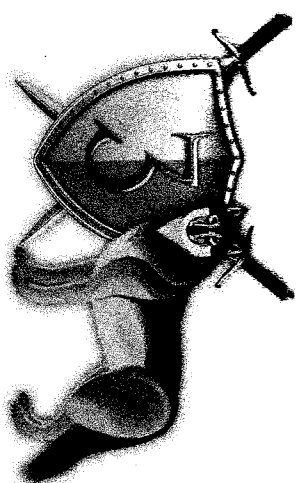


29. See John Strudler's "The Distinctive Wrong in Lying," in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10 (2007), pp. 171–179.
30. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 506.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 506.
32. Hugo Gross, *On the Law of War and Peace* (Whitefish, MT: Wildernessinget, 2010), p. 232.
33. Martin, *Game of Thrones*, p. 316.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 802.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 504.
36. It might also be better to think of a king if one thinks that he will keep him from doing something very bad. Eddard Stark might think that Robert would just kill the queen and her children if he found out the truth. It might be better to let him believe that he will deceive him even if he were not about to die.
37. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 316.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 322.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 421.
40. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Penguin Classics, 1975). For more on the doctrine of the divine right of kings in that medieval context, see Patrick Crocker's "Monty Python and the Search for the Meaning of Chivalry," in *Monty Python and Philosophy*, eds. Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. R. Park (Open Court, 2006), pp. 166–167.
41. I would like to thank Andrew G. Ross, Tony Zelnick, Henry Jacoby, Laura Lenhart, Kay Mathiesen, Jennifer Saul, and Tony Zelnick for their helpful suggestions on this chapter.



PLAYING THE GAME OF THRONES: SOME LESSONS FROM MACHIAVELLI

Marcus Schulzke

A Song of Ice and Fire is full of complex characters attempting to win the Iron Throne or at least to survive. Each employs his or her own strategy for reaching a particular goal, but over the course of the story it becomes clear that some of these strategies are far more successful than others. Some characters manage to escape even the most desperate circumstances, while others are outmaneuvered and killed. The philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) can help us understand why some characters succeed and others fail. Machiavelli was quite familiar with the struggle for power, and the word “Machiavellian” is still used to describe those who are adept at using force and cunning.

As Machiavelli explains, there are two different kinds of kingdoms, hereditary and new, which require two different kinds of rulers.¹ Hereditary rulers can maintain power by continuing

the policies of their predecessors; they enjoy a secure position because they are part of an established dynasty that has built a secure power base. New rulers face a much greater challenge. By seizing control of a state from someone else, they not only make enemies, but in the process also show others how to capture the throne. Becoming a new ruler requires a great deal of skill and luck, and because only the former can be learned, it is important to emulate the skill of great rulers.

Machiavelli's most famous book, *The Prince*, is full of advice for those aspiring to establish themselves as new rulers. To illustrate timeless lessons about how to become a new ruler and how to protect one's self against challengers, Machiavelli tells stories of those who succeeded or failed in their quest for power. With its focus on the struggle to establish new kingdoms, *The Prince* is a perfect lens through which to view the events of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. As we'll see, the War of the Five Kings follows the logic of the Machiavellian struggle for power and illustrates many of Machiavelli's most important lessons.

Aerys Targaryen, the Mad King who ruled Westeros before Robert Baratheon, started from a position of strength, as he was part of a long line of Targaryen kings. He had all the advantages associated with a hereditary king, yet he squandered these by acting cruelly and irrationally. Once he was deposed, Westeros lost its ruling dynasty and the Iron Throne became an unstable seat of power controlled by new rulers who faced many of the difficulties Machiavelli describes. All surviving members of the Targaryen family, and all those who had supported the Targaryens, became Robert's enemies. Those who helped Robert reach the throne were eager to call in favors in return for their support and to work to gain power in the new court. With the Mad King's downfall, the contest to take firm control of the throne and to establish the next dynasty began.

