

Connell Guides Essay

I have always suffered from chronic hero worship, with one figure or another. This has served me well - it was Roald Dahl's Matilda who made me a hopeless bibliophile, and a schoolgirl detective who had read War and Peace in a fortnight who inspired me to achieve the same (though what that did for my sleeping habits I dread to think). The characters I have loved since I can remember have shaped my personality more than anything else.

My parents, knowing this only too well, were more than a little concerned when, aged ten, I became enthralled by Niccolo Machiavelli. He was far from Chaucer's 'parfit gentil' knight. He was no King Arthur, William Wilberforce, or, say, Oprah Winfrey; rather that universally despicable thing - a scheming politician, mythologised to the extent that 'Machiavellian' has wormed its way into our vocabulary as meaning wily or deceitful, especially in the political sphere, and is decidedly an insult.

Without a doubt he was devoid of a moral compass. To quote the man himself, 'Politics have no relation to morals'; and he is a politician through and through. He was unscrupulous to a sickening degree, and makes no pretences not to be: The Prince, his best-known work today, advises, 'If an injury has to be done to a man it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared.' Yet, that sort of thing is gloriously seductive and entertaining to a ten-year-old planning world domination.

A personal hero is an entirely separate thing to a quest-completing, maiden-rescuing storybook hero. Does Machiavelli need morals to be worth of my adulation? He was famously immoral, but it's debatable how much these things should matter in appreciation of someone's achievements. Caravaggio was a murderer. Gauguin married three children while in Tahiti, while a husband and father of five back in France. Perhaps we should categorically discard their artwork, but as a society we cannot yet bring ourselves to lose a substantial proportion of our culture for just retribution of geniuses long dead. (It is entirely possible, actually, that in wake of the recent sexual harassment scandal Gauguin will finally be called to account; Caravaggio, however, remains a Byronesque 'tortured genius').

The difference is, of course, that the artists' misdemeanors are a wholly discrete thing from what they are known for, whereas Machiavelli's whole Unique Selling Point was the deviousness of his political theorising. But good on him. His marvellously wicked tendencies ensured he became one of the most noted politicians in history, rather than having them be an embarrassing open secret one tries to ignore upon visits to the National Gallery.

And so although he is endlessly vilified, perhaps Machiavelli was simply more honest than the rest of us. 'Men are always wicked at bottom unless they are made good by some compulsion,' he said. He, admirably, had fewer qualms about revealing and employing that wickedness. Besides, he was far from classically villainous in that he was not needlessly rotten to the core, like a cartoon character; all his actions were calculated for success and a greater good, since, as he infamously states, 'it is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both.'

I doubt any leading or effective politicians are truly moral. It's certainly not a career for the wholly virtuous, and never has been; political realism dates back to one of Machiavelli's key influences, the Greek historian Thucydides, and by the time we reach modern history it seems laughable that the League Of Nations expected any country (let alone Mussolini's Italy) to be persuaded by 'moral condemnation'. Machiavelli could have surmised this in a glance, and subsequently prevented the Second World War. Indeed, it becomes especially apparent that had countries in the 20th century been a little more astute and a little less blindly faithful in the morals of Hitler and Mussolini, the disastrous

'well, let him have Czechoslovakia, then he's sure to settle down' mentality might be been avoided. As might the war itself, and all its repercussions. My point - and Machiavelli's - is, a dash of cunning and wariness, at the cost of a golden halo, often causes far more good in the long run.

Those blips aside, Machiavelli was 'the father of modern political science' and modern politics, for all its faults, cannot be disregarded as one of the foundations of the world as we know it - and it is widely effective, something we take for granted. His scheming might have corrupted the true spirit of democracy, but if, in a hypothetical universe, pure democracy was possible, it is unlikely anything would ever be achieved, either politically or culturally. Recall Orson Welles' notorious speech in *The Third Man*. 'In Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love - they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.' Blatantly disregarding, for the sake of argument, the fact that Harry Lime, Welles' character, is a child-killing psychopath, he does have a point. Without Machiavelli, and the cunning with which he and those he influenced operated, the world would be a far more barren place; because, without Machiavelli, how powerful would the Medici family have been? Without Medici patronage, would we have the Old Masters?

Outside of his career, he was an admirably strong character. Never marrying, he devoted the entirety of his life to politics and to serving the Medici, which entailed leading - and winning - wars against Pisa, and even being imprisoned and tortured by them in their misguided paranoia (hung by his bound wrists, so that his arms carried his body weight and his shoulders were dislocated).

He was a man who had one passion, to which he gave his all: the arts and sciences of politics and diplomacy. Upon retirement (which, understandably, swiftly followed his release from torture), he spent the rest of his days at home, where, as he explained in a letter, 'I enter the ancient courts of rulers who have long since died ... I am not ashamed to talk to them and ask them to explain their actions and they, out of kindness, answer me. Four hours go by without my feeling any anxiety. I forget every worry. I am no longer afraid of poverty or frightened of death. I live entirely through them.'

There is something very poetic, indeed almost romantic, about that snippet. Machiavelli sets himself apart from my other heroes in the sense that I cannot and do not hope to fully emulate him, as I would Lizzy Bennet or Eleanor Roosevelt - he is, after all, a man from distant history, with a singular, all-consuming interest in politics at the expense of all else. Instead, he has irrevocably adjusted my outlook on the world; just as I learnt the power of reading from Matilda, I can chart my first perceptions of how the world really worked to reading *The Prince* aged ten. I know to 'be a fox to recognise traps, and a lion to frighten wolves', though these traps and/or wolves are currently less relevant to me as a teenage schoolgirl than, I imagine, to Lorenzo di Medici, ruling the Florentine Republic in times of change and warfare.

At any rate, I am edging ever closer to world domination.