The Prince

By Niccolo Machiavelli (1532)
Adapted & Illustrated by Shane Clester (2011)
Published by Round Table Comics (2011)
Review & Rationale by Nick Kremer (2012)

Grade Level and Audience

This graphic novel is recommended for high school English or Social Studies classes.

Plot Summary

*The Prince* was a treatise on governance written by Niccolo Machiavelli in the early sixteenth century. In a series of short passages, Machiavelli gives cynical yet pragmatic advice to an unnamed, newly-established prince on how to successfully rule his people. Machiavelli discusses the subtleties of governing style that should accompany the different types of principalities, offers insight on various aspects of military involvement, and ponders philosophical questions of leadership such as whether it is better to be feared than loved or whether the ends justify the means. Throughout, he cites historical examples of leaders from antiquity as evidence of the validity of his claims.

In adapting the work into a graphic novel, Shane Clester has utilized an abstracted, black-and-white cartoon style to accompany Machiavelli’s original, translated prose. He portrays Machiavelli and a child prince as characters navigating through the advice of each of the work’s serialized sections. In doing so, he seamlessly transitions throughout the piece from literal illustration of the text to visual metaphors of his own creation that interpret its meaning. Occasionally, he affords his characters some original, modern dialogue that humorously interacts with Machiavelli’s archaic prose.
Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

Clester’s drawing authentically captures Machiavelli’s sardonic tone in a way that enhances (rather than distracts from) the reading experience. Don’t let the simplistic cover deceive you - the overall illustrative style is playful yet sophisticated, and certainly reverential to its source material, which Clester has clearly spent careful time considering.

Machiavelli’s character (true to his reputation) is portrayed with delicious ambiguity – as soon as a reader has let down his guard and accepted the philosopher’s advice unquestioned, he is immediately bombarded on the next page with the character’s dark, brooding eyes and coy half-smile, prompting instant reconsideration of what one has just read. This visual dimension reminds us to constantly question the intentions of our narrator, when in pure prose, Machiavelli’s voice is often perceived as omniscient.

Likewise, by giving the young prince a physical form of varying caricatures in the graphic novel, Clester creates a moldable archetype that represents the various outcomes of Machiavelli’s advice. A prince may be pious or devious, capable or confused, effective or out of touch. These abstract, and sometimes subtle, variations are made powerfully concrete in this adaptation, helping readers to fully visualize the range of Machiavelli’s vision.

The graphic adaptation also brings The Prince’s historical allusions to life for the reader, who, without thorough knowledge of ancient world history, might miss them otherwise. Accurate illustrations of attire, setting, and physical attributes helps to give color and distinction to this cast of supplemental characters who would otherwise be a footnote in the reading experience.

And though Clester’s literal illustrations of the text are highly successful throughout, it is the points in the book where he offers his own original interpretation of Machiavelli’s prose that most enhance the adaptation. Sometimes these are several panels long (an episode where raiding Vikings are surprised to find a prince that has proactively armed his people rather than hiding behind castle walls), while at other points they are metaphors in a single frame – Robin Hood giving up the fight because of his fear of the death penalty, a sword salesman going out of business because guns have become in vogue, or a chessboard of men being maneuvered by the hand of Fortune. All add layers of visual subtext to Machiavelli’s work, making it infinitely easier for readers to accurately comprehend the layers of meaning in dense, antiquated prose.
Possible Objections

There are no foreseeable objections to the content within this novel. All violence is historical in nature and non-graphic in display, and language and sexuality are non-issues.

It might be a concern to some purists that though the translation of Machiavelli is true to his voice and style, the adaptation considerably abridges the original text. All 26 sections are included, but each has been edited down to its essential theses. This obviously makes for a faster read that is devoid of some of the details included in the full edition, though the essence of the work remains the same throughout.

Ideas for Thematic Braiding

Machiavelli is already a staple in many Government courses around the country, though sometimes teachers shy away from using his writing in primary source form because the prose is difficult for students to understand. Clester’s graphic adaptation provides an excellent solution to this problem for all of the reasons listed above, allowing students the opportunity to still grapple with Machiavelli’s own words while providing scaffolding for comprehension in the accompanying illustrations.

The Prince would work well in any dystopian literature unit, either read in-full over the course of a week, or read in intentionally-selected segments that compliment a longer companion novel. For example, it would be interesting to use Machiavelli as a philosophical lens by which to analyze the actions of Animal Farm’s Napoleon, or the Capital from The Hunger Games, or to compare/contrast the leadership styles of Ralph and Jack from Lord of the Flies.

Many of Shakespeare’s histories and tragedies would also find symbiotic support when read alongside The Prince. Macbeth’s rise to power, Julius Caesar’s assassination, and the struggle for Lear’s throne are all episodes begging Machiavellian inquiry. Many of these plays can also be found in graphic novel form (Macbeth – No Fear Shakespeare or John McDonald; King Lear – Garreth Hinds), giving teachers the option of comparing artistic treatment of source material as well as the thematic content therein.

Ideas for Implementation

Due to Machiavelli’s organization of The Prince, the book can easily be read in its entirety or in sections. Teachers who are strapped for time may wish to tease out specific
sections for the full class to consider, or utilize a “fishbowl” approach to reading, assigning different sections to different students who will then converge to share their portions of the book in small groups and come to understand the work as a whole from each other.

An excellent culminating assessment after reading the graphic adaption of The Prince would be requiring students to play the role of Clester – to choose a short section of the text and re-illustrate it on their own, choosing new metaphors, allusions, and interpretations of Machiavelli’s prose. Conversely, if studying the book as part of a government theory unit, students could choose a different political philosopher – Locke, Rousseau, Madison, etc. – and adapt a passage of his work in graphic novella format. Doing so requires critical engagement with the text and illustrating (literally) deep understanding of the content.

About the author

Nick is originally from Jefferson City, Missouri. He attended Truman State University for undergraduate (English, Theatre) and master's studies (English, Education) before starting the doctoral program at Mizzou. He lives in Columbia with his wife, Ashley, and children, Liam (2) and Ellison (newborn), and has taught 9th grade Language Arts for the past 5 years at Oakland Junior High School, where he also currently serves as Chairman of their Executive Council. Nick is also the acting Dean of Education for the American Legion Missouri Boys State program. Nick's research interests include visual literacy, graphic novels, creative composition, and online education.
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IT IS NECESSARY TO CONSIDER WHETHER A PRINCE HAS SUCH POWER THAT HE CAN SUPPORT HIMSELF WITH HIS OWN RESOURCES, OR WHETHER HE HAS ALWAYS NEED OF THE ASSISTANCE OF OTHERS.

THOSE WHO ARE ABLE TO SUPPORT THEMSELVES ARE THOSE WHO CAN RAISE A SUFFICIENT ARMY TO JOIN BATTLE AGAINST ANYONE WHO COMES TO ATTACK THEM.

THOSE WHO HAVE NEED OF OTHERS CANNOT SHOW THEMSELVES AGAINST THE ENEMY IN THE FIELD, BUT ARE FORCED TO DEFEND THEMSELVES BY SHELTERING BEHIND WALLS.

IF EVERYTHING IS WELL CONSIDERED, IT WILL NOT BE DIFFICULT FOR A WISE PRINCE TO KEEP THE MINDS OF HIS CITIZENS STEADFAST FROM FIRST TO LAST, WHEN HE DOES NOT FAIL TO SUPPORT AND DEFEND THEM.