal to Pope for a very brief time before Julius II, and focusing instead on how Borgia erred by not preventing Julius II's election. He stresses Borgia as an example of a prince who derived his initial power from the strength of others and criticizes him for being unable to stand on his own. By doing so, Machiavelli continued to shape his telling of Borgia's life into tragic form.

In 1512, a decade after he left Borgia in Rome, Machiavelli was fired by the ruling Medici of Florence.⁵⁷ He was imprisoned shortly after under suspicion of involvement in a conspiracy against the government.⁵⁸ In March 1513, Julius II died and Leo X, a Medici, ascended to the Holy See and pardoned Machiavelli, freeing him from prison but exiling him to his family's property outside the city.⁵⁹ Beyond just identifying with Borgia, whom he would go on to write as the tragic hero in *The Prince*, Machiavelli also related to the narrative of tragedy itself. Machiavelli makes it clear in his correspondence from the period of *The Prince* that he was heavily preoccupied with the notion of fortune and its negative effect upon the world and his own life.⁶⁰ He saw his world turned upside down by forces outside of his control, just as if dictated by the author of a tragedy like the one he himself used to frame Borgia's rise to and sudden loss of power.

A look at Machiavelli's letters surrounding the time he was writing *The Prince* shows that he clearly thought of his own situation similarly to how Borgia did—or, rather, similarly to how the fictionalized Borgia in his narrative did. Machiavelli's letters show a similar preoccupation with reversals of fortune and with the jettisoning of his career and, therefore, with self-worth enacted by political processes outside of his power to control. Machiavelli wrote to Vettori on 13 March 1513 that while he did not want to go into details at that time, "fate [*sorte*] has done everything to cause me this injury."⁶¹ This is the earliest preserved letter following Machiavelli's release from imprisonment and torture and while he does not refer to fortune [*fortuna*] directly, as he does in *The Prince*, the sentiment is clearly there. Machiavelli does not use this framework only when introducing and initially explaining his situation. He talks about his reduced circumstances in much the same way later, in the letter of 10 December 1513 to Vettori in which he mentions that he has finished a version of *The Prince*. He

writes in that letter that fortune “wants to do everything” and for men to let her act and wait their turn.⁶²

In total, Machiavelli explicitly references fortune in five letters to Vettori between 13 March and 10 December. If Machiavelli’s descent was put into the framework of tragedy just how Machiavelli framed Borgia’s, it would be easy to see it as triggered by his own failings, but ultimately carried out by broader structural shifts and the actions of people over whom he had no control. Again, this mirrors the narrative Machiavelli wrote for Borgia where he makes a crucial political misstep, but in which the canonical analysis within the text asserts that Borgia was ultimately a victim of fortune and not of his own flaws. Machiavelli used fortune as a key piece of the tragedy he wrote in *The Prince* and was pre-occupied with it in the letters he sent during the time he was writing. Borgia’s narrative is written to mirror Machiavelli’s own.

Both Borgia and Machiavelli suffered a reversal of fortune that took away their autonomy and emasculated them, as capability and independence were markers of adult masculinity.⁶³ Machiavelli infamously calls fortune a woman in *The Prince* and writes that “she” needs to be held down and beaten into submission.⁶⁴ Borgia, as Machiavelli writes, had been on the path to autonomy when Alexander VI died and he abruptly lost all that he had gained.⁶⁵ Machiavelli himself had his career brought to an inglorious end, also due to a sudden change in papal and peninsular politics beyond his control. Borgia in Machiavelli’s rendering was brought into submission by fortune, emasculated, without position or power. Machiavelli, too, felt the loss of his masculine independence as he had his freedom curtailed and his livelihood stripped from him. Borgia’s emasculation and sufferings at the hands of fortune in *The Prince* are an expression of Machiavelli’s own.

Part Three: Overcoming Fortune

There is a key difference, however, between the portrayals of Machiavelli and Borgia in *The Prince*. Machiavelli makes it clear that Borgia was a shadow of his former self when he met with him in Rome. The tone of the narrative changes, turning Borgia from a formidable and capable ruler to a pitiful and desperate victim of fortune’s whims. Looking back at what Borgia had been prior to the death of Alexander VI, Machiavelli in chapter seven writes that “he had such fierceness and such *virtù*.”⁶⁶ He reiterates the idea that Borgia become a prince through the actions of others but adds that if he had only had a little more time he would have been able to rely solely on “his own power and *virtù*.”⁶⁷

The word *virtù*, which has no exact English counterpart, comes up twice in the span of four sentences when describing how Borgia had appeared prior to fortune dealing him such a damning blow. *Virtù* is often translated as “ability.” Fundamentally Machiavelli had been praising Borgia, for his actions in the Romagna, for his *virtù*; his ability to understand and control the situation and to prove himself capable. Furthermore, *virtù* is an eminently masculine quality.

