

Seeing What Is Said: Teaching Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* Through Its Images

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ABSTRACT

This multidisciplinary pedagogy offers eight allegorical images in support of a visually contextual reading of *The Prince*. Responding to the pedagogical problem of students treating the text as an ahistorical manual for action addressed to them, our approach resituates *The Prince* in its visual cultural context. This allows us to specify Machiavelli's innovations as a theorist in terms of the importance of plurality and particularity in regard to political action. An online supplemental appendix provides access to databases and additional resources. Exploring Machiavelli's politicized moral concepts of prudence, parsimony, liberality, fortune, and impetuosity using these images, we show his masterful invocation and redeployment of the cultural codes of his time. In presenting a visual history of concepts, we hope to move students beyond common contemporary ideological biases and literal readings and to alert them to the complex stories and relationships evident in the visual history of civic humanism.


There are many challenges to teaching *The Prince* well, one of which is helping students resist the temptation to reduce Machiavelli's ideas to a utilitarian or realist manual devoid of historical context. Responding to the pedagogical problem of students treating the text as a manual for action addressed to them, our approach resituates *The Prince* in its visual cultural context, thereby specifying Machiavelli's innovations as a theorist and the importance of plurality and particularity in regard to political action.

Our reading of *The Prince* integrates the study of selected allegorical images to teach Machiavelli's moral concepts of prudence, parsimony, liberality, fortune, and impetus.¹ By discussing emblems, personifications, and paintings, we provide a visual pedagogy for this text. We do not claim direct genealogies or strict parallels between presented images and passages. Instead, the purpose of this approach is to acknowledge students' sometimes literal starting points as readers of *The Prince* and, through the study of images, to heighten their awareness of complex concepts

tied to both familiar and unfamiliar words. Engaging the visual code of Renaissance art allows teachers of political theory to help their students avoid Platonic readings—in the sense of singular and unchanging truths—in favor of an appreciation for Machiavelli's masterful demonstration of political thought as a manipulation of what were the familiar commonplaces of his time.

Recognizing the codified culture of the Renaissance sharpens our skill set for living in the twenty-first century, which requires the integration of visual and textual hermeneutics, especially concerning politics. In a digital world overflowing with combinations of images and texts, teaching a critical reading of the two combined makes sense beyond the political theory classroom. We provide our students with strategies for bringing the relationship between political message and image into focus by calling attention to how images evoking cultural associations are doing some of the work of political argumentation in *The Prince*.

My coauthor, Claudia Mesa Higuera, is a literature professor interested in visual culture and a scholar of early modern Spanish literature. When she was working on her own research on Machiavelli, she asked to visit my introductory political theory class on *The Prince*. Claudia listened to my comments and discussions with students. She had read the text and she heard what was said in the classroom; however, she also was reminded of allegorical images associated with Machiavelli's concepts. As students worked

