

The prince vs. henry

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People



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The Prince vs. Henry V A comparison of attributes After reading Machiavelli's The Prince and watching Shakespeare's Henry V in class, one begins to notice similarities between the authors' idea of what a "perfect king" should be. The patterns between the ideal ruler of Shakespeare and the ideal ruler of Machiavelli can be seen in numerous instances throughout this story. For the duration of this essay, I will compare the similarities in both pieces to give the reader a better understanding of how Shakespeare devised his view of what a "perfect king" should be.

One can see an example while looking back on Henry's youthful experiences. Before taking oath as king, Henry was involved with some scrupulous characters. He would party, stay out all night, and defile his father's wishes. But after becoming king, Henry shunned this former lifestyle and become the individual of greatness we know today. As Machiavelli stated, "So a prince should be so prudent that he knows how to escape the evil reputation attached to those vices which could lose him his state, and how to avoid those vices which are not so dangerous, if he possibly can; but, if he cannot, he need not worry so much about the latter.

And then, he must not flinch from being blamed for vices which are necessary for safeguarding the state. This is because, taking everything into account, he will find that some of the things that appear to be virtues will, if he practices them, ruin him, and some of the things that appear wicked will bring him security and prosperity." (Machiavelli) If looked at closely, this is exactly what Henry had done. He used this youthful expression to gain favor with the layperson and look even better when he took the throne.

This act of “ smoke and mirrors” worked to his advantage and backs up Machiavelli’s claims. As Machiavelli says, “ From this arises the following question: Whether it is better to be loved than feared, or the reverse. The answer is that one would like to be both the one and the other; but because it is difficult to combine them, it is far better to be feared than loved if you cannot be both. ” (Machiavelli) During Henry’s speech at Harfleur, one can see this point in action.

While speaking to the governor, Henry literally scares the people of Harfleur into submission and gains entry to the city without further fighting. This shows a definite similarity in what Machiavelli and Shakespeare view in their leader. As a king, Henry becomes known for being a man of resilience, strategy, and combat. These traits, according to Machiavelli, are necessary to become the “ ideal king. ” As stated by Machiavelli, “...a prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline; for this is the sole art that belongs to him who rules. (Machiavelli) This can be seen when the Dauphin presents Henry with a gift of tennis balls and an insulting speech practically telling him to stay out of grown men’s affairs. This gives Henry the leverage he needs to start a war with France without looking like the instigator. He can now put the blame of war on the Dauphin and the many lives of whom will be killed. Henry uses this to move toward his strength and show his full potential. Another example can be seen when Henry has to hang Bardolph for plundering during the invasion of France.

Years earlier, while drinking in the tavern, Bardolph had asked Prince Henry this question, “ Do not thou, when thou art king, hang a thief? ” Prince Henry

replied, " No, thou shalt. " (Branagh, Scofield and Holm) In this instance, one can see Henry is following his Machiavellian ways. This can be shown in the following passage. Machiavelli states, " The prince should nonetheless make himself feared in such a way that, if he is not loved, at least he escapes being hated; and the prince can always avoid hatred if he abstains from the property of his subjects and citizens and from their women.

If, even so, it proves necessary to execute someone, this should be done only when there is proper justification and manifest reason for it. But above all, a prince should abstain from the property of others; because men sooner forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony. " (Machiavelli) Bardolph had been warned of this many years earlier. Henry was just following up on this promise. For this last example, I will quote Machiavelli for almost the last time.

He states, " The fact is that a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous. Therefore, if a prince wants to maintain his rule, he must learn how not to be virtuous, and to make use of this or not according to need. " (Machiavelli) This can be seen on the night before the last battle. Henry disguises himself as a common soldier by borrowing Erpingham's cloak and spying on his troops. Henry does this to ensure his troops are mentally prepared and in high morale.

What he finds is a mixed morale within his troops and makes him prepare even harder for the upcoming battle. Henry uses this " cloak" as a tool to find the weaknesses in his army and then exploits them with his inspiring speech before the battle begins. This Machiavellian act could have been the

turning point and major reason they won against an outnumbering, French army. As seen throughout the film, the similarities between Machiavelli's "ideal prince" and Shakespeare's "perfect king" are too many to count.

A blend of old and new attributes created this timeless character in which we are still learning from today. One can only hope the few examples given will give the reader a better understanding of where Shakespeare derives his perfect, Machiavellian king from. To finish, a famous quote from Machiavelli, "The end justifies the means." (Machiavelli) Works Cited Henry V. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. Perf. Kenneth Branagh, et al. 1989. Machiavelli, Niccolo. "Selections from The Prince." Matthews, Roy T and F DeWitt Platt. Readings in the Western Humanities. Vol. II. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011. 18-21.