

Teaching Machiavelli, or How I Learned to Love *The Prince*

Drawing on The Simpsons and other contemporary references, Miller describes how the 15th-century classic can still resonate with young adults.

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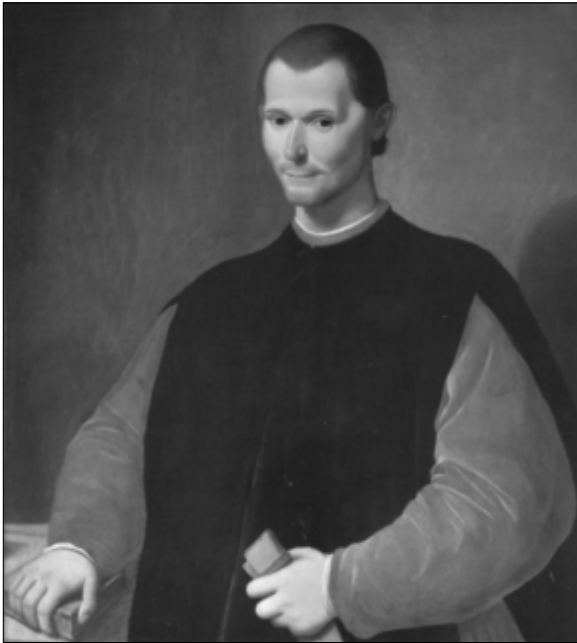
ritten by a petty bureaucrat and diplomat for Lorenzo de Medici, a member of one of the ruling families of Europe, Niccolò Machiavelli's

The Prince (1532) is a slim volume concerned primarily with advising Medici on how to acquire, maintain, and sustain power over a state. Its difficult and often archaic vocabulary aside, at first glance it hardly seems an ideal text for the sophomores I often teach. Nearly 500 years old, it features a glib attitude about violence and a cynical opinion of humankind. And hardly anyone teaches the book in its entirety at the secondary level—probably because it's repetitive, dense, and sometimes frustrating. Ironically, the things that make it a questionable choice also make it an excellent challenge, or "stretch" text, one that would require considerable attention and effort by young people. That history textbooks still reference Machiavelli demonstrates that his ideas are still considered relevant.

For several years, I taught Machiavelli's *The Prince* (Dover, 1992) as a nonfiction text for sophomores enrolled in a World Literature course at Berkeley High School because it helped create intellectual "glue" that could link required works such as *Macbeth*, *Oedipus Rex*, and Chinua Achebe's tragic novel, *Things Fall Apart*. The Dover introduction described the 16th-century work as "a primer for princes" and an introduction to the principles of leadership and governance (back cover). Widely read in college history and political science courses, and even graduate business schools, it would be challenging, but couldn't Machiavelli's words provide secondary students with a framework

that could unify much of the fiction, drama, and short stories they would read during the school year? Couldn't the Macbeths be considered typical Machiavellian rulers? Couldn't Oedipus be blamed for sharing power and underestimating a possible "religious" rival in the Delphic Oracle? Were the Ibo, as depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, too accommodating of the white settlers encroaching on their territory with a new religion, powerful weapons, destabilizing economic strategies, and potentially oppressive laws? Indeed, weren't the British in Nigeria perfecting Machiavelli's techniques? Not only did *The Prince* provide a way of understanding these problems, it also offered some principles for leaders concerned with how and when to act effectively to maintain control of their lands.