Virtù and Fortuna

Machiavelli argues that two forces determine the battle for power: *virtù* and *fortuna*. *Virtù* is the skill one needs to take power and keep it, but what this skill actually consists of continually changes based on the circumstances. When going into battle against a rival, acting with *virtù* may be a matter of charging courageously forward to meet the threat, whereas in other circumstances, such as plotting an assassination, *virtù* may require caution and patience. Robb's skill in battle and Littlefinger's ability to manipulate others are very different ways of winning power, but each shows *virtù*.

Rather than giving a clear definition or a list of characteristics, Machiavelli illustrates the concept by telling a series of stories about those who had *virtù* and those who lacked it. The best way to learn it is by emulating great figures of the past, but one cannot follow their examples too rigidly, as this would make one predictable.² Instead of copying those with *virtù*, Machiavelli advises his readers to discover what general lessons can be learned from them and then to apply these lessons in novel ways to discover a unique path to the throne.

Despite his vagueness about the meaning of *virtù*, Machiavelli is very clear on one point: *Virtù* is not the same as virtue. Virtue is usually associated with moral qualities. A virtuous person is one who is honest, courageous, and loyal. A person with *virtù* can display each of these qualities, but only when they are useful. Those with *virtù* often *appear* to be virtuous only because this appearance makes it easier for them to take and hold power. Being morally virtuous can actually be a hindrance, as it may prevent one from doing what is necessary to gain an advantage over opponents.

A concern with morality makes strong characters like Ned Stark vulnerable, while those who know when to act immorally prevail. This point is made clear when Lysa accuses Bronn of not fighting with honor after he wins Tyrion's trial by combat.

Bronn points toward the hole his opponent fell into and tells her, "No . . . he did" ("A Golden Crown"). An aspiring king must therefore know when to be virtuous and when to be cruel. He must also know how to make his actions appear to be good or be able to blame others for misdeeds.³ Machiavelli does not advise rulers to behave immorally, however. Rather, he advises them to avoid thinking in terms of morality at all. He says that actions are only good or bad to the extent that they increase or decrease one's power. Terrorizing others is often counterproductive because rulers who make themselves hated often provoke rebellions.

Fortuna can best be translated as luck. It encompasses whatever events are outside a person's control, whether they are good or bad. *Fortuna* includes everything from how other people act to natural disasters. When it is favorable, *fortuna* can help a person out of even the most desperate circumstances, as when Tyrrion had the good fortune of finding Bronn to defend him in a trial by combat. *Fortuna*, though, is an unreliable ally that can defect in an instant. For this reason, Machiavelli argues that one should leave nothing to chance; those with virtù usually succeed because they make their own luck. As he puts it, "Fortune is a woman, and if you wish to master her, you must strike and beat her, and you will see that she allows herself to be more easily vanquished by the rash and the violent than by those who proceed more slowly and coldly."⁴ *Fortuna* can be capricious, and thus it is essential to take precautions against it. In many of Machiavelli's historical examples, *fortuna* is the force that brings even the greatest generals and rulers to ruin.

The best one can hope for is to avoid *fortuna*'s harmful consequences by planning for every contingency and adapting quickly to new events. Those who seek power must engage in a constant struggle to control *fortuna* by force and deception. They must have the virtù to control their circumstances, so that their circumstances cannot control them. Many of

Machiavelli's examples of virtù involve men who were successful partly because they were beneficiaries of good *fortuna*. As he points out, however, luck is rarely enough in itself. Many people have good luck, but greatness requires using it to one's advantage. As Machiavelli says, "Opportunities, therefore, made these men fortunate, and it was their lofty virtue [virtù] that enabled them to recognize the opportunities by which their countries were made illustrious and most happy."⁵

The Downfall of Kings

The struggle for the Iron Throne is, as Machiavelli would have predicted, shaped by the same forces of virtù and *fortuna* that shaped the struggle for power in Renaissance Italy. In the game of thrones, players constantly struggle against *fortuna* by extending the range of their power and eliminating rivals. Ironically, some of the most powerful figures in the story are those who are least able to win the struggle against *fortuna*. Viserys Targaryen, Robert Baratheon, Joffrey Baratheon, Ned Stark, and Robb Stark illustrate some of the most basic mistakes one can make when attempting to take or keep power.

