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Machiavelli’s Fortune

Luck and the role it plays in life has many aliases and is portrayed in highly varying ways. Niccolo Machiavelli may call it “fortune” or “chance” or “the hand of God”; but, like Shakespeare’s rose, its name is not as not nearly as important as the role it plays and its effect on people’s circumstances. This focus on luck or fortune reflects a significant aspect of a prevalent mindset during that time period: that fortune, and by that I mean circumstances outside of one’s control, plays a tangible role in human affairs and must be accounted for both when making plans and recording events. Machiavelli provides an interesting take on fortune in *The Prince*, which he sees as only partially responsible for the direction one’s life takes, and his observations can even be applied to modern life.

Machiavelli devotes an entire chapter in *The Prince* to fortune, entitled “The Role of Luck in Human Affairs, And How to Defend Against It.” He briefly refers to the mindset that Boccaccio seemed to be of, “that the world is run by God and by fortune and that however shrewd men may be they can’t do anything about it and have no way of protecting themselves”(98). He separates himself from this mindset by saying that he “[has] leaned a bit that way [himself],” implying that he does not fully agree with it. The “fortune is a river” analogy is an excellent example of an attempt to reconcile free will and fate. He “reckon[s] it may be true that luck decides the half of what we do, but it leaves the other half, more or less, to us.” He says that fortune is “like one of those raging rivers that sometimes rise and flood the plain, tearing down trees and buildings, dragging soil from one place and dumping it down in another.” This metaphor works very well in that it not only draws to mind imagery of some unstoppable power, but it also takes into account that although the power may be unstoppable, if one goes about it properly, it can be controlled and its effect minimized or even used in one’s favor. Machiavelli has an interesting, if not pessimistic, view of what he calls “the problem of luck” (99) by seeing it as something that a person needs to defend hirself against, as opposed to using for hir own benefit. Generally, when a person thinks of luck or fortune, ze thinks of it as a good thing, but Machiavelli sees it as an impersonal force that must be dealt with and, if a person is lucky, benefit from.

Machiavelli’s negative attitude toward luck probably comes from his real life experiences. Throughout his life, fortune was never fully on his side. He became essentially an outcast of the society that he was used to, and fortune’s poor treatment of him left him bitter toward circumstances outside of his control. He decided that if fortune wouldn’t help him succeed, then he would prevail despite its role in his life. Indeed, the reason that he wrote *The Prince* in the first place was to gain the Medici Family’s favor. In the book’s introductory letter to Lorenzo de Medici, he briefly but significantly mentions how he believes he’s been wronged by life, and makes it clear that he wants something in return if he helps Medici when he writes “if, from the high peak of your position, you ever look down on those far below, you will see how very ungenerously and unfairly life continues to treat me.”

Machiavelli is of the opinion that you must be proactive when it comes to getting what you want, but life or fortune may or may not work in your favor. This concept is different from the prevalent one during his time period, which was more apathetic; the role of luck was considered so important that people didn’t really place much value in actions, and a “what will happen, will happen” kind of mentality became common.

There is a striking parallel here between Machiavelli’s time period and 21st century America. 15th century Europe was full of political turmoil as the church struggled for control and monarchs became ever more power hungry. Machiavelli recognized that this chaos led to apathy amongst the civilians, who came to the conclusion that there wasn’t much of a point in putting a whole lot of effort into something because circumstances outside of their control changed so frequently that there was a good chance that whatever they did would be for naught. “Generation Y” is often criticized for its political and social apathy, and general disenchantment with the government. Most politically apathetic people wouldn’t say they believe it’s luck or God that completely controls things, rather, there is a general lack of hope in the future and in direction America is headed. So people have little motivation to work and invest in “the system” if they are not confident that it will still be around in twenty years. When talking about this apathy, Machiavelli writes what could be found in any modern day op-ed: “this attitude is more prevalent these days as a result of the huge changes we’ve witnessed and are still witnessing every day. Things no one could have predicted.”

Machiavelli rejects this cynicism; although he recognizes that his political situation was tumultuous, he thinks of the power of change as something that is inevitable but manageable. When he uses the torrential river analogy, he makes the point that rivers can indeed be controlled during storms and floods if, while the water is low, people build banks and dykes to protect themselves and their property. So the relationship between people and fortune, from Montaigne’s perspective, is definitely two sided: fortune is a powerful, sometimes overpowering, force, and people must do their best to overcome it or at least deal with it to the best of their abilities. He doesn’t make the claim that we can count fortune out of the picture altogether, but we can “build banks and dykes, so that when the water rises the next time it can be contained in a single channel and the rush of the river in flood is not so uncontrolled and destructive.

Following Machiavelli’s argument, that fortune is a powerful, but not all-consuming, force that we must deal with, he presents two distinct attitudes toward the concept of luck: they can generally be called caution and impulsiveness. The cautious attitude toward luck, or “playing it safe” is criticized by Machiavelli, who is not known for his passivity. He believes that the hesitancy stemming from it does more harm than good in the long run. As for impulsiveness, he is generally more sympathetic to this mindset. He says that “it’s better to be impulsive than cautious; fortune is female and if you want to stay on top of her you have to slap and thrust.” Ignoring the blatant sexism in this metaphor, he actually gets a nuanced point across: that role of fortune is dependent both on a person’s own activeness and effort, yet fortune, like the woman in the metaphor, still has agency and a degree of its own control over the situation.

I disagree with his “fortune is female” metaphor on a couple of different levels. First and foremost is that it’s very misogynistic and offensive. The idea of controlling one’s fortune being like controlling a woman in bed leads to one major concern: Machiavelli places a heavy emphasis on succeeding despite what circumstances and fortune may do to prevent one from doing so. Would forcefully controlling one’s own circumstances be considered rape? Even the possibility of such an occurrence is enough that the metaphor is unwarranted. Of course, the society Machiavelli was writing in and the audience that he was writing for would not have been offended by this idea, so he should not be harshly criticized. When analyzed in modern times though, this metaphor is inappropriate and only alienates the reader. Machiavelli really should have stuck with the River metaphor; it has no misogynistic aspects and overall works in more ways than calling fortune female.

Although his view of fortune is imperfect, Machiavelli effectively presents his take on it in a unique and novel way. His depiction of fortune as a river works very well as a metaphor and it provides an interesting alternative to the prevalent mindset of his time period. Its significance is difficult to overestimate when seen through the lens of history; his insight into human opinion on uncontrollable circumstances is positively timeless and reflects a different side of a man who is so often seen so negatively.