At the time I was teaching *The Prince*, the California State University (CSU) system developed CAPI, or Collaborative Academic Preparation Initiatives. It created a partnership between high school English teachers and college professors in an effort to decrease the need for remediation at the 23 CSU campuses. They paid teachers to meet, provided valuable inservice training, and offered schools the opportunity to employ the assessment CSU used; these could help us identify student strengths and weaknesses in the areas of reading, writing, and grammar. CAPI allowed us to work together, to present and critique our teaching together, to visit each other's campuses and classrooms, and to understand the link between our jobs and our students' futures. They believed, as I was also coming to believe, that English teachers needed to include more nonfiction in our curricula because



Niccolò Machiavelli, portrait by Santi di Tuti (ca. 1520)

most college English classes included increasing amounts of nonfiction, that tests at both the high school and college levels relied heavily on nonfiction, and that most college majors contained relatively little fiction. In addition, we were reminded that most students will continue to read nonfiction whether they are college-bound or not: newspapers, contracts, leases, driver's tests and other forms of licensing, brochures, and advertisements. CAPI gave us time to consider in what ways the skills gleaned from studying fiction and nonfiction could provide students with strategies that they could recognize and employ in their writing.

Once I determined that I would teach Machiavelli, I had to determine how to engage the full spectrum of sophomores at Berkeley High School, one of the most diverse schools in the nation, in *The Prince*. I had to show how this work was relevant to everyone. Since so many students consider themselves college-bound, many were excited to read a book they had heard about and expected to encounter later. Devotees of rap music had heard Tupac Shakur call himself "Makaveli" and knew rumors that both the rapper and 15th-century political theorist had faked their deaths. Some were eager to know why Homer Simpson used the word *Machiavellian* and why I planned to show several episodes

of *The Simpsons* during the unit. Knowing that they would be assigned to write an essay in which they would apply the principles they learned in *The Prince* to modern situations intrigued others.

Reading the text would be the next challenge. I had to gloss the book heavily to provide definitions, footnotes, and background information. To assist reluctant and challenged readers, I needed to limit the amount of required nightly reading. I settled on 5–7 pages per night. (A letter to my generous parents secured more than enough money to purchase Dover paperback copies of *The Prince* for each student.) These two decisions helped me widen access for all students. I wanted student ownership of the ideas and the books; I wanted them to write personal notes in the texts, to circle words they didn't know, to write questions in the margins. Writing in books and dialoguing with text is a skill public school teachers rarely teach. One of my colleagues, Gabrielle Winer, modeled the strategy of alternately reading aloud and providing her personal commentary on a text. She showed, in other words, that reading is a process with fits and starts, that it is full of questions, that definitions have to be constantly revised, that thinking is not a linear process, and most importantly that tangents while reading were to be viewed as inevitable and savory, not as evidence of shoddy thinking.

Seeing this, I opted to read the beginning of the book aloud. Though many students didn't know all of the words on the page—words such as *antiquity*, *deem*, *esteem*, *amplified*, *extrinsic*, *allurements*, *wont*, *unremitting*, and *Fortune* (the capital F is intentional) appear in the Dedication—they understood that Machiavelli was "kissing up to" the man he called "The Magnificent Lorenzo di Piero de Medici." We talked about reading the text closely enough that they could determine the meaning of some words from context. I gave them a sheet with definitions of many of the words immediately after, and we determined which definitions suited each word. We identified and clustered the words in which Machiavelli revealed his purpose: to compare the luxurious language and lavish gifts Medici might expect

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from him with his “humble,” “simple,” practical insight. We also examined and discussed Machiavelli’s discussion of the perspective required for the task he sets out for himself. The diplomat viewed himself not standing face to face with his potential benefactor, but staring up, as at the foot of a great mountain.

On those first two days I modeled what I expected them to do each night: Number each paragraph and write titles or headings for each paragraph. I showed them that these headings didn’t have to be elaborate or complicated, and that they could use the words in the paragraph where it was possible and appropriate. Also, I showed them that they could identify the functions of the paragraphs to indicate which paragraphs summarized what had gone on before, which paragraphs provided examples, and which paragraphs defined terms. They could create headings such as “Summary of paragraphs 1–5,” or “Examples of _____,” or they could title a paragraph “_____ Defined.” This forced students to read more closely than they had previously, because I was training them not

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only to read for content but also to read as writers, to determine why Machiavelli structured his narrative as he did. (A CAPI strategy called “mapping,” in which students identify paragraph functions, helped here.) This helped everyone, especially lower-level readers. It was painstaking and painful, but it improved participation and comprehension; it also allowed students to appreciate the text on more than one level.

