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3/19/16

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Scotland's Ideal Ruler

Effective leadership is essential to the well-being and prosperity of a nation. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the essays "The Allegory of the Cave" and "The Morals of the Prince" by Plato and Machiavelli, respectively, offer their beliefs as to what constitutes a "successful" leader. While the views of Plato and Machiavelli are often considered antithetical, in the case of *Macbeth* they complement each other well. As the reader discerns from the exchange between Malcolm and Macduff in Act IV, Scene III, the ideal ruler for Scotland is one who places the needs of his subjects ahead of his own (reflecting Platonic precepts), while exercising measured cruelty and parsimony at the same time (echoing Machiavellian principles).

When Macduff attempts to convince Malcolm to return to Scotland and usurp the throne, Malcolm initially dissuades Macduff by divulging several undesirable qualities that would prevent Malcolm from being an effective king. Malcolm does not truly possess these traits; he only says as much to test Macduff's allegiances. Thus, Malcolm's spurious self-portrayal offers an apt definition of an inadequate leader. Malcolm states that should he attain power, he would "[p]our the sweet milk of concord into hell, / Uproar the universal peace, [and] confound / All unity on earth" (IV.iii.97-100). He essentially says that his being in power would disrupt world peace and dismantle international unity. The reader can infer that the ideal leader, on the other hand, would strengthen domestic and global unity by considering his subject's interests before his own. As

Plato writes, “the intention of the legislator… [is for] the happiness… to be in the whole State” (290). In addition, he states that an effectual leader functions as an “[instrument] in binding up the State” (Plato 290). Should rulers instead act with selfish motives and enter the “administration of public affairs, poor and hungering after their own private advantage, thinking that hence they are to snatch the chief good” (Plato 291), chaos will ensue. This idea is best illustrated by Macbeth, who selfishly murders King Duncan in order to seize the Scottish throne and later eliminates Banquo and Macduff’s family, engendering disorder and civil unrest throughout the kingdom. Malcolm, who reveals his genuine personality to Macduff later in the scene, states, “What I am truly, / Is thine and my poor country’s to command” (IV.iii.131-2). Shakespeare effectively communicates to the audience that a good leader is willing and able to fight for his country; in particular, Malcolm is prepared to confront Macbeth in order to restore peace and order to Scotland, thereby demonstrating that Malcolm possesses one of the qualities of a successful leader.

These notions of altruism and placing the interests of the subjects above one’s own do not necessarily contradict Machiavellian beliefs of cruelty and parsimony; rather, such ostensibly detrimental characteristics as harshness and frugality in leaders are necessary for the well-being of a society. As Machiavelli writes, “to be feared is much safer than to be loved” (225). Although cruelty may appear violent and unwarranted, rulers must exact severe punishment on wrongdoers in order to keep civilians “united and loyal” (Machiavelli 225). However, Machiavelli does not advocate for the use of excessive cruelty; he writes that a leader “ought to proceed cautiously, moderating his conduct with prudence and humanity, allowing neither overconfidence to make him careless, nor overtimidity to make him intolerable” (Machiavelli 225). King Duncan and Macbeth represent opposite ends of the spectrum of brutality: while Duncan has an affable, generous personality and is well-liked by his subjects, Macbeth is a ruthless despot who eliminates

any semblance of a threat to his authority. According to Machiavelli, both types of rulers are equally harmful. King Duncan exhibits a genial temperament toward his subjects, so much so that Macduff refers to Duncan as "a most sainted king" (IV.iii.109). However, the king's cordial disposition backfires as Macbeth takes advantage of King Duncan's friendliness and trust to murder the king in his sleep. Machiavelli writes that kindhearted leaders "allow [more] disorders to occur" (225) and that imbuing a sense of fear within one's subjects gives rise to a "dread of punishment" (226) that deters people from committing crimes. Had Duncan been more a stern ruler than a saint (by not exhibiting his gullibility so openly and instilling more fear in the Scottish populace), Macbeth may have hesitated to kill the king for fear of being caught and considered the consequences of his actions, potentially preventing Scotland's subsequent descent into chaos. When Macbeth ascends the throne, he institutes an inhumane regime of gratuitous murder that angers his subjects. As a result, Malcolm refers to Macbeth as a "tyrant" (IV.iii.45) and designates him as "bloody, / Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, / Sudden, malicious, [and] smacking of every sin / That has a name" (IV.iii.57-60), demonstrating the extent to which the Scottish populace despises Macbeth. As Machiavelli warns, a leader "should simply take pains not to be hated" (227); Macbeth is both feared and hated, making him an intolerable ruler. Thus, both *Macbeth* and "The Morals of the Prince" support the notion that an effective leader should instill fear in his subjects while not engendering hatred within the populace.

To do so, a leader should "keep his hands off the property of his subjects or citizens, and off their women" (Machiavelli 226). When conversing with Macduff about possibly reclaiming the Scottish throne, Malcolm states that "were [he] king, / [He] should cut off the nobles for their lands, / Desire his jewels and his other's house; / And [Malcolm's] more-having would be as a sauce / To make [him] hunger more, that [he] should forge / Quarrels unjust against the good and

loyal, / Destroying [the nobles] for wealth" (IV.iii.78-84). By portraying himself as an avaricious person with an insatiable desire for material wealth, Macduff conveys that an able ruler for Scotland must not be greedy. Machiavelli writes that a leader "who prefers not to rob his subjects" (223) should be parsimonious with his own wealth so that during wartime, the leader may utilize his personal resources rather subjecting "his people with exorbitant taxes" (223), which would breed resentment within the populace. Malcolm also informs Macduff that "[t]here's no bottom, none, / In [his] voluptuousness: your wives, your daughters, / Your matrons, and your maids, could not fill up / The cistern of [his] lust, and [his] desire / All continent impediments would o'erbear / That did oppose [his] will" (IV.iii.60-5). Malcolm depicts himself as a hedonistic, lascivious individual who is unable to contain his sexual desire, implying that the ideal ruler is the antithesis: sexually reserved and modest. This statement confirms Machiavelli's sentiment that a leader should practice sexual moderation so that he does not to attract loathing from his subjects. Thus, Malcolm's conversation with Macduff supports Machiavelli's beliefs that an effective ruler should abstain from rapacity and licentiousness.

Malcolm and Macduff's exchange indicates that a successful leader for Scotland should be at once altruistic and cruel and frugal, reflecting the ideas found in both Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave" and Machiavelli's "The Morals of the Prince". Readers often view the former text as overly idealistic and the latter as too cynical; however, when one synthesizes concepts from both essays, one produces a model of leadership that provides a balance of optimism and pragmatism, which is useful in analyzing political situations such as that in *Macbeth*. Modern-day rulers, whether presidents, dictators, or even leaders of smaller organizations, should consider these texts in guiding their governance.

Works Cited

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