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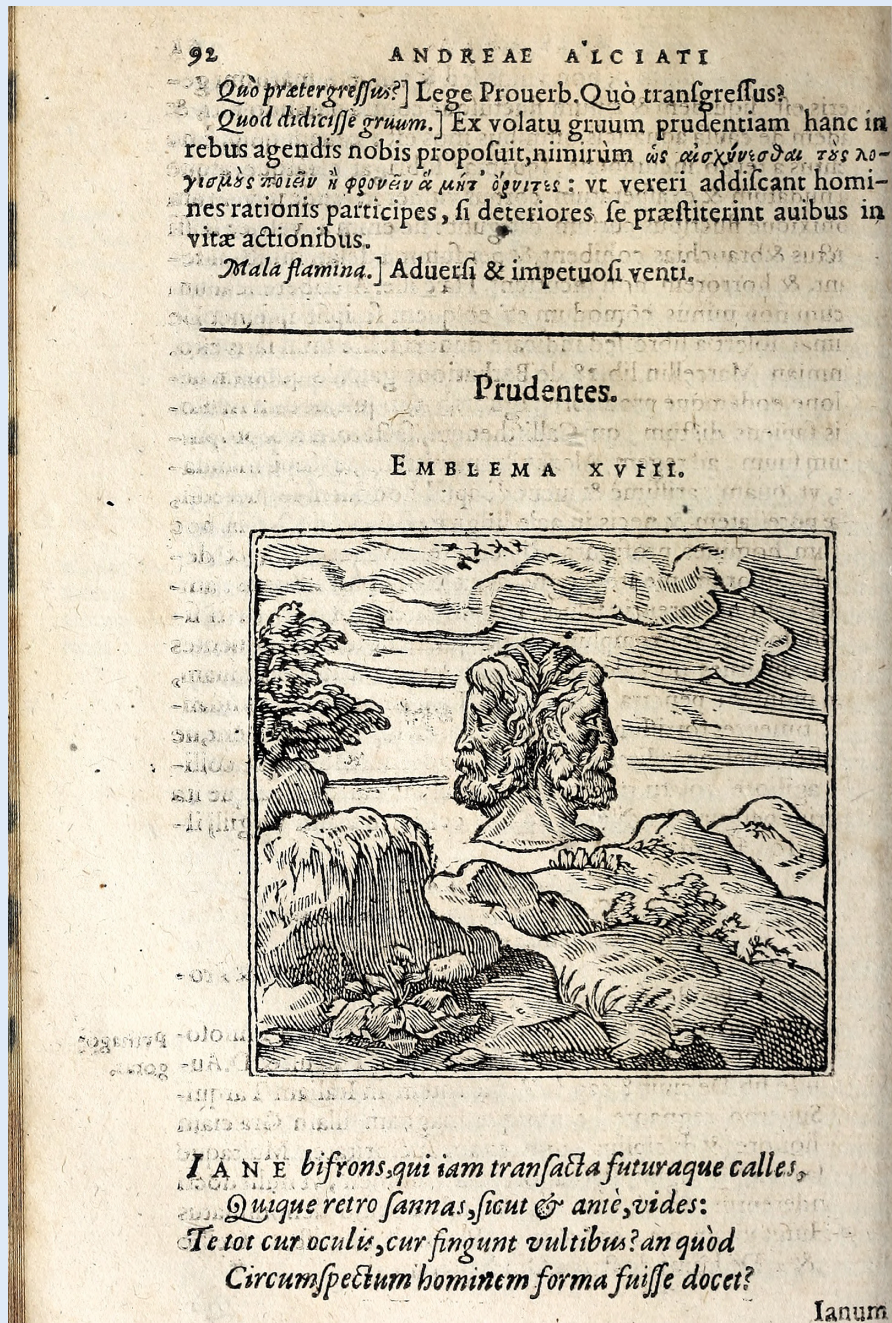
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Figure 1

Andrea Alciato's Emblem XVIII: *Prudentes* (1600)



Source: Public Domain

through their contemporary lexicon and ideological assumptions to understand an early sixteenth-century text, Claudia's mind conjured images that could help them grasp concepts as opposed to words; she saw what was said. As with her scholarship on emblem studies, she read the images and the text together. The images—familiar to her but unknown to my students and me—shifted her understanding of Machiavelli's arguments, his indebtedness to context as well as his incendiary innovations. By reworking cultural codes evident in the images representing moral

virtues, Machiavelli politicized those concepts by pairing them with particular historical accounts of the actions of leaders. It was a short step from this insight to providing students with images to support their reading of *The Prince*.

TEACHING WITH IMAGES

An image is a great place to start a political theory discussion. Multiple images representing a particular concept can teach students that several interpretations of a theory are possible.

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?
- How would you have designed the representation of a particular concept?

After the initial silence, a stream of observations begins. Students are not new to thinking about small images combined with short texts! They already are connoisseurs of memes and other com-

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pressed, contextually specific forms of communication. Social media continually exposes them to rematched images and texts. Any reluctance that students display in commenting on the text—that is, remote historical examples and opaque concepts intermingled—stands in contrast to confident comments on images. They take time to notice details in the depictions of personified virtues, observing the figures, their attributes, and objects. They share associations with well-known memes and explain them in terms of their manipulation of meanings, realizing that Machiavelli deploys the familiar images of his time. The students grasp that his writing was situated in relationship to a world of relatively shared meanings that could be affirmed or reworked, not unlike memes in their social media world. Eventually, the visual conversation returns to the textual one. Reflecting on two moments of understanding, before and after the consideration of images, students revise previous understandings of concepts. In what follows, we pair textual passages with images along with a discussion of insights.

PRUDENCE

For students, the word “prudence” carries associations including wisdom, caution, and safety. These are legitimate starting points for reading the text. Although prudence was not granted a separate chapter, the concept permeates the text in Machiavelli’s insistence on the contemplation of past wisdom, alertness for present action, and care for the near future. Understood since the Middle Ages as a cardinal virtue, Prudence as an allegorical personification has its own visual history instructive of the contrast between medieval accounts of virtue and the civic humanism of the Renaissance. An emblem and a painting help “materialize and delimit an otherwise boundless concept” (Ascoli and Capodivacca 2010, 193).