Viserys Targaryen is prideful, arrogant, and violent. He perfectly fits Machiavelli's description of a deposed leader, as he thinks of nothing but claiming what he considers his place.⁶ Viserys is willing to do anything, even sacrifice his own sister, in order to take the Iron Throne. However, he repeatedly makes serious mistakes that make him dependent on others. His decision to marry his sister to Khal Drogo is perhaps his greatest mistake, because it forces him to rely on both Drogo and his sister. His arrogance, of course, compounds this mistake.

Machiavelli argues that someone aspiring to power must either find support from average people or from the nobles.⁷ The nobles may initially seem to be more attractive, as they have access to positions of power, the wealth needed to raise an army, and experience in politics. Machiavelli advises against

aligning with the nobles, however, as they have one critical failing: they offer their support to a claimant to the throne only when it serves their purposes. Many lords, including Walder Frey and Roose Bolton, change their allegiances to gain an advantage. Had Viserys overcome his pride long enough to lead Khal Drogo's army into Westeros to reclaim the throne, he might have found that Drogo or his sister would expect favors in return. He would have been left completely dependent on them and would have been forced to give in to all of their demands. Yet, he never even had the opportunity to learn this lesson. Drogo and his sister realized the power they had over the arrogant man, and they lost their patience with him long before Viserys had an opportunity to invade Westeros.

The masses are much easier to please than the nobles, Machiavelli argues, because their only wish is not to be oppressed.⁸ Anyone who can promise them security and freedom will win their lasting support. Had Viserys sought support from average people, he might have found them more willing to indulge his arrogant habits.

King Robert Baratheon is a stark contrast to Viserys, but he too suffers from serious failings that make him a poor leader. Robert's rise to power indicates that he was once a man of great virtù. He managed to seize control of Westeros, reorganize its government, and place loyal supporters in key positions. Even when he becomes lazy and incapable of managing the state's finances, he has widespread support and is too powerful for any challengers to attack directly. Nevertheless, Robert is similar to Viserys in one important respect. He often allows his emotions to dictate his actions. For example, Robert is quick to turn on Ned in a moment of anger and dismiss him as Hand of the King when Ned insists that Daenerys not be assassinated—only to reverse his decision when the anger has passed.⁹ These strong emotions render Robert capricious and incapable of removing himself from the conflicts in which he is embroiled. Without this ability, fortuna is able to sway his

emotions and dictate his actions. Ultimately, Robert's lack of control over his emotions leads him to be a poor judge of his advisers and friends. His anger drives away honorable men like Ned Stark, and his pride leads him to become dependent on duplicitous advisers who echo his opinions.

Robert's heir, Joffrey, takes the throne when he is too young and immature to understand the consequences of his actions. Excited by his new power and eager to exert his will, at first his harsh actions are understandable. He must act violently to eliminate his enemies in King's Landing and to mobilize an army to oppose rival kings. Joffrey acts mercilessly against friends and enemies alike, however, and commits the fatal mistake of making himself hated. Machiavelli admits that cruelty is often necessary, but says it must be used cautiously so that it does not create enemies. Advising that unpopular measures should be acted upon quickly, Machiavelli says, "Cruelties should be committed all at once, as in that way each separate one is less felt, and gives less offence; benefits, on the other hand, should be conferred one at a time, for in that way they will be more appreciated."¹⁰ Unfortunately, Joffrey is cruel not only when it is necessary but also whenever he feels like controlling someone. In one of *The Prince's* most famous passages, Machiavelli discusses whether it is better to be loved or feared. Not surprisingly, it is most desirable to be *both* loved and feared. But if one must choose one or the other, fear is much better than love because it is a more reliable emotion.

