

Seeing What Is Said: Teaching Niccolò Machiavelli's *T P c* Through Its Images

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ABSTRACT This multidisciplinary pedagogy offers eight allegorical images in support of a visually contextual reading of *T P c*. Responding to the pedagogical problem of

through their contemporary lexicon and ideological assumptions

Where can teachers of political theory find images? We present eight images in this article. Databases providing choices and other related materials are available in the online supplemental appendix. To use images in our teaching, we pair them with important passages that describe concepts. We structure our lesson keeping in mind the added time of reading and discussing images.² We can integrate the study of images into our teaching of the text as we proceed or dedicate a special class to working with them.

When I dim the lights, the classroom settles into a thoughtful silence and focuses on the projected images. I ask the students three questions, as follows:

- What do you notice or see depicted?
- How does a caption change your first impression of an image?
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Figure 2
Titian, *An Allegory of Prudence* (c. 1550–1565)

Source: Public Domain

Titian's painting asserts the interconnectedness of human and animal natures and can be read in conjunction with Machiavelli's argument for combining the powers of the lion and the fox, making use of both physical prowess and cunning: "Thus, since a prince is compelled of necessity to know well how to use the beast, he should pick the fox and the lion, because the lion

natures. The visual lesson of the painting helps students to understand the concept of prudence as a description of the habits of mind of successful political rulers. Machiavelli has created a political lesson better accessed through the storytelling power of images than through dictionary entries of wisdom, caution, or safety. Prudence is a complex and situationally

Mac a a a c a d a ca b acc d
a a d c a d , ca , a .

does not defend itself from snares and the fox does not defend itself from wolves. So one needs to be a fox to recognize snares and a lion to frighten the wolves" (Machiavelli 1985, 69). Similarly, in chapter XVIII, Machiavelli stresses inner plurality as the necessary condition of leadership. By contrast with the singular identity of the Platonic soul, he symbolically expresses this plurality of the psyche in a hybrid being combining multiple

specific political argument that requires consideration of the moment and its necessity. It is not an invariably right, timeless, moral, or philosophical instruction.

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Less likely to be used or understood as words, "liberality" and "parsimony" stump students. In chapter XVI, Machiavelli

constantly give more to preserve the goodwill of his subjects. It is better to start off measured and to retain the ability to give in the long run. Preserving resources is good for political legitimacy. Although it may seem to be an advantage “to be held liberal,” Machiavelli recommends parsimony as a more reliable path to loyalty and power (Machiavelli 1985, 64–65).

When we look at Parsimony and Liberality as allegorical personifications, we see the commonplace meanings in circulation at the time that *The Prince* was written. Machiavelli’s revaluation of values is in conversation with commonplaces from antiquity as well as well-established iconographic traditions codified in Ripa’s *Iconologia*—a manual consulted by orators, painters, and poets who want to personify not only virtues and vices but also the arts, sciences, and other abstract concepts. Although the first illustrated edition of *Iconologia* dates from 1602, the content of Ripa’s manual predates publication of *The Prince* because it gathers circulating cultural capital from sources from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome.⁴

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In chapter XXV, Machiavelli demands agency through constant adjustment to the imperatives of the moment *after* acknowledging conventional wisdom on the futility of action:

It is not unknown to me that many have held and hold the opinion that worldly things are so governed by fortune and by God, that men cannot correct them with their prudence, indeed that they have no remedy at all; and on account of this they might judge that one need not sweat much over things but let oneself be governed by chance. [...] Nonetheless, in order that our free will not be eliminated, I judge that it might be true that fortune is arbiter of half of our actions, but also that she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern. (Machiavelli 1985, 98)

Rulers need to order the world by anticipating the impact of the unexpected in the form of storms, floods, and illnesses. Nature and the actions of others set the pace for politics. While acknowledging fatalism, Machiavelli displaces the divine in favor of fortune and free will.

Alciato’s emblem XCVIII *Ars naturam adiuvans* (“Art assisting nature”

chance” (Alciato 1591, 119). In the *pictura*, Hermes, messenger of the gods, sits on a square pedestal holding the caduceus in one hand. To his left is Fortuna, balancing on a sphere. A billowing sail threatens her equilibrium.