In an effort to make the ideas seem less foreign, I created my own names for Machiavellian principles. Comparing “Mixed Princedom” to “Blended Families,” I coined the “Stepmom Rule,” which posits that a stepparent, like a new Prince, “cannot avoid . . . offen(ding) his new subjects” (2). To personalize some of the examples, I would refer to nearby East Bay towns such as Emeryville (pop. 8,500) and Oakland (pop. 420,000) to clarify some theories espoused in *The Prince*. For example, I’d ask if Berkeley (pop. 102,000) should ever join Oak-

land in a war against Emeryville? (Machiavelli would emphatically answer no, arguing that a state should never join with a larger state unless absolutely forced to do so. Such states, he reasoned, would be tempted to take two states at once.) I reminded them also that they knew some of the rulers cited in the book from the Bible or popular history: Machiavelli refers to the Biblical King David, to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, to Julius Caesar, to Achilles and the Centaur. I helped students identify the contemporary “descendants” of “Duke Valentino,” the playboy/ruler who raped the women who inhabited the lands he conquered.

After asking students about maxims they had heard from their parents or from the media, I distributed some maxims from *The Prince*. What did these sayings mean, and what did they tell us about the culture that is their source?

1. “He who builds on the people builds on mire” (26).
2. “He who is the cause of another’s greatness is himself undone” (18).
3. “Leave it to time” (6; Machiavelli argued against this popular maxim).

Clearly Machiavelli meant for some of his ideas to have the same lasting value.

1. “The temper of the multitude is fickle” (14).
2. “A Prince who is not wise himself cannot be well advised by others” (64).
3. “Nothing makes a Prince so well thought of as to undertake great enterprises and give striking proofs of his capacity” (59). (Having a strong foreign policy—i.e., undertaking “great enterprises”—actually meant taking over other countries and displaying one’s military might. *The Prince* is full of such euphemisms.)
4. “He who wishes to deceive will never fail in finding willing dupes” (46).

Midway through our reading of the book, I formed groups of four students to create posters in which they would show how a school librarian, a small town mayor (like ours), a high school principal, a coach, a teacher, a dean, a history teacher, a parent, and a class president would use the Machiavellian principles to effectively “rule” their domain. Posters had to describe (and, hopefully, illustrate) the ruler’s environment. For instance, I

might ask: What would a Machiavellian librarian emphasize in organizing the library? What types of monuments, posters, and technology would decorate the library? Posters also had to provide at least two symbols of the ruler and his or her leadership style. (These symbols could be taken from the text or from the students' assessments of the ruler's needs.) The posters needed to include at least three quotes or paraphrases from the text. Posters needed to include five adjectives describing the ruler or the environment the ruler created. Posters obviously needed to depict the ruler and to name the type of ruler.

Four episodes of *The Simpsons* were especially helpful here. "Bart the General" shows how Bart, the bratty third grader, organizes his friends to combat Nelson, the school bully. "Two Cars in Every Garage, and Three Eyes on Every Fish" shows Mr. Burns, the town of Springfield's most detested capitalist, running for governor, employing every dirty trick in the book to get elected to avoid keeping the town's biggest employer, its nuclear power plant, up to code. "Sideshow Bob Roberts" depicts the clown sidekick involved in satire based loosely on Watergate and Chicago mayoral politics. "Last Exit to Springfield" shows Homer, Bart's father, becoming the president of his union local to save his dental benefits. While many students had viewed these episodes, none of them had previously discussed how these episodes utilized Machiavellian principles. For each episode, I created a "film sheet" to induce students to look carefully for events and dialogue that could enhance their understanding of *The Prince*. We discussed quotes from Machiavelli that seemed to describe the circumstances of each show. The *Simpsons* episodes that dealt with the media assisted me in reinforcing Machiavelli's early awareness that politics is at least partly public relations. Showing students political advertisements helped drive this point home even further. They were shocked to see the "Revolving Door" ad that George H. W. Bush's campaign had used against Michael Dukakis in the 1988 presidential election, and amused by the ad depicting Dukakis wearing the army hat and a silly grin—both parodied in "Sideshow Bob Roberts."

