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## William Shakespeare: Influencing Political Vision

by Virginia Bateman

(English 228 Shakespeare)

The Assignment: Write the second paper that will argue for Shakespeare's flexibility, plasticity, timelessness, timeliness, and/or universality in the light of your futures, interests, academic majors, and personal concerns and ambitions.

**A**uthors, whose motives have been either to educate or entertain, have been writing about politics for centuries. These writings can often be used as textbooks for the study of contemporary political science. William Shakespeare's Henry V is a prime example of how great political writing continues to influence politics to this day. Although written for entertainment value, Shakespeare's play was clearly influenced by the writings of Niccolo Machiavelli, and Shakespeare's Henry V, in turn, influenced American President John F. Kennedy who would continually quote the famous St. Crispin's Day speech from Henry V to his staff (Henry V, 4.3.20-70; Leamer 479). The Kennedy Administration offers an example of real-world implementation of the Shakespearean approach to politics. Each time one sees a play by Shakespeare, one is studying modern day politics. Similarly, every time a political strategist studies Theodore White's classic The Making of the President 1960, which details John F. Kennedy's campaign tactics during the 1960 presidential election, and other writings about Kennedy, he is indirectly studying the political theories of both Machiavelli and Shakespeare. King Henry V of England and President John F. Kennedy were masters of the maintenance of power.

Although Machiavelli does not possess a positive public image, both men, who were adored by the public, followed Machiavelli's principles for maintaining authority. Machiavelli's The Prince, a guide to maintaining political power, has been misinterpreted, resulting in great damage to Machiavelli's reputation. As a consequence of misinterpretations of Machiavelli's writings, the term Machiavelli took on negative connotations both in Renaissance and contemporary times. The word Machiavellian is used by modern-day society to describe unscrupulous political leaders, as defined by New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English Language: "of or related to the theories of Machiavelli // characterized by cunning duplicity." This interpretation of Machiavelli stems widely from his statement in The Prince: "...it is much safer to be feared than loved..."(90). While among one of the most famous quotes in history, it is an incomplete quote, taking Machiavelli's words out of context. Machiavelli's ideal ruler was one who was capable of being both feared and loved, and this ability was obtained by King Henry V and by President Kennedy. In the text of The Prince literally, Machiavelli actually advocated mercy over cruelty, but said cruelty, while not the preferred option, was sometimes necessary to maintain power (89). He advocated the cruel suppression of minor rebellions in order to prevent the wider spread of violence of revolution (89). According to Machiavelli, "...one ought to be both feared and loved, but as it is difficult for the two to go together, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one of the two has to be wanting.[...]...for love is held by a chain of obligation which, men being selfish, is broken whenever it serves their purpose; but fear is maintained by a dread of punishment which never fails.[...] I conclude, therefore, with regard to being feared and loved, that men love at their own free will, but fear at the will of the prince, and that a wise prince must rely on what is in his power and not what is in the power of others, and he must contrive to avoid incurring hatred..."(90-91).

Although King Henry V was born before Machiavelli, his leadership style incorporated Machiavelli's principles. Shakespeare's play, which is a combination of fact and fiction, glorifies these principles, making them a tribute to English nationalism. Historically, King Henry V was more popular than his father among the English masses (Norwich 175). In The Prince Machiavelli states, "...that it is necessary for a prince to possess the friendship of the people; otherwise he has no resources in times of adversity" (65). Henry V's popularity did not mean he was always merciful toward his enemies. In the

Battle of Harfleur, although he did not sack the city, he demanded that the residents of the city swear allegiance to Britain; those who refused, including 2,000 women and children, were driven from the city (Norwich 183). Yet, they were not killed, which is an example of a Machiavellian advocated blend of mercy and cruelty. Despite the fact much of Shakespeare's play is historically accurate and his account of this event is inaccurate; at this battle, the character King Henry says, "Use mercy to them all for us..." making Shakespeare's character less Machiavellian and more likable to a theater audience (3.3.55). In a later scene, one of the commoners with whom King Henry socialized in his youth, Bardolph, is caught robbing a church, and King Henry orders the execution of his former friend, applying Machiavelli's principle of cruelty to avoid disorder (3.6.100-115). Since Bardolph is a criminal, this action does not affect King Henry's popularity with the other men and is viewed as justice.

Kennedy was also popular with the masses. Machiavelli wrote about how to maintain power in a "civil principality," the closest form of government to a modern day democracy, in which the masses choose their prince: "One, however, who becomes prince by favour of the populace, must maintain its friendship, which he will find easy, the people asking nothing but not to be oppressed" (64). In order to maintain popularity in a society that frowns upon Machiavellian tactics, Kennedy hid the harsher aspects of his ruling style and his personal indiscretions. Concealing actions to give the appearance of being more virtuous is true to Machiavellian philosophy. In Henry V Shakespeare also addresses the humanity of rulers. King Henry disguises himself as a commoner, joins the soldiers, and debates the ethics of going to war with France. One soldier argues that the King, ruling by divine right, is morally responsible for the fate of his men, while King Henry argues that he is not responsible for the soul of another, because he is just a man (4.1.130-230). These arguments and the need to debate with the soldier in the hopes of securing the soldier's affirmation for his actions, support Machiavelli's theory that rulers are men susceptible to human weakness: "I know that everyone will admit that it would be highly praise-worthy in a prince to possess all the above-named qualities good [merciful, trustworthy, humane, chaste, religious, etc.], but as they cannot all be possessed or observed, human conditions not permitting of it, it is necessary that he should be prudent enough to avoid scandal of those vices which would lose him the state, and guard himself if possible against those which will not lose it him, but if not able to, he can indulge them with less scruple. [...] ...it will be found that some things which virtues would, if followed, lead to one's ruin, and some others which appear vices in one's greater security and wellbeing" (85). Adhering to Machiavelli's advice, during the 1960 presidential campaign, Kennedy intimidated his opponents' supporters. "In New York Stevenson backers were warned that their man would not even be *considered* for secretary of state unless they cut off all support to Humphrey. In Connecticut Senator William Benton was told sternly that if he continued to give money to Humphrey, his political future in the state was over" (Reeves 163). These were among many of Kennedy's strong-arm political maneuvers which were later revealed to the public by historians who exposed the malevolent side of his character. Later, during the Cold War, as President Kennedy overtly advocated the containment of communism, many of his actions to achieve this goal were covert in order to maintain the facade of caring, humanitarian leader. Following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, he was even willing to conspire with members of the Mafia, whom he publicly berated, in addition to ordering the death of a rival head of state:

