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ENGL 4140-001

30 November 2021

Is King Richard a True Machiavellian?

Comparing *The Prince* to *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third*

Most depictions of Richard III fit the conventional definition of a Machiavel. The definition from the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines the word as follows:

> A type of stage villain found in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and named after the Florentine political theorist Niccolò Machiavelli, whose notorious book *Il Principe* (*The Prince*, 1513) justified the use of dishonest means to retain state power. Exaggerated accounts of Machiavelli's views led to the use of his name—sometimes directly referred to in speeches—for a broad category of ruthless schemers, atheists, and poisoners. Shakespeare's Iago and Richard III are the most famous examples of the type.
>
> (Machiavel)

The version of the King in *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third* commits some Machiavellian acts. However, there are some hints that Gloster (later Richard III) within this play might not entirely fit the criteria. In addition, this definition of a Machiavel does not align with what is stated in Machiavelli's *The Prince.* This skewed definition further distances this play's version of Richard III from Machiavelli's view of an ideal leader. As such, the version of Richard III found in *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third* does not fit with *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* definition of a Machiavel, nor does he fit with Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

The aforementioned definition aligns with the cultural interpretation of a machiavel as it includes a self-indulgent attitude toward evil. This cultural interpretation comes from popular depictions of villainous characters like Shakespeare's *Richard III*. I will compare Richard III's character in *True Tragedy* to this scheming, self-indulgent depiction of a Machiavel. Going further I will compare, Richard III in *True Tragedy*, and by extension the definition to *The Prince*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines Machiavellian as "A follower of Machiavelli; a person who adopts the principles recommended, or supposed to have been recommended, by Machiavelli in his treatise on statecraft; a person who practices expediency in preference to morality; an intriguer or schemer. Usually derogatory" (Machiavellian). This definition also states that the person in question is a schemer and that the word is derogatory of that person. This is also against the objective description of a leader in *The Prince*.

As a Machiavel, this play's version of Richard III is quite different from the character in other plays about Richard III. He does use dishonest means to gain his power but not so much to retain and keep his power. Even then, his dishonest methods do not mean the character himself is truly dishonest. The version in *True Tragedy* is arrogant and is ignorant of his dishonesty. Other versions of Richard III relish in his villainy and seek to justify his rule and actions to himself and those around him. However, it is clear in his first scene in *True Tragedy* which foreshadows the death of his nephews, that he would rather do away with them quickly instead of engaging in a complex political game:

> Why what are the babes but a puffe of
>
> Gun-pouder? A marke for the soldiers, food for fishes,
>
> Or lining for beds, deuices enough to make them away,
>
> Wherein I am resolute, and determining, needs no counsel (15)

He admits it would be easier to snuff out the children with “a puffe of Gun-pouder” or, a bullet. Nonetheless, he does require dishonest means. He might be a machiavel, but merely a reluctant one. A reluctant Machiavel does not fit with this exaggerated, hyperbolic definition. T This play’s depiction of Richard III is less of a stereotypical machiavel than other better fitting depictions that rely on the dramatic self-indulgence of villainy. One such depiction is in Shakespeare’s *Richard III* within its own first scene;

> I am determinèd to prove a villain
> And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
> Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
> By drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams,
> To set my brother Clarence and the King
> In deadly hate the one against the other” (Shakespeare 1.1.30-35)

This version is not reluctant, but finds duplicity necessary to set his family against themselves.

In addition, the version of Richard III at the end of *The Second Part of King Edward IV* by Thomas Heywood fits as a Machiavel, leading into events most associated with Richard III. “What? Is he gone? In heat? Why, farewell, he. / He is displeased. Let him be pleased again; / We have no time to think on angry men” (23.108-110). Richard here reveals his deception and shows little care for Buckingham. This remains in line with the Machiavelian characteristic of dishonesty. In contrast, Richard III in *True Tragedy* feels immense guilt over his own actions:

> My fearfull shadow that still followes me,
> Hath summoned me before the seuere iudge,
> My conscience witnesse of the blood I spilt,
> Accuseth me as guiltie of the fact,

the fact a damned iudgement craues,

whereas impartiall iustice hath condemned.

