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In 1515 a disgusted Italian from Florence named Niccolo Machiavelli had had enough of the messed up politics of his day. Adhering to the old proverb, “If you want something done right, do it yourself,” Machiavelli wrote a treatise on the how a true ruler ought to govern his people. His work was a political and social bombshell, for in it he cast off all Christian idealism and helped to usher in a new age of cold pragmatism. Since this work, many literary characters and political leaders have been labeled as a ‘Machiavellian’ character, and it shall now be shown how Saruman, the wizard from J.R.R Tolkien’s renowned *The Lord of the Rings*, is one such character. First shall be elaborated the qualities of the ideal prince, and next how Saruman personifies one such prince.

Machiavelli’s ideal prince lives to the mantra of ‘balance.’ He rarely picks either end of the moral or political spectrum, but balances in between them to suit the situation, leaning toward one or the other as the occasion calls.

An important area in which this applies is combat, be it physical or political – in any situation where the ruler must accomplish something. Machiavelli distinguishes between using force and using law to accomplish a goal and assigns a ‘beast’ to each type. He says, “A prince is forced to know how to act like a beast, [so] he must learn from the fox and the lion; because the lion is defenseless against traps and a fox is defenseless against wolves. Therefore one must be a fox in order to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten off wolves.” (Machiavelli, 56-57) If a prince is to accomplish his ends, he must attain the perfect balance between force and cunning. His cunning must be able to use the laws of the land or the powers of rhetoric with utmost eloquence.

The prince must not be held to moral ties, but must be able to rapidly shift to moral, immoral, or amoral behavior, for then he is best equipped to handle any given situation. Machiavelli says a prince should “appear to be compassionate, faithful to his word, kind, guileless, and devout…but his disposition should be such that, if he needs to be the opposite, he knows how.” (Machiavelli, 57) To the idealistic bishop or prince of Machiavelli’s age, this seems counterintuitive. But Machiavelli insists that “a prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things which give men a reputation for virtue, because in order to maintain his state he is often forced to act in defiance of good faith, of charity, of kindness, of religion…men in general judge by their eyes… everyone sees what you appear to be...so let a prince set about the task of conquering, and maintaining his state; his methods will always be judged honorable and will be universally praised.” (Machiavelli, 57-58) In short, a prince ought to appear moral at all times, yet use whatever practical means he may to accomplish his goals. His apparent integrity will justify in the people’s eyes whatever ends he sets on.

Lastly, Machiavelli discusses the relationship between the prince and his people, posing the question: “Is it better to be feared or loved?” Once again, he answers this with his “middle path” option. However, because of his base premise that all man is depraved, Machiavelli knows that love is not as powerful as it should be, so fear is more important for a prince. He says “For love is secured by a bond of gratitude which men, wretched creatures that they are, break when it is to their advantage to do so; but fear is strengthened by a dread of punishment which is always effective. The prince must none the less make himself feared in such a way that, if he is not loved, at least he escapes being hated.” (Machiavelli, 54)

Ultimately, the prince must remember to appear as the populace’s ideal, yet act as best suits the occasion. Cunning, shrewd manipulation of the laws and a cold determination to beat out the fates that lesser princes would succumb to must characterize the prince. A perfect balance between compassion and cruelty must dominate the ruler’s relationship with his people in order that they do not disown him out of hatred, or overthrow him because of his softness. Machiavelli states that “because men are wretched creatures who would not keep their word to you, you need not keep your word to them.” (Machiavelli, 57)

With this groundwork, it can be seen how Saruman is truly a Machiavellian character. The head of his order, the White Council, Saruman was a wise and learned wizard. His knowledge of the enemy, Sauron, and of the Ring of power, surpassed all others. Yet as the Third Age of Middle Earth was drawing to a close, Saruman was lured by the power of the ring and went bad. Betraying his friends and forming large armies, Saruman attempted an alliance with Sauron, ultimately in hopes of taking the enemy’s Ring. His actions and methods truly embody Machiavelli’s ideal prince.