It derives from the Latin root *vir*: “man.”⁶⁸ To have *virtù* is, in a sense, to be a “man,” as it connotes the autonomy and independence so important to early modern ideas of masculinity. Borgia did not have this *virtù* when Machiavelli spoke with him in Rome. He was instead knocked to the ground by fortune, itself imagined female, and without masculine autonomy. Borgia comes across as blatantly distressed and agitated as he explains that he had prepared for all other possible situations, a far cry from the calculating and brilliant military commander he was portrayed as earlier.⁶⁹ If Borgia is still a fox or a lion, he is one that is caught in a snare by its own misstep and, instead of breaking free, is trying uselessly to justify its entrapment.

Machiavelli wrote about himself to Vettori on 18 March 1513, in his second letter since his release, in sharp contrast to his description of Borgia in their conversation at the Vatican. Machiavelli said that in regards to his own imprisonment and torture, “I bore them so straightforwardly that I feel proud of myself for it and it seems to me that I am better than I had believed [. . .]”⁷⁰ Here Machiavelli demonstrates that, at least by his own account, he met a reversal of fortune with dignity and showed it a good face. Machiavelli seemed to make a link in his writings between the changes in Borgia’s character and his own changed circumstances. In this way he set himself up from the start for a comparison between himself and Borgia within a narrative that could be manipulated by a clever author to lay them parallel to one another.⁷¹ Machiavelli continued to show his *virtù* by the way that he handled himself after he was released from imprisonment. As John Najemy argued, one of Machiavelli’s claims about Borgia and his fall from power was that “a new prince must not believe that bravado alone can bring success.”⁷² In sharp contrast to the depiction of Borgia in *The Prince* as ultimately immobile and caged, Machiavelli took steps to regain an honorable post in part through his writing to Vettori. The two men were friends, but Vettori was also the Florentine ambassador to the papal court, a similar but more prestigious position to Machiavelli’s prior job as a diplomat.⁷³ In his letters at this time to Vettori, Machiavelli frequently asked him to mention him to people and to curry favor.⁷⁴ He hoped that his friend would be able to use his connections to his benefit.

The narrative of fortune and *virtù* was one that Machiavelli consciously crafted for himself as well as for Borgia. Machiavelli was clearly aware of himself as the author of *The Prince* and made calculated creative choices, intentionally framing the example of Borgia in the text within the narrative of tragedy by streamlining the events he wished to discuss and focusing only on Borgia’s Italian campaigns. He emphasized Borgia’s singular political mistake and the overwhelming effect of fortune’s reversal. Similarly, Machiavelli showed deliberation as he claimed that same narrative and his more dignified handling of it in his personal writings. He bound himself to the tragic narrative by setting himself up as a parallel to Borgia in *The Prince*. Machiavelli only used the language of fortune with Vettori in their frequent correspondence between March and November 1513 either when discussing broader politics or his own personal disaster. On 26

June 1513 he explained his lack of correspondence to another friend, Giovanni Vernaccia, who was living away from Florence in Constantinople and was therefore unaware of what had happened to him. In this letter, Machiavelli fell back on religious language, writing that it was a “miracle” and only due to “God and my own innocence” that he had survived.⁷⁵ He added that “I am, by the grace of God, well, and I am living as I can, and I will work to do so, until the heavens show themselves to be more kind.”⁷⁶ Even here Machiavelli refers to his own stoicism and perseverance in the face of misfortune and the influence of powers outside of his control over his life. The method of explanation is decidedly different, however, even though Machiavelli at the end of the letter implores Vernaccia to make connections for him, again seeking reentry into the world from which he had been banned.

It is significant that Machiavelli knew how to switch between narratives and explanatory systems because it underscores the intentionality with which he chose to use the form of Greek tragedy to make sense not only of Borgia’s fall from grace, but his own as well. Whereas Borgia became an animal caught in a trap when confronted with a reversal of fortune, Machiavelli asserted that he rose above and proved himself better than he had believed possible. Machiavelli therefore could not blame Borgia in *The Prince* for being unsuccessful in his bid to establish a permanent state in the Romagna, because he too knew what it was like to lose everything due to processes beyond your ability to control. What he could do was point to Borgia’s fatal error, elaborate a lesson for his reader from it, and then show by comparison how much greater he himself was for his handling of such a blow. Even before Machiavelli was dismissed from his positions or imprisoned he “was always in but not of the world of power, an insider and yet an underling.”⁷⁷ He worked as a poorly paid diplomat, not a wealthy ambassador, and he did not have the financial funding needed to obtain a higher post and struggled to pay for his expenses while on the job. He had briefly attempted a military career with poor results and had most recently been imprisoned for a conspiracy of which he was not a part. Machiavelli remained a talented writer, however, and even if he could not undo what had happened in reality, he could choose how to frame things on paper.

