

**Princely Qualities**  
A Machiavellian Examination

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The political landscape of central and northern Italy in the 14th and 15th centuries was dominated by city-states that were frequently at war with one another. Most were controlled by wealthy merchant families, which rose to prominence as their wealth increased and one of the largest and most successful city-states in Europe at that time was Florence. One such merchant family was the Medici, which returned to ascendancy in the Florentine Republic in 1512 and was able to exert political control because of their wealth and alliances.

Niccolò Machiavelli was removed from his position in the republic after the Medici returned to power and he later wrote *The Prince*, possibly as an exposé or as a critical commentary of the current regime. Machiavelli wrote about the ideal qualities that were needed to govern effectively, among them liberality, mercy, and faithfulness. He recognized that maintaining the ideals in all circumstances set an unattainable standard and that discretion in how they were applied was essential. In this paper, those ideals will be examined and Machiavelli's reasoning for considering them important and how they can be applied flexibly or even ignored. These views and the examples he used were a departure from conventional thought.

The first ideal is liberality or put another way generosity. This is compared with miserliness or the reluctance to use one's own resources. The context is that of the ability of a prince to mount a successful defense in the event that an enemy starts a war. Machiavelli suggested that resources should be conserved and therefore available for use "without burdening his subjects" (Sayre 530). By doing so, the prince shows generosity because he does not need to levy a tax on his subjects to finance the defense. If he is miserly, the defense – and therefore his ability to govern – may fail.

Next, the quality of mercy is contrasted with cruelty. A prince should want to be viewed as merciful but should be able to use harsh measures even if the result was that he would be thought

of as cruel. Machiavelli cited the example of Cesare Borgia being viewed as cruel in response to his successful restoration of order in Romagna. Undoubtedly, the methods he might have used were harsh but the end result was that confusion and chaos were limited. The people of Pistoia were not as fortunate when Florence decided not to act because they wanted to avoid the appearance of being cruel. The city fell into disarray because of warring groups and it declined into chaos. Borgia “was in reality far more merciful than the people of Florence, who, ... suffered Pistoia to be torn to pieces ...” (Sayre 530-531).

Finally, a prince should keep faith with his subjects or at least seem to do so. Machiavelli stated that even princes of his day did not always keep their word and “have accomplished great things, and in the end got the better of those who trust to honest dealing” (Sayre 531). He suggested that princes should work within the legal framework, but that often times those methods would not be effective. In such circumstances, the prince should be ready to use other means to achieve a preferred outcome, including cunning and force. He suggested that a prince should be able to manipulate men according to their nature.

The conclusion to which these examples and their justifications invariably leads to has been stated in the past as “the end justifies the means.” Ideals are fine aspirations and are important for appearing righteous and good in order to foster the good will of those governed. Those same ideals should be flexible in their application and can even be abandoned if circumstances arise that make them inconvenient or hinder the accomplishment of the desired goals. Machiavelli stated “a Prince should have all the good qualities ... but it is most essential to seem to have them ... [and] the mind should remain so balanced that were it needful not to be so, you should be able and know how to change to the contrary” (Sayre 531).

## **Works Cited (Bibliography)**

Sayre, Henry M. *The Humanities: Culture, Continuity and Change*. Book 3. Saddle Rock, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2012. Print.