Meethinkes the Crowne which I before did weare,

Inchast with Pearle and costly Diamonds,

it turned now into a fatall wreathe,

of fiery flames, and euer burning starres,

and raging fiends hath past ther vgly shapes,

In studient lakes, adrest to tend on me,

If it be thus, what wilt thou do in this extremitie?

Nay what canst thou do to purge thee of thy guilt?

(*True Tragedy* 47)

This guilt is strong enough that even privately Richard cannot escape it. The other versions of this character would usually hide their true feelings but be open about their treachery with themselves. Other depictions of Richard III justify their actions to themselves and the audience. Instead, the unknown playwright shows how even the crown Richard lusted for is now just a representation of his sins.

Once King Richard has the crown and throne, upon hearing that Henry Earle of Richmond seeks the throne, Richard throws himself into an open war, instead of a stealthy assassination. “Why then there it goes, the great diuell of hell go with all. A marriage begun in mischiefe shall end in blood” (49). It should be noted that even if the plays are based on history, they dramatized and deviated from the historical record. While this could be a case of historical context getting in the way of character, *True Tragedy’s* Richard uses reluctant scheming instead of open threats to obtain the throne. His real historical open war with Richmond is better fitting

to fictional *True Tragedy*'s version Richard because as King, he doesn't need to assassinate his way up. He is already on top; he only has to defend his position. However, an open war for the crown would not fit the other plays the scheming, deceitful Richard III is in, who he prefers and relishes in his misdeeds regardless of the historical King Richard. *True Tragedy's* Richard III is different from Richard III from other plays because each playwright develops their characters differently even if based on a historic figure. This public show of war is inconsistent with a machiavel, which would apply to a wide range of depictions of Richard III. This inconsistency ironically fits True Tragedy's version. With this in mind, Richard's speech against Richmond seems to be aimed to convince his army that Richmond is guilty of conspiring against the crown, even though Richard is guilty of doing the same:

> Messenger staie, hat Blunt betrayed, doth Oxford rebell and aide the Earle Richmond, may this be true, what is our prison so weake, our friends so fickle, or Ports so ill lookt too, that they may passe and repasse the seas at their pleasures, then euerie one conspires, spoules our Conflex, conqueres our Castles, and Armes themselues with their owne weapons vnresisted? O villaines, rebels, fugetives, theeues, how are we betrayed, when our owne swoordes shall beate vs, and our owne subiects seeks the subuertion of the state (53-54)

This at first seems typical of Richard III character in most plays that represent him. Richard is known to push blame around. It reads as a standard speech to vilify Richmond. However, with the previous passages setting the context of this particular King Richard, we see that this one is genuine in blaming Richmond. It is dishonest as Richard leaves out his own deception to take the crown, but his disgust toward conspiracy makes this speech honest to himself, although ironic to the audience. *True Tragedy's* Richard III dislikes conspiracy and accuses Richmond of doing so.

Despite what Richard III has done, he sees himself as an honest figure condemning a dishonest character. The audience is aware that Richard is just as dishonest, even if he tries to excuse and ignore it. His arrogance is making him ignorant.

Before King Richard III dies his guilt comes back one more time. This time he is not alone because he confesses in front of his Page, breaking his public omission of guilt for taking the crown. While he usually hid his guilt, he does not go to the grave with it. He returns to full honesty upon death. “you watry heauens rowle on my gloomy day, and darksome cloudes close vp my cheerfull sownde, downe is they sunne Richard, neuer to shine againe, the birdes whose feathers should adorne my head, houers aloft & dares not come in sight[…] These are my last, what more I haue to say, ile make report among the damned soules” (65). He knows and can see all that awaits him is Hell for what he has done. He accepts it--a fate he knew was coming for him.

These points show that Richard III is not a Machiavel. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* definition and the character-driven interpretation of a Machiavel do not match the description of a leader in *The Prince*. The literary definition of a machiavel in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* explicitly states “a stage villain” and “exaggerated.” The definition and modern cultural mold of a Machaivel takes an originally historical and political mold and appropriates it for a dramatic, hyperbolic character.

Even historically though, the term was misused. Shakespeare himself uses the word in the *Third Part of Henry the Sixth* where Richard III uses that such word.

Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,

And set the murderous machiavel to school.

Can I do this, and cannot get a crown?

Tut, were it farther off, I'll pluck it down.

