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A.P. English Language and Composition

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**Macbeth Act Four Essay**

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 where Macduff’s allegiances lie. 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 ahead of 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 generally well-liked by his subjects, Macbeth is a ruthless despot who executes any semblance of a threat to his authority.

* King Duncan’s love for Macbeth and his subjects is ultimately unrequited as Macbeth does not think twice about murdering Duncan. Had the late king instead instilled fear in his subjects, Macbeth might have hesitated to kill King Duncan and Scotland would not have fallen into disorder.
* “He should simply take pains not to be hated” (Machiavelli 227).
* Macbeth is both feared and hated, making him an intolerable ruler.
* “our country sinks beneath the yoke; / It weeps, it bleeds” (IV.iii.39-40).
* Malcolm refers to Macbeth as a “tyrant” (IV.iii.45).
* He considers Macbeth “bloody, / Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, / Sudden, malicious, [and] smacking of every sin / That has a name” (IV.iii.57-60) for having murdered King Duncan and several supposed threats to his power, demonstrating the extent to which the Scottish populace despises Macbeth.

Abstinence and Greed

* “it is perfectly possible to be feared and not hated, and this will be the result if only the prince will keep his hands off the property of his subjects or citizens, and off their women” (Machiavelli 226).
* “there’s no bottom, none, / In my voluptuousness: your wives, your daughters, / Your matrons, and your maids, could not ﬁll up / The cistern of my lust, and my desire / All continent impediments would o’erbear / That did oppose my will” (IV.iii.60-5).
* “With this there grows / In my most ill-compos’d affection such / A stanchless avarice that, were I king, / I should cut off the nobles for their lands, / Desire his jewels and his other’s house; / And my more-having would be as a sauce / To make me hunger more, that I should forge / Quarrels unjust against the good and loyal, / Destroying them for wealth” (IV.iii.76-84).
* Despite Macduff’s concessions, this statement implies that an optimal ruler for Scotland would not be avaricious.
* Agrees with Machiavelli that leaders should not heavily tax their subjects lest such greed breed resentment within the populace.
* “… if he wants to keep a name for generosity, he will have to load his people with exorbitant taxes and squeeze money out of them in every way he can” (Machiavelli 223).
* “Hence a prince who prefers not to rob his subjects, who wants to be able to defend himself, who wants to avoid poverty and contempt, and who doesn’t want to become a plunderer, should not mind in the least if people consider him a miser” (Machiavelli 223).