The first image is from Andrea Alciato’s *Emblemata* shown in figure 1. An emblem is a symbolic image followed by text. The conventional emblem—*emblemata triplex*—has the following three parts:

- a motto (*inscriptio*)
- a symbolic image (*pictura*)
- an epigram or short prose text (*subscriptio*) that clarifies or expands the connection between the motto and the image (Daly 1993, 326)

The Latin *inscriptio* accompanying emblem XVIII reads *Prudentes* (The Wise).³ The *pictura* displays Janus, the double-headed Roman god. The *subscriptio* explains the relationship between the *inscriptio* and the *pictura*: because of his dual gaze, Janus is described as cautious or circumspect (Alciato 1600, 92). In classical antiquity, he is known as the guardian looking into the past and the future. Directing students’ awareness to the function of the emblem parts shifts the attention from a word to a lesson.

Returning to *The Prince*, students reconsider Machiavelli’s dedicatory letter to Lorenzo de’ Medici in which he shares his sources of political wisdom: “I have found nothing in my belongings that I care so much for and esteem so greatly as the knowledge of the actions of great men, learned by me from long experience with modern things and a continuous reading of ancient ones” (Machiavelli 1985, 3). Caring about concepts and their implications, we encourage stu-

dents to look beyond keywords. Prudence as a concept need not be named as such; its intelligibility requires understanding the qualities of a mindset, looking back in order to look ahead. Foresight, an important part of prudence, requires looking to the horizon to assess challenges and to respond promptly when action can be effective. The emblem shows Janus looking forward *and* backward, keeping two different moments in mind. Machiavelli’s text confines this message to a particular audience (i.e., rulers), appropriating the moral commonplace of prudence for a statement on political strategy. A single-minded present orientation endangers the project of political stability: “For men are much more taken by present things than by past ones, and when they find good in the present, they enjoy it and do not seek elsewhere” (Machiavelli 1985, 96). Prudence summarizes *virtù* (i.e., political skill) as a kind of knowing that gives shape to the most effective action.

Moving beyond the word to the concept, a similar meditation on the temporality of strategic political consciousness appears in Titian’s painting, *An Allegory of Prudence*, which portrays the three ages of man—youth, maturity, and old age—represented by three heads (figure 2). Old age looks to the past, maturity faces us in the present, and youth looks to the future. Depicted below the human heads are three animal heads: a wolf, a lion, and a dog. The animal triptych darkly echoes the faces above it. In the background, a Latin inscription is faintly legible: *EX PRAETERITO/PRAESENS PRVDENTER AGIT/NI FVTVRĀ ACTIONĒ DE DETVRPET* (“From the past/the present acts prudently/lest it spoil future action”). The painting shows consciousness directed at different moments. The three tenses and their potentially simultaneous urgency highlight the mental demands of effective leadership: a ruler cannot afford only one focus. This is a psychic portrait of an autarch unbounded by a singular way of thinking. The exceptional leader masters single-handedly that which usually takes several to accomplish.

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

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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.

LIBERALITY AND PARSIMONY

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

Figure 3

Cesare Ripa, "Parsimonia," *Iconologia* (1618)



Source: Public Domain

counterintuitively reworks the political merits of these moral virtues—that is, liberality enjoys a good moral reputation but parsimony proves to be the superior political strategy:

Thus, since a prince cannot, without damage to himself, use the virtue of liberality so that it is recognized, he should not, if he is prudent, care about a name for meanness. For with time, he will always be held more and more liberal when it is seen that with his parsimony his income is enough for him, that he can defend himself from whoever makes war on him, and that he can undertake campaigns without burdening the people. (Machiavelli 1985, 63)

Various editions of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* provide different illustrations of Parsimony. Whereas the code remains unchanged, visual interpretations of that code are many. A good approach is to ask students to compare and discuss several images for one concept. For example, in the 1618 edition, Parsimony is represented as a mature woman in plain clothes (figure 3). In her right hand, she holds a compass; in her left, a closed bag full of money. A banderole reads: *In melius servat* ("May the better one serve"). Looking to the right, she indicates her choice: Parsimony will best meet her ends (Ripa 1618, 396). Yet, in the 1613 edition of *Iconologia* (Ripa 1613), the woman's gaze is frontal, favoring neither attribute (figure 4). It is undecided. Questions arise: Which is better: to be generous (i.e., the bag of money) or to be economic (i.e., the compass)? What should she choose? A small shift in visual

representation—the neutrality of the gaze favoring neither side—yields a more open-ended lesson. The text clarifies the message. Ripa writes that liberality violates measurement: "It is to your advantage to have parsimony because in order to grow your income you need to moderate your expenses" (Ripa 1618, 396). Parsimony enables self-sufficiency and allows one to acquire a politically desirable reputation for liberality. This is a well-known Machiavellian lesson directly indebted to the cultural code.