Men have less hesitation about offending one who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared, for love is held together by a chain of obligation which, because men are sadly wicked, is broken at every opportunity to serve their self-interest, but fear is maintained by a dread of punishment which never abandons you.¹¹

Machiavelli, however, cautions those who would make themselves feared through terror, saying that the worst thing one

can do is to be hated, as hatred can drive people to action even when they are afraid. Joffrey strikes fear into his friends and enemies, but by continually acting cruelly, he makes himself hated by members of the court, the residents of King's Landing, and even his own brother. Luck saves him from being murdered by angry crowds when he and his companions ride through the streets of King's Landing in *A Clash of Kings*, but the fact that luck alone preserves his life is evidence that Joffrey is a poor model of how a king should behave.¹²

Morality and Dependency

Not all of the cautionary tales in *A Song of Ice and Fire* involve cruel or capricious kings. Some of the most admirable characters also display a lack of virtù. Although he never became a challenger to the Iron Throne, Ned Stark rose to a position of great power. A much different kind of leader than Viserys, Robert, or Joffrey, Ned always made decisions with justice and fairness in mind. A great warrior, and one of the story's most honorable characters, Ned was also a skilled administrator, a good friend, and a virtuous person. Despite all of these strengths, however, he is a prime example of how disastrous morality can be to those who are involved in politics.

Ned is often the beneficiary of good fortune, which allows him to advance far without compromising his values. Fortune gave him the position of King's Hand and returned him to that office after he resigned from it. Ned rarely takes full advantage of what luck has given him, however. Instead, he acts with restraint and a clear, uncompromising sense of right and wrong. Machiavelli insists, though, that a critical part of virtù is knowing when not to be good:

For the manner in which men live is so different from the way in which they ought to live, that he who leaves the common course for that which he ought to follow will find that it leads him to ruin rather than safety.

For a man who, in all respects, will carry out only his professions of good, will be apt to be ruined amongst so many who are evil. A prince therefore who desires to maintain himself must learn to be not always good, but to be so or not as necessity may require.¹³

Ned lacks the skill of knowing when not to be good. His honesty and loyalty make him a good friend to Robert and a good role model for his children, but such values are costly when one tries to compete against those who are not restrained by morals. Ned warns Cersei that he will tell Robert the truth about the illegitimate heir to the throne, and reveals his plans to Littlefinger, thus allowing them to respond well in advance. He trusts too easily, rigidly keeps his word, and refuses to hide his thoughts or deeds. Ned's moral virtue ultimately leads to his death when he makes the fatal mistake of trusting Littlefinger, a man whose cunning far exceeds his own. The trust is particularly ill advised since Littlefinger even warned Ned that he could not trust anyone and that his decision to support Stannis Baratheon as Robert's heir would lead to violence.

Ned's son, Robb, displays similar values, but is much better at adapting to his circumstances. Of all the kings in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Robb Stark is perhaps the one who comes closest to meeting Machiavelli's conception of virtù. He is an excellent general, adept at winning the support of unaligned nobles and capable of making long-term plans that extend his control over fortuna. However, Robb makes one of the mistakes that Machiavelli says is usually fatal: he relies too much on others for military support. Although Robb has his own loyal followers, he secures his crossing at the Twins and fills his ranks with more men by earning Walder Frey's support with the promise of his marriage to one of Walder's daughters. Thus he becomes dependent on a crossing controlled by an untrustworthy lord and on men whose loyalty rests only on a marriage contract. Robb may have had no choice but to earn Frey's trust when

crossing at the Twins, but he neglected to end his dependency once he was in a more powerful position.

Machiavelli warns against forming any kind of dependencies, especially when one must depend on someone powerful. One of the most dangerous dependencies is borrowing auxiliary soldiers. Machiavelli argues that auxiliaries are less willing to risk themselves in battle and that when they win, they have an interest in promoting someone else's interests.¹⁴ For these reasons, Machiavelli says that it is essential to rely only on one's own soldiers, even if doing so means fielding a smaller army. Although the Freys help Robb in many of his battles, they are quick to change sides when he breaks his marriage arrangements with their family.¹⁵ By putting his trust in soldiers with overriding loyalties to a capricious ally, Robb made himself vulnerable. Even worse, Robb did not learn from his mistake. He repeated it by going to the Freys and once again trying to win their loyalty through favors, rather than following Machiavelli's advice and relying only on his own soldiers.