As in the emblem shown in figure 6, Machiavelli invokes the instability of Fortuna to highlight the importance of political agency: the natural world requires an artful approach. Precautions must be taken in advance of natural catastrophes: “And I liken her to one of these violent rivers which, when they become enraged, flood the plains, ruin the trees...it is not as if men, when times are quiet, could not provide for them with dikes and dams so that when they rise later, either they go by a canal or their impetus is neither so wanton nor so damaging” (Machiavelli 1985, 98). Fortuna needs skillful taming. This is a theory of moral action applied to the particular needs of politics: one must act in anticipation of problems to protect worldly order.

In the second image (figure 7), an illustration from Charles de Bouelles’s (1510) *Liber de Intellectu*, blindfolded Fortuna sits on a sphere. Holding her wheel, she balances on an inclined plane that teeters on a fulcrum. She is not well grounded yet she rules the world. Her strength derives from imbalance and unpredictability. Across from Fortuna, Sapientia holds the mirror of self-knowledge. Her wisdom encompasses self and world, signified by the mirror’s

Figure 6

Andrea Alciato's Emblem XCVIII: *Ars naturam adiuvens*(1600)

Source: Public Domain

those who proceed coldly. And so always like a woman, she is the friend of the young, because they are less cautious, more ferocious, and command her with more audacity. (Machiavelli 1985, 101)

In this drama of sexual and combative masculine power, Machiavelli embraces Impetuosity to conquer Fortuna. Consider Ripa's contrasting critical representation of Impetus:

A young and valiant man of fierce demeanor who should appear barely clothed and in the moment of impetuously

confronting an enemy, unsheathing his sword, he will appear as if he were thrusting...blindfolded and with wings on his shoulders accompanied by an equally furious wild boar foaming at the snout, in the same demeanor as the person trying to attack. (Ripa 1613, 390)

Impetus is personified as a potent young man. For Ripa, impetuosity is a dangerous failure, not an aspirational quality. Like a rabid animal, Impetus is a raw force devoid of the prudence present in Machiavelli's earlier lessons on *virtù*.

Machiavellian impetuosity is *virtù* unleashed in the moment of crisis. The lack of deliberation is evident in this personification

Figure 8

Master of the Boccaccio Illustrations, “The Conflict between Fortuna against Poverty,” from Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De la Ruine des Nobles hommes et femmes* (“Of the ruin of noble men and women”)

Source: Photograph © [1476] Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

or static. They are constituted by relationships; for example, Impetus sheds new light on Fortuna. This also is evident in our third image of Fortuna by the Master of the Boccaccio Illustrations (1470–1490).

Found in Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De la Ruine des Nobles hommes et femmes* (“Of the ruin of noble men and women”), the illustration depicts “The Conflict between Fortuna against Poverty” (figure 8). While Machiavelli’s political framing of

Fortuna may be his innovation, the violence and apparent misogyny of the closing paragraph of chapter XXV are not unique to his work. Others have beaten Fortuna. In the illustration, the personification of Poverty (i.e., the ragged woman) beats Fortuna with a stick. With nothing left to lose in this world, Poverty dominates Fortuna. Two competing messages draw on images of Fortuna: (1) action for the powerful (i.e., Machiavelli), and (2) action for the powerless

(i.e., Boccaccio). Both highlight the importance of agency. The visual history of Fortuna shows that Machiavelli's political thought both invokes and reworks a wealth of what would have been familiar stories and images.

An image is a generative hermeneutical tool to read a text because it requires that the reader engage in a dialogue between what is being said and what the image has to offer. An image can problematize familiar concepts and open them up to deeper study and critical investigations. Once students can see what Machiavelli and his contemporary audience saw, they have a greater appreciation for his skills as a political thinker, and they are more resistant to reducing *The Prince* to familiar current ideological assumptions. This approach will not solve the many challenges of reading and teaching *The Prince*, but it can help us show our students how to be more prudent readers by looking not only at what is immediate and seemingly well known in the present but also to the past and the future when thinking about politics.

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To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S104909652000205X>.

1. We capitalize concepts when we invoke them as allegorical personifications. For example, "parsimony" is a moral concept. "Parsimonia" is an allegorical personification of that concept.

2. For another art-based approach to teaching political theory, see Rozinski's (2015) pairing of songs with texts.
3. Translations of Alciato's Latin into English are from the *Alciato at Glasgow* website (Adams et al., n.d.). Translations of Ripa's Italian into English are ours.
4. The *editio princeps* of Ripa's *Iconologia* was published in Rome without illustrations in 1593.

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