

Thoughts on ruling: machiavelli vs. petrarch essay sample

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In the fourteenth century, the humanist philosopher Francesco Petrarch wrote a letter entitled *How a Ruler Ought to Govern His State*. Nearly a century later, another philosopher by the name of Niccolo Machiavelli wrote a book about governing, *The Prince*. The two documents show many similarities in content and theme. While the two wrote in similar subject matter, it is clear that these philosophers possess distinctly different viewpoints on how a ruler should govern. In Petrarch's *How a Ruler Ought to Govern His State* and Machiavelli's *The Prince*, both philosophers possess different opinions on how a ruler ought to govern. In particular Machiavelli pays specific attention to the importance of appearing like a good ruler. There is much evidence to support this in the readings.

Niccolo Machiavelli was a humanist philosopher born in Florence, Italy. He spent a good portion of his life working in Florence as a banker. Soon, Machiavelli became an important political figure when he was promoted to the position of chancellor and secretary to the Council of Ten for War. Machiavelli was trusted on many other government councils as well. Machiavelli was very successful in his positions until 1512 when the powerful Medici family regained control of Florence. The following year, he was accused of participating in a conspiracy to restore the republic. Machiavelli was thrown in jail, tortured, and eventually exiled from Florence. This was very unfortunate for the philosopher who received much joy from partaking in political matters in Florence. It was in exile that he wrote *The Prince*. Machiavelli desperately wanted to return to politics. He decided to write *The Prince* for Lorenzo de' Medici, the head of the Medici family ruling the government. The philosopher hoped that by writing this book that he could

regain favor with the Medici family and receive his position back in the government. However, his writing was not received as he planned.

Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a guide to ruling. In this guide, Machiavelli makes many suggestions, but there are two that distinctly differ from the thoughts of Petrarch. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli repeatedly brings up the theme of importance of appearing like a virtuous ruler.

In chapter XV Machiavelli discusses how it is important to appear as a virtuous ruler, but to not actually possess these qualities. He states, “ one is considered a giver, the other rapacious; one cruel, another merciful; one treacherous, another faithful; one effeminate and cowardly, another bold and courageous; one humane, another haughty; one lascivious, another chaste; one trustworthy, another cunning; one harsh another lenient; one serious another frivolous; one religious another unbelieving; and the like. And I know that everyone will admit that it would be a very praiseworthy thing to find in a prince, of the qualities mentioned above, those that are held to be good; but since it is neither possible to have them nor observe them all completely, because human nature does not permit it, a prince must be prudent enough to know how to escape the bad reputation of those vices that would lose the state for him” (*The Portable Machiavelli* 127). In this chapter Machiavelli is suggesting that a good ruler can't be virtuous at all times because it would not be in the best interest of the people.

Machiavelli received much criticism from this suggestion, but he saw nothing wrong with it. To Machiavelli, the definition of virtue was anything that receives praise from others (*Portable Machiavelli* XV). I think it is clear that

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he had this in mind when he advised “ one must consider the end result” (Portable Machiavelli 135).

Machiavelli also warns, that you must watch for flatterers who will try to do the same. A ruler must be wise by “ making men understand that telling you the truth will not offend you; but when each man is able to tell you the truth you lose their respect” (Portable Machiavelli 155).

While Machiavelli thought these ideas would make a successful ruler, Petrarch would disagree. In How a Ruler Ought to Govern His Sate he believes that a ruler “ while true virtue does not reject merited glory, glory should follow it even if virtue is unwilling just as a shadow follows the body. I said to my self: This man, you can easily see prefers to be criticized rather than praised, and it is easier to acquire favor with him by finding fault than by giving him due praise” (The Earthly Republic 37). Petrarch disagrees with Machiavelli and feels that a successful ruler should be honest and virtuous to those he rules, and that they should love him more than fear him.

Both rulers have varying opinions on what makes a good ruler. Petrarch sees that a ruler should be loved by his people. Machiavelli sees that a ruler must only appear to be a virtuous leader. As Machiavelli said, “ One must consider the end result.”