Always Wear a Mask

Strangely, some of the exemplars of virtue in *A Song of Ice and Fire* tend to be characters not in the highest positions of authority. They are not the most popular, or the most skilled orators, or even the greatest warriors. The characters with the greatest virtue are those who are capable of manipulating others, disguising themselves, and acting independently. They manage to survive in a world torn apart by war, even when they are hunted, attacked, or imprisoned.

Lord Peyr "Littlefinger" Baelish is one of the story's most distinctly Machiavellian figures. He lacks any military power and is relatively poor compared to other lords, but as the Master of Coin and the operator of an extensive network of spies, he holds great influence over the court. Although he never attempts to seize the throne for himself, he knows how to manipulate

others so that he always ends up in a strong position, regardless of who rules over Westeros. Instead of openly siding with any of the claimants to the throne, he offers his assistance to everyone, but never commits to assisting them more than he must to retain his position. When Littlefinger must do something that might make him an enemy, he often uses someone else to do it for him, which gives him the power to deny his involvement or to mask it with the appearance of good will.

When Littlefinger offers Ned his assistance in naming Stannis as Robert's heir, he is clearly upset at the possibility that Ned's support of Stannis might lead to civil war. Nevertheless, rather than fighting Ned, he aligns himself with Cersei and uses her to capture Ned. Even when Ned is being led away, Littlefinger presents himself as the victim of circumstances who could not have acted differently.¹⁶ Because he never actually kills anyone and rarely makes a decisive move himself, Littlefinger never has to reveal his true intentions. He is so adept at playing all sides and hiding his true motives that it is difficult even for readers to judge where his alliances lie.

Although she is one of the story's smallest and most vulnerable characters, Arya Stark is also among those who best exemplify the quality of virtue. She is cursed with misfortune throughout the series. She is small, less attractive than Sansa, marginalized because she is a girl, and scorned because of her unconventional behavior. When her father is killed and she is forced to flee King's Landing, Arya loses the few advantages she had and must survive by herself. In other words, fortuna is very hard on Arya; it challenges her relentlessly. Nevertheless, Arya manages to survive by skill alone. Arya masks not only her intentions but also her identity. Fittingly, Arya earns the trust of one of the Faceless Men—the assassins who are able to change their appearance at will. Even before she meets them, she is faceless, able to disguise herself as a girl or a boy and able to act whatever part she chooses to play.

Virtù requires that one adapt to the circumstances, whether these call for force or for deception. To illustrate this, Machiavelli uses the metaphor of the lion and the fox.¹⁷ The fox is cunning and able to escape traps. The lion is able to strike fear into others and to defeat them in a fight. One must be capable of acting as a lion and a fox and of knowing when each role is appropriate to the circumstances. Although Littlefinger and Arya demonstrate virtù, they are unlike many of Machiavelli's examples of this quality because they do not have military skill. As Machiavelli explains, skill at fighting is the fastest way to rise to power and one of the qualities those with virtù usually possess.¹⁸ Littlefinger and Arya are excellent foxes and they can sometimes be lions, but they can never match the virtù of those who are capable of leading armies in the field and defeating powerful opponents in combat.

Jon Snow, on the other hand, shows how much can be accomplished by someone who can be both a lion and a fox. He starts the series as an unwanted bastard, but rises through the ranks of the Night's Watch to become the Lord Commander. Jon is a skilled warrior, capable of physically overpowering others, as he repeatedly demonstrates when dealing with his enemies on both sides of the wall. However, he also knows when he cannot win through force alone. When the wildlings overtake his scouting party, Jon reluctantly follows orders to defect and convinces them that his shift in allegiance is genuine. Although he is inwardly torn by this decision, he does not reveal his true feelings to anyone. Instead, he overcomes his reservations and helps the wildlings for as long as he must in order to survive and return to the Night's Watch.

Littlefinger, Arya, and Jon are able to make themselves appear the way they want to appear, and to convince others that this appearance is real. This is just as Machiavelli would advise. In *The Prince* he places such great weight on appearance that the person with virtù is characterized as someone who is so flexible that even carefully constructed appearances must be changed at a moment's notice.