Symbolized by the compass, measurement is the shared attribute of Parsimony and Liberality. In Ripa's manual, the personification of Liberality shows a woman in white robes, a spread eagle crowning her head (figure 5). She holds two cornucopias. One shows durable riches (including a crown, falling to the floor); the other shows the perishable abundance of nature. As in the representation of Parsimony, the compass appears on the right. This instrument does not leave its circumference: the parsimonious does not exceed the honest and reasonable (Ripa 1618, 396). Not exceeding limits defines both: liberality is not giving with abandon but rather requires prudence, just as parsimony does.

This visual lesson informs Machiavelli's measured recommendations for political action: neither too little nor too much but instead the right amount. Excessive spending compels future taxation or even confiscation of private property, practices that engender hatred. The ingratitude of others and growing expectations over time erode the wealth of the liberal ruler, who must

Figure 4
Cesare Ripa, "Parsimonia," *Iconologia* (1613)



Source: Public Domain

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

FORTUNA AND IMPETUOSITY

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 adiuvens* ("Art assisting nature") shown in figure 6 is the first of three images illustrating Machiavelli's understanding of fortune. The emblem suggests the potential of art (*technê*) to stabilize nature. The epigram reads: "Art [represented by Hermes] was developed to counteract the effect of Fortune, but when Fortune is bad, it often needs the assistance of Art. Therefore, studious youths learn good arts, which bring with them the benefits of an outcome not subject to

Figure 5
 Cesare Ripa, “Liberality,” *Iconologia* (1618)



Source: Public Domain

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, Sapiencia holds the mirror of self-knowledge. Her wisdom encompasses self and world, signified by the mirror’s margins depicting heavenly bodies. This image dovetails with Machiavelli’s lesson: a ruler cannot divert his attention from worldly

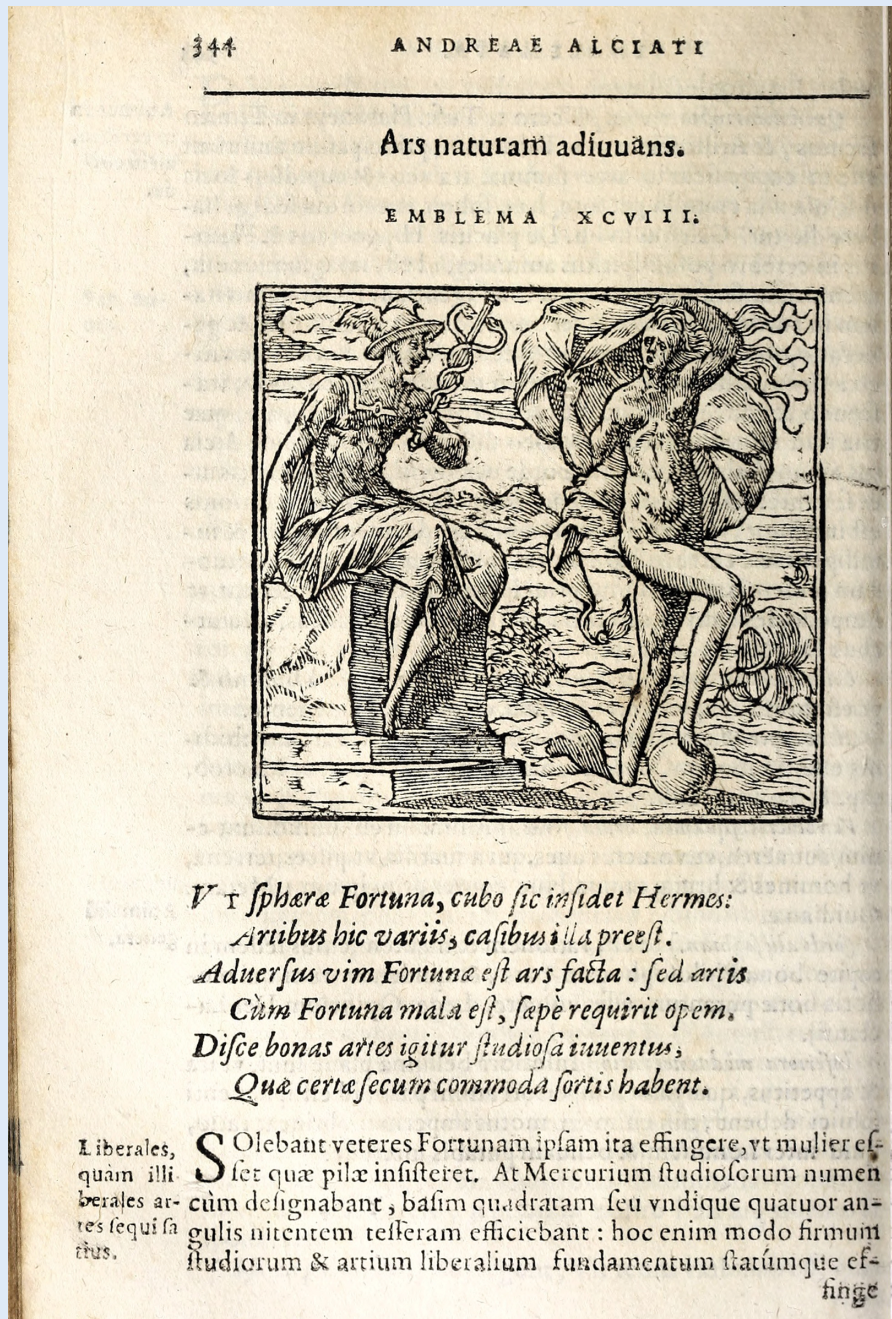
matters or afford apolitical self-centeredness. Sapiencia rests on a stable square foundation. The legend on Sapiencia’s throne reads *virtutis*, the genitive singular of *virtus*, which variously means manliness, courage, or resoluteness. A second dialogue is visible: above Fortuna, the fool *INSIPIENS* proclaims, *Te facimus Fortuna deam celoque locamus* (“We make you, Fortune, a goddess and elevate you to heaven”). Above Sapiencia, the wise man *SAPIENS* announces, *Fidite virtuti: Fortunam fugatior undis* (“Trust in virtue: Fortune is more fleeting than waves”).