The scattered narrative within *The Prince* that presents Borgia as a tragic hero suffering a stunning rise and sudden fall is a fiction. Machiavelli deliberately turns Borgia into more than a cut and dried example. He becomes a character in a recognizable story, one that even when Machiavelli scatters out of order over five chapters has been picked up on and reproduced in spirit, if not in full analysis, by other authors. Machiavelli furthermore steps into the timeline of his own text only to engage with this fictionalization, making himself a character intrinsically bound to Borgia, hanging somewhere between supporting role and narrator. Machiavelli intentionally shows Borgia as a trapped animal and with a clever literary trick makes the audience believe it is real. By entering the narrative at that point, Machiavelli asserts that he spoke with Borgia and presents the scene

as true because it is coming from a direct source. It is based on his own, impossible to verify, interview. This is not to say that it did not happen. Machiavelli did meet with Borgia and the scene is very similar to what he says occurred on other occasions. But by acting with the directness of a character with the power of the author, Machiavelli here makes a powerful claim: Borgia disgraced himself when overcome by fortune; I became greater than I had thought possible.

Machiavelli wrote Borgia's and his own narrative while still struggling under his own reversal of fortune. He bound the two of them together and examined them under the same literary framework while still fresh from imprisonment and still struggling to reenter political life. In the very act of writing *The Prince*, Machiavelli was seeking to triumph over fortune not by somehow undoing what had happened to him but by persevering and finding a new way. The lesson of the lion and the fox in *The Prince* is not that people should be one or the other but that they should be adaptable to changing circumstances. Borgia failed to rectify his situation by law, allowing Julius II to become Pope and did not bear himself with masculine dignity and honor. Machiavelli carried himself well, called upon his connections, and wrote *The Prince* in a bid for success. Even if Machiavelli's intentions came to naught at least he still had honor because of how he had displayed his *virtù*. Machiavelli wrote Borgia as a mirror not just for princes but for himself, and Machiavelli in this very writing stepped away from Borgia, proving himself to be greater than the reflection.

Conclusion

In *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli discussed examples from Borgia's life that, when looked at as a whole, take on the form of an artfully framed and delineated tragedy. Machiavelli deliberately chose to use this literary form and to insert himself as a character into his own text in order to interact with it. Machiavelli indicated a clear awareness of his authorial choices in his personal letters discussing his writing process. Furthermore, Machiavelli's contemporaries also used familiar narratives when discussing Borgia's life, although they selected different ones. Machiavelli was not alone in creating fictions from the past, but he likewise did not have to write the kind that he did.

Machiavelli created this narrative to make certain points. He placed Borgia within the structure of a tragedy because he himself identified both with Borgia and with that narrative. Machiavelli saw his own life at this time as similarly ruled by the destructive and emasculating powers of fate and he related to Borgia's fall from power. Machiavelli tied himself to Borgia many times over in the text and discussed the effects of fortune in the world in general as well as in his own life in particular in personal letters after his release from prison in 1513, the same period in which he wrote *The Prince*.

Taken together as two parts of the same document, Machiavelli's letters from this time and *The Prince* inform one another. Machiavelli shows, in his scattered narrative, how Borgia was unable to effectively handle the blows of fortune dealt

to him as a tragic protagonist. As a counterpoint to this, Machiavelli writes how proud he was of how he carried himself when tested by fortune and takes active steps to regain his prior status instead of erring as Borgia did and then being rendered impotent. One of these steps was, in fact, to write *The Prince* and, in doing so, surpass Borgia as a subject worthy of emulation.

NOTES

¹ For a recent biography of Machiavelli, see Corrado Vivanti, *Niccolò Machiavelli: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Simon MacMichael (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

² John Najemy, "Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia: A Reconsideration of Chapter 7 of '*The Prince*,'" *The Review of Politics* 75.4 (2013): 540.

³ Borgia and Machiavelli have long been associated with one another due to their interactions in life and Machiavelli's use of Borgia as an example in *The Prince*. It is difficult to find works on Borgia that do not include Machiavelli as a source. See oft-cited biographies for examples: Michael Edward Mallett, *The Borgias: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Dynasty* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969); Sarah Bradford, *Cesare Borgia: His Life and Times* (London: Penguin, 1976); Ivan Cloulas, *The Borgias*, trans. Glinda Roberts (New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1989); and Christopher Hibbert, *The Borgias and Their Enemies: 1431-1519* (London: Harcourt Inc., 2008).