Selected questions (and my answers) from the final exam for the unit on *The Prince* give some of the flavor of Machiavelli, and also provide some of

the brand of critical-thinking opportunities available from this text:

1. Five years ago, Berkeley Mayor Tom Bates destroyed thousands of copies of the *Daily Cal* (UC–Berkeley) student newspapers that did not endorse him. What would Machiavelli think of this and why?

Answer: Machiavelli would say this was fine. Anything you can do to acquire or maintain power is good. The problem here is getting caught.

2. Former President George W. Bush twice opposed raises for soldiers. Soldiers have been reluctant to criticize him about this issue or to comment on how poorly the medical facilities for soldiers have been maintained. How would Machiavelli explain the behavior of Bush and the soldiers?

Answer: Machiavelli would say that you don't want the soldiers to be too happy with their situation. Remember: you want your soldiers hungry and motivated, not fat and lazy. You also want to train them not to stand up to you.

3. You are a current senator planning a future run for president, with a child who has been admitted to West Point (a military academy), Harvard (an old, elite college with a fine reputation), and Amherst College (a fine, small, liberal arts college in Massachusetts). According to Machiavelli, where do you encourage your child to attend college? Why?

Answer: You should send your child to West Point, so he or she will be eligible to succeed you as a military leader. This shows that you are not a hypocrite because you are willing to have your own child in a military institution, and that you value the military.

4. If you are a Machiavellian Prince, do you cut the budget of the National Endowment of the Arts? Why or why not?

Answer: No. You would only do so in an emergency. You provide the people with distracting bread and circuses. You encourage your citizens to achieve all manner of excellence in diverse fields.

5. You have just been elected president when you discover that you are inheriting an enormous budget deficit. Do you go ahead with the publicly funded inaugural bash that you have planned or do you save the money

for more pressing economic and social needs? What would Machiavelli advise and why?

Answer: You go ahead with the big bash. Nothing impresses the people like a big party at government expense. Raise taxes afterwards to pay for it. They will always have the memories and associate you with fun.

6. You are the new CEO of a company facing negotiations with your two most important employees unions—one is the most skilled, best paid, and most powerful; the other is a relatively new union. What do you do? What would Machiavelli say about your response?


Answer: Pit them against each other. Provide the weaker one with resources to fight the stronger one. You want to weaken the strong and strengthen the weak. Facilitate a fight between them so that they cannot focus on you.

While all of the lessons in the unit described above are enjoyable, what made this unit even more rewarding was hearing students make connections between Machiavelli and the literature we read later, and even to the history that they were studying in their history classes. Not surprisingly, I discovered that teaching Machiavelli during an election year could enhance student interest in campaigns, but even in other years, it would be an effective text to teach. My History/

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So why should one teach Machiavelli's *The Prince*? It incites students to reach. It is rewarding. It both activates and stimulates their store of background knowledge. It forces all students to read carefully and critically. It invites them to look closely at the worlds they inhabit. In addition, they gain a framework to help them understand social dynamics—not only on the political battlefield but also in school, in the workplace, and in interpersonal relationships. Machiavelli's master work also introduces one of the most enduring philosophical questions: Do the ends justify the means?

When I asked one of my students recently to tell me why she should read Machiavelli, she said, "There's a prince on every corner." 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The Simpsons presents a nearly inexhaustible collection of resources for exploring satire in the classroom. In "Exploring Satire with *The Simpsons*," students identify the techniques of satire—exaggeration, incongruity, reversal, and parody—through an analysis of scenes from *The Simpsons* and from the show's website. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=811