These images propose several possible relationships defining fortune as a concept. In Alciato’s emblem, Hermes (art) aids Fortuna (nature). In Bouelles’s illustration, the embedded text makes Sapiencia and Fortuna unequal: Fortuna aligns with the fool and Sapiencia aligns with the wise man. In both images, Fortuna is a powerful force. *The Prince* contains no singular advice regarding Fortuna. Prudence and other strategies may aim to appease and guide her, but when there is open conflict with Fortuna the final lesson in the Machiavellian arsenal is impetuosity:

I conclude, thus, that when fortune varies and men remain obstinate in their modes, men are happy while they are in accord, as they come into discord, unhappy...it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman; and it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her down. And one sees that she lets herself be won more by the impetuous than by

Figure 6

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



Vt sphaera Fortuna, cubo sic insidet Hermes:
 Artibus hic variis, casibus illa preest.
 Aduersus vim Fortuna est ars facta: sed artis
 Cum Fortuna mala est, saepe requirit opem.
 Disce bonas artes igitur studiosa iuuentus,
 Quae certa secum commoda sortis habent.

Solebant veteres Fortunam ipsam ita effingere, vt mulier es-
 set quae pilae insisteret. At Mercurium studiosorum numen
 cum designabant, basim quadratam seu undique quatuor an-
 gulis nitentem tesseram efficiebant: hoc enim modo firmum
 studiorum & artium liberalium fundamentum statumque ef-
 finge

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 Fortune. 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*.

Figure 7
 Charles de Bouelles's Illustration from the *Liber de Intellectu* (1510)



Source: University and State Library Duesseldorf, urn:nbn:de:hbz:061:1-18589

The plurality of representations of Fortuna reveals the concept's complexity.

Machiavellian impetuosity is *virtù* unleashed in the moment of crisis. The lack of deliberation is evident in this personification because the youth appears “deprived of the light of the intellect that is the rule and measurement of all human actions” (Ripa 1613, 390). By embracing impetuosity as instrumental, Machiavelli highlights one aspect of the iconographical convention defining fortune. Impetuosity requires agency, not passive

acceptance of fate. Although the story reads as one of brutal misogynistic violence, the message of Impetus may be that an effort beyond all imagination and every rule is sometimes necessary for leaders.

The plurality of representations of Fortuna reveals the concept's complexity. Just as Machiavelli emphasizes the particularities of history, location, and perspective, concepts are not singular

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.

CONCLUSION

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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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

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

NOTES

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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