A prince should seem to be merciful, faithful, humane, religious and upright, and should even be so in reality; but he should have his mind so trained that, when occasion requires it, he may know how to change to the opposite.¹⁹

As this passage reveals, "seeming" to be good or bad is what matters. Machiavelli thinks actually possessing one quality or another is inconsequential as long as the right appearance can be maintained. In fact, genuinely having these characteristics could be fatal, as moral qualities might interfere with one's ability to take on false appearances and mislead others.

Those Who Make Their Own Luck

The characters who best illustrate the qualities Machiavelli associates with virtù are Tyrion Lannister and Daenerys Targaryen. Both are able to make their own luck, adapt to new circumstances, and deceive others. They escape numerous life-threatening situations, raise their own armies, and form advantageous alliances.

Tyrion is small and physically weak, yet he is consistently able to make up for his size. Even though he is not an exceptional fighter, he is a good commander, capable of winning a battle even when badly outnumbered. When King's Landing is threatened by Stannis Baratheon, Tyrion responds in the way Machiavelli would advise. He spends his time planning the future battle, exploring all the possible courses of action and simulating the fight in his mind. By the time Stannis is in striking distance of the city, Tyrion has already won the naval battle with a carefully laid trap that destroyed most of the invading fleet.²⁰

One of Tyrion's greatest strengths is his ability to make sudden, radical changes. In this respect he is much like Littlefinger, yet his challenges are far more extreme. Littlefinger is skilled at maneuvering in the world of King's Landing, but he rarely has

to prove himself in more difficult contexts. Tyrion, by contrast, is capable of exerting mastery over his circumstances in dungeons, in hostile territory, and on the battlefield. Tyrion has only one critical weakness: he is easily distracted by women. Even worse, he continually pursues women who will damage his reputation and his relationship with his family. Machiavelli warns that "men who persist obstinately in their own ways will be successful only so long as those ways coincide with those of fortune; and whenever these differ, they will fail."²¹ Tyrion is obstinate in his pursuit of women, and though this repeatedly threatens him with disgrace, he is so skilled at manipulation and dissimulation that he rarely has to rely on fortune or help.

Although Machiavelli is clear that one needs exceptional skill to succeed in politics, he also explains that those who wish to use their skill to seize control of a throne must have an army. Even such wise lawgivers as Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus would have failed without military power.²² Daenerys begins the story as a frail girl, first at the mercy of her brother and then of her husband. She survives only because she is protected by Khal Drogo and Ser Jorah. She reaches her position as *khalessi* by luck, as her marriage is orchestrated by others. As the story progresses, however, she becomes more competent and begins acting like the *khalessi*. When Khal Drogo dies, she learns to survive on her own. Daenerys follows Machiavelli's advice of building her own army and reducing her dependency on others. Even more important, she recruits her supporters from the most vulnerable groups of people.

Unlike her brother, who attempts to recruit nobles to his cause, Daenerys fills the ranks of her army with the slaves she freed—people who are completely loyal to her and who have no aspirations beyond protecting their freedom. Daenerys is capable of making herself both loved and feared by her followers. By freeing them and giving them the opportunity to join her willingly, she ensures that she will retain their lasting affection. This kind of support is far more valuable than

the castle walls so many of the great men of Westeros hide behind. As Machiavelli says, "The best fortress which a prince can possess is the affection of his people."²³ Daenerys is loved and feared by thousands of followers, capable of deceiving or influencing others, and able to make dispassionate decisions. This makes her the story's highest example of *virtù* and puts her in the strongest position to win the game of thrones.

A Final Lesson

Much like Machiavelli's Renaissance Italy, the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is torn apart by constant warring and political maneuvering. Those with exceptional luck and *virtù* survive, while others become victims of the conflict. Even those who possess *virtù* or benefit from good fortune must constantly be on guard. Just as in the real world, everyone is vulnerable. Perhaps Machiavelli's greatest lesson is that power is fleeting and that even the most powerful people can be destroyed when they become lazy or when they are challenged by someone with even greater skill. There is no security, even for those like Tyrion Lannister and Daenerys Targaryen. There is only the constant struggle for power.

NOTES

1. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004), p. 5.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
9. George R. R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), pp. 354–355.
10. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 50.