⁴ See Albert Russell Ascoli and Victoria Kahn, eds., *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Peter E. Bondanella, *Machiavelli and the Art of Renaissance History* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1973); and Clifford Owen, "The Riddle of Cesare Borgia and the Legacy of Machiavelli's *Prince*" in *Machiavelli's Legacy: The Prince After Five Hundred Years*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 156-170 for examples of scholarly analysis of *The Prince* that take Machiavelli's active role as author into account.

⁵ John Bernard, "Writing and the Paradox of the Self: Machiavelli's Literary Vocation," *Renaissance Quarterly* 59.1 (2006): 59.

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Bradford, *Cesare Borgia*, 289-290.

⁸ Ibid., 290.

⁹ Bradford's work, while less harsh towards Borgia and his family members than many, is not an outlier in either tone or analysis of sources. Narrative choices in her biography are reflective of the majority of related works and her text is often cited alongside other well-known biographies of Borgia such as those listed previously.

¹⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe di Machiavelli: Testo manoscritto anonimo*, ed. Andrea Borgianni (Florence: Centro Editoriale Toscano, 2006), 43, 49-51, 161, 169, 189.

¹¹ Machiavelli, *Il Principe di Machiavelli*, 41, 67-89.

¹² For a discussion of the changing historiography on the Borgias, see Marion Hermann-Röttgen, *La familia Borja. Historia de una leyenda* (Valencia: Edition Alfons el Magnanim, 1994), 10.

¹³ For example the oft-cited Allan Gilbert, "With respect to his most prominent achievement, *The Prince*, one cannot too often repeat that its purpose is limited. Its specific rather than far-reaching intention is in part dimmed by the author's essay-like manner of writing. . ." in "Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Letters of Machiavelli*, ed. and trans. Allan Gilbert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 46. Compare to Bondanella, "Machiavelli's willingness to sacrifice historical details to his larger design often gives his examples in *The Prince* and the *Discourses* a schematic quality." Bondanella, *Machiavelli and the Art of Renaissance History*, 55.

¹⁴ See Emanuele Cutinelli-Rèndina, *Chiesa e religione in Machiavelli* (Rome: Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, 1998), 118; Hermann-Röttgen, *La familia Borja*, 15; and Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti, *Machiavelli o la scelta della letteratura* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1987), 118.

¹⁵ See Owen, “The Riddle of Cesare Borgia”, 158 and Victoria Kahn, “Virtù and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli’s *Prince*” in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature Ascoli*, eds. Albert Russell and Victoria Kahn, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 204.

¹⁶ Johann Burchard, *At The Court of the Borgia: being an Account of the Reign of Pope Alexander VI written by his Master of Ceremonies Johann Burchard*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey Parker (London: The Folio Society Ltd., 1963). See Hermann-Röttgen, *La familia Borja, 75*; José María Cruselles Gómez, “Los Borja en Valencia. Nota Sobre Historiografía, Historicismo y Pseudohistoria,” *Revista d’Història Medieval* 11 (2001): 279-280; and Óscar Villarroel González, *Los Borgia: Iglesia y poder entre los siglos xv y xvi* (Madrid: ELECE, Industria Gráfica, 2005), 332 for a discussion of its use.

¹⁷ Hermann-Röttgen, *La familia Borgia*, 18.

¹⁸ On humanist fictionalizations, see Bondanella, *Machiavelli and the Art of Renaissance History*, 72-73.

¹⁹ Clayton Koelb, “‘Tragedy’ as an Evaluative Term,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 11.1 (1974): 70.

²⁰ For Machiavelli’s familiarity with narrative structure, see Hanna Fenchel Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 44. For a discussion of classical influence on *The Prince* see Bondanella, *Machiavelli and the Art of Renaissance History*, 10, 16, 19.

²¹ See for example Johann Burchard, *At The Court of the Borgia: being an Account of the Reign of Pope Alexander VI written by his Master of Ceremonies Johann Burchard*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey Parker (London: The Folio Society Ltd., 1963) and Francisco Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, ed. and trans. Sidney Alexander (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). For a discussion of how early readers interpreted *The Prince*, see Giovanni Giorgini, “Five Hundred Years of Italian Scholarship on Machiavelli’s ‘Prince,’” *The Review of Politics* 75.4 (2013): 625-640.

²² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Lettere di Niccolò Machiavelli con prefazione di Giovanni Papini*, vol. 2 (Lanciano, 1915), 26.

