

Panel 4.2 Abstracts

“Fit to rule a kingdom”: Machiavelli’s Mandragola and political judgment**Birte Loschenkohl**

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In this paper I want to explore parallels between *virtù* and *fortuna* in Machiavelli’s *Prince*, his *Discourses* on Livy, and his comedy *La Mandragola* with particular attention to the question of how one might frame, contextualise and approach such parallels. One connection that is often drawn in the literature is between the *Mandragola* and Livy’s telling of the rape of Lucretia and the founding of Rome, and for obvious and rather compelling reasons. But what I want to suggest, here, is that in addition to this we might turn to two other ancient sources, namely to Plato’s *Republic* and to the Old Testament. The former comparison lends support to reading the play as a political allegory in the first place, which is still contested in the literature; and the second shifts our understanding of who is really the “statesman” in the play. Machiavelli notably describes Lucrezia as beautiful, virtuous, and “fit to rule a kingdom”. And yet most interpretations do not take this line very seriously. By drawing parallels to the Old Testament, I argue that the *Mandragola* suggests that *fortuna* is not always a woman, and *virtù* is not necessarily a virile quality only. In a final step, I will argue that Machiavelli’s conceptualisation of political conflict, change, and new political foundings find their most apt counterpart in citizens with a ‘comic disposition’. I will support this argument both through interpretive work with Machiavelli’s own comedies, as well as by placing him in a neglected history of political philosophy as reflected through the lens of comedy.

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Freedom and Political Agency in Machiavelli**Adam Smrcz**

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In chapter 25 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli gave an astonishingly weak argument on behalf of his libertarian position: after confessing his earlier sympathy for determinism (according to which „worldly affairs are controlled by Fortune and God”), he claimed that the existence of free will had to be admitted in order that „our free will ought not to be destroyed” [il nostro libero arbitrio non sia spento]. The first problem with this argument is that it clearly contains a rhetorical fallacy called question begging (a mostly infantile error, which is otherwise highly untypical for Machiavelli or for thinkers of his rank in general). But the resulting hardship becomes even more annoying, if one considers that the author’s overall theory on Fortune and Virtue is based on this quicksand.

However, what Machiavelli had to prove in the aforementioned chapter was not that worldly events were (mostly) governed by Fortune (since it was a claim shared by his opponents as well), but rather whether Fortune’s power could be hindered by someone’s Virtue at all. Hence, the question raised in chapter 25 merely concerns the possibility of virtuous action in general, but – in my view – Machiavelli leaves this question unanswered. (Apart from mine, this might have been the view of Justus Lipsius as well, who criticized Machiavelli’s ungrounded concept of Virtue in the Preface and chapter 1 of his *Politica sive Civilis Doctrina* for similar reasons).

According to my claim, these (rather metaphysical) considerations should not be dismissed either, when discussing Machiavelli’s views on the agency of the prince, the magistrate, the people etc., but the question has to be reversed: for Machiavelli’s notion of liberty can not be deduced from any (even tacit) a priori claim, and it is merely the unfolding of Fortune (in the shape of history) which was supposed to solve this riddle a posteriori. Following Gennaro Sasso’s definition of Machiavelli’s concept of Fortune, as the historical circumstances that more or less impede political agency (Sasso 1980), one should infer that the evidence of political agency (virtú) could serve as proof on behalf of liberty in the metaphysical sense. Hence, the possibility of a virtuous leader (as the one portrayed in the realism of *The Prince*), and that of virtuous citizens (portrayed by the republicanism of the *Discorsi*) both serve as proofs meant to substitute the aforementioned rhetorical argument of chapter 25 of *The Prince*.