A Mongoose, which was called the "Kennedy vendetta," involved four hundred American employees, two thousand Cuban agents, a small navy and air force, and more than fifty business fronts. Its headquarters in Miami became for a time the world's largest CIA station. Activities included intelligence gathering, propaganda, and minor sabotage. The CIA also reactivated the Mafia efforts to kill Castro. (Reeves 277)

Shakespeare's King Henry also retaliated violently, losing his temper on the battlefield at Agincourt after hearing of the loss of his men to the French and seeking a vendetta: "Then every soldier kill his prisoners" (4.7.37). Machiavelli would have approved of both men's militaristic actions: "For a prince must have two kinds of fear: one internal as regards his subjects, one external as regards foreign powers.

From the latter he can defend himself with good arms and good friends, and he will always have good friends if he has good arms..." (95).

Conforming to Machiavellian tradition, both Shakespeare's King Henry and President Kennedy took violent actions toward external enemies, but played the role of magnanimous leader to their people. Part of this facade included having a vision, or positive goal, which would include and benefit all followers, and every follower was called a friend and equal. Shakespeare's *Henry V* and President John F. Kennedy's visionary speeches are widely studied. The St. Crispin's Day Speech from *Henry V* is mandatory reading for College of DuPage's leadership course, which has an entire unit dedicated to "Articulating a Vision" (Phi Theta Kappa 13-14). President Kennedy, adopted the St. Crispin's Day speech and elements of Machiavellism as part of his vision for the American presidency.

Referring to the treatment of ministers and advisors, Machiavelli writes, "Because there is no other way of guarding oneself against flattery than by letting men understand that they will not offend you by speaking the truth, you lose their respect. [...] ...by choosing a council of wise men, and giving these alone full liberty to speak the truth to him, but only of those things that he asks and of nothing else..." (116). In the St. Crispin's Day Speech King Henry claims the common man to be his brother, which is ironic, since the second act of the play describes how he cuts ties with the common man upon his ascension to the throne (2.1). Kennedy used this famous speech to motivate his staff:

Like soldiers in the front line, they [Kennedy's staff] worked all night when they had to, and through the next day. They shared a deep rooted patriotism and can do attitude about endeavors large and small. Kennedy was fond of quoting the famous St. Crispin's Day speech from Shakespeare's *Henry V* ("We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;/For he today that sheds his blood with me/ Shall be my brother"). Kennedy paid each member of his band of brothers the same salary \$21,000, and would have gladly given them all the same title, special assistant. He wanted no staff meetings, no thicket of bureaucracy. He wanted his men to come to him. (Leamer 479)

Kennedy's famous inauguration speech was nationalistic, tapping into liberal ideas and showing the influence of *Henry V*'s St. Crispin's Day speech. Similar to King Henry addressing his band of brothers, Kennedy addressed his fellow citizens, making them his equals: "And, so my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you---ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man" (Leamer 473). This speech and the development of the Peace Corps are major parts of the Kennedy legacy. Ironically, Kennedy expected the Peace Corps to be a flop and appointed his brother-in-law to head the organization, so it would be easier to fire the director when it failed (Reeves 255). Furthermore, Kennedy is remembered as a liberal, and Kennedy despised liberals: "Jack [President Kennedy] readily admitted lacking any firm ideological leaning. He told one writer in early 1953 that he especially disliked letters that chided him for failing to be a true liberal. 'I'd be very happy to tell them I'm not a liberal at all. I've never joined the Americans for Democratic Action or the Americans Veterans Committee. I'm not comfortable with those people'" (Reeves 119). Kennedy was a student of political science, following Machiavelli's instruction: "...the prince ought to read history and study the actions of eminent men, see how they acted in warfare, examine the causes of their victories and defeats in order to imitate the former and avoid the latter, and above all, do as some men have done in the past, who have imitated some one, who has been much praised and glorified..." (83). Following Machiavellian theory, Kennedy incorporated elements of Shakespeare's play into his style of governing in order to maintain his good relationship with the American public. He successfully used quotes from Shakespeare and other great men to cover up his own lack of ideology, and became a symbol of twentieth-century nationalism, America's *Henry V*.

As a result of Kennedy's success, contemporary political science students now learn from Kennedy, studying his methods, as he studied the great men who came before him. Through the study of Kennedy, these future "princes" are keeping alive the political theories of Machiavelli and Shakespeare whose ideas once again will be recycled, creating the vision for the next generation of political leadership.

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