(*3 Henry VI* 3.2.192-195)

This use so early on helps set the historical precedent for *Machiavel* to be misused in plays, though not entirely Shakespeare's fault.

This gradual misuse of the word *Machiavellian* is made more obvious when it comes from a perspective that *The Prince* is some form of satire and not to be taken literally. This perspective is false. Wayne Rebhorn points to Machiavelli's exile and imprisonment causes for Machiavelli's bitter feelings toward the Medici. As such, these projected feelings made scholars think Machiavelli wrote satire to his former torturers. However, they miss why Machiavelli sent the treatise to the Medici in the first place and miss what the text says what a prince should do. The introduction to the Norton Critical Edition of *The Prince* gives the first reason. "He wanted to use his treatise as part of a 'job application,' showing the Medici his potential worth as a political advisor. It is not clear that they ever read *The Prince,* but if they did, it did not persuade them to offer Machiavelli the position he desired" (Rebhorn xii). Regardless of whether the Medici truly read it, using a satire work to apply for a job does not make much sense. When taken literally, it shows Machiavelli was able to put aside his own biases against the Medici to ensure for himself that the state could remain intact. This bias against the Medici cannot be understated. However, it is a testament to Machiavelli's strength of will to overlook his torture, imprisonment, and exile to improve the state he serves.

Since scholars tend to misunderstand *The Prince* as satire, they lose the intended purpose of the treatise. The text itself shares the very opinions that Machiavelli felt. It was not a satire because Machiavelli would not have been satirical over his own opinions. The main opinion, as stated from *The Prince*, is that a prince must serve the state, not themselves:

> A prince must be prudent enough to know how to avoid the infamy of those vices that would take his state away from him, and whenever possible, to be on guard even against those that might not lose it for him, but that, if he cannot resist them, he can indulge them with less concern. Furthermore, he should not worry about incurring the infamy of those vices without which it would be hard for him to save his state, for carefully taking everything into account, a man will discover that something resembling a virtue would, if it were put into practice, result in his ruin, whereas something else, which seems a vice, would, if it were put into practice, result in his security and well-being. (49)

If a prince needs to remain in power for the good of the state, then the prince should attempt to keep their position if challenged. If a prince must remove themselves from their position of power, then the prince serving the state must step aside for a new prince. The state is the ultimate goal, not the prince. Just as Machiavelli put his own justified biases aside to serve the Medici, a prince must set aside theirs to serve the state.

The previously stated satirical perspective on *The Prince* is not new. This view grew from an earlier misunderstanding of the treatise. In "Reconsidering the Early Modern Machiavellian: Illicit Manuscripts and Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*," Timothy M. Ponce shares that the misconception grew from the Catholic banning of Machiavelli's books, turning Machiavelli's prince into an evil, violent character. "By bringing the two seemingly contradictory principles of violence and contemplation together as Machiavelli instructs, Hieronimo righteously attains his ultimate goal as he follows the example of the biblical judges. This reading challenges the critical precedent, which assumes an automatic demonization of all connections with Machiavelli" (Ponce 448). Hieronimo from *The Spanish Tragedy* is a character that follows Machiavelli better than a "Machiavel," but by then the demonization of

Machiavellian characters had been established, allowing this non-traditional, and more accurate, character to slip past. Ponce also argues that *The Prince* was not popular because it was subversive of political power of the time. It would have been destroyed before it became popular. Instead, it was popular because its misunderstanding created a template for a villain. The Protestant countries were the only ones that could print it, thus enabling the book to skirt immediate destruction. However, its infamy created taboo status despite the treatise's survival. It was not officially published in English until 1640, though there were some English manuscripts. Its late translation further contributed to its false scandalous image. When a book like this is demonized, it creates the perfect contextual villain template. Once someone saw that a character in this time was "Machiavellian," they knew this one was a villain because Machiavelli was evil, not because of the treatise's content.