Firstly, Saruman demonstrates the coldness a prince must have by breaking from his alliances. He breaks his promises and his word because it is advantageous for him to do so. Saruman “had a mind to capture the Ring, for himself.” (LOTR, Fellowship, pg. 101) In doing so, however, he attempts to maintain an important connection in his effort to woo his fellow yet subordinate wizard Gandalf. Saruman is careful to ally himself only with a weaker entity, something Machiavelli stresses as extremely important: “a prince should never join in an aggressive alliance with someone more powerful than himself…because if you are the victor, you emerge as his prisoner.” Saruman followed this rule by attempting to side with the weaker Gandalf, and when Gandalf refused, disposing of him. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Secondly, Saruman uses the Machiavellian balance of fear and love in his relationship with the neighboring Rohirrim as well as with the Men of Dunland and his own Uruk-hai. Because the Uruk-hai were a special species, driven by hatred and fear, Saruman needed only to show them that he was their master, and they would fight for him against all odds and circumstances, driven by fear and not by love. In this he is essentially remaking the laws by creating an awful yet functional ‘species’ that is unfailingly loyal and horrifyingly brutal. But he balances this with his relationship with the men of Dunland, who, being long-time enemies of Rohan, were bonded, through their hatred for Rohan, in love to Saruman, who gave them a chance to fight against their enemies.[[2]](#footnote-2) Also, Saruman again demonstrates a false promise by attacking nearby Rohan, breaking any former agreement of peace.

Saruman demonstrates the use of force in his assault on Helm’s Deep, yet he also attempts to use smooth talk and counsel to entice the victorious captains who confront him at Orthanc. “What have you to say, Theoden King? Will you have peace with me, and all the aid that my knowledge, founded in long years, can bring? Shall we make our counsels together against evil days, and repair our injuries with such good will that our estates shall both come to fairer flower than ever before?” (LOTR, Towers, 184) Eomer rightly calls him an “old liar with honey on his forked tongue,” (LOTR, Towers, 185) which is just the type of person Machiavelli would encourage a prince to be in such a situation.

Saruman again makes his own laws and skirts the dangerous precipices of Fate with his use of the Palantir, a ball made by the men of Westernesse for use by the seven Kings. Not only does Saruman use the ball against its proper use, but he uses it to communicate with Sauron and to see the plans of his enemies before their execution. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Finally, Saruman’s cunning and fate-skirting shrewdness looked far ahead to the day that, if and when his plans went awry, he might have a safe haven. He began trading with the Shire very early on, and by the time the War of the Ring was over he had removed to Hobbiton and ‘renovated’ and reconstructed it, and so both recreated the laws of the land, dominated hobbits by sheer force with his ruffians, and beat out fate with his cunning. [[4]](#footnote-4)

Saruman almost perfectly embodies a Machiavellian character, but he uses Machiavelli’s principles and personifies his traits on the wrong motive. Machiavelli wrote his book to be a guideline for the perfect prince, but Saruman uses his themes in a quest for power rather than to perfect his government. His thesis and motive were wrong, and it affected the results of his behavior. His pure greed for power pushed him to an attempted alliance with Sauron, an alliance Machiavelli would never recommend. He does nothing for the good of the people, but solely for the advancement of his own personal goals.

Despite his failure to found his actions on the basis of being a good ruler, Saruman otherwise nearly perfectly employs Machiavellian traits and feats. His cunning and manipulation of the people through fear and love demonstrate how he wholly exemplifies a Machiavellian character.

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1. See LOTR, The Fellowship of the Ring, Book 2 Chapter 2, pgs. 269-275 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See LOTR, Two Towers, Book 3 Chapter 7, pg. 132 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See LOTR, Two Towers, Book 3, Chapter 10-11, pgs. 189-206 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See LOTR, The Return of the King, Book 6, Chapter 8, pgs. 297-300 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)