

A Comparative Study of Henry IV and the Machiavellian Prince

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Abstract: Henry IV is an important figure in Shakespeare's history plays. Many of his personalities and ways of governing the state echo the Italian politician Machiavelli's ideas of a good prince, who should be a fierce lion as well as an astute fox. But Henry IV is not a completely Machiavellian prince. His melancholy reflects Shakespeare's concerns about the legal inheritance of the throne, which is essentially different from Machiavelli's practical morality.

Key words: Henry IV; Machiavellian prince; inheritance; legality

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Among all the political treatises published in Western literature, *The Prince* by the Italian diplomat and political theorist Niccolò Machiavelli may be the most controversial one. Its major argument that "a prince should be a fierce lion as well as an astute fox" (Machiavelli 122) has also received criticism from many scholars. Shakespeare also shows interests in politics; his history plays create various kinds of princes reflect his concerns of an ideal prince.

Previous researches regard Henry IV as "the most typical example that demonstrates Machiavelli's definition of a good prince" (Rutter 11). But a careful reading and analysis of Henry IV's personalities would reject the assumption that he is a completely Machiavellian prince. What has been ignored is that in fact Henry IV has been troubled by the legality of his crown since he came to the throne. His moral self-restriction and the fact that he has been tortured by his usurpation of Richard II form a clear contrast to Machiavelli's practical morality.

1 Resemblance of the Machiavellian Prince

Machiavelli's *The Prince* offers detailed principles of how to be a successful prince, the most famous and controversial of which is that a prince should be "a fierce lion as well as an astute fox" (Machiavelli 122). Henry IV resembles Machiavelli's idea in this aspect. His fierceness could be seen from his attitude towards his subjects. At the beginning of *Henry IV* he is bothered by Worcester, Sir Walter Blunt, and Percy: although they once assisted him in dethroning Richard II, they refuse to give him the captured. In Henry's eyes their request is unreasonable and it threatens his authority as a prince. What adds to his anger is that these once helpful ministers become arrogant and self-centered; they believe they could bargain with the prince with the help of their meritorious service, which is intolerable for a prince. Machiavelli states in his *The Prince* that for those ambitious and arrogant subjects, "the prince must be on guard against them, and fear them as if they were open enemies, because in adversity they will always help ruin him" (Machiavelli 66). Therefore, he refuses them directly and powerfully. He says "My blood hath been too cold and temperate... But be sure I will from henceforth rather be myself, mighty and to be

fear'd" (Shakespeare 115). His words directly shows Worcester and Percy that they would make a great mistake if they take his humbleness as an evidence of his cowardice and weakness. As a prince, his dignity, honor and pride allow no offense.

"Power and strength may make one a prince, but astuteness and wisdom could lengthen his career" (Hardin 35). The astuteness of Henry IV could be reflected from his ways of leaving a good impression of himself on people's mind. His son Henry V always hangs around with vulgar men from the lower society, which in his eyes is quite inappropriate for a prince-to-be. He speaks earnestly to his son, "The skipping King, he ambled up and down with shallow jesters and rash bavin wits... Grew a companion to the common streets, enfeoff'd himself to popularity" (Shakespeare 164). He understands that "men judge, in general, more by their eyes and less by their hands" (Machiavelli 112). So it is necessary for a prince, especially the new prince to pretend to be humble, honest and merciful in public to leave a good impression on people's minds. He further points out frequent appearance of a skipping king together with vulgar people would make his people do not cherish his presence any more, thus damaging his authority and sanctity. He finally tells his son that remaining deliberately silent and humble before you come to the throne is one of the best ways for self-protection.

2 Derivation from the Machiavellian Prince

One reason for the criticism of Machiavelli and his *The Prince* is that Machiavelli favors practical morality. He cares little about whether the new prince comes to his throne through violent usurpation or legal inheritance. But in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, readers and audience could clearly sense the moral anxiety of Henry IV, reflecting Shakespeare's concerns about the inheritance and legality of the throne. And it is the essential difference between Shakespeare and Machiavelli in their ideas of the prince.

Besides his bravery and wisdom, melancholy is another obvious part of Henry IV's personality. An important cause of his melancholy is the fact that his crown is not inherited legally. "Regicide and usurpation would only disgrace his honor, and this kind of moral anxiety becomes his mental burden and tortures him in the fol-

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lowing years” (Holland 46). In the end, Henry IV gradually becomes very sensitive and he associate many irrelevant things with it. According to Machiavelli, “the princess who have done great things are those who have taken little account of faith” (Machiavelli 110). But Henry IV takes great account of faith and morality. He fears God would punish him for his regicide and usurpation of Richard II. Compared with the energetic Bolingbroke in *Richard II*, Henry IV in *Henry IV* appears to be more melancholy, which is the result of his moral anxiety.

The moral anxiety of Henry IV reflects the concerns of Shakespeare. Many of Shakespeare’s history plays are written in the late Elizabethan Age, when there is a heated discussion about the inheritance of the throne. Researches on Shakespeare’s view of politics also reveal his complex attitude towards the prince. Without legal inheritance, the stability of a state would be impossible to achieve, but if the legal prince is a tyrant or an incapable man like Richard II, dethroning the prince would help to save the state and its citizens.

In *Henry IV*, Shakespeare describes Henry IV as a brave and capable prince instead of a evil person to condemn, which suggests Shakespeare may hold a more tolerant attitude to usurpation, but he still could not totally get rid of the conventional idea of legal inheritance (Hou 123). And Shakespeare’s concerns of the morality and legality of the prince is what differentiates his Henry IV from a fully Machiavellian prince.

3 Conclusion

Henry IV resembles the Machiavellian prince in many as-

pects. He is both a fierce lion and an astute fox. He allows no offense to his dignity and absolute authority as a prince in front of his subjects; he also uses astute ways to establish his image as a wise and humble prince in people’s minds. All these echo what Machiavelli advocates in his *The Prince*. But Henry IV is not a completely Machiavellian prince. Unlike Machiavelli who favors practical morality, he has strict moral restrictions for himself and morality remains one of his primary concerns until the end of his life. Shakespeare presents readers and audience his complicated attitude towards the legal inheritance of the throne, which is the most essential difference between Shakespeare and Machiavelli in their ideas of the prince.

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children successfully turn into subjects of bourgeois ideology. For the Morel children, their desire, taste as well as the attitude towards the mining industry is rather constructed than being natural, which witnesses the success of bourgeois ideological interpellation.

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