The cultural context of *The Prince* left it in a state of negativity. It was further condemned in 1572 after the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, which many believed to have been based on a Machiavellian line of thinking. This event is when French protestatns were assassinated by Catholics. Even in the ways the work survived Catholic scrutiny, it was still permeated with outside context. In "Why We Understand Machiavelli the Way We Do," Jacob Soll states, "Through a rereading of Machiavelli's concept of the idea of prudence, Lipsius advocated a viable, Christian, civic version of Machiavelli's pragmatic and expedient prudence, which could be openly embraced by good Christian absolutist princes and used to strengthen the nascent states, which had been hobbled by confessional strife" (Soll 2). Even though the classical scholar Lipsius' work allowed *The Prince* to survive, it detracted from the areligious message intended. Chapter 18 of *The Prince* directly contradicts a religious reading:

> Hence a prince should take great care never to let anything fall from his lips that is not imbued with the five qualities mentioned above, and to anyone seeing and hearing him, he should appear all mercy, all faithfulness, all integrity, all humanity, all religion. And nothing is more necessary than to seem to have than this last quality. And men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands, because everyone can see, but few can feel… And in the actions of all men, and especially of princes, where there is no court to which to appeal, one looks at the end. (56)

Even though it is impressive that The Prince survived, its means of survival harmed the ultimate message of the treatise, letting the term *Machiavel* grow in a context of tyranny rather than as an amoral guide. The term *Machiavel* is applied in retrospect in the modern era to literary characters, but by the time it was used by early-modern culture, it was already skewed from *The Prince*. This term used for literary characters today is indicative of past Christian opinion slandering *The Prince.* Machiavelli intended his treatise to show how a good leader should rule. However, the treatise and his name became slandered in the 16th century, later misunderstood by scholars, then applied to fictionalized villainous characters. This left the term *Machiavel* only sharing a name and not much else resembling its origin.

A better definition of *Machiavel* might be "A leader who puts the needs of their state above their own, regardless of moral, religious, or personal needs." This definition would be left untouched by the historical context that grew around it and include dramatic characters. Yet, this definition is still open enough to describe a broad category of leaders both fictional and real.

If *The Prince's* literal context is focused on Richard III, then a new comparison must be made. If a prince is meant to serve the state above all else, then Richard in *The True Tragedy*

starts off poorly. In one way that aligns with his other representations, he wishes to be king through jealousy, not the good of the state.

> I reapt not the gaine but the glorie, and since it becommeth
>
> A sonne to maintaine the honor of his deceased father,
>
> Why should I not hazard his dignitie by my brothers sonnes?
>
> To be a baser than a King I disdaine,
>
> And to be more then Protector, the law deny,
>
> Why my father got the Crowne, my brother won the Crowne,
>
> And I will weare the Crowne
>
> (14)

He gives his own personal reasons, but does not explain why the state would be better under his rule than that of the current king. Even when he finally gets the crown and is wracked with guilt, he still feels he deserved the crown despite the burden. The only part of Richard's speech that fits is that he does not allow God to get in the way of his decisions. God is left out, leaning into Machiavelli's areligious message.

Gloster does not follow *The Prince* for obtaining the crown, nor is he able to keep the crown. Within the same scene when he obtains power, Richmond has already consolidated allies against Richard. "The Earle is vp in Armes, And with him many of the Nobilitie, He hath ayde in France" (49). While a prince cannot trust anyone around them, they must have those around trust the prince. Or, if the prince cannot be trusted, the prince must be feared. This Richard was never given the chance to show any sort of mercy and was plunged straight into a war. He only keeps half of this piece of advice in *The Prince*; he does not trust anyone. Richard says "In company I dare not trust my friend, Being alone, I dread the secret foe : I doubt my foode, least poyson

lurke therein. My bed is vncoth, rest refraines my head" (62). He does not trust anyone, but few trust him. Even fewer fear him. Or if they do fear him, they flock to serve Richmond.

Richard III as seen in *The True Tragedy of Richard The Third* does not fit the modern dramatic, exaggerated definition of a Machiavel, not does he fit my proposed definition that is based on *The Prince.* Within the context of the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Richard is reluctant to be a Machiavel at best. He does not willingly commit villainy, as he prefers open violence. Nor is he dishonest as he openly regrets his actions upon his death. When contextualized within *The Prince* itself, he does not hold the state above his own needs, nor does he have the ability to retain and continue the state under his rule. Even though this character is based on a historical figure, the nature of playwrighting keeps him separated from the historical record. Other versions of the character, not the historic figure, may fit better with either definition, but this particular version of Richard III does not display enough characteristics of either to warrant being called a Machiavel.

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