

J. M.

Great Books

Shawn McCowan

27 May 2021



A True Leader

If you were assigned to guide a king or ruler in how he should act, and what his duties should be, what advice would you offer? In 1513, Niccolo Machiavelli decided to tackle this problem by composing a letter to the ruler of the day to inform the prince how he should rule as king. In truth, Machiavelli wrote this letter to regain favor with the present ruler. Eventually, this letter evolved into a book known as *The Prince*. This book advises rulers to perform rather interesting actions, such as cause their subjects to fear them, yet not be cruel to them. Due to the way this book was written, *The Prince* can be seen as one of two ways: a guideline to rulers on how to keep their power, or a satire to rulers on how not to rule. However, this book is most likely to be the latter due to the fact that this book was released to the people as well as being sent to the current ruler. By comparison, in the seventeenth century, William Shakespeare wrote a play about a good king, named *Henry V*, in which he was challenging the French king for the throne of France. While this play was not intended to be advice to kings on how to rule, King Henry had many attributes that are desirable in a leader. Niccolo Machiavelli and William Shakespeare deal with the subject of leadership in their works, but they present contrasting ideas of leadership in the areas of governing the people, war, and faith.

In *The Prince*, Niccolo Machiavelli advises leaders that they should cause their people to fear them, yet at the same time not oppress the people because then they will turn against him. He tells leaders that when they must choose between love and fear, they should choose fear. He

argues that fear is easier to control than love is, and should therefore be chosen over love. In addition, Machiavelli says, “What makes [a leader] hated above all...is to be [greedy] and a usurper of the property” (72). One can quickly gather that Machiavelli advocates for a middle ground. He advises rulers to be feared, but not cruel. To Machiavelli, a leader was not supposed to care for his citizens, but to bend them to his will through whatever means necessary in order to keep the throne.

While Machiavelli advises leaders to rule by fear, Henry V shows that it is better for one's citizens to be loyal because of love, rather than loyal due to fear. He says, “When [kindness] and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner” (Henry V 3.6). In addition, there is a certain occasion where King Henry disguises himself, and goes out among his men to assess their attitude towards an upcoming battle. While he is doing this, he comes across a soldier, and they begin to quarrel. Instead of allowing the man to give him the traditional blow to signal a challenge, King Henry asks the man if they can exchange gloves and finish their quarrel on a different date. The soldier agrees, and then they part ways. Later on, Henry V sends one of his captains with the glove so the soldier can settle the dispute with the captain. At first glance, it seems like King Henry is a coward for not settling the dispute with the soldier. However, if the soldier had struck the king, he would have been killed because striking the king is a capital offense. At the same time, Henry V allows the man to keep his honor by letting him strike the captain. In terms of how they treat the people, King Henry wins.

In *The Prince* it appears that Machiavelli really likes war. Much of his book is about what types of soldiers a ruler should use, how a ruler should prepare for war, and so on. He says rulers should devote all of his time to the study of war. However, if a ruler does that, then he will never be able to benefit his subjects in any way, because he becomes paranoid with other countries’

actions that he could view as a threat. Machiavelli also tells leaders that they should avoid mercenaries and other countries' armies because those armies only work for pay. At one point, he even says, "A wise prince, therefore, has always avoided [mercenary] arms and turned to his own. He has preferred to lose with his own than to win with others, since he judges it no true victory that is acquired with alien arms" (55). With any battle comes loss of life, but to lose a battle can bring even more death to the losing party. Yet Machiavelli is saying that a king's pride is more important than the lives of his men. This is obviously bad advice.

King Henry on the other hand demonstrates good qualities when he comes to the subject of war. He knows that in war, no matter how pure the ruler's cause, he can never have completely blameless soldiers. But he also knows that if he encourages them to do the right thing, then the outcome could turn out better. He knows that in times of peace a king should be merciful, but in times of war, a king should be firm, and at times as fierce as a tiger. Henry V also values the lives of his soldiers. At the beginning of the play, he tells the bishops who are encouraging him to go to war to think hard about their decision because he knows that many men will die in the battle (1.2.18). Finally, King Henry knows how to encourage his men. He goes among his men telling them that their fight will be a fight worth remembering, and he calls them brothers and friends (4.3.60). That is why Henry V is the better option to look to in times of war than *The Prince*.

Chapter XVIII of *The Prince* is titled, "In What Mode Faith Should Be Kept by Princes." The chapter begins like this: "How praiseworthy it is for a prince to keep his faith, and to live with honesty and not astuteness, everyone understands. Nonetheless one sees by experience in our times that the princes who have done great things are those who have taken little account of faith" (68-69). This appalling; this chapter is even titled about faith, but after the first couple

sentences Machiavelli ceases to talk about that. In addition, it seems like he is advocating for a leader to completely ignore God. In fact, in other portions of his book, Machiavelli references God as a type of fortune, giving blessings one moment, and curses the next. Clearly, Machiavelli does not have a good opinion of God.

In comparison, Henry V realizes God's sovereignty over the world. At one point, he repents to God for his father's murder of King Richard II, who was the ruler before Henry's father. In addition, after winning the war, King Henry gives God the glory, orders none of his soldiers to boast about their victory, and he even commands that a special song of praise to God be sung (4.8.14-22). Henry V definitely knows his place, which is an important thing for kings to remember. Even though someone may be an earthly king or leader, they are still subject to God, the King of Kings.

In conclusion, the attributes demonstrated by Henry V are the best qualities for a leader to have. As democracies and republics come into power with more and more countries, this applies less to monarchs, and more to the elected leaders of each country. Presidents, chancellors, senators, representatives, and prime ministers should look to Henry V as a role model whose attributes should be copied. No, he wasn't perfect, but in general he demonstrated good qualities for leaders to follow. In addition, the people should carefully examine their leaders' or candidates' qualities to determine who would really be the best leader for the country. Who will make wise decisions? Which person will put aside their personal desires for the good of the country? These are all important questions that must be answered when choosing a leader. Sometimes, two mediocre, or even poor options could be presented as the only candidates for the position. In this case the best course of action is to choose the "lesser of two evils" or the person who will do the least harm to the country. Someone should not be voted for just because they're

good looking, or because they're from the same political party as you, they should be voted for because they are the best person for the job. Therefore, this does not just apply to leaders, but to their subjects as well. Remember, even if you will never be able to find a perfect leader, you should always go for the best option, no matter what.

Works Cited:

Henry V, by William Shakespeare

The Prince, by Niccolo Machiavelli