Niccolò Machiavelli’s Renaissance Classic The Prince: Critical Analysis

Niccolò Machiavelli’s Renaissance classic ‘The Prince’ has been classed by many as a brutally blunt ‘handbook’ for effective leadership. However, there exists underlying connotations and interpretations of the text which may warp this perception. Many in modern society might class Machiavelli’s remarks as harsh or dangerous, however when context is given, and the political situation in renaissance Italy is explained, it begins to become clear that Machiavelli’s claim may justified, if not in different ways. Rather than being covert in his methods, Machiavelli is brutally honest and gives great specificity when discussing precepts that would lead to an ascension to power. His time served as a secretary in the Florentine government provides him with a wealth of experience, and his fixation with historical events may explain his complex motivations for writing the Prince. Many in their analysis fail to acknowledge Machiavelli’s republicanism, instead they’re blinded by his dedication of the book to Lorenzo de Medici. With this, and a deeper exploration of Machiavelli himself, it becomes increasingly clear that The Prince was not written with its’ sole intention as being a ‘handbook’, and his recommendations like a Prince must learn ‘how not to be good’, may not be so persuasive.

In 14th century, there were many, divided Italian states. Being engaged in warfare, each major power; the papacy, Milan, Naples and Venice all toiled over control and territory. These states continued to collide until conflict subsided in the mid 1450’s. These long, drawn out wars meant that now, power would increasingly become vacuumed toward the elite (Stern, 2004). War-torn governments relied on the elite families for financial support, trading influence over the government the other way. This eventually handed command to large and powerful families like the Medici in Florence. According to John Najemy, ‘the elites and Popolo tacitly agreed to a compact in which the former ruled and the latter… [was] without real power’ – this enabled the already powerful families great reign over city states, including Florence. This power vacuum lasted until 1494 when the French interfered. Francesco Guicciardini (1755) argued that it was they brought “a flame and plague into Italy” which “not only overthrew city-states, but also changed their forms of government”. However, with the French came the restoration of the Florentine Republic, seemingly handing power back to the people and out of the clutches of the Medici. At this time, Niccolo Machiavelli, a strong republican, was appointed to office in Florence. He served as secretary and inhabited many other important leadership positions until his ousting in 1513. The Florentine Republic did not last long, with Pope Julius II defeating the French in 1512, with whom Florence had a long-standing alliance. As a result, the Medici seized control of Florence, restoring monarchic control and choosing to exile and torture many former councilors and government members. This includes Machiavelli who faced torture on accusations of conspiracy (Skinner, 2000). Eventually being imprisoned and later released, he promised to live out the rest of his life outside Florence. It is here that Machiavelli, for reasons about to be explored, began and finished writing ‘Il Principe’ (The Prince), with it being finished in 1513.

In the Prince, Machiavelli recommends that sometimes it is “necessary for a prince to maintain his position to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity” (p.53). In Machiavellian terms, George (2002) suggests that a ruler is not expected to always be good and moral. This is because Machiavelli suggests that those who are under the Prince's

leadership are inherently bad according to him. Machiavelli here takes a realist approach which may only be described as convincing. Famous realists like those studied by Machiavelli, Plato and Aristotle, and Machiavelli himself view human nature as inherently egoistic and self-interested. A man of history and experience, Machiavelli draws conclusions from historical examples of people with a negative view of human nature. By drawing on such historical figures and examples, Machiavelli holds that, if the prince values reputation he must learn how not to be good so that he will maintain his power by seeming, rather than being a good person. (Mohammed Seid Ali, 237). This holds true with another recommendation set forward by Machiavelli that it “is better to be feared than loved” (p. 62). As such, Machiavelli believes that the prince had to be no different for this is not how one earns a good reputation. Looking through a realist lens, it can be seen how Machiavelli describes and constantly eludes that being mean is a vice. However, in political life, it may be an aid in retaining power. A leader will be contempt to have a good reputation for being mean (George, 2002), but when used in the right context, and presumably for the ‘right’ reasons, meanness, or simply ‘not being good’, maybe the best course of action for the retention of power, or quelling of a conflict.