²³ Machiavelli, *Il Principe di Machiavelli*, 41.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 125, 129, 153, 155.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 153, 155.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 69, 71.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 75, 77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 77, 79, 183.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 85, 87.

³¹ *Idem.*

³² *Ibid.*, 70.

³³ For a discussion of the widespread ubiquity of this text, see also Karla Mallette, “Beyond Mimesis: Aristotle’s ‘Poetics’ in the Medieval Mediterranean” in *PMLA* 124:2 (March 2009): 583-591.

³⁴ Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Poetics: Translated and with a Commentary by George Whalley*, trans. George Whalley, eds. John Baxter and Patrick Atherton (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 95.

³⁵ Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, 77.

³⁶ *Idem.*

³⁷ Machiavelli, *Lettere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 2, 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

³⁹ Cesare Borgia was married to Charlotte d’Albret, sister of John III of Navarre. The Navarrese monarchs would break Borgia from his eventual imprisonment in Castile with the support of Philip I and Borgia seems to have believed that after leading the Navarrese forces he would find a position serving Maximilian I. Rachel Bard, *Navarra: The Durable Kingdom* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1982), 134-136.

⁴⁰ Machiavelli, *Il Principe di Machiavelli*, 192.

⁴¹ *Idem.*

- ⁴² Ibid., 182.
- ⁴³ Machiavelli uses the fox as a metaphor for a successful method of rule, *ibid.*, 193.
- ⁴⁴ Machiavelli, *Lettere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 2, 26.
- ⁴⁵ *Idem.*, emphasis in original.
- ⁴⁶ Bernard, "Writing and the Paradox of the Self," 60.
- ⁴⁷ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Le Opere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, eds. Pietro Fanfani, Luigi Passerini, and Gaetano Milanese (Rome: Tipografia Cenniniana, 1875), 298.
- ⁴⁸ Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, 40.
- ⁴⁹ See Pasquale Villari, *The Life and Times of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. Linda Villari (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1962), 322 for a discussion of interpretations of the letter.
- ⁵⁰ Owen, "The Riddle of Cesare Borgia," 158.
- ⁵¹ Machiavelli, *Il Principe di Machiavelli*, 5-9. See William J. Connell, "Dating *The Prince*: Beginnings and Endings," *The Review of Politics* 75. 4 (2013): 511 for a more detailed explanation of the political nuances of this dedication.
- ⁵² Owen, "The Riddle of Cesare Borgia," 158.
- ⁵³ *Idem.*
- ⁵⁴ Machiavelli, *Il Principe di Machiavelli*, 87.
- ⁵⁵ John Najemy, *Between Friends: Discourses of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli-Vettori Letters of 1513-1515* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 69.
- ⁵⁶ Apart from being the most politically prominent member of the family, Alexander VI also spent great sums to finance Cesare Borgia's military campaigns and territorial acquisitions, as noted by their contemporaries. See Antonio Giustiniani, *Dispacci di Antonio Giustinian, ambasciatore veneto in Roma dal 1502 al 1505*, ed. Pasquale Villari (Florence: Successori Le Monnier, 1876), 297. For a brief summary of Borgia's fall from power typical of most scholarship, see Vivanti, *Niccolò Machiavelli*, 35.
- ⁵⁷ Vivanti, *Niccolò Machiavelli*, 71.
- ⁵⁸ *Idem.*
- ⁵⁹ *Idem.*
- ⁶⁰ See for example Niccolò Machiavelli, *Lettere di Niccolò Machiavelli con prefazione di Giovanni Papini*, vol. 1 (Lanciano, 1915), 124, 125, 128-129, 133-135, 140-145.
- ⁶¹ Machiavelli, *Lettere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 1, 124.
- ⁶² Machiavelli, *Lettere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 2, 25.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ⁶⁴ Machiavelli, *Il Principe di Machiavelli*, 282.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.
- ⁶⁶ *Idem.*
- ⁶⁷ *Idem.*
- ⁶⁸ Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, 25.
- ⁶⁹ Machiavelli, *Il Principe di Machiavelli*, 87.
- ⁷⁰ Machiavelli, *Lettere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 1, 125.
- ⁷¹ Najemy, *Between Friends*, 68.
- ⁷² Najemy, "Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia," 554.
- ⁷³ Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, 8.
- ⁷⁴ For example his letters of 16 April 1513 (Machiavelli, *Lettere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 1, 128-129) and 20 August 1513 (Machiavelli, *Lettere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 2, 17-18).
- ⁷⁵ Machiavelli, *Lettere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 1, 135.
- ⁷⁶ *Idem.*
- ⁷⁷ Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, 26.